



Submission for the Federal Fire Inquiry 2002/2003.

It is a sad occasion that prompts me to write this submission to you. Thank you for the opportunity.

I have had some experience with wildfire and associated management issues.

Firstly, my experience with the Ash Wednesday wildfires. (See Attachment 1.)

Secondly, I have traveled many thousands of ' bush kilometers ' in the forests of the Great Dividing Range. I am extremely confident and familiar with many areas lying between the Dandenong Ranges and the Omeo district.

Thirdly, my significant involvement in a parliamentary inquiry, of an environmental nature, into eductor gold dredging in the early 1990s, saw my interest grow in the methodologies of land management. Some years ago I began to cross-reference these methodologies across to the wildfire issue after finding many similar issues existed between them.

The above experiences combined to tell me that our forests were under serious threat from future wildfire(s) due to the excessive fuel loads. This threat began, with the ignorance of our early settlers, who did not realize the importance of fire in our forests and the catastrophic situation that would result from a fire exclusion policy. Later, political opportunism compounded the situation, by ignoring the facts and designed management policies that were more about gaining votes, then achieving positive environmental outcomes. This was at a time when ignorance was no excuse. Fact was often been replaced by fantasy in the pursuit of publicity.

This realization by myself prompted me to become active in trying to make the public and authorities aware of the dire situation at hand. I have contacted authorities on many, many occasions, attended public meetings, written letters, joined the Wildfire Taskforce (currently in recession due to lack of interest and funds) and

helped organize field trips, where senior government personnel were invited to undertake a trip with myself and Mr. Fred Ward to show our concerns.

These trips, during the late 1990s, were actually organized by Fred, as he has first hand and intimate knowledge of the 1939 Black Friday and its effect on the high country, especially the Mt. Hotham region. On different trips and by invitation by Fred, we were accompanied by Mr. Phil Cheney (Senior Fire research officer with the CSIRO), Mr. John McDonald (Senior Fire Manager for Gippsland, Department of Natural Resources and Environment) and Mr Ben Rankin (Senior Ranger and Fire Manager with Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Omeo district.) Mr Fred Ward deserves a medal for the work he has done on this issue of wildfire.

I realize fully that fire has a long association with most of our forests. I also realize that the following writings will give the impression that I have narrowed observations of the issue to such a point that I am trying to lay blame at certain authorities or environmental lobby groups. I am not but at the same time I am not a professional submission writer and have very limited resources to deal with the various elements of the issue. So, in advance please excuse any waffling and my apologies for the inadequacies in explanation and reference materials. I hope you see the gist of it all. Feel free to contact me at anytime for a fuller explanation.

In the context of modern times, this recent fire event is a reflection of the negligent manner, in which our forests and surrounds, are being grossly mis-managed, at a time in history when we should know better. This issue goes to the heart of land management and is not simply a fuel load problem anymore.

I have seen little investigation and reference, to the relationship between fuel reduction burning and the influence of flora and fauna management on it. Environmental legislation is now very much geared towards management of individual species, within perceived ecosystem modeling and similar methodologies.

In my submission I will focus on this element of land management quite a bit as I believe this new approach is an underlying issue of the most importance and concern. I believe that this is a mute point but is responsible for an inertia and confusion, behind the public face of land management departments.

I will now climb on my soap box.

The politics of the 1970-80's saw the environment put on the agenda, standing side by side with economic and social values and so it should be. The trouble was, the public face for the environment at the time, were people who the media came to call the conservation movement, or similar. Their ideals were radical and all encompassing. The public was given little opportunity to challenge their philosophies, in fact the opposite occurred.

Lobbying and publicity campaigns called for new land methodologies based on preservation, with National Parks and Wilderness Areas being their ultimate goal. A lock it up mentality. These were areas touted as 'pristine' and 'fragile', where disturbance was to be kept to a minimum. Human activity was to be all but eliminated from these parks. A concept of preservation has prevailed, a frozen land in time that is pristine and fragile, apparently.

*'A national park is a relatively large area set aside for its predominantly unspoiled natural landscape, and protected from all interference other than essential management practices, so that its natural attributes are preserved.'*¹

(I am not anti national park per se, it is the philosophy of preservation I am highlighting.)

¹ 'A Natural Legacy Ecology in Australia' edited by Harry F. Recher, Daniel Lunney & Irina Dunn; Pergamon Press 1979. pp 185.

By packing the environment in cotton wool, was enough these people thought, to make up for the devastation that humans had caused to the environment.

When politics joined with the radical conservation movement, the stage was set for one of the biggest frauds to take place in our country's history. It is an environmental fraud, which is still being played out today and has had, a profound effect on fuel reduction burning.

The conservation groups have hijacked our environment and have been handed a legislative process, which allows them to discriminate against any human activity they disagree with. This, in many instances, includes the human activity of fuel reduction burning.

To balance these comments I must say that I find it very difficult to express my opinion on those involved in land management, including public, private and government entities, for most people would seem to be honest and display a responsible attitude towards the environment.

However, there is an element of the radical conservation movement that is responsible for distorting environmental realities, such as fire. Legislation has been tailored to help these conservationists achieve their goals and has consequently introduced these distortions into management practices.

The following extracts are taken from a leading reference issued to participants in the Diploma of Natural Resources Management course run by Victorian TAFE colleges. The first is a description of one of its authors:

Allin Hodson is a lecturer in the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Sydney. He took his degrees in South Australia, where he worked on oysters and land snails. He is particularly interested in the ecology of small native mammals, especially those occurring in the national parks around Sydney. He believes that 'academic' ecologists can do much to bridge the gap between conservationists

and those they oppose, and that they have a responsibility to try. As a result, he has taken part in the preparation of many environmental impact statements".²

Secondly, from the same book:

'Nonetheless it is true that people often behave selfishly and show little concern towards their own, as well as other species, except when there is a direct benefit to them'³

I disagree with the second quote and find it rather disturbing.

To question the DSE management, often seems like a crime. If you were to mention your experience as a prospector, often you were dismissed as being part of a 'special interest group', which in this case had become enemies of the environment. Recreational prospectors were people who raped the earth.

An example, this happened to me at a **community** wildfire forum, organized by DSE / Parks Vic, held at the Wy Yung hotel in late 2002.

I listened for sometime, as they explained the structure of their meeting and what the topics would be. Each expert was to give background on relative issues, when sometime into the self promoting speeches, I had to interrupt and say that there seemed to be so little time for 'community' discussion, upon which I was told that there was so much to get through. Must continue.

Next while the focus of attention had swung to discussion on the 1998 Caledonia river fires, I again had to raise my hand. Too often, for my liking, indications were made that there was a strong element of control with regards to this

² 'A Natural Legacy Ecology in Australia' edited by Harry F. Recher, Daniel Lunney & Irina Dunn; Pergamon Press 1979. pp vii.

³ 'A Natural Legacy Ecology in Australia' edited by Harry F. Recher, Daniel Lunney & Irina Dunn; Pergamon Press 1979. pp 12.

fire by the suppression forces. I had received similar impressions while listening to ABC Radio at the time of this fire event.

