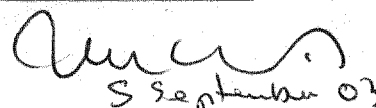


Re – Enquiry into the incidence of bushfires


5 September 03

Background

I have been associated with the lands of Morton-Budawang National Parks for well over forty years. Over this time I have witnessed a change from an area virtually unknown to one that is today probably one of the most popular bushwalking destinations in the State.

In 1970 the boundary of the Morton Primitive area at Bundanoon was extended south of the Shoalhaven River to Pigeon House Mountain embracing the lower Shoalhaven River catchment area and that of the Clyde and Endrick Rivers. More recently in the light of greater knowledge and appreciation of the intrinsic cultural and biological heritage values these lands are now managed as wilderness.

Up until the mid 1960's over much of what is open savannah woodland and swamp plains there had been grazing. A practice carried out for the previous 70 to 80 years. There had also been logging, mining and isolated harvesting of wattle bark for the tanneries in Nowra.

It was not prized grazing country as the trace element deficiency weakened the bones of the stock and they could only be left there for around 6 to 8 weeks at a time. Together with the prevailing damp conditions this combined to make the area unsuited for cattle. From an agricultural perspective the areas only value was as a stop over for cattle en route to the coast or for low scale winter relief.

During the 1960's the changing attitudes towards land use gathered momentum. A more enlightened view towards natural area management and 30 years of community pressure saw these areas, mostly crown land declared as National Parks under the control of the NPWS.

Fire Trail Management

Around 1965 and probably in the anticipation of National Park declaration a labyrinth of fire trails were constructed. These were by and large ill conceived, un surveyed and unplanned and at the time appeared to demonstrate a little appreciation of the fragile landscape as they did for the knowledge of fire and fire management. It did expose a fear of the unknown of what natural area management is about. The trails were simply a series of bulldozer tracks that penetrated the vast swamp plains on the plateaus and high altitude valleys and along ridge lines. This frenzy of dozer activity exposed the fragile lands to severe degradation. In many places these trails were simply an extension of what had in the past been old logging trails.

In the fullness of time the history of events has revealed they were ill conceived as many were abandoned as having no value for strategic fire management in the dissected rugged terrain and therefore their maintenance could not be justified. Ones having fire management value have been maintained by the NPWS.

Revegetation

Today in many places particularly in the former grazing lands we are witnessing a transition of the grazing induced modification of vegetation to what existed in pre European times. Many walkers who visited the area in the 50s and 60's would be today conscious of the domination of shrubs such as hakea. Yet nature in the fullness of time will adjust the imbalance. As other species re establish from existing seed stocks or from seeds carried in from adjacent country there will be a regeneration of the heath that formerly covered these lands. This is what National Parks and Wilderness are about. As the Wilderness guidelines refer, lands considered for this status are in part those that have the capacity to be returned to some representation of the vegetation existing prior to European settlement.

Fire Management and Natural Area Protection.

One of the experiences revealed not just with the fires over the last 2 years but with monotonous regularity has been the lack of understanding and tolerance by the some community sectors of what natural area

management is about. The history of fire activity should play a key role in any strategic planning and fire management process. This also includes the importance of fire in the ecological balance and biodiversity and the maintenance of natural vegetation patterns.

Many of our national parks have a logging and mining component in their history and therefore have a network of old vehicle trails used for that activity but had little fire management value. With the transition to National Park the strategic review of these roads under their new status has often rendered them of little use. The general approach across all land tenures is to only maintain those roads required for a purpose given the status of the land. If the status changes ie from state forest to national park then the existence of the road will be reviewed. Logic dictates that the money will be spent where it is needed. I am aware that for this reason, all public land managers in the Shoalhaven, including NPWS are undertaking a coordinated review of all trails in the region to determine their fire management across land tenures.

In doing so, it is important to look at fire history. For instance in the remote Endrick Trail we have a detailed knowledge of the fire events along this trail and throughout much of this area covering back to 1949 and even 1939. Although fire has occurred in different locations every 10 to 13 years the entire area has never been totally ablaze. The fact is that although the Endrick Trail has been targeted for maintenance and expensive periodic upgrade it has only once in recent history been used or required for fire management. The other important issue is that the incidence of fire is greater at the urban interface than that coming from remote the protected areas.

In the Xmas 2002 New Year period NPWS allowed the Endrick Trail to be used as a fire control line. A plan of approach to slashing considered necessary along the Endrick trail was negotiated and agreed on in order to provide a line from which the fire could be managed. The tragic consequences of these plans being ignored and bulldozers in the field running apparently unrestrained and without accountability and showing their disregard of the values is now painfully obvious. This activity has left such massive degrading and damage that it is difficult to envisage a regeneration to normality for this area along the Endrick Trail.

This example highlights the need for greater tolerance, understanding and the responsibilities of all parties and accountability that even volunteers must accept on these occasions.

Surely there is a need for greater understanding of issues and responsibility and therefore cooperation if this outcome is to be avoided in future.

Recommendations

- 1) That grazing is not an appropriate fire management technique in national parks or reserves.
- 2) That it be recognized that not all trails are fire trails and that authorities should cooperatively identify strategic trails taking into account fire history.
- 3) That strategic trails be maintained and not excessively widened on-ground during fire suppression without prior authorization.
- 4) That the protection of natural and cultural values be recognized as important along with the protection of built assets.
- 5) That it be recognized that the fires of the last 2 years have occurred under extreme drought and weather conditions and that NPWS played an active role in fire suppression.

R. Snedden
On behalf of
Kevin Mills

Chairman District Advisory Committee South Coast Region NPWS