

Making care visible: A photo essay on wildfire risk management in California

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Introduction

Care is rarely centred in conversations about disasters or how their risks are known, managed and lived with by communities. Dominant narratives tend to prioritise logics of control, top-down management and efficiency – frameworks more readily aligned with technical, institutional, or securitised approaches of risk. Within these discourses, care is often overlooked or marginalised, reduced to the (emotional) labour of women or emergency responders, typically framed as reactive support for needy others during disaster response or recovery. This paper seeks to reclaim care – not as rescue, heroism, or saviourism – but as an ongoing relational practice concerned with maintaining, continuing and repairing “as well as possible relations” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 6). Care theorists have long understood care as a vital affective orientation, an ethico-political commitment and a material doing (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 1993). From this perspective, care is “a vital necessity” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 67) – something all are entangled with and dependent upon. In disaster contexts, then, care is not peripheral but foundational to how communities endure and sustain life amid escalating risk. This paper, therefore, brings care to the centre, asking: *How does care surface in the ways disaster risk is known, managed and lived with? And how might we make such care visible?* (see Plates 1–13)

Scholars of visual communication have long highlighted photography’s capacity to evoke affect, capture nuance and convey counter-narratives. They argue that photographs can illuminate the socio-spatial dimensions, processes and relationships that shape the worlds we study (see Chaplin, 2011; O’Neill, 2025; Pauwels, 2012; Rose, 2008). Building on this, visual scholars have demonstrated how photo essays can serve as powerful tools for communicating research beyond academic audiences, disrupting expert-driven, text-heavy conventions of research dissemination (Pink, 2020). Yet photo essays remain underrepresented in both academic and public discourses – especially those that move beyond journalistic formats or dominant media aesthetics (O’Neill, 2025; Pink, 2020). While disaster researchers have increasingly used photographs, these are often employed to document dramatic impacts and aftermaths: “collapsed infrastructure and destitute, hurt, or grieving people” (Kelman, 2024, p. 37). Such representations are frequently “sensationalized and sanitized” (Kelman, 2024, p. 37) and rarely capture the everyday practices of risk management or the relational work that communities rely on to navigate life in disaster-prone regions.

In what follows, I present a photo essay that draws on techniques of landscape and documentary photography, while steering clear of mainstream journalistic aesthetics, sensationalism and sanitisation. This essay shifts the visual focus from the spectacular and moments of rupture to the everyday, ongoing care that emerges in how disaster risk is understood, managed and lived with. I argue that the photo essay is particularly well-suited to making such care visible, as it can draw attention to often overlooked and ambivalent relations and practices of care – such as routine maintenance, repair work and more-than-human contributions. It also enables the presentation of aspects of care that resist easy articulation in words, including its embodied, affective and non-verbal dimensions.

This photo essay draws on six months of (visual) ethnographic research in the world of wildfire risk management in Sonoma County, California – a region that has experienced eight federally declared disasters, including four catastrophic wildfires over the past decade. It features mundane images of ordinary wildfire risk management activities – I make no claim

Funding: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (award no. ES/P000762/1).



that they are spectacular or complete, but I do hope they linger, unsettle and quietly invite viewers to look closely, feel deeply and reflect with care. Collectively, these images help render visible the entanglement of care as communities in Sonoma County navigate life in what seems like an increasingly risky world – opening space for viewers’ reflection, dialogue and debate. While photo essays are often valued for their ability to depict aspects of social and cultural life that are difficult to represent in text alone” (Wagner, 2007, p. 47), visual communication scholars have increasingly emphasised that the meaning of a photograph rarely resides in a single image (O’Neill, 2025; Pink, 2020). Rather, meaning emerges through the interplay of images, text and other materials. This photo essay is therefore structured as a series of image-based vignettes that weave together theoretical insights, field encounters, photographs, fieldnotes and interview excerpts [1].

The photo essay



Plate 1. I’m walking with Gaia near her property to visit what she and many others call the “spooky trees.” Charred trunks rise around us in eerie stillness, their skeletal branches reaching into the early morning mist. This ridge was devastated by the 2017 Nuns/Tubbs wildfire, which swept through this part of Sonoma County with terrifying speed and intensity. “Everything is still healing,” Gaia says quietly. Then, with a faint smile, she gestures toward a small green shrub beside her. “But we’re all learning to live, again.”



