

The Secretary,  
Senate Environment, Communications Information Technology and the Arts References  
Committee  
Parliament House,  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

Submission on Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas

As I have limited time available I will limit my submission to the one or two areas of particular interest to me.

I am a professional forester with 30 years experience in forest management, mostly in wood production forests. During that time I have been involved in controlled burning and firefighting in the Northern Territory, New South Wales (NSW) and Tasmania, including within National Parks.

My argument in summary is:

- that there should be considerably more controlled burning done (I have used the term controlled burning to be virtually synonymous with various terms such as hazard or fuel reduction burning, low intensity burning etc.)
- that the lack of controlled burning leads to unacceptable bushfire risks and also results in adverse ecological effects thus degrading the values the parks are intended to protect
- that resourcing is insufficient to enable adequate controlled burning
- that a lot of public education is required to enable there to be community support for controlled burning rather than opposition

My observation has been that management of fuels in national parks and conservation reserves has been vastly inadequate. When I was in NSW from 1980-1987 the main conservation groups were totally opposed to any controlled burning in parks. As a result controlled burning in parks at the time was limited in extent, and done in spite of the conservation movement. At the time and subsequently there have been many intense wildfires in parks and conservation areas, particularly in New South Wales. These have been the subject of media comment and various government inquiries. These intense wildfires, mostly originating in national parks, have resulted in severe loss of life (around 10 people from memory in the time I was in NSW and more since). They must also have resulted in degradation of conservation values in those parks as discussed below.

The Australian flora has evolved with fire. There is ample evidence that Aboriginals used fire on a widespread and frequent basis. There is also evidence from explorers journals etc. that due to a high frequency of fire much of south-east Australia had vegetation that was less dense than it is now (where native vegetation still exists). They sometimes described open park-like country covered in grasses that they could easily ride their horses through. Often these same areas now have dense understorey vegetation due to lack of fire.

This change in vegetation pattern means that when a fire does occur it is more likely to be a high intensity fire. High intensity fires necessarily result in adverse effects on wildlife if the normal fire regime was for more frequent, lower intensity fires. Thus conservation values are diminished rather than enhanced.

Another adverse ecological effect is that with less frequent fires, species that depend on frequent low intensity fires are disadvantaged. Some threatened species of plants are colonising species.

These species germinate after fire and thrive until competition eliminates them. They are then dependent on seed stores in the ground for survival. The seed will not survive indefinitely, and eventually, in the absence of a fire or another form of disturbance such species will be eliminated from the site. Thus current management regimes, with less frequent, higher intensity fires, are likely to result in reduced biodiversity.

In recent times controlled burning has often been difficult to achieve due to community attitudes. More city people are moving to the urban fringe which is where some of our parks are located. These people move there because they like to have some bush around them. However, they are generally hostile to controlled burning. This is largely for selfish reasons (they aren't prepared to put up with a bit of smoke occasionally), but also because the conservation movement has convinced a lot of them that fire is actually bad for the bush, not good for the bush.

Inadequate resourcing and setting of priorities is another problem. In a recent report by the Auditor General, Victoria ([http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/reports\\_par/agp8804.html](http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/reports_par/agp8804.html)) only 36 percent of the targeted fuel reduction burning was achieved. Fuel reduction burning is often one of the lowest priorities, and just tends to not get done when something else intervenes. Even when it is done, it is usually the "easy" areas that are done, with the "hard" areas being bypassed year after year. This is largely a resourcing issue, but it is also because fuel reduction burning is not up there in the priorities as a big ticket item.

Massive resourcing goes into firefighting. Last summer Forestry Tasmania spent approximately \$5 million fighting the Arthur River fire. To put this in context, on a pro rata basis this would be equivalent to about \$70 million in NSW. Governments seem quite happy to pay out vast sums fighting fires, but not doing controlled burning. The value of controlled burning in also reducing the cost of firefighting has been underestimated. When I worked in NSW on one day we had 14 fires start from lightning strikes in one day. Our total district staff numbers were about 15, so we had to decide in the short term which fires to attack and which to ignore. We found that several were in or adjoining areas that had been hazard reduced in the previous 1-2 years. The effect of this on fire behaviour was obvious and dramatic. Several fires in the hazard reduced areas went out of their own volition.

I believe that there was a golden opportunity straight after the recent spate of wildfires to improve public education while people were still receptive to information on fire. My impression is that very little has been done.

Given that we are seeing more and more people living on the urban fringe in rural residential type developments ( a total disaster in my opinion in terms of conservation, and wise use of resources), the degree of difficulty in achieving controlled burning is going to increase, exacerbating the whole problem.

What is sad to me is that despite the evidence having been there for decades we don't seem to be advancing in terms of managing our parks and nature reserves to reduce the risk of severe wildfire and, as a consequence, both protect the public and best protect the biodiversity values of those areas.

Chris Mitchell  
17 February 2006