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EPD-Net as a Paradigm for Raising Awareness and Reducing Forest Fire Risks through Ecological Planning and Design

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Abstract: Forest fires increasingly emerge at the intersection of climate instability, land degradation, ecosystem fragmentation, settlement expansion, and institutional weakness. They cannot be reduced to combustion events triggered by heat, drought, or negligence. They are spatially produced risks, shaped by how territories are planned, how ecological systems are interpreted, how settlement edges expand into vulnerable landscapes, and how environmental intelligence is integrated into governance. This paper argues that the EPD-Net project offers a useful framework for reframing forest fire risk reduction through ecological planning and design. EPD-Net, formally titled Filling the Gap: Development of Ecological Planning and Design Learning Network and an Adaptive Smart Training Module for Disaster Resilient and Sustainable Cities, is a 36-month Erasmus+ action built around an AI-supported adaptive smart training module and a transnational learning network. In the current framework adopted for this study, EPD-Net is approached as a 32-partner, 13-country initiative. The paper does not claim that the project was designed exclusively for wildfires. It repositions disaster resilience from a narrow emergency-response frame toward a preventive, ecological, spatial, educational, and networked logic. Drawing on the project documentation and on the wider literature on wildfire risk, climate change, wildland-urban interface dynamics, ecological resilience, and remote sensing supported decision-making, the paper develops three claims. First, wildfire awareness is weak when reduced to communication and stronger when grounded in competencies. Second, ecological planning and design are not peripheral to wildfire risk reduction; they are among its structural conditions. Third, EPD-Net's transnational, interdisciplinary, and adaptive learning architecture provides a basis for translating these principles into institutional and professional practice. The paper concludes that EPD-Net can be interpreted as more than a project output framework, since it also represents an emerging educational and territorial approach that may support ecological responsibility and fire-aware spatial planning.

Keywords: EPD-Net, Forest fire risk reduction, Ecological planning and design, Adaptive learning, Ecological literacy

Introduction

Forest fires have become one of the clearest indicators that environmental crisis can no longer be treated as a separate domain from spatial planning, settlement policy, and institutional learning. The treatment of fire as a sudden natural hazard external to territorial organization is analytically insufficient and institutionally convenient, because it shifts attention away from land-use decisions, settlement expansion, and governance failure.

Fire regimes are increasingly shaped by the interaction of climate stress, vegetation conditions, topography, human settlement patterns, road access, land-use interfaces, demographic change, and governance systems. Across Europe, both climatic and anthropogenic variables play significant roles in the initiation and spread of

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large wildfires, and understanding those drivers is indispensable if prevention is to become more than a slogan (Ochoa et al., 2024). In southern Europe, future wildfire danger and burnt area are projected to increase under warming climate conditions, with fire-prone zones expected to expand spatially as warmer and drier conditions intensify over the century (Dupuy et al., 2020). Recent work also suggests that under moderate warming scenarios some parts of Europe may face up to a tenfold increase in the probability of extreme fires, accompanied by longer fire seasons and growing strain on continental response capacity (El Garroussi et al., 2024).

Even where the wildfire threat is broadly acknowledged, institutional responses often remain divided across suppression, emergency coordination, post-fire recovery, and technological surveillance. These domains are necessary, but they do not fully address the territorial conditions that produce vulnerability. Wildfires affect forests, but they also reveal weaknesses in settlement design, ecosystem management, interface governance, public awareness, and professional education. Where ecological literacy is weak and spatial decision-making remains detached from landscape processes, the risk is reproduced long before ignition occurs. The Sendai Framework already insists that disaster risk reduction depends on understanding disaster risk, strengthening governance, investing in resilience, and building preparedness before impact (UNDRR, 2015). This perspective has direct implications for fire-prone regions. Risk reduction therefore has to begin before the emergency phase, within planning, design, and governance decisions. This is consistent with recent international wildfire policy literature, which calls for governments to move beyond response-centered approaches and invest more systematically in prevention, preparedness, ecosystem restoration, and integrated fire management (UNEP, 2022; OECD, 2023).

This paper argues that EPD-Net offers a useful framework for connecting wildfire risk reduction with ecological planning and design education. Although the project was not designed as a dedicated wildfire program, it addresses the educational, spatial, technological, and institutional conditions through which disaster resilience is learned and operationalized. This is relevant because wildfire risk is produced before ignition through settlement patterns, interface governance, weakened ecological continuity, vulnerable population distribution, and gaps in professional training. Fire behavior depends on climate and fuels, but the scale of damage is also shaped by where and how humans build, how interfaces are managed, and how institutions learn from prior events. The paper first situates wildfire risk as a climate-linked, land-use-sensitive, and governance-dependent phenomenon, then interprets EPD-Net as an educational and institutional framework for linking ecological planning and design with wildfire awareness, prevention, and risk reduction.