Plate 2. From the back of a weathered pickup truck, trays of native grass plugs – 2000 in total – are handed out to be planted across the wildfire burn scar. There are about fifteen volunteers, including me and we each take a tray to begin planting. It's hard, repetitive labour. We move steadily and mostly in silence, heads down, hands muddy, all focused on finishing before the rain arrives. *"I hope these make it,"* Laura says quietly, pressing another plug into the soil. I can't help but hope too! At the end of the day, as we clean and pack away tools, I ask Haig – one of the committed land stewards who organised the workday – how he thought it went. He smiles and replies, *"It was a perfect day of restoration and renewal. I feel great."*



Plate 3. I'm running with Jonah, Nick, Mali and Lenny through Trione-Annadel State Park. They have chosen a route that winds uphill toward a lake used by aerial firefighting crews to collect water during wildfire events. Partway up, we come across a large group of sheep and goats grazing along a dry ditch. We stop – partly to catch our breath, partly to watch them at work. *"Why are they here?"* I ask. *"It's a vegetation management program"* Jonah replies. *"You see it a lot here. It's great for keeping everything cut back and that's obviously good for reducing fuel loads and wildfire risk."* Clara adds, *"Yeah, the flocks do way more than we ever could and it feels more, like, like, how it should be, right?"* I continue watching them – heads down, all together, quietly chewing through the vegetation. It's peaceful, almost meditative



Plate 4. A 12-acre prescribed burn in a grove of old-growth redwoods in Sonoma County. The reintroduction of good fire is part of a long-standing tradition of land stewardship, supporting ecological balance, reducing hazardous fuel loads and lowering catastrophic wildfire risk. This single burn required months of permitting, training and careful coordination. On the day of prescribed burning requires rake hoes, flames, drip torches, water, backpack pumps, fire-resistant clothing, committed land stewards, fire personnel, adequate weather and CAL-FIRE approval/sign-off. It also takes humility, trust and a willingness to learn. Prescribed burning represents a renewed relationship with fire – one that moves beyond control and suppression. But, of course, it's not entirely new. Indigenous communities have been tending and caring for this land with fire for millennia



Plate 5. The room is filled with fire agency personnel, county employees, fire prevention non-profits and other local stakeholders. The County is hosting a scoping session for the Sonoma County Hazardous Fuel Reduction project – an effort to foster collaborative planning and broad consultation. But tensions quickly surface. Fire agency staff and non-profit representatives express frustration, viewing the process as redundant and inefficient. *“This data already exists,”* Daniel says sharply. *“You’ve brought us here without doing your homework – and we’ve got countless projects ready to go. They just need funding.”* Several heads nod in agreement. The County maintains its position, emphasising the importance of shared priority-setting and collaborative project mapping. One fire personnel leans over and mutters, *“If you want a project to die, give it to the County.”* Eventually, the mapping exercise begins. After a few moments of stillness, with many sitting silently and arms crossed, a few people start to move, encouraging broader participation. Gradually, more gather around the table, tracing maps to mark critical infrastructure, priority areas and project proposals. The process is shaped by compromise, memory and technical knowledge – but remains far from smooth

