

The Bushfire Front Inc

“Dedicated to Best Practice in bushfire management in Western Australia”

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The Chairman,
Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee,
Parliament House,
Canberra, ACT 2600

Dear Chair,

Inquiry into National Parks in Australia

Summary

The Bushfire Front is concerned about a number of aspects of national park management in Australia, but most gravely concerned about the unprofessional standard of bushfire management in forested parks in NSW, ACT, Victoria and WA. We consider that unless States/agencies get bushfire protection right, no other management objectives can be achieved.

We outline the problem and its causes, and make recommendations for improved management and implementation of change. The Commonwealth government is only able to influence the management of State lands through budgetary processes, and we suggest a mechanism which will achieve this.

Definition

In this paper we use the expression “national park” to encompass a range of reserve types, including areas designated as nature reserves, conservation reserves, State parks and regional parks. The distinguishing features of these tenures is that (i) the primary purpose of management is protection of biodiversity, but in many instances a secondary purpose is recreation; and (ii) except in the Northern Territory, they are managed by State agencies variously named, but usually something like “National Parks and Wildlife”.

In the case of Western Australia national parks are vested in the Conservation Commission (CCWA), a community organisation, responsible for planning and policy, but are managed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), a government agency who are required to implement the plans produced by the CCWA.

The Bushfire Front and our views on National Parks

The Bushfire Front Inc is a professional organisation whose members have over 400 years accumulated experience in land management and bushfire policy, legislation, fire science, public administration, conservation, research and firefighting. We are independent of government, agencies, emergency services or community groups. Our fundamental objective is to see effective programs of bushfire management in Australia.

The Bushfire Front was stimulated to action by the disastrous bushfires in the eastern states in January 2003, and the realisation that the same pre-disposing problems existed in Western Australia. We have made many attempts to bring the seriousness of the situation to Federal, State and agency staff and have made submissions to the Nairn and the COAG Inquiries and to the EPA and the Auditor General in Western Australia. A sister organisation Forest Fire Victoria has been formed with similar aims and we are regularly in touch with a number of other organisations in various States who share our concerns.

Our dire predictions have inevitably come to pass. In WA in the last four years there have been shocking and highly damaging forest fires in the Nuyts National Park, Denbarker conservation reserve, Mt Cooke conservation reserve,

Yanchep National Park, in an un-named national park near Mundaring Weir and in the Lane Poole Reserve. Recently we have observed terrible fires in national parks in the Grampians and Gippsland and at Erica in Victoria. All of these fires un-necessarily damaged human and environmental values and economic and community assets, and cost millions of dollars to control.

The Bushfire Front is concerned about the status of national park management in Australia and numerous aspects of national park management, but our most serious concern is related to bushfire management. This critical issue stems from the ongoing transfer of State forests to national parks; this has the effect of transferring responsibility for management from professionals to amateurs. We note that a general philosophy of “non-intervention” seems to pervade the philosophy of park managers in Australia. When people who have been trained or encultured in the religion of environmentalism and who promote the view that “nature can look after itself”, take over forest management from people trained in forestry and land management, the risks of destruction of national parks by wildfire accelerates dramatically. Indeed, if recent history is a guide, the setting aside an area of forest as a national park with the aim of protecting its intrinsic values seems almost to guarantee that it will experience a high intensity and damaging wildfire because of a decline in bushfire preparedness and mitigation. The values for which the park was created, e.g., biodiversity and landscape beauty, are so severely affected by high intensity fire that they can take a century or more to recover.

In years to come, the failure of national park managers in Australia to develop and apply effective programs of bushfire management will be looked upon as one of the greatest crimes in the history of land management in this country.

The status of National Park management in Australia

National park management in Australia has never achieved the status it deserves. Even when the national park estate was small, resources were always inadequate. This was exemplified by a lack of policy and management planning, inadequate systems of research and inventory, virtually no monitoring or public reporting, few trained professional managers; obsolete equipment; and amateurish leadership. In WA up until the mid-1980s national parks were basically in the hands of a single untrained Ranger, operating without a management plan and unsupported by technical specialists. The principal role of the national park ranger at this time was ejecting tourists with dogs or preventing people from camping outside defined campgrounds. There was little emphasis on bushfire management because no plan was capable of implementation, and no trained staff were available.

The status of national park management in Australia has always compared unfavorably with the status of the management of State forests. At a time when national parks were being managed individually by a single ranger, every State had a strong, well-trained professional forest management organisation, excellent research and specialist services, a strong regional and district system, and a cadre of experienced field staff and forest workers.

Standards of national park management have further deteriorated in recent years. It is very clear that while sections of the community want more and bigger national parks, and are happy to see them created at the expense of State forests, they are not prepared to see these parks properly funded or managed, or are unaware that there is a problem. Political kudos for park creation is not followed by political interest in park protection and management.

