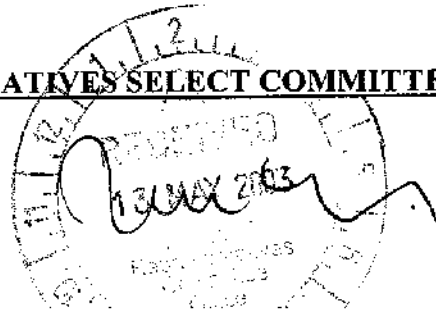


**SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SELECT COMMITTEE ON  
THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES**

**COLONG FOUNDATION FOR WILDERNESS  
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Submission No.243

**TERMS OF REFERENCE**

**The Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires seeks to identify measures that can be implemented by governments, industry and the community to minimise the incidence of, and impact of bushfires on, life, property and the environment with specific regard to the following.**

Too often community and industry expectations are evaluated in isolation, with associated ecological impacts reviewed in isolation. This is particularly relevant when land management practices are reviewed within the bureaucratic isolation of state boundaries. The bushfires in the Australian Alps were a classic example.

**1. Response to specific terms of reference.**

**(a) the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;**

Strategic planning for, and management of, bushfires needs to consider land tenure. Land tenures with the primary objective of conservation of ecological systems require planning and management systems which prioritise ecological values. This is mandated through legislation that has undergone the rigours of parliamentary debate and other due process. Public scrutiny is often a part of this due process. It is important that the Committee appreciates the importance of such land tenures to the ecological sustainability of Australia's ecosystems and appreciates the State, Federal and International obligations to do so.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) manages public land which has been reserved primarily for nature conservation. However, its bushfire management protocols also prioritise the protection of human life and property. With respect to the practicalities which follow, it is crucial that National Park infrastructure is minimised so that its protection does not require reduced response to, and therefore increased impacts of, fire in other regions of the Park. The Colong Foundation is extremely concerned about increasing expropriations that National Parks provide levels of infrastructure for activities that would be better placed off park.

In the 2002-03 Kosciuszko National Park fires, maximising efforts to protect the private assets of resort leaseholders in Perisher Blue and Thredbo compromised NPWS legislative responsibilities to protect the natural values of the Park. Plans for increased use of the NSW ski resorts throughout the year will exacerbate this management paradox.

The Colong Foundation presents the view that the resorts would be better located outside the Park within a regional tourism framework and this case has been put to NSW Members of Parliament in late 2002, including the then Ministers, and Shadow Ministers, for Environment and Planning.

We request that the Committee review ski industry expectations in the light of the recent fires.

It is an unfortunate view that the burden of land management for both public land and private land providing essential services for the greater public good should have to bear the financial burden of sound ecologically sustainable management practices. It is Colong Foundation's view that both public and private lands should be managed with the priority of ecological sustainability. There needs to be public recognition of the true value of such management services, and mechanisms to provide appropriate budgets for public land managers and substantial financial relief to private land managers to manage land sustainably.

In the case of private landholders living adjacent to public lands, such ecologically sustainable land management practices, in sympathy with the lands they adjut, is crucial. Such a view requires a recognition that such communities should not bear any increased financial burden in instigating management practices in sympathy with the public lands near them. The costs should be borne equitably by all members of our society.

Further, these landholders should be encouraged to recognise the bases for the legislative responsibilities of public land managers of conservation reserves. However, while the views of adjacent land managers are obviously relevant to attaining a good working relationship with the bureaucracies that manage public lands which adjut them, public lands need to be managed sustainably for their primary purpose, for the the greater public good.

Since the Committee is set up under the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth, it is in a position to make far reaching recommendations in relation to cost sharing, by recommending increased monetary outlay for ecological sustainable practice. This could include an increase in the environment budget, fiscal mechanisms for reducing the burden on individual landholders and increasing the imposition of specific levies for industries who seek to place ecologically sustainable land practices at risk.

**(b) the causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property;**

An Independent Scientific Committee (ISC) consisting of some of Australia's most eminent experts in their various fields is providing advice to the current review of the Kosciuszko National Park Plan of Management.

In respect to fire, the ISC has presented a detailed analysis of past and current land management practices in the Park in its Interim Report, published in late 2002. The analysis reviewed the impacts of past grazing and broad acre burning practices. The ISC analysis substantiates the Colong Foundation position that such practices were not only detrimental to the ecological systems of the Park but were also poor management practices in relation to fire prevention and suppression (Refer Appendix A: attached Fiona McCrossin Page 2 13/05/2003pdf file and Appendix B). The ISC is currently completing a supplementary analysis relating to the 2002-3 fires in the Park. The Colong Foundation requests that the Parliamentary Committee incorporate the ISC findings, as supplied in the attached pdf file (Appendix A) and Appendix B, into its analysis and access the supplementary report (or its draft) from the ISC through the NSW NPWS.