I am very familiar with this country where the 1998 fires burnt, around Mt. Tamboritha and out towards the Moroka River. I know this area to be extremely rugged with relatively few access tracks and significant levels of fire fuel throughout. While following events on ABC Radio it was quite clear that this fire had grown to dangerous proportions and was now large and out of control. I was intrigued to hear, that the authorities claimed to have put control lines in place. Following the fire's path on my maps I was able to see exactly where the fire was and there was a lot of trackless country where they had put these control lines. I could only imagine they were referring to the Moroka River itself, which was confirmed in a later broadcast. I found this incredulous for no river was now going to stop this fire, only rain.

At the Wy Yung meeting I began to raise this point of concern that I had, upon which I was interrupted and asked "Were you there?" inferring 'you don't know what you're talking about'. I objected to this and began to try and explain that I know this country pretty well, when again, I was interrupted and asked that same question "Were you there?". I asked the gentleman to refrain from belittling my opinion which he refuted and continued on the departmental rhetoric track and pointing at the whiteboard.

A further disturbing incident occurred at this meeting, concerning something that many local people and I have been suspicious of, that is, ineffective fuel reduction burns.

One of the senior speakers of DSE, in the course of his speech, referred to a particular prescribed burn that had been done in the past and was telling of the success of it all. A member of the audience was quick to stand up, and suggested the truth be told. This audience member reminded the speaker, that he was present at this burn and that the burn referred to was far from a success. In fact quite the opposite. It was indicated by the audience member, that the fire did not take hold and did little to

remove fuel, yet it was recorded as a success. The senior expert brushed this criticism off as an annoyance and had a little joke about it.

The Hidden Fuel Factor.

As mentioned, fire has a long history and association with this country. Before the arrival of Europeans, fires were a frequent feature of this landscape. At first, lightning strikes and even burning coal seams, periodically ignited the forests and heath lands.

Later, aboriginals were to be a further ignition source, the first humans to change the natural cycle of fire. (See Attachment 2.)

Historic fire, in many of our forests is well recorded and not something created in recent times but the intensity and extent of forest fires has changed.

If there is one thing that most people would find difficult to come to grips with, is the expanse of forest that is at threat from catastrophic wildfire. It is the forests' expanse, remoteness and rugged landscape that limit many Victorians ability to see from the ground any great deal of it.

Until one has spent a significant amount of time covering many spurs, ridges, rivers and gullies I find it difficult to see how one could appreciate the huge volume of combustible material laying and growing in many of our forests.

Many forests of a dry sclerophyl type, which dominate large areas, are known to require fire on a reasonably regular basis but instead have remained unburnt for decades becoming impenetratable in many cases, due to the unhindered growth of scrub, which chokes gullies and spurs alike, guaranteeing severe crown fires will result. Many areas I have seen have scrub growing thickly to a height of 4 metres or more, over large contiguous areas. For those unfamiliar with the bush, I am talking huge areas.

While fighting the Ash Wednesday fires, it was easily seen how the scrub, would provide a ladder for the fire to reach into the tree canopies, above. If a strong wind was present, scrub would explode into flame, followed by the tree canopy above.

Many areas I visited around my home after Ash Wednesday, where once there had been forest over grown with thick scrub, were incinerated. Everything was burnt, including the branches from the trees while the ash was 12 inches under foot.

So, if one has witnessed over an extended period of time the behaviour of an out of control wildfire, such as Ash Wednesday, close up and then visits many forests of the Great Dividing Range, extensively and slowly but surely, one would realize it doesn't take rocket science to see that given the right climatic conditions of low moisture, high temperatures and high winds, a repeat of the 1939 fires and much worse is a reality. Such large fires are obviously, environmentally unsustainable, especially with regards to fauna.

Where's the Fuel?

To date I believe no serious attempt has been made to properly map fuel loads, with the focus on mapping them all, on a per hectare basis, so as to establish extreme wildfire potential in an area, regardless of land tenure. This could be done at an observation only level in many, many areas, by a trained eye. This then could be incorporated into such things as species management plans and could be highlighted with a quantifiable measure, to put perspective and draw immediate attention to this ecological threat. It would eliminate, to a significant degree the apparent lack of perspective that exists, when documents/ reports are released assigning a number of ecological threats to an issue.

More effort in fact is put into counting frogs, than mapping fuel.

Presently we have a model based on a zone system but the prescriptions and management goals are complicated, especially confusing in the zones 2,3 & 4, when

manipulation of individual species for conservation, landscape values purposes, Special Protection Zones and the like are thrown in the mix.

Zone 4 & 5, specific flora and fauna management and fire exclusion zones, respectively, are not qualified. Fuel management goals are ill defined (as required) for zone 4 and mis-guided (no fire) in zone 5. In Gippsland, Zones 4 & 5 represents, 963,223 Ha of land, while zones 1,2 and 3 combined represent 613,611 Ha of land. This imbalance needs to be investigated along with why fire is excluded in some areas, like sub alpine areas.

Statistics show that between the period 1992 - 2002 fuel reduction programs fell well short of targets. No targets have been met in the last 10 years and fell up to 50 per cent short. This has an exponential increase on fuel; with programs never being able to 'catch-up' to fuel that has developed in the meantime. This is bad. The dry conditions over previous years are no excuse. There were plenty of safe periods, when it wasn't extreme fire behaviour weather.

I think the current zoning system should be to a two Zone fuel reduction system with opportunistic burns as required over and above each zones basic requirements. Of course common sense, driven by experience must prevail.

Zone 1 should be as described before, focusing on asset protection. Further fuel reduction activities should be introduced here like grazing in forests, that fringe townships or significant property.

Zone 2 would combine the old zones 2 & 3.

My logic is simple and is in recognition of the extent of fuel that exists out there. Fires can begin anywhere at the moment and all efforts must be made to retard future fire intensity and extent. Fires in the future, if possible, should not be allowed to build huge wildfire fronts, which burn uninterrupted, over landscapes full of fuel. Fires starting on town boundaries or in nearby forests are immediately threatening to lives and properties. However, as we saw in these recent fires, a wildfire can just as well start in remote country, deep in the mountains and build into a monster that will soon

be knocking on every body's door. All areas need fuel reduction urgently because of what we are dealing with here.

Domestic wood collection services could be improved by the DSE, seeking out and advising the public of suggested areas where wood is abundant and then providing temporary access tracks where appropriate. I walk through a lot of country where, having previously memorized the basic topographical features from a map, I make my way along spurs and ridgelines looking for whatever. The thick patchy bush will often hide significant amounts of wood along the way, suitable for the domestic gatherers. This is how I find my wood. This would aid in removing wood along the spur and ridgelines. I fear the government is about to cash in on this 'captured' domestic wood market. This will contribute to removing a source of fuel reduction, as the price of wood rises. Ironically, the prices will rise, citing environmental reasoning based on smoke (pollution??) increases contributing to global warming, which will win them Green votes. Actually a double irony occurs. The Greens cite, human induced global warming as the culprit, causing our wildfires. Meanwhile the fuel grows and accumulates.

A fuel load register, partly driven by community input, could be instigated to allow members of the public to register observed fuel loads in forests they visit. It could exist as an adjunct to the Landcare programs perhaps. There are numerous community driven environmental programs that exist already, that are designed to enhance and educate people on environmental issues.