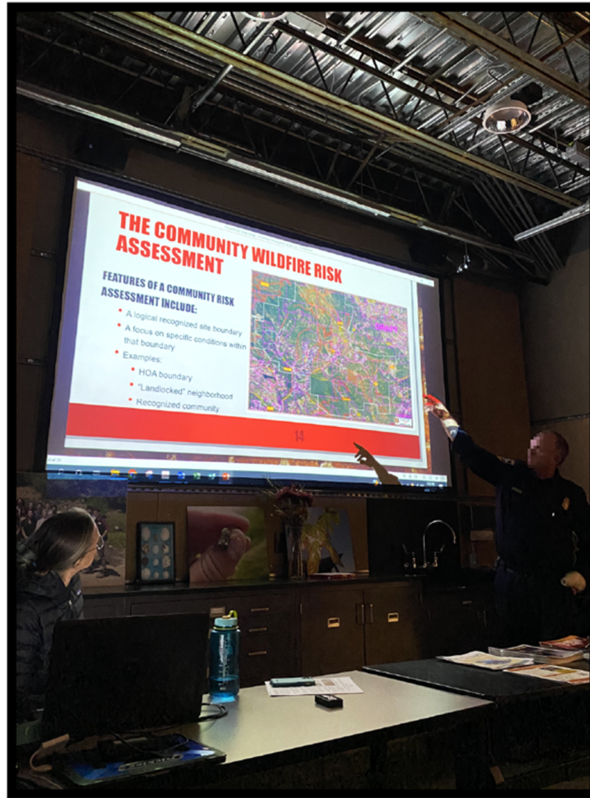


Plate 6. I have spent the day accompanying Mila, an employee at a fire prevention non-profit. It has been a whirlwind – she has taken me along to back-to-back meetings with various stakeholders, picked up her child from daycare, grabbed a quick dinner at In-N-Out and now we’re at an evening community meeting to discuss a neighbourhood’s potential application to become Fire Wise. Mila tells me she has asked Terry – a trusted, well-liked fire officer – to lead the presentation, hoping his presence will resonate with the community. Terry stands at the front of the room, speaking clearly to a group of about twenty residents. *“Fire Wise is a pathway to shift the focus from individual properties to collective action. Communities, governments, and local authorities, coming together, working together!”* he says. The community members listen attentively, ask thoughtful questions, take notes and exchange glances. When the meeting wraps up, no one rushes to leave. People linger, chatting with one another. The atmosphere is upbeat and engaged. It feels as though there is enough momentum for the neighbourhood to move forward with the application



Plate 7. We're at the Glen Ellen Village Fair – a lively town parade and street party – and the street is already filling up with people out enjoying the crisp fall weather. As we set up, Patricia turns to me and says, “We can’t expect people to come to us, so we’ve got to meet them where they are. Go to them.” It’s a quick remark, but it captures the spirit of their approach to public engagement. The event is full-on: setting up the tent, laying out leaflets, arranging maps and visuals, fielding questions, sharing resources and encouraging people to care. It’s slow, steady, relational work – not just about delivering information, but about building trust, sparking conversations and being present



Plate 8. “It’s helpful coming to these events,” Sheila says as we continue walking between booths. “You can get a few things, and it gets you started . . . but it’s not enough, you know? Still, it helps to see what else I’m supposed to have.” She pauses to chat with a few more non-profits and collects some of the free supplies being handed out. “It’s hard though,” she adds quietly. “I’m not working right now, so it’ll take a bit of time to save up for the rest. That radio over there?” – she nods toward the stand – “it’s forty bucks. I can’t afford that.” We find some shade and sit down. Sheila opens her Go-Bag and begins unpacking, showing me each: a foil blanket, a small toiletries kit, a flashlight, a poncho, water, chapstick. “Even having this,” she says, looking down at her new Go-Bag, “it’s a relief . . . in case a fire comes.” In a wildfire, these few essentials could mean the difference between chaos and a safe, swift evacuation, between relying on others or the ability to get by on her own for a little while



Plate 9. It is an extreme fire danger day, and I'm riding along with fire prevention officers from the Sonoma County Fire District. The atmosphere is tense, with a heightened sense of alert as we patrol a hillside community near Windsor, conducting home hardening and defensible space inspections. We stop at several properties, offering advice on trimming back vegetation and removing flammable materials, such as plastic BBQ covers. The officers move with practiced ease, their eyes meticulously scanning each property for the small details most people overlook – details that could make all the difference if embers start flying. They answer questions, gently guide residents on home improvements and provide calm reassurance that they will be on duty all weekend until the weather becomes less dicey. While they work, I speak with John, a neighbourhood representative riding along with us. Reflecting on their efforts, he says, *"Fire staff get harassed doing defensible space inspections. But that is as heroic act as going into fires, we need to reevaluate their value, not just coming to the rescue, putting out the bad thing . . . it's just so juvenile to value be saved from the emergency, but not to value preventing the emergency in the first place . . ."*



Plate 10. The Sonoma County Fire District is hosting a ribbon-cutting ceremony for their new helicopter – 'Sonoma County 1' – which is equipped with aerial firefighting capabilities. A fire official delivers a speech celebrating this advancement in fire response tactics. There is coffee, cake and a crowd of senior officials. It is a big event – a moment of celebration. As the ribbon is cut, people applaud, snap photos and share them on social media. I can't help but notice the contrast. Compared to the quiet, often unseen work of fire prevention and mitigation – home hardening, defensible space inspections, land management, community outreach – this moment feels loud, polished, even preformative. *"They'll never stop wanting the bigger truck or the next shiny thing,"* Olivia, a fire prevention officer, murmurs, rolling her eyes