Blaming park management for bush fires is a favourite ploy of the opponents of national parks. Mr. Brian Gilligan, Director General of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, has rubbished their claim. He said that statistics showed that over the past seven years only 9 per cent of fires which began in national parks or reserves escaped park boundaries. Yet 22 per cent of fires which affected national parks started outside them. The notion of trying to fire proof Australian landscape was absurd - "the thing is, the land has burnt historically regardless of who owned and who was managing it." (As reported in SMH).

Brian Gilligan's assessment is confirmed by a group of 15 scientists with vast experience in fire ecology (Refer Appendix C). Speaking for the group, Professor Rob Whelan (Dean of Science at Wollongong University) expressed deep concern at the misleading and inaccurate statements about the fires. "National parks," he said, "are not the reason for these fires. More extreme hazard reduction in forests will not guarantee protection from fires in extreme conditions, but will threaten biodiversity."

**(c) the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;**

The ISC Report reflects the Colong Foundation view on appropriate methodologies for management of fire in conservation reserves.

While appreciating the traditional differentiation between "economic" and "environmental" impacts, the Colong Foundation is working towards a greater understanding and incorporation of environmental economic analysis of different planning and management options. Such analysis would lead to a greater incorporation of the true ecological costs of different management options.

Methodology for environmental economic analysis exists, and the Colong Foundation requests that the Committee seek expert evidence from an environmental economist on how such methodology could be used, or further developed, to assess the environmental costs of different strategies for bushfire prevention and control.

**(d) appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices;**

Different land tenures lead to different management outcomes. The degree of environmental protection associated with management outcomes is often dictated by legislation and/ or policy. In the case of NSW public lands, legislation dictates that different tenures offer differing degrees of environmental protection. It follows that the land management practices used by State Forests NSW are inappropriate for National Parks and Nature Reserves. Indeed, NPWS submissions to Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) produced by the Forestry Commission of NSW have questioned the ecological sustainability of Forestry Commission practices.

It is important to recognise that during the 2002-2003 fire season, a number of organisations found it opportunistic to use the fires to elevate their own land management agendas. Such opportunistic calls were ethically inappropriate. One opportunistic agenda was presented by NAFL in recommending that "waste" should be removed from the "forest floors" of national parks (refer extract below). This concept of "forest waste" has erroneously been used to substantiate woodchipping in State Forest lands and has absolutely no ecological basis in land managed for nature conservation. Structural diversity is essential for ecological sustainability in forests, and is an absolute in land managed for nature conservation such as national parks and nature reserves. It is prudent to recognise that this opportunistic rhetoric occurred during the bushfires and may need to be taken into account when assessing the validity of some submissions advocating particular land use practices.

**Extract from: Forest industries push for National Park backburning**

**The World Today** - Tuesday, January 21, 2003 12:10

ELEANOR HALL: Kate Carnell, well you heard that there from Brian Gilligan. He says that the proposal is utter nonsense. What was your response from the Prime Minister when you met him to talk about a radical re-think of our National Parks?

KATE CARNELL: I didn't meet him this morning. I sent a letter to him and I hope to catch up a little bit later with, with John Anderson today. But, ah, what, what was said then really isn't what we're talking about.

Certainly hazard reduction burns need to happen and they need to happen at appropriate times from a, from the perspective of weather. But is point 7 per cent of the total, say NSW, I think 5.5 million hectares of National Parks are hazard-reduction burnt last year acceptable. If that's all that can be done, then we have to look at other ways of doing it.

ELEANOR HALL: What other ways though? I mean as Brian Gilligan says, the issue is the weather.

KATE CARNELL: No, well, it isn't the weather at all. That might be the case with, with back-burning in certain areas. You know, the United States has had, had similar problems over the last few years as everyone would know with significant fires in National Parks, and what they announced, or President Bush announced last August I think, was a healthy forest initiative which significantly changed the whole way National Parks were managed.

Certainly lots more back-burning, but also active harvest-based management, thinning, getting rid of waste on forest floors in a sustainable manner in sensible areas. So what we're talking about is certainly hazard reduction, but also maintaining trails so there's capacity for fire crews to get into these areas which there isn't at the moment. Providing adequate staffing, equipment, infrastructure and so on to stop what happened in Canberra on Saturday happening again.

**The Colong Foundation supports the post fire recovery programmes outlined on the NPWS website such as:**

- ensuring that post-fire feral animal control programs are in place to minimise the additional pressures on native species;
- restricting access or close fire affected areas to minimise disturbance to burnt ground and habitats;
- implementing appropriate bush regeneration and erosion control programs;
- continuing important research and survey work to monitor population recovery;
- refining fire management strategies to avoid further burning of some areas remote from park boundaries for at least 10-15 years so that the plant and animal communities can properly recover;

A post-fire recovery and rehabilitation programme has been produced for Kosciuszko National Park. The essence of such a programme is adaptive management. The programme focuses on the ecological recovery programmes for threatened species, ecological communities, rehabilitation of tracks and trails, maintaining water quality to towns and resorts and protecting sensitive communities. Perhaps it is pertinent to note that the total cost of this programme is less than the average house price in some enclaves of suburban Sydney.