On my recent walk down off the slopes of Mt. Hotham I covered a bit of ground, probably around 20 kilometres over 3 days. I visited these areas in previous years on numerous occasions. I remembered from previous trips how the forest was in certain areas, with regards to the amounts of scrub and there was plenty. The falls into Murphy and Brandy Creek, between Dinner Plain and Mt. Hotham, were particularly thick with scrub and steep. Last year, going down to Brandy Creek I was nearly forced to turn back up the slope, as it got impossibly thick towards the bottom. Lucky I like a challenge.

This is sub alpine country, where fuel management plans declare it, a fire exclusion zone. No fuel reduction burns are allowed in this area.

During my walks, there were three distinct things you could notice.

First, that a lot of tree canopies remained, many browned off by the heat.⁴

Secondly, the grass was a real surprise. Wherever I walked and came across grassy patches, both small and large, if they had been clear of scrub prior to the fires, the grass remained largely unburnt. In fact, on Paw Paw Plain and Boiler Plain, both grassy open plains, surrounded by forest that had burnt, it could be seen that where burning embers had landed on these plains the grass had smouldered for a moment and then gone out.

Thirdly, where there had been scrub, the fire had tracked this down, stripping the ground clear of it in many areas, which it must have done with quite a rush. Looking carefully, where the scrub had been, you could often see the remains of a stem and in any given area on a slope, all these burnt stems would be pointing in the same direction, often uphill, indicating a fast moving fire had swept through it. I spoke to a friend of mine, Mr. Paul Armstrong, who had spent a considerable amount of time, fighting the fires on Mt. Hotham at its peak and he described how this scrub, even on lower fire danger days readily caught fire, in fact it has a nickname the 'kerosene plant'. And that nickname I have been told by locals, goes back some time, and is not a new term.

Therefore, the current management prescription of fire exclusion in sub-alpine zones I find to be a complete mystery when it is clear the grass has evolved to resist fire and the scrub loves fire.

The grass would have needed to build a resistance, as the conditions on top of these high peaks is so harsh and unpredictable that resistance, rather than relying on fast reproduction attributes, would have been required for this species survival. The scrub has tougher seed pods, which could lie, on the ground until the right climatic conditions arrive, maybe in the following season.

Further these high peaks have a higher exposure to lightning strikes and aboriginals were known to frequent these areas, the bogong moth festival is an example of frequent visitation.

I suggest the authorities get in contact with Mr. Fred Ward, now living in Bairnsdale, witness to the 1939 Black Friday fires and a man very familiar with this region, including the sub-alpine areas, before and after this wildfire event. He will explain what really happened up there on Mt. Hotham in 1939. Only the frost hollows and basalt rock screes were spared from complete destruction, while the mountainsides from the Mt. Hotham summit to Omeo were all but obliterated. Thick single trunked snowgums lined the mountainsides before 1939. After the fires most were blackened trunks with all leaves and most branches burnt off. These trees have now produced multiple, up to 4,5 or 6 trunks, from the one root-stock.

Had a strong wind been behind this fire, it would have probably burnt the canopies as well, just like in 1939.

I feel this fire exclusion policy for sub-alpine regions needs to be investigated. It needs to be clarified, that this is not some part of a green driven agenda, to remove high country cattlemen from these historic grazing grounds.

Further to this, following numerous talkback sessions on the ABC radio here in Gippsland, a number of comments have been made regarding the reduced intensity of fire in areas that have been previously grazed. Quite clear and defined landscapes have been brought up for comparison between grazed and ungrazed land and the effect on fire intensity. This requires urgent attention and verification, before the forest grows back, over any evidence that may exist as to the effects on the fires intensity.

The Wind Threat

⁴ During the 1939 fires, the winds were far stronger and responsible for a far greater intensity of fire and therefore damage. Many trees lost their canopies completely. Mr. Fred Ward, witness. *Perseus.com*

This years Vic/NSW wildfires, were only a taste of what is going to probably repeat itself, again and again, until the massive fuel load is broken up into a patchwork containing large areas of alternating burnt and unburnt areas. While this will not necessarily stop a fire, it must have a significant affect of reducing a fires intensity and its potential spread.

Being familiar with a lot of the southern forest regions and extreme wildfire behaviour, I can guarantee, that if a fire gets hold in this region, accompanied by high fire danger weather, especially strong winds, then we have some real big problems at hand. Many towns will be endangered, forests will be engulfed by firestorms, species may disappear, the lives of (eco) tourists, water supplies and other important infrastructure seriously threatened. The social, economic, environmental and cultural costs could be catastrophic.

I think the authorities had better take a closer look at the true intensity of the 1939 Black Friday wildfires. There are people still alive, like Mr. Fred Ward of East Gippsland, who witnessed these fires and who have an excellent understanding of what happened at this time. The 1939 fires were far worse than history has recorded them.

The effect of wind on a fires intensity and rate of spread is as important to acknowledge than the fuel load equation. High wind should be factored into flora and fauna management as a potential threatening process due to its direct effect on combustion. It has an indirect but significant effect on the manner in which material burns, as is evident with the blacksmith's bellows.

So, when the full potential of wildfire is being acknowledged, the potential of successive high wind days and its subsequent effect on fire intensity, needs to be clearly acknowledged, when dealing with potential threats to flora and fauna. In a manner of speaking, the higher the wind, the higher the intensity of a fire, regardless of available fuel. The effect of high wind was very evident in many past wildfires such as Ash Wednesday and Black Friday and was responsible for driving the spread of fire at a rapid and ferocious rate.

The scrub, heavy undergrowth and ground litter, that exists close by in the forests around my town of Bruthen, is at extreme levels. These types of forests are similar to those found around the Belgrave Heights area. During Ash Wednesday I witnessed patches of scrub explode into balls of flame which defied the size or extent of that scrub. This was often due to the wind combining with flame to become one.

The scrub out the back here in Bruthen is far thicker, taller and more extensive than I witnessed exploding into flames during Ash Wednesday. When I drive in these areas and happen to think of an Ash Wednesday type fire starting in it I get a scared feeling deep inside. There is not a lot that worries me in the bush now but the emotions that well up inside of me when I think of the potential of future fires is a mixture of fear and sadness.

“ What the hell are the authorities doing? “ I ask myself.

Sorry to sound skeptical but all of a sudden, following the media attention from these 2003 fires, the authorities are now burning some of the country close to Bruthen and have graded local tracks, that were previously let to deteriorate over many years. Is this a cover up or a coincidence? Which ever, there is a great deal to go. They are only scratching the surface.

Local Experience is Ignored

I often hear the term ‘ contentious ‘, being applied to the term hazard reduction. I feel things only become contentious, when the confusion of modern management goals and values are applied, which hobbles serious efforts to make inroads into this growing problem. Add to this the scientific ‘whitewashing’ of observable realities, such as excessive regional fuel loads and we have denial through omission, a recipe for disaster.

Many people in this region, including many experienced on this issue, inside and outside of DSE, have said repeatedly, that ‘bureaucrats’, 300km away in

Melbourne, were causing continual delays and problems for fuel reduction burning programs over here in East Gippsland.

