

**TO THE HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE RECENT
BUSHFIRES**

I have walked in most areas of Kosciuszko National Park and spend on average two days per week in the Northern Region either walking or doing volunteer work. I have witnessed the changes that have occurred since the mountains were declared a National Park. Most noticeable the build up of fuel and overgrown straggly understory in forested areas, in open areas clumps of snow grass green on top but surrounded by masses of dead foliage.

(A) The fires have had a devastating impact on many areas. Of special concern to me is (a) The destruction of *Eucalyptus delegatensis* (alpine ash) forests. The Cabramurra-Tumut Ponds areas was destroyed by fire in 1984. The trees that germinated after that destruction had not reached seeding age. Ash forests evolved and matured despite Aboriginal burning, controlled burning and lightning strikes before European settlement. Under National Park fire management policies some appear to be threatened with extinction.

(b) Lichen, little recognised, environmentally important, has been burnt from rock faces, banks and bare soil where it prevented much erosion. It will take many decades to re-establish, some species could be lost.

(c) Historic huts and sites destroyed. This is heritage that cannot be replaced, apart from the sense of loss by descendant families Tourism with its benefits to local communities is also affected.

(B) There have been repeated warnings from local communities that an environmental disaster would occur as the result of excessive fuel loads.

As a member of the Snowy Mts. Advisory Committee at the meetings held:

- 27th January 1997 I with another member expressed concern at the build up of fuel .
- 30th January 1998 More concern expressed re fuel loads.
- 27th March 1998 I was elected to a Fire Sub-committee .
- 29th May 1998 I requested buffer zones for the protection from fire of non-vascular plants on cliffs and prominent rock faces.
- 9th April 1999 I seconded a motion to have a buffer zone placed around historic huts.

These motions were either defeated by conservation groups or ignored by Park Management. In Wilderness submissions I, other local residents, foreshadowed the wildfire disaster that would eventually occur from the massive fuel loads accumulated in many areas of KNP.

In response to local warnings the public have been repeatedly advised that fuel reduction was being carried out. The inadequacy of the fuel reduction, or the cancelling because of weather conditions, was never addressed. .

Following is an extract from the report to The Plan Of Management Committee of a meeting I called in Tumut, which was attended by one hundred people in the wake of the bushfires.

(Almost without exception those speaking, who called for more fuel reduction burning and a total rethink on fire strategies, were loudly applauded by the gathering.

Whilst acknowledging that nothing would have prevented the fires during the prevailing conditions. Speakers, some of whom were born in and worked for many years in the

mountains, outlined the increasing apprehension they have had for a number of years as the heavy fuel loads accumulated unchecked in most of KNP since its declaration.

The obvious 'green' influence on Government and National Park Policies by conservation groups whilst at the same time ignoring many submissions from local communities warning of the impending tragedy was repeated by most speakers. The Colong Foundations influence and their letters published in the local press created much anger as speakers noted their complete lack of understanding of the situation.

One speaker suggested Global Warming impacted on weather conditions. This idea was refuted by other speakers indicating that extreme temperatures and drought have occurred in the past as have lightning strikes but the presence of excessive loads of fuel intensified the horrendous fire storms.

Fears were expressed that some areas would never completely recover from the inferno resulting in loss of biodiversity. The impact on the fauna and for those animals which did escape the fire, the loss of habitat, access to food and vulnerability to predator attack upset most participants.

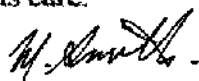
One speaker, a retired employee of Hume Snowy fire management, described the manner in which cool burns in late autumn provided a mosaic of areas in which the fuel had been reduced. Keeping open well maintained fire trails rated high on the list of priorities. The idea of the fire trails being used to keep a mosaic of areas at different stages of fuel reduction was mooted. One speaker called for more water storage as access to water was a problem in some areas in particular the Wee Jasper area.

Speakers were critical of the comparisons made with the 1939 fires. During the 1939 fires extreme temperatures existed, however the fires were not as severe and wide spread as recent fires because of grazing and regular burning. It was stated those fires were fought and controlled by men on horseback with rakes and beaters. No helicopters, dozers, tankers or radio communications.

References made in the media, by someone in authority, to the window of opportunity to control burn being small because of snow covering the ground for six months of the year was laughed at by the gathering. Little of KNP is covered by snow for six months of the year. Most control burning, it was pointed out, should be done during autumn when cold damp nights ensure the fire is extinguished.)

I am not commenting on d; e; f; g; h; i; j; under the terms of reference those matters being outside my expertise.

As a long time walker through Kosciuszko National Park and a lover of its flora, fauna and ruggedness I feel an overwhelming sense of loss which is compounded by the knowledge that a more sensible fire management policy, whilst not preventing the fires, would have reduced the devastating impact on all those things the National Park Service has entrusted to its care.



Margery Smith OAM