

This Day in History... August 9, 1944

Smokey Bear Created to Join the War Effort

On August 9, 1944, the US Forest Service created Smokey Bear to encourage people to prevent forest fires. The Wildfire Prevention Campaign is the longest-running public service announcement campaign in US history, and Smokey has become an icon recognized around the globe.

Though forest fires had long been an issue, America's involvement in World War II made fighting these fires more difficult. Most able-bodied men were fighting overseas, so there weren't enough young men to fight fires. In 1942 the Forest Service used Disney characters from the film *Bambi* on colorful posters to raise awareness on how to prevent forest fires. However, those characters could only be used for a year, so the forest service needed their own mascot.



Early fire prevention posters featured characters from Bambi.

In 1944 they created Smokey Bear, named after New York City firefighter "Smokey" Joe Martin. The first poster was designed by Albert Staehle and pictured Smokey pouring a bucket of water on a campfire with the message "Smokey says – Care will prevent 9 out of 10 forest fires!" Smokey quickly became a household name, with toy companies producing teddy bears and a variety of posters hanging across the country.

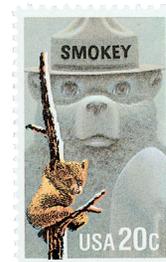
Months later, the Japanese began using forest fires to attack the US. Between November 1944 and April 1945, they launched more than 9,000 incendiary balloons into the jet stream. About 10% of those reached the US, with one of them claiming six lives. Smokey's warnings likely helped save many other forest fires from occurring. Smokey's saying changed to "Remember... Only YOU Can Prevent Forest Fires" in 1947. Then in 2001, it became "Only You Can Prevent Wildfires," in response to the large number of wildfires that began to break out outside of forests.



Ideal Toys started making Smokey Bear dolls in 1952.

In May 1950, a man-made fire ravaged 17,000 acres of forest in the Capitan Mountains of south-central New Mexico. A small bear cub managed to survive the blaze by climbing a tree (as pictured on the stamp above). Firefighters rescued the cub from the tree and tended to his badly burned feet. Soon after, they nicknamed him Smokey Bear, in reference to the symbol for fire prevention.

Sent to live in the National Zoo, the little bear cub became a living symbol for forest fire prevention, and quickly became a national and worldwide celebrity. He received millions of visitors and over 13,000 letters per week. In fact, in 1964, the USPS gave him his own zip code (20252). Smokey Bear died in 1976, and was buried at Smokey Bear Historical Park, in downtown Capitan, New Mexico.



Issued for Smokey's 40th anniversary.



Smokey Bear was created by the US Forest Service.

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