The Burning Forest

> *Every summer,we see the images on the news: massive infernos raging through the forests of Southern Europe. It seems as though nature is destroying itself. But what many people fail to realize is that the forests burning most fiercely in France and Spain are often not natural at all. It is time for a fundamental reconsideration of how we manage, design, and plant land, especially if you own property in these regions yourself.*

The Legacy of Monoculture

Spain and France originally consisted largely of vast, mixed deciduous forests and Mediterranean oak woodlands. Holm oak, cork oak, and beech dominated the landscape. What we see today, endless seas of pine and eucalyptus, is the result of large- scale human planting. In France, the *Forêt des Landes* was planted in the 19th century to drain swamps and extract resin. In Spain, millions of hectares were planted during the dictatorship for the timber industry and to prevent erosion.

These trees grow quickly, but they bring a deadly drawback in a warming climate. Pines and eucalyptus are filled with resins and essential oils. They stand close together and leave behind a thick, bone-dry layer of slow-decaying needles. As soon as fire strikes, the forest acts like a torch.

Designing for the Future: A Permaculture Approach

How can we manage land so that it is safe, yet still yields valuable timber? The answer lies in designing systems that work in harmony with the landscape—a core principle of every well-crafted permaculture design.

1. **Fighting Fire with Water: The Power of Swales (Wadis)**
   Fire hates moisture. The first step in a fire-safe landscape design is directing and retaining water. By digging swales along the contour lines of the terrain, you prevent scarce rainwater from washing directly off the slope. A swale forces the water to sink slowly into the soil, creating an invisible underground water buffer that keeps the landscape and vegetation lush and green during hot summers.

2. **Strategic Deciduous Firebreaks**
   Instead of filling the entire property with resinous trees, you work with strategic plantings of native deciduous trees. Fire accelerates dramatically when traveling uphill. Through smart design, you can break this momentum. For instance, consider planting a dense, moisture-retaining oak woodland on the second contour line going up. Such a belt of solid, green deciduous timber creates a natural, humid barrier that effectively slows advancing flames and absorbs the intense heat.

Timber Harvesting Without Deforestation

You can still harvest wood without compromising safety. Through traditional coppicing and pollarding techniques, you periodically harvest timber from species like sweet chestnut or oak. The tree subsequently resprouts naturally. By keeping the canopy open, you prevent crown fires, preserve the root system to protect the soil, and secure an endless source of local construction timber.

By integrating native flora into a well-considered landscape, you not only create a sanctuary for biodiversity, but literally build a green, living shield against wildfires.

Together Towards a Fire-Safe Landscape

As a certified **Permaculture Design Consultant**, I would be glad to collaborate with you on a thoughtful design or custom practical advice. Using the right permaculture principles, we can work together toward a landscape that is more resilient, where wildfires spread less easily, and potential damage is minimized as much as possible. Of course, no one can fully predict nature or rule out fire entirely, but I offer my expertise to explore future-proof solutions that can make a real difference. Discover the possibilities on my website: **martineverweij.eu**.