

# Fighting Fires, Past & Future

BY MELINDA MURPHY

The world's heart is breaking along with Australia's. So, what do we do?

I read the news. "More than a billion animals dead." Then I sat on my bed and sobbed. Truly. I sobbed. And I bet I'm not the only one.

And it's not just the animals. Sadly, so much has been lost in the Australian wildfire, just so much. Dear Aussie friends of mine know several families whose homes burned, and there are plenty of others among the expat community in Singapore who are closely connected in some way to the sufferers. Farms are completely gone. Lives have been lost. And a way of life has disappeared for so many.

## The bad news

While Australia has certainly copped the worst and largest fires of recent times, it has not been the only place to suffer. One headline read, "2019 Was the Year the World Burned".

For California, 2019 wasn't as bad as 2018, but it was still pretty awful. In fact, seven of California's ten most destructive fires have taken place in the past four years. The Amazon? Eighty-thousand fires burned in 2019, an increase of more than seventy-five percent from 2018 (yet all those fires are only half as big as Australia's). Russia's Siberia saw hundreds of fires, too. While several of these were closer to cities than in the past, many were so remote that they weren't fought; the resultant smoke created a global environmental hazard with three hundred megatons of carbon dioxide released. Then, of course, there's Indonesia on our doorstep. Last year's annual burning of the palm oil fields proved particularly destructive.

## One possible answer

Bill Gammage, author of *The Biggest Estate on Earth* and a professor at the Australian National University, told ANUTV he believes the Aborigines had a very specific way of managing land before the Europeans arrived in 1788. He believes they purposefully distributed plants in a mosaic, of sorts. This meant the way the land was planted lured and helped locate animals, which made them abundant, convenient and predictable.

But more so, the mosaic pattern that dominated the countryside meant there was less underbrush to burn. Old paintings are said to support what Bill believes.

"When Europeans first came to Australia and for a long while since, right up until now, they assumed that what they saw was natural," explains Bill. "They described the landscape as parks. It never occurred to them that the parks were made, that 'wandering savages' could have done such a thing."



## Making fire an ally

Aboriginal people created this mosaic landscape in two ways. One was by damming streams to provide water. In fact, these current Australian wildfires have revealed an ancient aquaculture system in southwest Victoria built by indigenous people, which is thought to predate the time of the Pyramids of Egypt. Water management was key to Aboriginal communities. The plants used for landscapes also helped moderate the moisture of the soil.

The more common way to manage land, however, was using fire.

"We think of fire as an enemy – as something to be fearful of," says Bill. "For Aboriginal people, it was an ally. They learned to work with it and they had very intense knowledge on how to use fire,

how long it would burn, where it would spread, how intense it would be and how to control it... Fire was a constant companion. They had to work with it all the time." Indigenous Australians used fire to create the mosaic patterns that helped manage animals and water.

## The bigger picture

"This is a time bomb ticking now because all that canopy has been wiped out," Oliver Costello of the national Indigenous Firesticks Alliance told *The Guardian*. "A lot of areas will end up regenerating really strongly, but they'll return in the wrong way. We'll end up with the wrong species compositions and balance."

Oliver and others are advocating a return to Aboriginal landscaping and fire practices. Believe it or not, some of

these areas may need yet more burning. And then the right plants need to be planted a certain way to prevent this from happening again and to help the remaining animals.

Of course, there's more to all this than just the land being managed better. Australia has been blistered by unbearable temperatures and a long drought. That, folks, is climate change.

The Emergency Leaders for Climate Action, which includes ex-fire chiefs from New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania, have made a direct link between global warming and harder-to-control fires. They are calling for an urgent plan to phase out fossil fuels, claiming this is the root cause of all Australia's woes.

## How to help

The global outpouring of assistance for the fires has been remarkable – from Singapore supplying Chinook helicopters to help battle the blazes, to the average Joe on the street putting his hand in his pocket. You can help too, through some of the amazing organisations involved in the fight. (Be careful not to get scammed; there are plenty of irreputable people claiming to be good guys!) For an up-to-date list of possible places to donate, log onto [expatliving.sg](http://expatliving.sg).

Try to look at the bigger picture, too. There are tiny steps we can take every day to fight climate change. We all know the drill. Don't use so much air-con. Use mass transit instead of a car. Say goodbye to single-use plastic. Every little action helps. *EL*



## THE SHOCKING SIZE OF THE AUSTRALIAN WILDFIRES

Representation of the area affected by recent major wildfire events