**(e) any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;**

The ISC provided a proposal for management in Kosciuszko National Park. The Colong Foundation supports their approach.

- (f) the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires;**

The Colong Foundation places the onus firmly on the shoulders of the owners of both private property on private land and the leaseholders on public land to follow stringent guidelines in the planning and management of their homes, buildings and infrastructure. Australia is an arid continent, where fire is to be expected and planned for. The imposition any fire policies which de-emphasises the protection of ecological systems is opposed. This is particularly relevant in areas adjacent to, or within, conservation reserves, where there is a legislative mandate to manage for nature conservation.

- (g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;**

- (h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;**

Colong supports the absolute sharing of public and private resources in fire management.

- (i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;**

It is an unfortunate view that the burden of land management for both public land and private land, providing essential services for the greater public good, should have to bear the financial burden of sound ecologically sustainable management practices.

Colong rejects the imposition of liability on public land managers for properties adjacent to such land if the legislative requirements for management of the lands have been met. Compensation should not be expected if due process has occurred. Commercial ventures which are accommodated in conservation reserves would be better served in lands where the primary objective is not nature conservation.

- (j) the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.**

**2. The Colong Foundation requests that the following IUCN resolution is taken into account by the Committee**

**RESOLUTION ON FIRE MANAGEMENT BY THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF THE IUCN**

***IMPACTS OF HUMAN-INDUCED FIRE EVENTS ON BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION***

RECOGNIZING that both protected areas and non-protected natural and modified habitats on public and private lands make a vital contribution to the conservation of biodiversity and ecological integrity;

RECOGNIZING that many ecosystems are highly sensitive to fire, for example wetlands, rainforests and alpine areas, and that their ecological integrity may be destroyed, degraded or significantly altered as a result of inappropriate fire regimes; and that other ecosystems such as prairies are dependent on fire to maintain natural processes;

RECOGNIZING that fire is required to renew or to maintain the natural ecological characteristics and functions of ecosystems such as natural grasslands, brush lands, pine forests and the boreal forest, and can be an appropriate landscape management tool;

NOTING that in many parts of the world the natural vegetation is highly flammable under certain conditions and that where land-use patterns are inappropriate this creates risks to life and property;

NOTING that urbanization (residential, recreational, tourism, etc.) increasingly extends into natural or semi-natural areas of value for biodiversity and that protected areas may receive large numbers of visitors;

NOTING that in many such areas the incidence of human-induced fires is increasingly more common than naturally-caused fires because of arson, accidental fire and planned fire events;

NOTING that in both protected and non-protected areas the optimum strategy is one that utilizes a better balance of techniques including planned fire events and non-fire-based risk reduction strategies;

NOTING that in some protected and non-protected areas the current management focus on the use of planned fire events for fuel reduction is giving rise to an increasing reliance on fire-based techniques at the expense of more ecologically and economically sustainable non-fire-based risk reduction strategies; and in some ecosystems the absence of fire-based management techniques may lead to the irreversible loss of biodiversity;

BELIEVING that all human-induced fire management strategies should place emphasis on ecological sustainability when implementing strategies to reduce risks for life and property;

The World Conservation Congress at its 1<sup>st</sup> Session in Montreal, Canada, 14-23 October 1996:

1. REQUESTS the Commission on Ecosystem Management to identify the types and extent of ecosystems subject to frequent occurrences of human-induced fire events, and to identify and consider the implications of human-induced changes to natural fire regimes for the biodiversity and ecological integrity of such ecosystems;
2. CALLS upon all governments to have regard for the ecological sustainability of affected ecosystems when implementing bush fire risk management strategies in relation to both public and private lands.

**3. The Colong Foundation requests that the following ABC report is taken into account by the Committee**

**IMPACT OF GLOBAL WARMING**

**FOSSIL FUEL USE HEATING UP DROUGHT: REPORT (ABC WEBSITE)**

A new report shows current drought temperatures are much higher than during any other drought since 1950.

The report by the World Wide Fund for Nature says the higher temperatures are caused by global warming and human consumption of fossil fuels.

Author, meteorologist Professor David Karoly, says global warming has pushed up temperatures to such a degree that they are having a dramatic impact on the landscape.

"The higher temperatures lead to more rapid drying out of rivers, of reservoirs of the land and also they mean that the ground dries out much faster," he said.

"Then the higher temperatures and the drier forests, drier vegetation means that there's much more bushfire danger."