The explanation

The problem of the low status of National Park management in Australia, and the on-going deterioration in management, is the consequence of the following things:

- (i) **No policy.** Australian national parks are not “national” in the sense that there is any overarching or coordination of policy, philosophy or management practice. Individual national park services in the States and Territories do their own thing. Worse than this, within the States, individual parks are managed according to individual park management plans, each drawn up by different people, or influenced by different pressure groups or local communities. This allows a proliferation of approaches and a bewildering lack of consistency. To ensure effective practice in areas like bushfire management, it is essential that there is an overarching policy, implemented across all parks (and adjoining forest tenures).

- (ii) **Negative philosophy.** Australia's national parks have fallen into the hands of people with an essentially negative attitude to land use and land management. The environmentalist bureaucrats know what they are against, but do not know what they are for. Thus management plans for national parks are often little more than a list of all the things which are forbidden: no dogs, no horses, no burning, no campfires, no bulldozers for firefighting, no retardants, no four-wheel drives, no timber cutting, no salvage of fire-killed trees; no gravel, no beekeeping, no road maintenance, and so on. The only permitted activities are some forms of low-impact recreation, and even this is always severely constrained. Park managers are for "biodiversity" as though it is a self-evident concept that needs no explanation, but when pressed are never able to explain what this actually means, let alone set out a positive program for the park to achieve it.

A classic example of the negative attitude pervading park managers in Australia (outside the Northern Territory anyway) is the denial of aboriginal burning practices. Practically every other land manager in the country now accepts that the Aboriginal people once ignited the forests very regularly, and never put fires out. But in our national parks, a European attitude persists, i.e., that any fire started by humans is bad. This denies the land management skills and approach of the aborigines extending back for more than 40,000 years, but worse, it allows a view to be put that "fires started by Mother Nature are good, and we should enjoy them".

Some enlightened national park managers are starting to accept burning but require that it be carried out to create a "fine grain mosaic" of burnt and unburnt patches as this emulates the outcomes of the constant burning by aborigines. However, dividing up a large area of forest into a multitude of small patches and then attempting to burn some and not others is not practical, nor are the funds, manpower or days available. Attempts to create patch burning without firebreaks are a recipe for uncontrolled fires. In fact frequent, broadscale green burning carried out at low fire intensities achieves a very satisfactory mosaic of burnt and unburnt patches, as is very well known to experience bushfire managers.

- (iii) **Lack of resources.** There have been massive increases in the number and size of the national park estate in Australia over the last 20 years. This is a legitimate use of forested publicly owned land, and the Bushfire Front does not argue with the right of governments to decide on land use. The problem is that the creation of parks has not been accompanied by an appropriate increase in staff or financial resources so as to ensure essential care and protection. Parks are created, and management plans written for them which completely ignore the requirements for the most basic day-to-day management, let alone the demands and practicalities of bushfire protection. One of the greatest consequences of lack of resources has been the decline in road maintenance. In most areas where State forest has been converted to national park, the first thing that happens is that the standards and intensity of road maintenance declines. The scrub grows out, trees and limbs fall across roads, bridges and stream crossings are washed out. Then when there is a fire, access is impossible and dangerous to firefighters. Subsequent fires tend to be larger and fiercer, causing greater environmental damage.

In some cases decline in standard of access is "accidental", i.e. it simply results from the withdrawal or non-availability of resources. In other cases it is deliberate, following the creation of wilderness areas. The deliberate creation of areas with poor or no access for firefighting is one of the most reprehensible of all national park policies, since the inevitable outcome is destruction of the park by wildfire.

- (iv) **Lack of professional management capability within State park services.** Australia has moved from a few, generally small number of national parks in the 1980s to a vast national park estate today without a cadre of trained, experienced park managers being available to take over responsibility for management. Three things have always been missing or inadequate: (a) degree training in national park management at Tertiary level to produce professional managers with on-ground experience; (b) technical training to produce field staff and rangers; and (iii) organisations which mentor young people and train them in the realities of actual field management. As a result we see national park services across the country today being run by academics or environmental scientists, i.e. people who do not have appropriate professional training and have never actually worked in the bush. This has enormous implications for bushfire management: the

people in charge of our parks do not understand fire, have not themselves handled it, do not appreciate the value of green burning, or the environmental costs of large high intensity fires.

One of the most serious consequences of the failure of park services to build and maintain good staff is the decline in field operatives with sound experience in the practicalities of green burning. It is almost as disastrous as no burning to put a burning program in the hands of people who don't know how to burn. The result is fires which are too hot, which escape and cause damage, and which reduce the credibility of the entire approach.

- (v) ***The influence of environmental activists.*** National parks in Australia have increasingly become the playthings of city-based environmental activists who have no expertise or experience in land management and practical conservation and are not accountable for any adverse consequences resulting from their influence. This leads to policies such as the creation of wilderness areas where access for firefighting is reduced, to opposition to green burning which will reduce fuel levels under mild weather conditions, and to a general anti-human approach. What the environmental activists have is excellent political and media skills and enormous energy. This has allowed them to capture the bureaucracies and go on to influence management plans and practices and in most cases render them impractical. At the same time, their media skills have enabled them to escape scrutiny, to avoid accountability and to ensure that the problems in the national parks are generally not known within the community.

