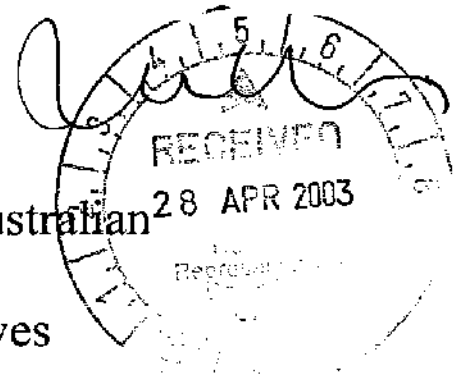


19 April 2003

House Select Committee on the recent Australian  
bushfires  
Department of the House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT  
AUSTRALIA 2600



Submission No.50

Dear Sir or Madam

**Submission to the Enquiry into the Incidence and  
Impact of Bushfires**

**LEARN FROM HISTORY AND APPLY THAT  
KNOWLEDGE**

It is appalling that National Parks, Parks Victoria, State and Federal Governments have not been able to assess and apply the wealth of historical knowledge of Alpine areas relating to management of fire and the environment. Before white settlement there was continual **mosaic burning** of Alpine regions by aboriginals and lightning strikes. It should be noted that Aborigines fielded no fire brigades or attempted to put out fires. It is only since white settlement that fire has become a problem and there have been the **unnatural incinerating holocausts** largely brought about in recent times by gross

mismanagement by Parks Victoria and National Parks authorities Our native flora and fauna evolved with the hazard of fire but it was with **cool burning fire and in the context of mosaic burning which gave protection to fauna and flora alike**

### RECENT EVENTS

The lightning strikes in the Alps in Victoria in early January 2003 heralded the beginning of a wild fire eclipsing the fires of 1939 although following much the same path except this time the fire extended over the Wulgulmerang Plateau and beyond incinerating most everything in its path The designated wilderness area in the upper Buchan Valley completely mismanaged by Parks Victoria had such a build up of under story fuel to feed this fire that it became a raging inferno not only crowning out but becoming an unstoppable fire ball hitting Black Mountain, Wulgulmerang, and Seldom Seen with devastating speed and destruction Wildlife suffered huge losses birds were sucked into the fire and perished Endangered species such as the rock wallaby are probably extinct in the Buchan Creek area which was severely burnt Many animals perished here and those that did not die in the fire died of starvation or were easy prey to wild dogs Cattle died not only from the flames The radiant heat, generated by those gaseous fire balls, exploded their stomachs their cloven feet gone and walking on bleeding stumps Even with this unbelievable disaster forecast by locals with the knowledge and experience, small areas had relatively cool burns that can easily be identified by the trees retaining their upper story green leaves and low levels of damage at ground

level Why did these areas escape the full severity of the fire? The answer is there for all to see Some of those areas had been fuel reduced the previous year and others had been grazed by cattle brumbies and fauna and retained a short green cover of native grasses (This is in contrast to an area on the Dargo High Plain which had an area fenced to eliminate grazing That fenced area was incinerated but the grazed plain either burnt cool or not at all) These areas are now sanctuary to surviving wild life and birds which crowd any tree with green leaves which is a sure sign the fire burnt cool The Wulgulmerang Plateau has lost kilometres of fencing adjoining National Parks and Crown Land The refusal of the Victorian Government, Parks Victoria and National Parks to accept any responsibility for the reinstatement of these fences to a stock proof condition is deplorable Parks Victoria have indicated that a better alignment for fencing between private property and National Parks is acceptable providing the new alignment is within private property **but severe penalties will be incurred if the alignment encroaches even 150mm** into National Parks

### THE AFTERMATH OF THE FIRES

Are we to see a repeat of this disaster 10or20 years hence??

Is the arrogance of Parks Victoria to continue or will they listen to local knowledge and experience??

The "experts" have had it wrong too often There is a great need for practical management Too often theorists and academia has made impractical decisions This also applies to the commanders of DSE at the fires of Omeo and Gelantipy Here CFA units returned to Gelantipy

from Black Mountain for lunch after being informed by their command the fire was 2 or 3 days away An experienced high country bushman and farmer drove out the BENAMBRA ROAD He informed his neighbours he estimated the fire was 2 to 3 hours away The fire passed through Black Mountain Wulgulmerang Seldom Seen areas within 3 hours The CFA were unable to return and the people in this area received no assistance The command posts were too far away from the fire fronts to operate with efficiency During four days the Southern fire was accompanied by severe Northerly gales for the rest the wind was from the South West or South East ideal for back burning No action was allowed and the disastrous results of this was the burning of the Bundar Omeo Valley Benambra through and beyond the Wulgulmerang Plateau The soil erosion and silting of our streams, rivers and reservoirs as a result of these fires will continue for many years Water quality is affected in Omeo, Swifts Creek, Buchan and other fire areas No amount of dollars will restore the damage to the eco system or the loss of fauna and flora some lost forever Parks Victoria management, National Parks philosophy will need to change dramatically if the fires of 2003 are not to be repeated in the future

### **THE FUTURE LEARNING AND LISTENING**

The National Parks Act and the Parks Victoria Act are inflexible and run counter to practical management of the Parks This was starkly demonstrated in the clearing of a back burn break along a road on the Eastern side of the fire The felled timber on the East side of the road could be utilised because it came from State Forest The trees

felled on the West side of the road from National Park were to be burnt, all because there was no room for practical application of the law Access into the Parks during the fires was intolerable Road ways had locked gateways, mounds of soil, deliberate stacking of trees across them, shocking mismanagement and neglect **People** from the time prior to white settlement have always been part of the management of the Alpine regions Since Parks Victoria have restricted people movement through National Parks the natural management eg keeping roadways trafficable, establishing a bank of people with intimate knowledge of the fauna and flora and terrain have become a scarce resource The present regulations are counter productive to good management The ban on the taking of burnt Alpine Ash for milling from National Parks highlights bad management Burnt mature Alpine Ash will not survive this fire and not being a durable timber will soon come crashing down to be the fuel for the next fire The ash beds from the fires will create a massive regeneration from the seed banks The Alpine Ash takes up to 30 years to produce viable seed If that forest is prematurely destroyed by fire before seed set the chance of a continuing Alpine Ash forest is slim Here is an example of rigid regulation with the potential to destroy our Parks in the future

A few weeks ago one of the “experts” on radio stated burning was unnecessary in the Alpine region and not at all in the heath lands because it would destroy the habitat of the native birds and animals 1.2 million hectares of the Alpine area has been savagely burnt, huge losses of birds and wild life and still the “experts” churn out a recipe for a future disaster

## **POSITIVE STEPS TO TAKE**

Fuel reduction burning in National Parks and other forest areas on a much increased scale

No high intensity burning Cool mosaic burns with sufficient burning to control wildfire and protect flora and fauna

Mountain cattlemen, apiarists, forest workers, property owners and the general public should be encouraged by government agencies to use National Parks and other areas, not ban them

Utilising and trusting people with local knowledge  
Government agencies should cease their arrogant attitudes

Emergency services should enlist the services of people with local knowledge Decisions should be made at the place where the services are required

Arguments put forward by academics and others that are out of touch with reality should not be listened to, but take on board the views based on practical experience to optimise the protection and survival of the fauna and flora, save unnecessary damage to the catchments and the destruction of private property and business

The provision of compensation for assets destroyed by fire originating in areas controlled by National Parks, Parks Victoria and Crown Land

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J.P.M. Margetts', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John P.M. Margetts