Being interested in this issue and having a continuing awareness of the wildfire potential, I have noticed many periods of weather where fuel reduction programs could have been carried out. Of course, in the past few years we have experienced drought conditions which would have made the use of fire to dangerous during certain times, however, there were still plenty of opportunities to clear fuel in desperately needed areas.

Local talk in East Gippsland has it, that tourist seasons and smoke are now the type of reasoning behind many lost opportunities to burn fuel in forests in this region, including Zone 1 for Asset protection. Concern over liability for a burnt fence post another reason. If this is so then its quite pathetic really, almost criminal neglect, when you consider the problem of fuel loads, its affect on fire intensity and the catastrophic effect this intensity can have on the forest environment.

Local fire managers and people need more control of their respective regions.

I had two occasions in these recent fires where experienced bushmen I know predicted the path of the fire 2-3 days prior. They were spot on not only with predicting the path of the fire but also on the intensity of it. It was an extensive area they covered in their predictions. One of them predicted exactly, the catastrophic scenario that occurred around Seldom Seen, two days prior to it occurring and was able to predict the spurs and ridgelines it would likely travel along and it did.

There seems to be an overly strict management prescription that governs whether a particular fuel reduction burning program shall commence. There are a number of causes I am sure, legal liability over 'escaped' fires, wildfire concerns, flora / fauna issues and occupational / health issues. So many rules.

The people in charge of our environment, I worry about. Maybe, these people in departments have been overcome by politics and have built a culture around them 'We're right and they're not because we are the experts'. Regional land management

offices are being run on urban political dictates. This potential for catastrophic wildfire, which exists in large mountainous tracts throughout Victoria, has gone over their heads.

Well here I am, just a bloke. I have no certification of academic intellect. However, I assure you that I and others, who repeat the following assertion are 100% justified, when we say “to the academics, the politicians, the activists and the experts”, WAKE UP FOOLS, your urban based philosophies of equal rights and those of justice and fairness evaporate when dealing with these forests. The modern wildfire doesn't have boundaries or a conscience. In its quest for fuel these fires will happily burn, even destroy, any ecosystem, National Park, Special Protection Zone, High Conservation value and all values it can get a hold on.

Man-made politics, has met the forests and there is a stand off. Fire will rule, in an environmentally overwhelming way, if fuel is not reduced urgently.

People who have a long established relationship with forests of the great divide need to be included in management decisions. The adversarial position put forward by conservation groups in the 1980s, has pushed much experience out of the picture. The conservation movement has cut our noses off despite our faces. I can see how great experience has been thrown out the door.

Many field officers who are employed to search for species and the like in remote zones, have extremely limited experience, often none at all. Dealing with matters of the environment, should include intuitive knowledge which can only be gained from a close relationship with an environment over a significant period of time. Knowing the taxonomy of a frog or the general range of a species is not enough to understand the everyday dynamics at play in the forests. I have read many a recent report on environmental issues and have found many do not give a true perspective of regional environments. People who therefore make decisions based on such reports could surely not understand fully what they are dealing with. This anomaly, along with the elimination of important experience, leaves a narrow band of biased experts

to influence the decisions. This is not acceptable and needs immediate remedies so that common sense and the other half of the story can be introduced into the mix.

ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT, DISTURBANCES and ENDANGERED SPECIES.

Before the advent of modern ecological management concepts, ecology was more a descriptive tool. It has now become something on which it is purported predictable management models can be built on. I believe the academics are looking through rosy glasses and have instead built a pseudo value system that only they will understand, giving them control of our environment.

The following is a quote, from a popular reference used in the Diploma of Natural Resource Management course run by our TAFE colleges in Victoria,

"Much of this area of ecology is theoretical and mathematical and lends itself to the formulation of predictions".⁵

I can fully understand the theory of eco-system based management. However, as the above statement and many more like it state, it is a theory. Originally, it was seen more as a descriptive study of the interaction between plants/ animals and their environment. Around the 1970s, the notion of predicting ecological outcomes, through mathematical formulae and prediction modeling, was introduced by environmental academics. It was around this point of time that our environment was to be hijacked by the conservation movement and ignorant politicians. It was about this time, that people living locally to many of the forests, many with vast experience and knowledge of them, were slowly being ignored over issues regarding their own

⁵ 'A Natural Legacy Ecology in Australia' edited by Harry F. Recher, Daniel Lunney & Irina Dunn; Pergamon Press 1979, pp 168

neighborhood. Many of these 'locals' from then, until now, have been calling for an increase in fuel reduction burning to remove fuel, they said, would one day contribute to a catastrophic wildfire event.

There seems to be little mention of the link between eco-system (*aka. flora and fauna*) management and fuel reduction programs, yet it is here where the cause for the great reduction in such programs, going back to the early 1970s, can be found.

Earlier in the piece, it was more a case of scare mongering by radical conservation groups and the National Park service, claiming a threat to species existed if fire was not 'applied' properly. The National Parks began to exclude fire from many of their parks, with serious consequences, as was the case with Wilson's Promontory National Park.

The effect a disturbance has on the environment, varies of course but the 'new age' conservationist has gone to extreme lengths to ensure, that human disturbances are exaggerated, in such a manner, that a perception results, of a 'potential' for irreversible environmental damage. In essence, a control over land tenure is the result.

Further, the potential of a disturbance, maybe tied in with an endangered species in that area. We now begin to secure a complete control of land tenure. This is the true aim of these people.

I have reason to believe that the status of endangered or threatened species has been applied incorrectly to a number of species. Consequently, the recovery programs for these species, that have all but eliminated fuel reduction burning in their 'known' habitat and surrounding areas, is also incorrect. This 'fire exclusion' policy is in place, despite the forests in these areas being highly fire prone and carrying excessive fuel loads. Many of these areas were severely damaged during the 1939 Black Friday fires. Preservation gone mad.

The following is an extract taken from the FFG Act, Action Plan 112, for the spotted tree frog:

3.11.4 Fire Management

To prevent changes in the habitat of the Spotted Tree Frog or changes to water quality in STF streams: Do not permit prescribed fire in the Spotted Tree Frog habitat, and aim to exclude all fire from this area. Fuel reduction burning to be excluded from all catchments upstream of Spotted Tree Frog habitat where possible. Fire management strategy to be developed for each catchment, including provision for treatment of wildfire such that minimal disturbance to Spotted Tree Frog habitat is maintained; to be included in area fire management plans.⁶

and

Fire Management

The Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land (CNR 1995) requires consideration of environmental values in fire management operations which will generally aid the conservation of Spotted Tree Frog populations. In addition to these requirements, NRE will endeavour to prevent changes in Spotted Tree Frog habitat or changes to water quality or yield in Spotted Tree Frog streams by:

- *excluding, as far as practicable, fuel reduction burning in the 300m Special Protection Zone around Spotted Tree Frog sites - where fuel reduction burning is considered essential to meet statutory obligations under the **Forests Act 1958**, a detailed proposal will be developed in consultation with senior wildlife management staff to minimise the risk of adverse impacts;*
- *conducting any necessary fuel reduction burning in a manner which ensures the risk of encroachment of fire into Spotted Tree Frog habitat is minimal;*
- *managing the extent and frequency of fuel reduction burning elsewhere in Spotted Tree Frog catchments to ensure the risk of adverse impacts on water quality or yield is minimal;*

⁶ Environment Australia, Spotted Tree Frog 1998-2002 Recovery Plan, Graham Gillespie, Peter Robertson Department of Environment and Heritage, Canberra, 1998.

