

The Life and Times of Smokey Bear

Smokey Bear, that blue jean and ranger hat-wearing, shovel-toting icon of wildfire prevention, has been around for more than 60 years. Few of us can hear about forest fires without remembering his bass voice proclaiming, “Remember: Only you can prevent forest fires.” In fact, the Smokey Bear fire prevention message is the longest running public service campaign in U.S. history.

First things first, though. Smokey Bear’s middle name is not “the.” It’s just Smokey Bear. Period.

Smokey was born during World War II, when fears about enemy incendiary shells exploding in the timber stands of the Pacific Coast ignited a movement to protect and preserve the nation’s forests from careless fire starters. Consequently, the U.S. Forest Service organized the Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention Campaign with the help of the Wartime Advertising Council.

The council created posters and slogans, including “Forest Fires Aid the Enemy,” that suggested people could prevent accidental fires and help win the war.

In 1944, Walt Disney’s film “Bambi” premiered, and Disney allowed the forest fire prevention campaign to use the fawn on a poster. The Bambi poster was a big success, proving that using an animal to promote fire prevention could work. Unfortunately, the image was on loan from the Disney studios for only one year, so the Forest Service needed to come up with an animal that would belong to the fire prevention campaign. The service eventually settled on a bear as the nation’s No. 1 firefighter.

The first poster of Smokey Bear debuted on August 9, 1944, and depicted the jean-clad bear pouring a bucket of water on a campfire. The new symbol of fire prevention was a hit, and Smokey soon began appearing on other posters and cards.

In 1952, Smokey Bear had enough popular recognition to attract commercial interest. Congress passed an act to take Smokey out of the public domain, place him under the control of

the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, and allow his image to be licensed to raise funds for forest fire prevention.

Over the years, Smokey's image has appeared on countless posters, T-shirts, stuffed toys, and other licensed items. His tagline has been updated to "Only you can prevent *wildfires*" to include the devastating blazes that have occurred in nonforested areas of the country.

Yet Smokey's appearance has remained virtually unchanged. And as long as there are careless smokers, campers, and brush burners, he will continue to be the voice and image of fire prevention across America.