Plate 11. I walk through the county’s emergency operations centre. It’s a “warm Emergency Operations Centre,” set up but not staffed. Rows of dark computer monitors, silent radios and idle telephones line the tables. Chairs sit empty, scattered around the room. Whiteboards, projectors and maps cover the walls. The building is quiet; only Susan and I are here. It feels still, yet it holds a quiet tension, a readiness. Though dormant now, everything is in place, poised to activate at the onset of an emergency. It’s a room built for urgency, simply waiting

Conclusion

By attending to the ordinary, everyday practices of wildfire risk management – clearing brush, managing stockpiles, coordinating neighbours – this paper renders visible the dispersed, relational and sometimes ambiguous ways in which “as well as possible relations” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 6) surface in how communities know, manage and live with wildfire risk in Sonoma County. In the case made visible, care did not unfold through heroism, speech, or traditional gendered roles, but rather through mundane practices of risk management, more-than-human entanglements and collective efforts to live (better) with fire. The relations of care perhaps appeared disengaged, bureaucratic, or unintentional – and may even be dismissed as not-care by viewers. Yet I argue that such diverse and ambivalent engagements reveal the often-unrecognised pervasiveness of care within wildfire risk management – whereby, amongst others, land stewards, sheep, computers at the emergency operations centre, fire personnel, fire itself, all are entangled and dependent upon the care. In many ways, wildfire risk management is a caring entanglement: a collective, more-than-human endeavour sustained through interdependent acts of maintenance and repair that enables communities – human and more-than-human – to continue inhabiting fire-prone landscapes in ways that feel liveable, familiar and worthwhile.

The photo essay format – composed of 13 image-based vignettes – made these relations of care visible in ways conventional academic text-based formats often do not. The interplay of images and text attempted to offer a textured, sensorial entry into the world of wildfire risk management, creating space for complexity, ambiguity and speculation. Unlike many disaster photo essays – particularly those that adopt mainstream media aesthetics that gravitate toward spectacle and destruction (Kelman, 2024) – this work centred the everyday, the banal and the more-than-human: chipped wood, grazing sheep, hand-painted signs and half-filled Go-Bags. Foregrounding these ordinary scenes matters, shifting attention from crisis to continuity and highlighting the sustained, quiet care that occurs before, during and after wildfires. It also expands the frame of both risk management and care beyond human action to include the “unnatural alliances” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 80) that constitute such caring worlds.



Plate 12. Keren walks me around her property, recounting her experience during the 2017 Nuns/Tubbs wildfire. We pause to pet her horses; her love for them is unmistakable. Her voice trembles as she recalls the chaos of evacuation: “We were racing the fire to load up the horses . . . trying to remember what to grab . . . driving through actual flames to get to the fairgrounds . . . I didn’t think we’d make it.” We continue towards a trailer at the edge of the field. “After that, I said never again,” Keren sighs. “I have to be prepared. I’m responsible for them – and I want to make sure all animals in Sonoma County are safe. Preparedness isn’t just for people.” She opens the trailer, revealing shelves neatly stocked with emergency supplies she’s been gathering over time: leads, cat carriers, harnesses, blankets, food, water, helmets. Everything needed to keep animals safe when the next fire comes

Visual communication scholars argue that photo essays, as a sustained form of critical engagement, hold the potential to engage broader audiences in our research and disrupt dominant narratives (Pink, 2020). At a moment marked by urgent concerns about the possibilities for life amid the escalating wildfire and climate crisis, I contend that photo essays are more necessary than ever. They encourage us to notice, make visible and linger – carefully – with the complex realities of how life is (and is not) sustained in the world. Disaster scholars stand to benefit from embracing this fertile ground of critical image-based work, as these approaches foreground the embodied, relational and affective dimensions of disaster settings, while fostering ethical attentiveness and nuanced representational choices that honour both communities and landscapes (supporting commitments to “A Disaster Studies Manifesto” RADIX, n.d.).



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in the present and future. I would also like to thank my research participants and PhD supervisors, Ben Anderson and Léonie Newhouse, for their time, encouragement and kindness.

Note

1. All images in this photo essay were taken by the author.

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