- *recognising Spotted Tree Frog sites as a high value asset in fire protection plans and wildfire suppression plans and adopting fire prevention and suppression procedures which seek to*
- *ensure the risk to Frog populations from wildfire is minimised;*
- *recognising the importance of Spotted Tree Frog habitat in the development and implementation of wildfire suppression plans and seeking to minimise disturbances resulting from suppression operations.*

The application of these measures in Spotted Tree Frog catchments will be detailed in Fire Protection Plans and will be given a high priority in the development of annual Works Programs prepared for each NRE Fire District.

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and

*'Manage the habitat so that there is no more than 1% probability of extinction of the species in Victoria within 100 years (as determined by population viability analysis). As a short term aim, until detailed ecological information is available to enable such analyses, all extant populations should be maintained at least at their present levels.'*⁸

Species such as the Spotted Tree Frog (see Attachment 3), the Brush-Tailed Rock Wallaby and the Pygmy Possum are a few species whose status of endangered are not truthful. Conservationists have played on people's ignorance and manipulated statistics and historical data to create a perception of a species in decline. This, with further manufactured evidence, is submitted as fact, into a process of nomination, which in itself is in need of investigation.

Preceding this years fires, the above mentioned species were and had been for decades, under severe threat of extinction (local and total) from future wildfires, due to the fires environmentally

⁷ Flora & Fauna Guarantee Act, Action Statement No. 112 Spotted Tree Frog *Litoria Spenceri*

⁸ Flora & Fauna Guarantee Act, Action Statement No. 112 Spotted Tree Frog *Litoria Spenceri*

unsustainable nature, as a consequence of excessive forest fuel accumulations and contiguous unburnt landscapes.

I have in recent times, visited the Lightning Creek area, where a substantial population of the 'critically endangered' Spotted Tree Frog was known to exist. This fire had gutted this area. In fact the whole drive from Omeo to Lightning Creek, via the Mitta Mitta River watershed, was a devastating sight. Hill after hill, mountain after mountain, and the ground was stripped of vegetation from the rivers edge up to the ridgelines. On my second trip into this area the eucalyptus trees had begun to sprout new shoots, as they do, however the animals in this area have been dealt a bad hand indeed. Many thousands of animals have died. Some may become extinct.

A budget of close to one million dollars, was proposed for the 'recovery' of the spotted tree frog, from 1998-2002 alone. This would represent a lot of fuel reduction burning programs. The profit that could be made from a single species, seems a bit extravagant.

The populations of the endangered brushed tailed rock wallaby known in a part of the Snowy River seem all but wiped out. One has been found. Again ecosystem management methodology has severely hampered any serious attempt to reduce fuel levels in its habitat. Recent attempts to burn were paltry, too little too late and belie previous decades of management's procrastination over the issue. I believe a public dispute occurred some 2 or 3 years ago in my local paper, the Bairnsdale Advertiser, where the consultants on the wallabies recovery program, were forced to publicly state that wildfire was the most serious threat to this species. Wildfire was until that point, vaguely mentioned, along with other threatening processes, without any clear delineation or measure given to them.

With my experience in the bush, I do wonder how a handful of people, some with no experience in such rugged terrain, expect to find to many of these species, even if they do exist in numbers.

The high incidence of scrub and vegetation in the brush tailed rock wallabies 'known' habitat would make movement through the bush noisy or slow. These animals are not silly and highly alert and they have friends. Birds are the 'grapevine' of the bush. Unless one stalks through the bush, slowly and stealthily, you are bound to get the birds talking. The wallabies understand this talk when it becomes frantic. With high levels of scrub and ground litter, walking can become very noisy, unless you carefully watch each step or walk on rocks. High levels of scrub would put animals on a permanent high alert from ambush, by predator dogs/ foxes. Then there is the carriage of your scent on the wind which in gorge country would

I am not trying to put myself up here as bushman of the year but reality is reality out in the mountains. It is the ruggedness and 'inaccessibility' of many areas, that is the protection for many species, except with regard to wildfire.

It is obvious that if a species were to be endangered and under threat of extinction the public would expect all to be done to help its chances of survival. The nature of eco-politics however, has seen radical conservationists and vote hungry politicians, cash in on this attribute, by twisting the truth on the status of species and then running this information through environmental reporting processes, enough times that it becomes seen as fact, when all the time it was factitious.

Reporting that describes species or threatening processes, that may adversely affect that species, are often vaguely put or broadly described. This leaves it open to favorable translation or extrapolations, which secure land tenures for conservation reasons. Control in other words. It may be achieved via a National Park, Special Protection Zone, Reference Zone or Critical Habitat designation.

A potentially threatening process under Schedule 2 of the Flora & Fauna Guarantee Act is listed as an:

'Increase in sediment input into Victorian rivers and streams due to human activities'

An unqualified statement but often quoted and typical of broad descriptions used.

Sedimentation is a natural process, with sediment movement in the landscape a highly variable dynamic. Wind can transport dust, while one rain event can wash down many tons of sediment from hillsides, into gullies to be transported down rivers. Most importantly to this issue of wildfire is that one wildfire event can cause a massive increase in sediment available for transport due to the exposure of soils and the loss of soil binding agents due to the death of vegetation.

NRE and Parks Victoria will prevent human disturbance to frog behaviour and deterioration of frog habitat by:

- *not increasing access to streams, and close access to frog habitat in some areas;*
- *actively managing camping areas close to Spotted Tree Frog habitat to minimise recreational impacts or, where feasible, relocating these camping areas away from Spotted Tree Frog catchments to exclude disturbance; and*
- *restricting road use to a minimum in catchments, particularly in wet weather, when sediment risk would be greatest.⁹*

If we use the third point here as a measure of when sedimentation is a risk, it would seem that the use of a vehicle on a highly localized piece of land, a track, is enough to cause concern of a serious threat to the survival of a species. What then would the effect of sedimentation as a consequence of a large fire be? The real reason

⁹ *Elmer & Eason Guarantee Act, Action Statement No. 112 Spotted Tree Frog *Litoria Spenceri**

behind the above 'sediment risk' is a hidden agenda of closing down tracks and limiting human access. Preservation.

What we have is environmental discrimination on a grand scale with the intent to cause a cessation to human activity in our forests, whether they do damage or not. During this process the serious threat of catastrophic wildfire was brushed under the carpet. I know there are a lot of documents and management plans pertaining to forest fire management. They read very well but lack, the urgency and 'on the ground' follow up work, in particular fuel reduction burning.

Fuel reduction burning, on one hand, has been diluted as an issue, by the competition it now faces, with the innumerable forest 'values' now in existence. We have landscape values, old growth forest, cultural values, habitat protection scenarios, eco-tourism values and many more 'values', which are now included in management processes. More and more National Parks are being declared, which lack funding or clear administrative processes.

All values must, according to legislation, be included in management planning processes, if that value, is shown to relate in anyway, to the particular area of management and again, we find vaguely written reporting that establishes such relationships. Fuel reduction programs have been significantly affected by this new value system.