A classic situation in Western Australia is that management plans for national parks are the work of a community committee (the Conservation Commission) who do not themselves have expertise or experience in bushfire management, nor are they responsible for plan implementation or outcomes. These management plans are not costed, and have no budget. Most West Australians do not know the Conservation Commission exists, let alone appreciate its influence on national park management.

The bushfire issue is fundamental

National park managers in Australia do not yet appear to have grasped the fact that bushfire management is the most fundamental and essential aspect of their job. If they fail in this, and the parks are ravaged by large high intensity fires, no other management objective can be achieved. A failed bushfire policy means that the beautiful forests in the park are blackened; tall mature ("old growth") trees are killed and replaced by even aged regrowth; whole landscapes are made less biologically diverse; tourist and recreation facilities are destroyed, and require the diversion of precious funds to replace; endangered species are incinerated; research programs are set back or lost; soils are cooked or eroded and streams are blocked with sediment. In some cases, failure to put effective bushfire management systems in place will also lead to loss of life, to damage to neighbouring properties and to expensive litigation and increased insurance.

None of this appears to sufficiently worry national park managers so as to stimulate them into developing and implementing an effective bushfire management strategy. We have been told by senior environmentalist bureaucrats that big, intense wildfires are simply a fact of nature, and nature can recover. This is only true if nature is taken as something which excludes humans and human values. There is an alternative view: Australia's national parks have been created to provide Australians with inspiring places to visit and examples of beautiful bushland, as well as reserves for wildlife. They are for people as well as for flora and fauna. Human values are recognised and accorded priorities. The Bushfire Front believes that most Australians think this way, and that it is only a small, but powerful minority of environmentalists and academics who promote the anti-human view.

The most depressing aspect of the current approach by Australian national park managers is that it denies the fact that our forests can be protected from killer bushfires while at the same time the ecology and the environment are also protected. The Bushfire Front has developed a simple template for Best Practice in Bushfire Management, which any government could implement at a modest cost (certainly far less than the recurrent costs of fighting massive bushfires). The fundamental aspect of this management regime is an effective and carefully designed program of green burning the aim of which is to reduce fuels during mild weather conditions before a fire occurs under severe conditions. This approach protects both human and environmental values. We know what to do and

how to do it. Opposition is based entirely on ideology and an anti-human philosophy, or stems from apathy and poor leadership.

There is one other point. We now know that Australian forests, including those in national parks, are deteriorating in health in areas where fire is long excluded. Thus green burning (in the form of regular low intensity fires lit under mild weather conditions) is needed to maintain forest health as well as to protect forest, community and human assets from killer fires.

The role of the Commonwealth government

The Commonwealth government has a ridiculous approach to bushfire management. In the first place, responsibility for planning and implementation is in the hands of the States; in the second place, the Commonwealth pours in money in the wake of bushfire disasters. This approach encourages and rewards poor performance by the State agencies.

A far better approach would be for the Commonwealth to establish a template for best practice in bushfire management. This can be readily done (we have already produced one). The States would then be required to implement this, and they would be audited to see whether or not they comply. Non-complying States would not be rewarded by cash from the Commonwealth to fund recovery and restitution of State assets. They would only get cash if they are doing a good job, not if they are failing to perform.

The Commonwealth is also able to fund bushfire research, and this is a key function. At the moment there is little research being done into key questions relating to national park conservation. The Bushfire CRC is dominated by emergency service representatives. This is an area which needs a thorough review.

Recommendations

There is a range of recommendations we could make with respect to good governance of Australia's national parks, and on issues of policy and philosophy. In this submission, however, we will focus on bushfire issues, as this is the field in which we have experience and expertise.

We recommend that this Senate Inquiry finds that:

1. Australia must develop a national policy on the management and protection of Australia's national parks, signed off by all States and Territories and the Commonwealth government.
2. High intensity bushfires have been and will continue to be a major threat to the forests in National Parks in Australia, but at the same time, these forests and their inherent values can be protected from wildfire damage by simple effective programs of bushfire preparedness and mitigation.
3. Australia must develop a national bushfire policy which can link to the national parks policy. This policy should focus on fire preparedness and damage mitigation, not just fire suppression. It needs to be signed off by all States and Territories and the Commonwealth. Funding for bushfire suppression and recovery should be tied to implementation of the national policy.
4. The Federal government, in conjunction with the States and Territories should develop a template for Best Practice in Bushfire Management for application to forests in national parks. Commonwealth funding should only be provided to States demonstrating through professional audit, that they are meeting the requirements for Best Practice.
5. Green burning is an essential management practice in forested national parks to maintain forest health and protect the environment and the community from killer bushfires.
6. Australia needs a good system of education and training for national park managers.

7. The transfer of forests from State forests to national parks must always be accompanied by adequate additional resources for park care and protection, including resources for maintenance of access for firefighting.
8. No new wilderness areas are needed, especially where the creation and management policy for these areas results in them becoming more vulnerable to bushfire damage.
8. Research into bushfire management in national parks must be greatly expanded.

We would be very happy to make a verbal presentation to your Inquiry, and advise that further information is available on our website: www.bushfirefront.com.au

Yours sincerely,

Roger Underwood
CHAIRMAN
February 3, 2006