

# WTREX 2019: Women in Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange

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## Indulging in Fire: Reflections from the Women in Fire Training Exchange

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A few years ago, I asked my closest friends to describe my biggest character flaws. I had my own ideas about what they were, but I wanted to hear from the people who knew me best. And after they got over the discomfort of the question, they opened up. Two of them mentioned my extroversion, and how I sometimes inadvertently make them feel bad when they don't want to socialize. I could see that. But my husband took a different angle, and he didn't hesitate for one minute before saying that my main character flaw was overindulgence—not just in simple pleasures like food and drink, but in everything I do, including my friendships and my work. I'm all in, all the time.

You may think it seems odd to over-indulge in work. (Can work even be indulgent?) But here I am at 4:30 a.m., starting a five-hour drive home from the airport after two weeks of 16-hour workdays where I averaged less than six hours of sleep a night, and all I want to do is write this blog. So I'm dictating into my phone as I drive, cursing Siri and thinking about my husband, who—as usual—I've proven right.

I am returning from the third Women in Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange, or



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WTREX, which we hosted this year in Tallahassee, Florida, at the renowned Tall Timbers Research Station. (Check out my blog “The Evolution of Leadership in Fire: Stories from Three WTREX Leaders” for more background on WTREX’s purpose and initial leaders.) This year’s WTREX brought about 40 women and a handful of men from 16 states and four countries to burn together in north Florida—the national heartland of prescribed fire. During the 12-day event, we burned 24 individual units and treated a total of 635 acres. We also evaluated 28 position task books and provided final evaluations on eight. And, we hosted short workshops and presentations on a variety of topics, including fire effects, equity and inclusion, work-life balance, new geospatial tools and technologies, and more.

We also swam with manatees and alligators, hosted a trivia night, had a dance party, and hand-silkscreened 161 items of clothing with this year’s WTREX art, which I designed specifically for the event. It’s no wonder we didn’t get much sleep.

However, as I reflect on this year’s WTREX, it’s not the hard numbers that jump out at me. Rather, it’s the ethereal components of the event that now linger: the energy, the comradery, the odd sense that we probably would have all stayed there a lot longer if that were a reasonable option. And this is not just a WTREX thing—this is one of the defining features of all TREXs, something we all brace ourselves for every time we host a TREX. Our team has actually started incorporating a closing talk about re-entering normal life post-WTREX. You’d be surprised how hard it can be.



This year’s WTREX design was silkscreened onto 161 items of clothing.

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You may have seen the article that Jeremy Bailey and I wrote about TREX in the most recent edition of *Fire Management Today*. In it, we describe the premise behind the TREX model—the three-legged stool of training, treatment and outreach that defines every training exchange. But as I drove home this weekend, I was reflecting on the parts that we don’t often describe—or perhaps don’t have words to describe. Then, I ended up listening to a series of seemingly unrelated podcasts that ended up getting me thinking about the features of TREX that make it so special, so transformative.

It may seem paradoxical, but there is a key component of TREX that makes it so unique: TREX is the most comfortably uncomfortable training environment out there. The discomfort comes with the novelty of the setting—new landscapes, new fuel types, new people, new equipment, new languages. Every TREX participant is naturally caught off guard, not knowing the local customs, the local partners, the local fire behavior. Federal employees may have never worked with state, private and international burners, or on properties with different standards for burn plans or burn-unit preparation. Nonfederal participants may have never experienced the

## MORE ONLINE

- "Indulging in Fire: Reflections from the Women-in-Fire Training Exchange" (FAC Net blog, April 4, 2019)  
<https://fireadaptednetwork.org/reflections-from-the-women-in-fire-training-exchange/>
- "The Evolution of Leadership in Fire: Stories from Three WTREX Leaders" (FAC Net blog, February 1, 2018)  
<https://fireadaptednetwork.org/evolution-of-leadership-three-wtrex-leaders/>
- "Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges: Training, Treatment, and Outreach" (*Fire Management Today* 76(4):20-22)  
[https://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/fire-management-today/fs\\_fire\\_management\\_v76-4\\_508\\_v2.pdf](https://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/fire-management-today/fs_fire_management_v76-4_508_v2.pdf)
- "The Daily Show's Secret to Creativity" (WorkLife with Adam Grant, March 7, 2018)  
<https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/ted/worklife-with-adam-grant/e/53602389>

incident command system, and they are often surprised by the seemingly military structure of the events.

This diversity of backgrounds and experiences is core to the TREC model—something we specifically design most TREC to include. We always say that we need a diversity of perspectives to solve the fire problem and that TREC is a perfect venue for that confluence. But as I was listening to those podcasts on the drive—particularly an episode of Work Life called The Daily Show's Secret to Creativity—I realized that there's another beautiful benefit of diversity in a setting like TREC: discomfort, or rather, creative discomfort. It turns out that the edge brought on by working with different types of people can actually spur innovation and creativity, because it pushes us outside of our comfort zones. When we work with people who think like we do, it can be easy to slip into a fixed mindset, thinking we already



WTREX may have been mostly women, but we represented a full spectrum of experience and backgrounds. We had volunteer firefighters from Costa Rica, park biologists and foresters from multiple states, a contract tree feller from Canada, Forest Service hot shots, National Park Service fire management officers and fire ecologists, municipal firefighters, geospatial analysts, seasoned fire professionals from Australia, national and local conservation organization staff, academics, documentary film crews, men, women, and early career and late career fire practitioners. © Holly Tuckett

know the problems and understand the solutions. When we are dropped into an entirely new setting with new people—like a TREC—we're suddenly challenged to rethink what we know and to grow in new, more creative directions.

But don't worry—TREC isn't just uncomfortable. In fact, creative discomfort is only possible in a setting where people feel safe and supported in their differences. And this, too, is an explicit component of many TREC events, and especially the WTREX. At this year's event, we were lucky enough to have Maria Estrada and LA Allen from The Nature Conservancy's Global Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Team join us for a week. Their time with us focused on building a sense of psychological safety within the group. Psychological safety allows for interpersonal risk-taking, where people can be themselves and speak their minds without fear of judgment or ostracism, and it has been shown to be a critical factor for high-performing teams (including The Daily Show!).

At WTREX, we wanted to create an environment where people could explore their talents and push their personal boundaries, but to do that, we needed them to be comfortable with the prospect of failure. One participant commented to me that she hadn't quite believed our introductory talk, where we had said WTREX was a safe space to fail, but by the end of the event, she fully agreed. She said she'd never been surrounded by so many supportive women and men, or felt so empowered to take personal risks and push herself.

Discomfort and failure—I bet you're dying to sign up for the next event! But really, it's this combination of creative discomfort and psychological safety that fuels the magic behind TREC (and was exemplified at WTREX). I think it's

the fourth, unnamed leg of the TREC stool—the personal/interpersonal growth element that we can't quite quantify or describe, and that we don't often find in other fire settings or in our normal jobs. It's energizing, empowering and soulful. Is it any wonder that I overindulge?



This story was originally published on the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (FAC Net) blog. FAC Net publishes blogs about community wildfire resilience weekly; visit [fireadaptednetwork.org/subscribe](https://fireadaptednetwork.org/subscribe) to have stories like this delivered to your inbox.

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<http://nature.ly/trainingexchanges>

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