Often the values are promoted in such a manner, that it, the value, lends itself to arguments posed by conservation lobby groups. It aids in propping up their self-fulfilling prophecies.

Fuel reduction burning has been further hobbled by the introduction of a vaguely described scientific approach, using ecosystem modeling. The ecosystem approach to management is one, which the scientists and academics themselves, admit to be a theoretical approach based on potentials and predictions.

The introduction of theoretical ecological management has produced a state of confusion with regard to land management. Management priorities have become foggy. The only reason this is not a public issue is because:

- so little fuel reduction burning has occurred since the introduction of ecological management, that any problems caused by the 'scientific' approach, have not been made apparent as yet. It all sounds good on paper though.
- the reality of this problem is not familiar to the public and does not gain attention.
- to raise the issue would invite the accusation that one is anti-environment, when one is not.

Conservationists are playing politics and have a monopoly over our forests due to the legislative powers of flora and fauna management. They have used this authority to discriminate against the human species under an unworkable agenda of preservation. Meanwhile, an irresponsible and negligent attitude has evolved in land management that affects entire landscapes due to distorted methodologies. Long term knowledge and experience of the forests, is being ignored due to political interferences. With all due respect many of these conservationists don't know what they are talking about half the time. Many have extremely limited on the ground experience, in the forests or the environments they talk about. The media and politicians have given them their relevance.

Further, I have noticed that there are people involved in senior management positions who have dubious backgrounds with regards to their expertise and seem more like 'ring ins' to me. They are good in their field I believe but their influence is

not balanced. The people I am thinking of have an influence on fire management, which has been one of discouraging fire.

I had always suspected there might be some favoritism going on, but when I ran into a particular person while working for the Catchment Management Authority, I was assured in my mind that my suspicions were justified. Essentially, this person was a former DSE officer, who had gone out and formed a private environmental consultation firm. He was employed by the CMA to advise on a plant species, that he was to find, we were to pick seed from it and propagate plants for planting. On his arrival he declared to us that he couldn't understand why he had been employed because he had little idea about this plant. So, he gave me a description of it and I took him to it. On arrival, his attention was totally taken by another plant nearby, the Tassel Cord Rush, which he described as endangered and extremely rare. He was very excited about this 'find'. Then I informed him that I knew that plant to exist in many locations in the area we were in. He looked confused. This person is a nice bloke, but he along with other nice blokes are 'ring ins'.

I don't want to go on to much more on this point. I would if I had more confidence in the system but I assure the committee that there are positions held by people that are not deserved. My attention was drawn initially to certain people during the educator dredging parliamentary inquiry in 1990. By sheer coincidence I was made aware of their anomalous positions some years later.

I will quickly mention something here, and it is not a plug. It's concerning the before mentioned parliamentary inquiry into educator gold dredging. Regardless of ones opinion on this equipment, the committee would be well advised to look at what happened then. I was very tempted to blend environmental findings from that inquiry into this submission, just to show the shocking information distortions that took place, some quite relevant to this issue actually. I resisted but the way, that DNRE and its private consultants on hydrology (who just happen to be consultants to the CMA now), went to great lengths to distract attention away from the fact, that mountain rivers, where dredging predominately took place, are prone to flash

flooding. This disturbance was very important as a comparison to the minimal disturbance caused by dredging. They denied it occurred in summer, which was not true. Now when I think of that poor woman fire fighter that was washed off the bridge during these fires, it reminded me of the eductor dredging incident I just described.

THE FLORA and FAUNA GUARANTEE Act.

The Papers White but the Words are Green.

The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act is a piece of legislation that needs thorough investigation. Opinions of people outside the academic circles of biologists and ecologists need to be sought during this investigation. I respect such people's intelligent minds but there are many people who are not academics, however they possess a profound knowledge of the forests within their regions. Knowledge built on life times of direct experience, often under harsh conditions, when you get to know all the moods and swings of Mother Nature.

The FFG Act was essentially a pay off to the conservation movement by politicians in the 1980s. It is the toolbox that allows the conservation movement to manipulate environmental outcomes by nominating a species that needs protection or nominating a process that they see as ecologically threatening and having it removed from that environment. All nominations are anonymous. Many 'action plans' that have been generated from the FFG Act contain a strong element of fire exclusion or a suggestion of that nature, covering significantly large areas. This defies logic when those forests are fire prone and full of fuel.

An investigation, judicial in nature, must seek to verify the validity of nominations, account for any improper conduct between information sources

(including private environmental consultation firms), nominees and employees within the DSE and PV.

As a small matter of interest, approximately 2 years ago I decided to try and have a nomination of a threatening process accepted. It would have read something like this:

Low frequency fires can lead to excessive fuel accumulation that as a consequence contributes to the intensity and extent of wildfire events, making them ecologically unsustainable.

I was surprised, when I found wildfire was not listed as a threatening processes, especially since the conservation minister at the time of Ash Wednesday, was to become the premier who introduced this Act and she won her election due to the greens party preferences.

Anyhow, not long after I had made a few inquiries regarding my nomination, low and behold this is nominated by somebody and accepted as a threatening process under the FFG Act:

'High frequency fire resulting in disruption of life cycle processes in plants and animals and loss of vegetation structure and composition'

Being an anonymous nomination process, I don't know who it was but I would guess it was the Victorian National Parks Association, the Australian Conservation Foundation or an associate of a flora and fauna researcher in DSE. I had inquired with these groups and made my intentions clear regarding my nomination. This is the sort of games the radical conservationists play.

There is clear potential for 'insider trading' of important environmental information. Information critical to the understanding of an issue is either trickle fed to the public, held as unpublished reports or intellectual property within government

departments or disseminated in such a way that it is the conservation groups, which have almost exclusive privilege to information or management processes.

I believe a clear case exists that shows certain people may have set up a circuit of information designed to discriminate against certain human activities with the clear intention of eliminating them completely, regardless of their impact on the environment. In so doing the human being as a species has been discriminated against and subsequently the humans place in the environment has been largely ignored. This must have a profound affect on ecological management issues with regard to historic human manipulation and historic human relationships with the environment.

The following extract from the FFG Act further highlights the deliberate attempts to remove humans from the 'natural' environment.

*'Fauna means any animal alive which is indigenous to Victoria whether vertebrate or invertebrate in any stage of biological development and includes fish and any other living thing generally classified as fauna but does not include humans'*¹⁰

Last time I checked I was a mammal, as are aborigines. We are animals aren't we?

By excluding humans the wording and over-riding authority of conservation strategies in land management has taken the attention away from important historic ecological events, such as the use of fire by aboriginals to clear undergrowth from forested areas. I believe the inclusion of humans and therefore aborigines, as a faunal species, would introduce facts on ecological disturbance processes that would cause ecosystem modeling to become useless. This would be due to the random nature of and significant disturbance caused by historic wildfire. The variations in ecological

¹⁰ Flora And Fauna Guarantee Act, 1983, pp 3

values caused by such major disruption would be incalculable but the catastrophic potential of fire remains regardless.

This is a quote from Tim Low's book *The New Nature* (2002), a book in which he discusses the devastating effect the removal of fire has had on many parts of this country. This is a comment on ecological management.

