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## After Suffolk fires, 'vibrant regeneration' predicted for burned Long Island pine barrens, experts say



The aftermath in the pine barrens on Tuesday after the weekend fires. Credit: Rande Daddona

**By John Asbury**

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The section of the pine barrens that burned in the Westhampton brush fire on Saturday is expected to recover with new plant life and wildlife, experts said.

The pine barrens are a "fire dependent ecosystem," according to ecologists, meaning that burns are necessary to clear dead vegetation and reduce density so that new growth can take place.

Suffolk County police said a family [attempting to cook s'mores](#) Saturday morning in Manorville is believed to have sparked four separate fires – in Center Moriches, East Moriches, Eastport and the largest fire that burned more than 420 acres of the pine barrens in the Westhampton area.

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The region has seen fires over the past century, but much of the section of the pine barrens impacted on Saturday has not burned in a significant way since 1995, experts said.

That section includes dwarf pitch pines, which only open their cones during a fire so their seeds can disperse, said Pace University ecologist Matthew Aiello-Lammens.

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"We should expect to see some vibrant regeneration of baby pitch pines in the next year and a half," Aiello-Lammens said. "This is probably good for the ecosystem and better for the biodiversity of the region."

The Crescent Bow fire of 2012 burned 1,100 acres, farther north in the Manorville-Ridge area, after starting on the grounds of Brookhaven National Laboratory. That marked the largest fire on Long Island since the nearly 3,200-acre Sunrise Fire burned off Sunrise Highway in 1995.

The fires ensure that species such as oak trees do not predominate, while also clearing debris and allowing for new seedlings to take root, experts said.

The fires also consume dead debris and can clear the ecosystem for new seedlings, said Nina Leonhardt, acting director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society.

"Those dwarf pine trees are especially fire dependent. Their cones are sealed in resin and the fire melts the resin and opens the cones and disperses seeds," Leonhardt said. "Fire is necessary to keep them going. Fire can also clear some of the brush that accumulates on the forest floor and free more space for growth."

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While wildlife generally instinctually flees from a blaze, unless it's especially fast-moving, there are some potential impacts from the weekend brush fires.

The region is home to birds, small mammals and deer. Since this fire was at the beginning of spring, "when everyone is starting their families, it probably will set back quite a few species," said Grace DeNatale, the hospital supervisor at the Evelyn Alexander Wildlife Rescue Center in Hampton Bays.

"Squirrels and rabbits are nesting and having babies right now, so that may affect their success for this season," DeNatale said. "They may have to start over. Rabbits can have multiple litters in the season, but squirrels don't, so that might affect their success this season."

The Atlantic Marine Conservation Society, based near Gabreski Airport in Westhampton Beach, was forced to evacuate 14 sea turtles that were being rehabilitated after being cold-stunned in New England, according to the group's executive director, Rob DiGiovanni.

The turtles were returned to the facility Sunday once the fire was controlled, DiGiovanni said. The organization, he said, has worked with Southampton Town officials on an evacuation plan.

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"You never want to be meeting anyone in a crisis for the first time," DiGiovanni said.

Meanwhile, forest rangers with the state Department of Environmental Conservation patrolled the burn area Tuesday with hand crews, mopping up remnants of the fire and looking for any potential hot spots, Suffolk County Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services Commissioner Rudy Sunderman said.

Suffolk County officials said on Tuesday that they did not yet have an estimated cost for the fire response.

*With Tracy Tullis*



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