Background

Forest Fires as a Socio-Ecological and Territorial Problem

Wildfires are often discussed through the language of hazard. At large scales, weather and climate remain powerful controls. In European contexts, rising temperatures, altered precipitation regimes, longer drought periods, and more severe fire weather are expected to increase the likelihood, intensity, and duration of extreme fire events (Dupuy et al., 2020; El Garroussi et al., 2024). The IPCC has already made the broader point that climate change, land degradation, and unsustainable land management interact in mutually reinforcing ways, affecting ecosystem functioning and the resilience of human-environment systems (IPCC, 2019). Once this interaction is acknowledged, the conventional distinction between a natural fire event and a human territorial system begins to collapse. Fire is therefore both an ecological process and a territorial outcome shaped by land use, governance, and infrastructure choices.

European wildfire studies increasingly point to the combined role of climatic and human drivers. Ochoa et al. (2024), using machine learning models at a continental scale, show that climate variables matter strongly, but so do human drivers such as population density, aging, road proximity, and forest-agriculture interfaces. Roads and interface zones link ignitions to human access and land use. It means ignition patterns are inseparable from how humans occupy and move through territory. Ganteaume et al. (2013) had already argued that knowledge of ignition causes and their driving factors is a prerequisite for effective prevention policy in Europe. Fire is produced through mixed systems in which weather, vegetation, human pressure, land abandonment, and landscape fragmentation interact. This complexity strengthens the case for planning approaches that address ignition, exposure, land use, and institutional preparedness together.

The territorial dimension becomes even sharper in the wildland-urban interface. Carlson et al. (2022) describe the wildland-urban interface as the focus of many major land management problems, including wildfire, habitat

fragmentation, invasive species, and human-wildlife conflict. Their work is U.S.-based, yet its conceptual relevance is wider. Housing growth and settlement expansion in interface zones increase the number of people and structures exposed to fire while simultaneously raising the probability of human-caused ignitions. Bento-Gonçalves and Vieira (2020) go further by reviewing key concepts and evaluation methodologies for wildfires in the wildland-urban interface and showing that prevention in these spaces cannot be handled by fire science alone. It requires integration of land management, settlement design, exposure assessment, and public awareness. The wildland-urban interface should therefore be understood as a spatial condition where settlement expansion, ecological vulnerability, and governance gaps converge.

Limits of Awareness-Based Approaches

Awareness is often invoked in wildfire policy, but its meaning is rarely specified. In practice, it is usually reduced to campaigns, warning messages, risk notices, or post-disaster communication. These measures are useful, but they do not automatically produce the competence needed for planning, design, governance, and professional judgment. This helps explain why wildfire risk can persist even when people know that fire danger exists. Awareness has little effect if the decisions that increase exposure remain unchanged.

The recent review by Sandoval-Díaz et al. (2025) is useful. Their synthesis of community resilience to wildfires shows that local resilience depends on information, social cohesion, emergency planning, support networks, and the articulation of local and institutional knowledge. Barriers, conversely, include inadequate disaster risk governance and limited preparedness. If poor governance and weak preparedness undermine resilience, then awareness must be embedded in governance and preparedness structures to matter. Awareness becomes meaningful when it changes capacity. It informs how actors perceive risk, prioritize interventions, and learn across scales.

Wildfire awareness is usually directed at citizens, homeowners, and local communities. This is necessary, but it does not reach all the actors who shape risk. Planners, designers, accreditation bodies, municipal authorities, and training institutions also influence where exposure grows, how interfaces are governed, and how professional routines are formed. Catastrophic wildfire outcomes cannot be explained only by insufficient public information; they also reflect vulnerable settlement forms, fuel-continuous landscapes, weak interface governance, and unclear institutional responsibilities. Awareness therefore has to extend beyond those who live with risk to those who help produce or reduce it.

Ecological Planning and Design in Disaster Risk Reduction

Ecological planning and design are often discussed in sustainability contexts, but their role in disaster risk reduction is deeper than a general green agenda. They address how settlements relate to ecosystems, how landscape functions are maintained or degraded, how land-use choices alter exposure, and how environmental capacities can become part of planning decisions instead of remaining residual constraints. The Sendai Framework's emphasis on understanding risk, strengthening governance, and investing in resilience is fully compatible with ecosystem-based approaches and land-use-aware risk reduction (UNDRR, 2015, 2020).

For wildfire-prone landscapes, this is significant in very practical ways. Ecological planning can influence settlement location, buffer design, land-use compatibility, infrastructure alignment, vegetation management, and the continuity of ecological functions after disturbance. Design, meanwhile, affects how human occupation meets combustible landscapes, how public space and infrastructure are organized, how evacuation and access operate, and how restoration is approached after fire. If climate change is enlarging the risk envelope, then ecological planning and design become core components of adaptation and risk reduction. The literature on wildfire mapping and geospatial assessment reinforces this point. Remote sensing, GIS, and machine learning increasingly support fire detection, burned-area mapping, severity estimation, and susceptibility analysis, but their value depends on how decision systems use them (Guiop-Servan et al., 2025). Data become useful for risk reduction only when they inform planning, design, and governance decisions.