*'The ecosystem engineers theory has a problem of scale. For an ant, the scratchings of every mouse and lizard count as major engineering feats, implying that most animals are engineers. The theory also fails to accommodate abiotic engineering generated by fire and floods.'*¹¹

Further people such as prospectors, fishermen, farmers and timber workers are all humans with a long-term connection with the forests of Victoria. They have the potential to provide our current society with invaluable and intuitive knowledge on areas known to them. They too should be included in ecological modeling and consultancies, as part of evolutionary ecology. The following is a diary extract from a gold-miner, Athol Christie, working alluvial deposits on the Jordan River. It refers to observations made following the 1939 Black Friday fires:

*'Before the fire there were little fish in all the small creeks flowing into the Jordan, they could be seen in all the small pools, the fire killed them all and they were never any small fish in the creeks again.'*¹²

*'The place was burnt out in the 1939 bushfire - only one house in the township escaped, it had a big green oak tree alongside it and also bare gravel flat in the direction the fire came from.'*¹³

¹¹ *The New Nature* (2002), by Tim Low, pp 57.

¹² *Diary of Athol Christie, A Gippsland Goldfield History*, by J.G. Rogers, pp 188

The U.S. WILDFIRES - EERIE SIMILARITIES

With the introduction of the internet, it enabled me to closely follow the events prior to, during and after massive wildfire events, that were experienced in the United States during the years 1999 -2002, in which over 10 million hectares of their forests burnt in catastrophic fires. I spent a significant amount of time studying all sides of the story on websites and closely monitored the U.S. governments, House of Representatives, Committee on Resources.

"The exploding threat of large-scale catastrophic wildfires and massive insect and disease epidemics combine to pose the single largest challenge facing federal land and resources managers today." said Congressman Scott McInnis (R-CO).¹⁴

Many hearings followed these fires, which exposed a disturbing trend of mis-management and cover up, concerning a number of forest management issues, which many people had been saying strong and loud for many years in that country. Issues that had been continually raised included, concerns over the decades of forest fuel accumulation that existed over huge, contiguous landscapes and the refusal of authorities to recognize its wildfire potential. Concerns from many groups were raised, of their belief that the authorities were totally unaccountable for their actions and that radical green politics had brought with it an element of exaggeration, that was good for publicity in their earlier days but later became dangerous and discriminatory management practices.

It was said and later proven, that many listed endangered species were in fact not endangered and that the Endangered Species Act was being abused routinely¹⁵, for the purposes of unjustifiably taking authority over land tenures or changing the tenure

¹³ Jericho on the Jordan, A Gippsland Goldfield History, by J.G. Rogers, pp 188.

¹⁴ <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov> Document titled "House Resources Committee approves Healthy Forests Restoration Act"

¹⁵ <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov> Refer to Endangered Species Act reform and the Lynx fraud for background

completely. As an example, forest service employees were found to have 'planted' fur samples of a lynx at sampling stations in the forest. The sampling stations were rub posts, designed to signify the existence of the endangered listed Lynx cat in an area not having records of this species.

The current scientific standard for decisions is the best scientific and commercial data available. Such a standard is really no standard, because it would permit listing on the basis of a single master's thesis, if that were the only, or best data available.¹⁶

Numbers of endangered species were found to have similar anomalies, some with more serious consequences. Nominated species under their ESA, clearly affect the management of (human) activities in the U.S., including the use of prescribed fire to reduce fuel or even the water to put out the fires where necessary.

The lives of four firefighters were lost, it was said, due to delays caused to water extraction from the nearby Klamath River by water bombers. The delays were caused over a salmon species listed as endangered, that lived in this river and the 'disturbance' concerns, that water extraction may cause to its 'critical' habitat. A more thorough investigation into this species listing process, found the salmon was in fact not endangered at all.

The U.S. of course is another country, 1000's of kilometres across the sea; however, this is certainly no reason to dismiss drawing attention to particular forces at play in that country, when discussing issues of forest and other land management in Victoria.

History repeating itself

Back then, wrongheaded government leaders refused to fund roads and trails for the management of our forests. Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the USDA Forest Service, talked publicly about "the bias" and "the bullheadedness" of the people blocking proactive forest management.

¹⁶ <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov> Testimony of Mr. Carl Loop, Vice President, American Farm Bureau Federation, President, Florida Farm Bureau, Before Committee on Resources, September 20, 1995.

.....
To put this tragedy in perspective, we lost about 2.3 million acres of land under Forest Service protection during three months of ferocious wildfires last year. I can't conceive of the loss of three million acres and nearly 100 men in 48 hours.¹⁷

The vegetation may be different in the U.S. but we have almost identical circumstances, where fire and the evolutionary role it plays, in certain forests, has become a serious ecological threat in modern times, due to excessive fuel loads.

Some of the major highlights of this report include:

The most extensive and serious problem related to health of national forests in the interior West is the over accumulation of vegetation, which has caused an increasing number of large, intense, uncontrollable, and catastrophically destructive wildfires.

Experts agree that catastrophic fires will prevent the Forest Service from meeting its mission requirement to sustain the national forests' multiple uses because the fires damage soils, habitat, and watershed functions for many generations or even permanently.

¹⁸

Our environmental legislation and management frameworks here in Victoria are also similar, if not the same. Their green groups act in the same way, using the same publicity techniques, often using similar species or issues as a platform. The only major difference is they have access to the courts. However, this extract from the Australian Greens Party policy paper¹⁹ reads:

2.4.9 Strengthen, implement, and enforce, the

** Code of Forest Practices,*

** Flora and Fauna Guarantee act,*

¹⁷ <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov> Congressman James V. Hansen, (1st District - Utah) Chairman, Committee on Resources; U.S. House of Representatives; 'America, where it stood a century ago. On the threshold of devastating fire', *September 7, 2001*

¹⁸ <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov> Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health Briefing Paper

Oversight Hearing on: the GAO report entitled, "A Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats."

June 29, 1999

** Heritage Rivers act, and*

** Wildlife act.*

and provide individuals and organisations a right to take legal actions where these laws are breached.

In the U.S, it was found, that the legally literate within the conservation movement, had instigated lawsuits to stop many fuel reduction burns, claiming it was an ecological threat.

A USDA internal report²⁰ outlining reasons for delays in reducing fire hazards will be discussed at tomorrow's hearing. In Fiscal year 2002, the USDA proposed cutting down excess small trees that could fuel forest fires in 326 instances across the nation. Nearly half - 155 - of those projects have been delayed by administrative appeals. A score of these cases ended up in court.

In Arizona, a state plagued with wildfires, 75 percent of the fuel load reduction plans were appealed. In Montana, another state buffeted this summer by fierce fire, 100 percent of the fuel-reduction plans were appealed.²¹

The conservation lobby groups then denied this until the U.S. government revealed documentation that showed indeed they had. The irresponsibility of these groups until then had been ignored, due to political influences. Of course, like in Australia, these environmental groups are Non Government Organisations (NGO) and enjoy the position of legal immunity. This anomaly must be addressed as an urgent matter. While I believe that Victorian conservation groups do not have this legal avenue, due to there being no 'bill of rights' in this country. Instead the 'community' in Victoria was given the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act in 1988. Discussed earlier in this submission.

