



CONFERENCE 2005

OPINION PIECE

FORESTS, WOODS AND LIVELIHOODS

Finding a Future for All

Bush Fires: who will burn in the New Year this year?

In January 1994 there were four fire related deaths, hundreds of thousands of hectares burnt and fingers of fire crept into the city of Sydney. Parliament, the Coroner and the Cabinet held inquiries and released reports on the reasons, causes of the deaths and the possible means of improving and avoiding the same problems in the future.

On Christmas Day in 2001 the concerns of fire authorities in NSW were realised – in full measure. Leading up to the summer, conditions had been drier than normal. The 25th of December 2001 was hot with temperatures well over thirty degrees, worse still very low humidities of less than 15% and worst of all winds from the west from the dry interior of our desert continent. These bush fires burnt nearly 700 000 ha, with 115 houses and many other buildings destroyed and scores of others damaged. Dramatic pictures of fires approaching houses less than 16 kilometres from the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House were shown daily along with thousands of people evacuated from their homes or holiday places, hundreds of firefighters from other states of Australia and a centre-stage spot for a large helicopter known as Elvis which dropped large amounts of water and was credited with much, but perhaps should not have been.

Parliament and the Coroner held inquiries and released reports on the reasons, causes . . .

In January 2003 the concerns of fire authorities in NSW, Victoria and the ACT were realised – in full measure. Leading up to the summer, conditions had been drier than normal

Parliament, the Coroner and the Council of Australian Governments held inquiries and released reports on the reasons, causes

These same two paragraphs, with minor variation could be repeated for the fire seasons of 1897, 1912, 1926, 1933, 1939, 1944, 1949, 1951, 1957, 1960, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1977, 1980 and 1983.

These events are not unprecedented, can be foreseen and are within repeated recent memory. At this stage there is every reason they will be with us again. Why?

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Alliance of Future Harvest Centers of the CGIAR, AusAID, Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, Australian Forest Growers, Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, A3P - Australian Plantation Products and Paper Industry Council, Center for International Forestry Research, CSIRO Livestock Industries, ensis - the joint forces of CSIRO and Scion, Forest and Wood Products Research and Development Corporation, National Association of Forest Industries, World Agroforestry Centre

While the fires of 1994, 2001 and 2003 burnt the familiar debates began to also rage. Across the Internet, among civil society and politicians and in the media, national and state political leaders and heads of agencies were all asked pointed questions. Everyone senses that there are key questions. There seem to be few people who know what they might be.

The “pointed” inquiries by various actors are sharpened by a sense that there is something not quite right and that someone is not making that clear. Tragically the debate tends to polarise along conventional environmental or political “battle lines” and the underlying factors in the 1994, Black Christmas Fires of 2001 and January 2003 are blurred, buried or lost in a flurry of repeated rhetoric, age-old antagonisms and basic confusion.

Efforts to deal with landscape scale requirements to address “bushfires” and management of natural and human assets and at the same time incorporate smaller scale concerns to do with the protection of particular species or habitats and homes is non-trivial. In many years and most fire seasons the uneasy relationship between scale, scope, management ethos and political processes goes un-noticed. Bushfire impacts, however, cannot be avoided and will be noticed.

Australia is a fire formed continent in many ways and fire is part of our landscapes. The place and role of the invaders; people, plants, buildings and animals is what we must mediate with the needs of our fire formed landscapes for this uneasy relationship to be better managed.

Fire Management has four facets and only one of them is fire fighting: Prevention; Preparedness (to Respond); Response (Fire fighting) and Recovery (after fires for people, assets and landscapes).

Prevention is considered by many to be far more worthy of significant investment and fundamental consideration than the dramatically obvious fire fighting. Fire fighting is obviously necessary, essential and highly visible. It is relatively easy to obtain support for it from civil society, politicians and agencies. Prevention, which is on the whole, dull, boring, repetitive, irritates many of the interest groups, makes the washing smell of smoke and is not very photogenic, suffers from murky understanding and a mainly negative public profile.

Prescribed burning, buffer zones, development regulations and building standards are all, by degrees, contentious and poorly appreciated. The key underlying issue seems to be one of Prevention “housekeeping” and the conditions essential to its effective implementation. What do we want? Who is responsible to do it? When will they do it? How will the vision of it be formed and the pressures upon it be resolved (not ignored)?

The underlying causes of bush fires would seem to include the apparent reluctance or inability for politicians, agencies, interest groups and the civil society to develop a clear set of information upon which to develop objectives and work consistently on solutions at varying scales and timeframes.

My fellow Australians, that construct begins to look a lot like the fire problem in SE Asia.

Dr Peter F. Moore is addressing ‘Fire Management – Imbalanced and Misunderstood?’ at “Forests, Wood and Livelihoods: Finding a Future For All” to be held on 16 August. Peter is the Programme Coordinator for IUCN Vietnam. He has 25 years of fire management & forestry experience. He coordinated the management of the State Forests effort during the 1994 NSW Bushfire emergency. From 1998 Peter was the Coordinator of Project FireFight SE Asia and a Fire Management and Policy Specialist working for WWF, IUCN, TNC, GTZ, South African Department of Water and Forests, DFID, ASEAN, CARE International and others.