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EPD-Net as an Educational and Institutional Framework

EPD-Net should be described as a disaster-resilience-oriented educational framework, not as a dedicated wildfire program. Its formal documents position ecological planning and design as underrecognized fields in disaster management and respond to this gap through an AI-aided adaptive training module, curriculum development, pilot implementation, dissemination, and a transnational learning network. This architecture is relevant to wildfire risk because it addresses the professional and institutional capacities that shape how territories are planned, assessed, and governed before disasters occur.

The project's institutional framing is also confirmed by Eskisehir Technical University, which identifies EPD-Net as an Erasmus+ Alliances for Innovation project with a 36-month duration and a partnership structure involving higher education institutions, businesses, public bodies, and non-governmental organizations (Eskisehir Technical University, 2024).

EPD-Net therefore functions as a project framework and as a broader proposal for teaching and practicing disaster resilience. Its core proposition is that ecological planning and design should move from the margins of disaster management into the center of training and professional practice. This shift expands risk reduction beyond emergency management by bringing planning, design, ecology, and technology into the same problem field.

Relevance to Wildfire Risk Reduction

The relevance to wildfire risk reduction follows directly from the structure of the problem. If wildfire risk emerges from the interaction of climate, fuels, land-use interfaces, roads, settlement patterns, and ecological degradation, then no adequate prevention strategy can ignore planning and design. These fields are often brought in late, during rebuilding or post-disaster assessment, although they are needed earlier in prevention and preparedness. EPD-Net challenges this sequence by linking training, exchange, and adaptive educational tools with prevention and preparedness. Its relevance to wildfire risk reduction lies in its focus on the upstream conditions through which vulnerability is produced, even if wildfire is not singled out in the original scenario set.

A second reason concerns coordination. Fire science, civil protection, forestry, planning, architecture, and local government often approach wildfire risk from different professional perspectives. EPD-Net responds to this problem by bringing higher education institutions, professional bodies, accreditation structures, enterprises, and associated partners into a shared transnational learning environment. In the updated project frame, EPD-Net is presented as a 32-partner, 13-country initiative (EPD-Net, 2026). The project has the scale and diversity to function as a cross-sector learning network, not a single-discipline platform.

Awareness as Competence, Not Messaging

One important contribution of EPD-Net to wildfire risk reduction lies in how it reframes awareness. The project does not define awareness as passive exposure to information. It ties awareness to curriculum, training, adaptive support, stakeholder interaction, and pilot validation. This distinction matters because competence-based awareness requires planners to interpret fire-prone interfaces as design and governance problems, local authorities to connect geospatial fire indicators with land-use decisions, and training systems to address post-fire recovery, ecological restoration, and risk-sensitive settlement patterns.

The project work plan supports this interpretation by linking needs analysis, training material development, AI-supported self-evaluation, pilot implementation, and dissemination. Awareness is therefore treated less as a communication output than as a capacity developed through training in risk mapping, ecological vulnerability, resilience-oriented design, and landscape-sensitive decision-making. The geospatial literature makes such a move increasingly feasible. Remote sensing and GIS can support this training agenda, but only where users and institutions are able to translate geospatial information into planning and governance decisions (Guiop-Servan et al., 2025). EPD-Net is relevant at this point because it links information, training, self-evaluation, and institutional learning within a single educational architecture.

Ecological Planning and Design as Pre-Fire Intelligence

Wildfire policy often remains concentrated on suppression, emergency response, and recovery, although wildfire prevention also depends on land-use planning, buffer zones, fuel-break systems, building regulations, and risk assessment (OECD, 2023). Ecological planning and design contribute here by examining territorial arrangements before ignition, including interface management, settlement placement, access systems, ecological buffers, and post-disturbance recoverability.

EPD-Net brings this broader intelligence framework into disaster education by positioning planners and designers as active contributors to disaster risk reduction. This gives wildfire prevention a clearer place within professional education, across fields such as fire ecology, civil protection, architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, GIS, and resilience-oriented design. Wildfire risk should therefore become part of the professional training of planners, designers, and spatial decision-makers.

Transnational Learning and Institutional Continuity

Wildfire learning often remains tied to crisis cycles. Institutional attention rises after severe fire seasons and weakens as the crisis fades. EPD-Net's transnational learning network can reduce this volatility by circulating tools, cases, methods, and governance lessons across institutions beyond a single project cycle.