²⁰ USDA internal report Factors Affecting Timely Mechanical Fuel Treatment Decisions - USDA Forest Service - July 2002

MY SUMMARY

- The modern wildfire is a national problem. These fires do not recognize borders or human land tenures, so therefore, the federal government should be given authority over the management of it and treat it as a national emergency. I would envisage the state departments to still undertake 'on the ground' works, fuel reduction burning, track maintenance, etc.
- Considering successive state governments have created a confusion of environmental management values, along with associated departments, branches, sections and groups, for the sake of simplicity and with regard to the wildfire threat, a system of accountability must be introduced into the equation. The accountability system must have penalties that reflect the potential threat to social, cultural, environmental and economic values that wildfire poses.
- Flora and fauna methodologies need a system of accountability that reflects the significant effect (potential and real), it has on land management, especially fuel reduction programs. More checks need to be put in place with regard to 'field surveys' and species status reporting.
- The description and potential of wildfire must be clearly stated and a measure of disturbance based on a rating system, introduced. The full potential as an ecological threat, must be defined and prioritized in all issues of land management, where wildfire, has the potential to create that threat.

- A system of judicial re-course needs to be established that discourages political opportunism on matters of the environment.
- The public does not really have access to important information held by land management departments. Often information is spread over a number of regional offices with no central repository. The use of unpublished reports and personnel communications often disallows the public, especially those affected by particular decisions, to verify or challenge management plans. This makes the notion of community input, a much heralded attribute of today's society, a notion that is meaningless. All documents, reports and management plans should be published on the internet.
- Professional relationships between particular entities of DSE, Parks Victoria, Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and private consultation firms need to be explored to ensure that a monopoly on crucial information does not exist. The veracity of information processing, between such groups needs to be investigated. There is a strong perception amongst many people experienced with forests that some 'experts' are making it up as they go along.
- Local experience should be fully utilized where appropriate on all issues of land management. The environmental discriminatory practices of the last two+ decades need to be recognized and remedied. Many individuals and groups with vast experience have been ignored.
- The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act needs a complete overhaul. Nominees should be made public as should details of their nominations. Information accepted is often too broad and open to (deliberate) mis-interpretation. Committees such as the Scientific

Advisory Committee (SAC) must be more representative of the community. The SAC must also be interchangeable, to allow for regional differences to be accommodated, and the expertise that is available from a region. Currently the SAC is weighted with a biased panel.

- The human species should be included in all descriptions of fauna and recognized for its significant place in evolutionary ecology.
- The creation of Parks Victoria is a precursor to privatisation. The environment is not like a suburb or city that can be broken up into smaller areas jurisdiction. The wildfire threat is an overwhelming issue of management across entire forested regions. The creation of fiefdoms of all shapes and sizes, further distracts from the most serious environmental issues, in favor of publicity programming and self promoting lip service. Parks Victoria has created a perception of land management that has conveniently avoided, to a greater degree, the most serious ecological threats in our forests. The bottom line is Parks Victoria and other environmental bodies are not accountable for what it does and what they say. This 'body corporate', if not held accountable for its actions, will ruin our environment, continue to cause unnecessary social division, deny economic opportunities and unjustifiably take access away to our forests, while claiming to 'manage' for all people.
- The introduction of fee systems for 'use' of our forests is about to escalate. I see this as no more than an unjustified revenue collection, to justify the out of control and burgeoning land management structure that exists. It also is about providing a revenue structure for those who buy our natural assets and entire landscapes.

- The track network in the forest should be maintained and extended to allow access by fire crews. They should be open to the public so as they are kept free of vegetation and blockages by fallen trees and rocks. I cannot count the number of times I have cleared fallen debris from tracks. It should be investigated, whether the closing of access tracks to forests is not a green agenda based on a preservation policy gone mad. Many tracks that exist today are old mining tracks that have changed very little in time. Mountain sides have not slipped away or rivers have not filled with extra sediment. The earlier conservation movement put up spurious claims regarding the disturbance to the environment caused by tracks in the bush.
- The Greens Party aim to allow court access to the public, over issues of the environment, should not be allowed. Publicity stunts and exaggerations by certain green groups have set a dangerous precedence of intent. People think all these greens mean well etc. etc. but really they need to grow up. The politicians who have empowered them should hang their heads in shame for the way they have placed our environment in their hands. Open slather to the courts, would do no more than create a further hindrance to land management, especially fuel reduction programs, as has been shown to occur in the United States.
- The public should be made more aware of the wildfire situation in overseas countries, especially the United States. Links should be provided on the DSE website to the House of Representatives, Committee of Resources website highlighting the wildfire hearings that have occurred in recent years, so a broader, international perspective is given. Their flora and fauna may be different but overall, the threat of wildfire to our respective

environments is more or less the same. An inquiry should be made to establish whether this was a deliberate attempt by authorities to keep a lid on this subject.

- o The public should be made aware, that it is a matter of fact, that conservation programs going back to the 1800s in Australia, have wrought devastating results on the environment. Such programs were good natured but ill conceived, causing great damage to environments. This should be recognized, for it is the conservation movement who deals directly with, and seeks to consciously manipulate living systems, over entire landscapes. Never in history has such a concerted and detailed approach been attempted and if you consider the exaggerated claims and denial of facts that helped promote and establish the conservation movement groups, during the 1970-80s, it is of great concern that these groups remain unchallenged to this day. At least not publicly. A lot of people have jumped on the bandwagon and now boast of being green. In a way this is good but lets make sure this energy is used properly and not to support a covert political agenda that discriminates and introduces extreme ideologies that won't work in the long run.

When I go back and read my summary I shrink to a degree for it does not really describe my thoughts and attitude to this subject. For example, I am actually far kinder and more understanding to the conservation movement, in my thoughts than is apparent in this submission. In fact my earlier life included living on Bouganville, Solomon Islands in the mid 1970s. I became quite a little jungle boy during this time. The jungle started at our back fence and I did many a reeve into the jungle with other boys in the camp and my indigenous friends. I saw the effects of the Panguna copper mine including the filth that ran down mountain rivers from this mine and down

through remote mountain country to the other side of the island. I came back to Australia very much with thoughts of indigenous 'rights' and of the environment on my mind. Since that time I have had a close affiliation with many different natural environments, on land and underwater.

Regardless of this, I lost everything I owned once to a wildfire. I witnessed first hand this monster move over different landscapes. I later had my hobby banned for no good reason, with irreversible damage to the environment being cited as the reason. Now my freedom is being taken away to wander over the mountains. I was later to discover that this conservation movement was common to all these problems. I did not have to dig too deep to see that they often told profound lies and that they were given a free ticket by the authorities and the media to do so.

The time to be nice, or politically correct, is a waste of time these days, as both of these attributes today, are often no more than publicity stunts in themselves.

Regardless of my problems and attitudes, I know one thing, the urban and political influence on the forests of the great divide, based on current conservation principles and methodologies, will see the forests burn in catastrophic wildfire events. I am sure a judicial inquiry into these matters will be strenuously avoided by the relevant authorities, however, that is what is needed. The politicians, the academics and green groups, have painted themselves and our environment into a corner.

The last thing to say I suppose is, bye bye forests. That is the reality, lets face it. 'Managed' destruction, I'd call it, as I jump down from my soapbox.

Stewart Stastra