

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives

Submission:

Having worked in the Dargo High Plains area near Mr Hotham, Victoria for eight years between 1980 and 1989, and having been associated with, and lived in, the bush for a large portion of my life, I have noted a dramatic decline in native animals that eat the grass and young shoots, and forage on undergrowth. I also saw a marked increase in the numbers of wild dogs and feral cats, which have decimated native animals. I believe this in part contributed toward why the recent bushfires in Victoria and NSW were so fierce.

I believe the reasons for this are:

- Old Timers have told me that when the possums were trapped out many years ago, the young tree seedlings and new shoots were not eaten down, resulting in an increase in dense undergrowth and less natural clearings of grassed areas
- I personally witnessed a lot of large dogs which run in packs in the bush, that have originally been brought there by deer shooters, who lose them in the course of their hunt. These dogs have hunted down and killed out most of the kangaroos, wallabies and wombats, which again foraged on grass etc. During my time in the alps, it got that way that I wouldn't walk without carrying a large stick good enough to beat off a couple of large dogs if necessary.
- Wild cats prey on lyrebirds and other ground dwelling birds. The lyrebirds like to scratch the undergrowth and turn it over, which results in fallen matter rotting quicker. Their depletion means that dried debris remains on top of the forest floor, increasing fuel.
- Now that cattle have been removed from many areas where they were grazed during the summer, there are no animals to keep the grass and undergrowth down.
- With few grass eating animals and birds left to spread dung on the ground, the bacteria that breeds in it, which helps break down forest floor matter, is not distributed.
- Historically Mountain Cattlemen lit fuel reduction fires mainly in the autumn, to burn out ridges and other overgrown areas on their leases, to create firebreaks for the next summer. These fires, which burnt slowly, mainly went out in the cool of the evening, and encouraged green grass to shoot, providing food for native animals.

Solutions to these problems are:

- Stop deer shooters taking dogs into the bush
- Allow cattle back into the bush where they previously ran. In areas where there is a risk of damage to the environment such as soaks, bog holes etc. a requirement of the lease would be that farmers fence these areas off. Farmers would also be responsible for vermin and weed control on their runs
- The current system by Governments of control and decision making is too one-sided, and doesn't include local knowledge and hands on experience, or allow ownership of environmental solutions by local communities. This has resulted in many small rural communities feeling disenfranchised, and lacking in pride in their own area. This could be changed with the introduction of a "Bush Landcare" program for the bush, controlled by a committee of local interest groups. This committee would have four representatives,

one from each of the following: Land users, Recreation groups, fire brigade, and a Govt. representative from either Parks/forestry/council etc. The Govt and Firebrigade representatives are nominated while the land users and recreation representatives would be elected by local ratepayers. It is important that the committee is established in such a way that it can't be "hijacked" by any one interest group. These programs would operate out of each locally defined area, where decisions would be made re where/when reduction burning is to be carried out. They would also be responsible for their area within National Parks, responsible for identifying vermin and noxious weed control, control of water catchment areas, logging and mining, tourism, walking tracks, cattle leases, etc., while working closely with Govt departments to ensure local and national interests.

- Set up a web site for Australia Wide for "bush land care". Communities could report ideas, share experiences, advertise their area including parks and attractions, and share their area of interest, which would assist other groups with ideas. Bush land care groups could even advertised "holidays" for those interested in joining local communities on projects such as extermination of vermin, clearing noxious weeds, etc. or beautifying recreation areas, walking tracks etc. These could also be used by schools & universities for students studying environmental science and land care management to get hands on experience. The Internet site would also allow visitors to the area to report back to the local group re needs within an area eg. potential dangers, fallen trees on tracks/in rivers, erosion etc. that need attending to. A true community development approach which enables anyone within the local or greater community to participate actively in making a difference to the environment.
- The Dept. of Land/parks/forestry/conservation would be responsible for providing administrative support to the bush land care committee and the web site, and for the allocation of money to ensure funds are available for identified projects.

Yours truly,

Ken Scott