

16 April 2020

NSW Independent Bushfire Enquiry

ATTN Mr. Dave Owens and Professor Mary O’Kane

Dear Mr. Owens and Professor O’Kane,

RE: Submission to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. It is critically important that we identify the failures in our management of the natural environment so that in future we minimise and avoid where possible the severity of events like the recent bushfires which ravaged the east coast of Australia.

My name is Tony Edge, I am an Architect living and working in the Northern Beaches in Sydney where I have lived and practised for the past 12 years.

Our recent personal experience of the bushfires was initially from a distance where we experienced weeks of acrid smoke from the fires surrounding Sydney and months of reports of the progress of the fires and the damage they were causing to people, property, wildlife and bush.

Our direct experience of the fires was through a brother and sister in law living in Kulnura and Wollombi, inland from the Central Coast. We were alerted by daily updates about the Gospers Mountain fire which when joined up with several other fires, tore through over a million hectares of bush and threatened both properties as well as burning many others to the ground, killing 35 people and over one billion animals in this unstoppable inferno.

This tragedy unfolding on our doorstep was excruciating and painful to witness and has left an indelible scar on our memory.

The intensity and spread of these fires was such that it raises questions about the future of bush management in this country and how we can be better prepared to handle things in the future, even as climate change adds to the ferocity and frequency of these events.

Research from respectable organisations like the World Weather Attribution Network shows that, while the climate changes all the time due to many natural factors, fire conditions are made much more frequent and severe by human-induced climate change and further unchecked greenhouse gas pollution will multiply fire risk unless urgent action is taken now.

One of the major causes of the intensity of the recent fires was the amount of fuel that had built up over time which was extremely dry as a result of the prolonged drought afflicting 99% of NSW.

Management of this fuel load has been left to the Rural Fire Service and Local Government which has clearly failed to appreciate the enormity of the problem. Techniques employed by state fire management authorities have not considered environmental activities which would normally be standard practice for indigenous management of the bush.

It is becoming more widely understood that indigenous management of the natural environment resulted in a landscape free of excessive fuel loads from regular managed burns which took into account soil type, wildlife, geography, tree species, season, prevailing weather and availability of water.

Is it time for widespread adoption of indigenous fire management practices?

Early exploration of Australia recorded how the country 'looked very pleasant and fertile; and the trees, quite free from underwood, appeared like plantations in a gentlemen's park'¹. This was no accident or natural feature in the landscape. Quite the opposite, it was the systematic management of the whole environment which involved regular, controlled burns so that wildfires never took hold. Around 70% of native species need or tolerate fire and it was the indigenous knowledge of 'which plants welcome fire and when and how much, was critical to managing the land'.²

Organisations like Firesticks³ have worked for many years educating local communities and fire authorities about environmental management, with fire workshops demonstrating how to select the right burn for a particular landscape.

It is time to engage with the indigenous community and the broad scale employment of indigenous fire knowledge holders to train practitioners in the art of bushfire management and conduct appropriate burns around the country.

What is needed is a 'skilled team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that works in with the entire community, agencies and emergency services to deliver an effective and educational strategy into the future.'⁴

¹ The Biggest Estate on Earth, Bill Gammage p.5

² The Biggest Estate on Earth, Bill Gammage p.1

³ Fire Country, Victor Steffensen p.220

⁴ Fire Country, Victor Steffensen p. 213