Wildfire preparedness remains uneven across Europe. Some regions have long histories of fire-adapted management and extensive data systems, while others have less experience, weaker institutional coordination, or limited integration of ecological risk into professional training. Transnational collaboration cannot remove these differences, but it can shorten learning curves by circulating ecological planning and design knowledge across institutions.

Discussions

The interpretation of EPD-Net as a paradigm for wildfire risk reduction is defensible, but it should remain qualified. Paradigmatic claims often fail when they remain rhetorical rather than institutionalized. They may remain as project-specific vocabulary without leaving durable institutional effects. Whether EPD-Net avoids that fate depends on whether its ecological planning and design logic is translated into hazard-specific educational and territorial practices.

The project's broad architecture is strong yet may also carry risk. If ecological planning and design are invoked only as desirable principles, the framework remains conceptually attractive but operationally weak. Training content must engage with interface mapping, settlement exposure, vegetation structure, land-use compatibility, ecological restoration, geospatial monitoring, and governance coordination. The project's educational system is capable of hosting such content, but the disciplined translation of broad ecological principles into hazard-specific learning content is necessary.

There is also a methodological challenge. Wildfire risk reduction is often split between those who privilege quantitative modeling and those who privilege planning and social process. Ochoa et al. (2024) show the value of machine learning and explainable modeling at continental scales. Guiop-Servan et al. (2025) demonstrate the breadth of remote sensing and algorithmic advances in wildfire mapping. Sandoval-Díaz et al. (2025) show that community resilience and governance capacities remain essential. EPD-Net is well positioned precisely since its documented design already combines digital tools, adaptive training, multi-actor participation, and transnational collaboration. If implemented with sufficient disciplinary specificity, it can provide a platform in which geospatial analytics, ecological reasoning, and planning judgment are brought into operational relation.

A further issue concerns the temporal structure of wildfire awareness, which often remains tied to fire seasons and media cycles. Ecological planning and design, in contrast, are inherently long-term. They work through settlement logic, infrastructure, landscape form, and institutional memory. This temporal depth may be one of the most important contributions EPD-Net can make. By embedding ecological resilience into training systems, the project offers a way to stretch wildfire thinking beyond crisis time. This is significant because many factors shaping catastrophic fire develop slowly, including gradual interface expansion, ecosystem fragmentation, cumulative land abandonment, governance erosion, and the normalization of risky development patterns.

EPD-Net cannot solve the structural political economy of land development, speculative interface urbanization, or unequal municipal capacity. It cannot replace regulatory reform, long-term ecological restoration, or coherent

national fire policy. Its more realistic contribution is to alter the educational and cognitive preconditions under which these larger systems operate. It can produce actors who ask better questions. In many hazard domains, weak questions produce weak institutional responses.

Regarding the wildfire field, much effort has gone into better prediction, better suppression, and better post-event monitoring. Still, the recurrence of severe fire seasons in Europe suggests that technical improvement alone is not altering the territorial production of risk fast enough (Sedano et al., 2025). The literature on the wildland-urban interface underscores this bluntly. WUI growth increases exposure and often increases ignition likelihood as well (Carlson et al., 2022; Bento-Gonçalves & Vieira, 2020). Where settlement expansion continues into ecologically vulnerable spaces, no amount of public awareness messaging can fully compensate. A paradigm centered on ecological planning and design has the advantage of confronting this contradiction directly. It shifts attention from managing the next emergency to asking whether risk is being built into the landscape.

Conclusions

This paper has examined EPD-Net as a qualified paradigm for connecting forest fire risk reduction with ecological planning and design education. EPD-Net's value does not come from narrow wildfire specialization. It comes from changing the terms through which wildfire risk can be understood and taught. The literature reviewed in this paper shows that wildfire risk is shaped by climate change, land-use dynamics, settlement expansion, governance quality, community preparedness, and wildland-urban interface conditions. These findings support the view that wildfire risk is ecological and emergency-related, but also territorial and educational.

EPD-Net aligns with that conclusion by linking ecological planning and design, adaptive training, and transnational learning. Its contribution to forest fire risk reduction is practical rather than rhetorical because it frames awareness as competence, places ecological planning and design within resilience education, and creates a structure through which relevant knowledge can circulate.

The practical implication is that forest fire awareness becomes more durable when embedded in how planners, designers, geospatial analysts, institutions, and communities learn to read territory. EPD-Net cannot replace regulatory reform, national fire policy, ecological restoration, or stronger land-use control. Its value is more specific because it can help reshape professional and institutional cultures through which wildfire risk is understood before ignition, instead of being addressed only after impact.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

* The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the authors.

* The authors also declare that AI-based tools were used only for translation support, language editing, and stylistic refinement. All conceptual arguments, source selection, interpretations, and final scholarly responsibility belong to the authors.

Conflict of Interest

* The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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