



Submission to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission by the National Parks Association of the ACT

The National Parks Association of the ACT (NPA ACT) was formed in 1960 as part of a national movement to create a system of properly managed national parks and to promote environmental awareness. Its particular focus was on the establishment and good management of a national park for the ACT, and we eventually succeeded with the establishment of Namadgi National Park in 1984. Namadgi is part of the Australian Alpine National Parks system and shares many of the environmental values and challenges of the Victorian National Park system.

Since the devastating fires in our region in 2003, many of us in the ACT community have been working to resolve some of the issues which now face the Commission, expressed in your terms of reference as: *“The preparation and planning by government, emergency services, other entities, the community and households for bushfires in Victoria, including current laws, policies, practices, resources and strategies for the prevention, identification, evaluation, management and communication of bushfire threats and risks.”*

Claims of a mismanaged fire prevention regime in Namadgi National Park were at the heart of investigations into the 2003 fires. The ACT Coronial Inquiry in particular held the view that adequate prescribed burning in Namadgi National Park in the years leading up to the 2003 fires could have prevented the devastating impact of 18 January on the urban interface. Members of NPA ACT who have had close and long standing experience in the national park were unconvinced by these reports.

So our organisation set about finding out as much as we could about the current science of fire management and the effects of fire on the forests and eco-systems of our area in order to make up our own minds about what is appropriate fire management in natural areas.

We have held two public conferences (and are planning a third in 2010) designed to develop a common community understanding of fire management strategies, their risks and benefits, and other issues relating to park management and biodiversity conservation. We regularly invite speakers to our monthly public meetings to discuss the latest research related to fire recovery or fire management strategies and we have made a point of including speakers from the ACT Emergency Services Authority (ESA) and

the relevant land management authority, the Department of Territory and Municipal Services (TAMS).

We helped plan and run a seminar in 2008 called "Future Burning" to bring together people from the different sectors of fire management, conservation and forestry to hear each other's opinions and build some mutual understanding outside the day-to-day work environment. We have been active participants in helping the ESA develop the next version of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan which is currently out for public consultation.

Despite all this work we still regularly get accused of being greenies who cause bushfires by preventing prescribed burning. Such accusations ignore the facts about conservation organisations such as ours. Far from seeking a blanket ban on prescribed burning, NPA ACT is actively working to develop community agreement on a regime of prescribed burning in Namadgi National Park which best protects all the assets – human, built and environmental – of the ACT. Our sister organisation, Victorian National Parks Association has shared their expertise and experience with us over many years and we know that their approach is the same.

So what is driving this recurring hostility which prevents us as a community working together to get the best outcome we can? We believe that the passion, hostility and misinformation we see today stems from the battles in the 1990's which saw large areas of forest taken from the state forest managers and handed over to the national parks for conservation. The clashes of the late 20th century took on an almost religious fervour because this was not just about jobs and recreation but a perception that access - and even a sense of ownership of the forest - was being taken away from people.

The perception of loss and deprivation has become a cultural divide still used today to separate the 'greenies' from the 'normals'. For example, "greenies" get blamed for lack of fuel reduction burning when the real reason is that weather conditions prevented or limited the planned burning. While the scientific merits of the debate remain unrecognised in many communities, each side presents its heroes, victims and scapegoats; and the biggest scapegoat in all this appears to be national parks. The tag line of 'lock-it-and-leave', used to accuse national park managers of neglect, illustrates their frustrations of feeling locked-out of national parks more than people realise.

However, national parks play a critical role in the regeneration of natural areas and are in fact the engine houses for recovery after bushfire for plants, animals and soil biota including fungi and microorganisms. They are the great fire survivors and studies in the Brindabella Ranges show that the native forests have survived far worse fires than we have seen so far in European history. (See work by Professor Geoff Hope and Martin Worthy, ANU on the impact on the landscape of intense summer fires followed by mega-storm events.)

On the other hand, studies done by Michael Doherty of the CSIRO, again in the Brindabella ranges, on fire recovery of plant species show that it is not fire

intensity which eliminates species in these forests but the frequency of even mild fires which destroys the seed bank and microscopic biota which enable plant regeneration and recovery of fauna.

In our experience, this sense of grievance against national parks has become institutionalised at the professional level by the clash of two different forest management models. One model looks to manage forests for the timber they produce. Unplanned fire destroys the assets in this model and must be excluded from the forests. The other model manages the forests for their conservation values where fire is a natural process, even essential for some eco-systems, and this requires quite a different approach. It is often this basic underlying mismatch of management values and the clash of production values against conservation that has come to occupy centre stage in the national and international debate on fire management, instead of evidence-based science on ways to reduce the impact of unplanned fires on people and assets.

For example we have noted that, in its findings in 2006 into the 2003 Canberra bushfires, the ACT Coronial Inquiry did not address the role of the ember attack on the urban areas from the burning softwood plantations immediately adjacent to the suburbs of Duffy and Weston. Nor did it note their absence from those areas on the urban edge, facing directly into the national park, which successfully withstood the fire without losing homes. Nevertheless we note that in subsequent years, the softwood plantation industry in the ACT has been wound up and provision made to remove all pine tree plantations from the urban area.

Again, despite its focus on hazard reduction burning in preventing the spread of fires, the Coronial report did not address the issue that although fuel reduction has its place, it will not prevent or stop fires in anything more than moderate weather conditions. This was despite clear evidence that in the final days of the 2003 fires some areas of the Brindabella Ranges were severely re-burnt even though they had already burnt in previous days. In many submissions to recent post-bushfires inquiries the effectiveness of prescribed burning is often over-emphasised while the limits of its effectiveness are ignored.

Too often we are arguing about fire management when the elephant in the room is the legitimacy of natural forest conservation. At both the national and community levels we still have not accepted the role of national parks as having a primary goal of conservation. Many people still prefer to see them as commercial or recreation opportunities where their needs take priority.

Politics plays a very strong part in supporting and encouraging this community division. Politicians often feel an obligation to echo community concerns and can become embroiled in heated emotional responses to catastrophe. For example even the then Prime Minister, John Howard, was quoted as blaming the 2007 Victorian bushfires on the “lock-it-and-leave-mentality” of national park management, a simplification which is quite regrettable.

One huge step towards more effective bushfire management in Australia would be a non-partisan policy with all political parties working for the development of long term strategies for fire mitigation based on sound scientific research. This is hard to picture but it remains a hope for those of us who recognise the dangers of community division and hostilities in the face of the increased bushfire threats which are predicted in the near future.

In the meantime, we ask the Commission to consider ways of encouraging a better informed public to support sound, scientific fire management regimes which respect the management objectives of different land tenures including national parks, state forests, nature reserves and agriculture while protecting people and assets.

Christine Goonrey
President
National Parks Association of the ACT
7 May 2009