

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY



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Emeritus Professor Ken Taylor AM
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Mr G Nairn MP
Chair
House of Representatives Select Committee
Recent Bushfires.

Dear Mr Nairn,

I realise that the closing date for submissions to the above inquiry has passed, but I wonder if you would be prepared to accept my comments. I wish to submit the enclosed newspaper article as the basis of my submission and make the following points.

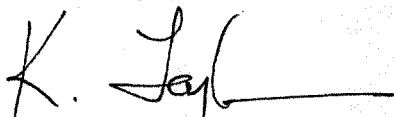
- Historical evidence of the way the landscape in the park area around the national capital has changed over the last two hundred years since European settlement is I believe underplayed by managers of our national parks.
- Those of us interested in reading the landscape are clear that, since the early descriptions by explorers and settlers of the open wooded country with grass predominantly as an understorey, the forest areas have become more impenetrable and loaded with ground fuel.
- There is no tangible evidence to suggest that there has been a previous fire of such catastrophic magnitude in the last two hundred years and no hard evidence that such an event might have occurred in the period leading up to settlement. There have been fires as we know, but their extent and ferocity does not approach the January 2003 event.
- The conditions of January were certainly conducive to fire but were not in my opinion the result of circumstances that will not happen again. The drought and the heat were the last straw for a landscape waiting to burn. The circumstances are likely to recur unless a sensible program of controlled burning is initiated.
- The argument that burning will destroy ecosystems and fauna habitats sits oddly with the richness of flora and fauna when Europeans arrived and extolled the open, parklike, wooded landscape which many of us claim was the result of Aboriginal management through burning. My article briefly gives examples.
- The build-up of fuel is equally of concern in the urban bushland areas of Canberra. I refer specifically to Black Mountain adjacent to where I live. It is loaded with ground fuel up

to the urban fringe and is in my opinion an unacceptable hazard. It is not a quasi-wilderness but part of an urban open space system. I read briefly last week that the ACT government has allocated money for some controlled burning on Black Mountain and elsewhere. It needs more than this for it is difficult to see how burning can be readily undertaken next to house blocks without some danger or without a result of inadequate burning. In particular some parts on the fringe are likely to need mechanical equipment to remove the worst of the build-up. I am in no doubt of the fact that the fire at Caswell Drive interchange in December 2001 which drastically reduced fuel availability, substantially saved Aranda on the night of January 18. In addition was the efforts of the firefighters. But they were greatly helped by the low fuel load and later wind shift. Without the reduced fuel load however it is highly likely the fire would have raced up Black Mountain into Aranda, over into The ANU and across the city to Mount Ainslie etc. It is about twelve years ago that such a scene was predicted as possible in an article in *The Canberra Times*. I recall the scoffing by the environmental lobby.

There have been reports to various ACT governments (and I presume to the NSW authorities) on the advisability of reducing ground fuel. It appears these have been successively ignored and it would be interesting to know on whose recommendation. I understand that some ten years ago in one such paper it was suggested that there ought to be a 100 metre zone around wooded suburban edges where shrubs and accumulated ground material should be kept removed. Nothing happened.

- It would be appropriate for conservation and park services to seek the input from historians on landscape change over time rather than keep denying that such change has occurred or has been minimal and to look seriously at how mosaic patterns of burning after Aboriginal practice could be implemented and sustain ecological diversity.
- The constant creation of national parks and reserves by politicians without adequate funding to manage them is inappropriate and reckless.
- National Park Services ought to be required to prepare management plans with differing zones including areas of buffers on and around their edges.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Ken Taylor
21 May 2003