

Managed fires can support rejuvenation and conservation – wildfires only deliver devastation!

The 2019/20 bushfires have been devastating in their intensity, and unprecedented in their national coverage and impact. The fact that millions of hectares have burnt, over a thousand megatonnes of CO₂ has been released (equivalent of 217 million cars on the road), and major cities throughout the nation have been choked by smoke, has focussed both the Australian public's, and global attention on the question 'why is this happening?' It has unfortunately also generated a range of seemingly polar views, whilst what really is needed is a factual assessment and non-politicised acknowledgement of the obvious outcomes of current poor land management practices.

Indigenous Land Management

For over 60,000 years, Australia's Indigenous peoples have regularly used low intensity fires to burn the undergrowth and forest understorey to remove thick and prickly vegetation to improve access, to attract game for hunting and to encourage the regrowth of useful plants for food, fuel and spiritual practice.

These actions moulded a mosaic landscape of different age classes and biodiversity values. These land management practices also allowed regeneration of the native hardwood forests which require low to moderate heat for the trees' seed pods to open and germinate in the resulting nutrient-rich ash seedbeds.

The fires also minimised the build-up of forest floor tree litter, reducing the risk of uncontrolled 'wildfire', whose high intensity could kill the trees and decimate the local wildlife.

These traditional land management practices were effective and rejuvenating because they were regularly applied, as required, over the millennia.

Low intensity → Forest Rejuvenation
Fire

The Conservation Era

The early 80's saw an explosion in Australia of environmental activism following the Franklin River High Court decision focussed on 'Conservation'.

A core 'Conservation Era' principle for native hardwood forests has been *'that it is better environmentally to reserve the forest in a Conservation Zone or National Park rather than manage it for all its environmental, social and economic values'*.

The purest Conservation position involves invoking the 'precautionary-principle/approach' where there is no intervention – *leave it to nature, what happens ... happens*.

Australian forest areas placed into the conservation and reserve systems have had little, to no, active broad-scale fuel reduction or prevention management.

This means that in areas where natural bushfires have not occurred, the understorey vegetation, weeds and forest tree litter will build-up to a level where, if ignited, a high intensity and devastating wildfire is much more likely.

High Fuel levels → High Intensity Wildfire

Recent Victorian Bushfires

The 1939 Victorian Black Friday wildfires burnt almost 2 million hectares; much of Victoria's forest today is regrowth from these fires.

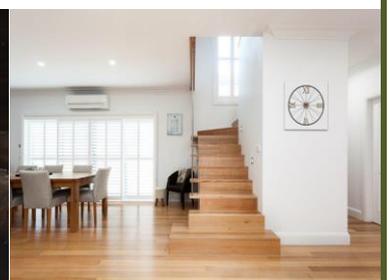


Between 2002-2009 bushfires burnt almost 3 million hectares across Victoria's private and multi-use public forest, National Parks and conservation reserves.

2003 saw the Eastern Alpine Wildfires decimate 1.3 million hectares of wilderness, and in 2006/07 the Great Divide North and South Wildfires razed over 1.0 million hectares.

The tragic 2009 Black Saturday wildfires resulted in 173 fatalities, over 7,550 people displaced, 2,000 homes & 3,550 agricultural structures burnt in the 430,000 hectares of national parks and reserves impacted.

The national 2019/20 wildfires have resulted in Victoria alone in over 1.5 million hectares burnt five fatalities and millions of native animals lost.



Fire has, and always will have, the greatest impact on Victoria's natural forests, flora, fauna and our regional communities. The devastating 2019/20 wildfires have clearly shown the need for sound forest and fire management based on good science and ongoing action.

Fuel Reduction Practices

Victoria's 7.64 million hectares of natural hardwood forests need to be appropriately managed to ensure their well-being and rejuvenation. This means actively addressing the issues of noxious weeds, vermin, feral animals, disease and, importantly, fires.

The impact of current climate change which has in recent years contributed to longer more severe fire seasons makes it even more important that land managers utilise effective and active management practices to reduce fire risk through the use of both mechanical fuel reduction and low to medium intensity fuel hazard reduction burns.

It is well known from experience, and simple physics of fire behaviour, that good land management including regular fuel hazard reduction practices are a key measure in wildfire prevention.

A simple medical analogy would be preventative vaccination, administered regularly and in an ongoing manageable way, rather than waiting for the epidemic to strike.

The intensity of a fire is proportional to the quantity of fuel squared. **That is, twice the amount of fuel gives four times the fire intensity; four times the amount of fuel gives 16 times the fire intensity!** And the rate of spread – the rate at which fires move across the landscape - is also directly proportional to fuel load.

Bushfire Management

All Victorian natural hardwood forests require fire to regenerate, so ongoing and active land management through sustainable forestry practices, including bushfire reduction activities, is critical to ensure the health and well-being of the overall flora and fauna.

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC), following the tragic Black Saturday fires, recognised the importance of reducing forest fuel loads and recommended:

*"The State fund and commit to implementing a long-term program of **prescribed burning** based on an annual rolling target of **5 per cent minimum of public land.**"*
(Recommendation 56)

Despite this importance, the Government's Implementation Monitor's report (2014) indicates that less than one-half (approx. 2.17%) of the minimum recommended target had actually been achieved.

Some researchers and authorities have claimed that fuel reduction has little effect in reducing the spread of bushfires under more extreme conditions. Others have also said that it will just cost too much.

The effectiveness of fuel reduction depends completely on its extent and frequency; and in terms of dollar cost – **what is the cost of the lives lost, the family homes and buildings razed, and the wildlife incinerated.**

It's an undeniable fact

No fuel... No fire

The Best Combined Solution

Proper forest land management includes protecting Australia's old Ancient forest and biodiversity threatened areas, but it must also include actively working, nurturing and managing the remaining vast forest area for all its economic, social and environmental values. This also includes management for sustainable, renewable, independently certified wood production to meet consumer demands and needs.

Bushfires are not always bad, they can be rejuvenating and positive, it is uncontrolled wildfire that delivers devastation on a vast scale.

Active broad scale holistic land management practices, including specific conservation areas, are the solution, not simply the philosophic and anachronistic position of 'lock it all up and leave it', which has now clearly been proven to have devastating negative outcomes for communities and wildlife.

Active forest management also provides appropriate roading for bushfire suppression, and in the 3,000 hectares per annum assigned for timber production, regular thinning as well as harvesting and regeneration.

Our Victorian forests, governed for all their values, must be actively managed to help keep our forests and communities safe.

Fire is inevitable.

Fire minimisation activity is a fundamental safeguard.

