

Burning off our biodiversity breaking every rule in the book

Australia is home to some of the world's most iconic flora and fauna, the like of which occur nowhere else in the world. Sadly, our extinction rate is a national disgrace, and today literally hundreds of species are listed as threatened, a recognition that unless their declining numbers are reversed, they too are heading for extinction.

Loss of habitat is undoubtedly the greatest contributor, and yet landowners continue to destroy critical habitat right across the board, much of it illegally and are seldom punished. Broad-acre land clearing is on the increase as liberal governments relax laws to protect native vegetation. However, land clearing comes in many forms, not just the obvious impacts of the bulldozer blade. “Burning off”, something widely practised by so called 'graziers', is by far and away the most damaging to biodiversity.



The graziers mostly to blame for this degradation, are owners of land with very low fertility soils, often with carrying capacities lower than one beast to 20 hectares. They supplement periodic logging income by running poor quality mixed bred cattle, or “scrubbers” as they are more commonly known, that are ultimately sold to feed lots or owners of more fertile farms which are better suited to fattening that stock.

Have no delusions about the practice of “burning off”. It is seldom done for the purpose of hazard reduction, and burning to create “green pick” for cattle, which is allowed by authorities as an “agricultural activity”, is generally just a mask for clearing of unwanted trees and undergrowth that are unsuitable for timber.

Every year these landowners drop matches into bushland for that very purpose, with no plans to stop it burning, with the result that tens of thousands of hectares of native bushland is 'nuked' every year, much of it on neighbouring properties including state forests, national parks, and nature reserves.

The cost to taxpayers is enormous, yet prosecutions seldom result. However the cost to the environment, particularly to flora and fauna, is beyond calculation, and here is the anomaly which nobody ever seems to consider. It is illegal to harm native fauna, punishable by fines and even prison terms, yet landowners are allowed to set fire to habitat, knowing it will kill native animals and even young birds in their nests, but those laws protecting them simply don't apply in this instance. **Why is that?**

Those landowners can be heard justifying what they are doing, citing the fallacy that Aboriginal peoples did the same thing for thousands of years. However, those early Australians did not precede that burning with logging that left a degraded weed infested landscape littered with tree crowns, damaged tree trunks, and other flammable material. Neither did they follow that burning with herds of cattle and sheep trampling the now denuded creek and gully banks, creating erosion on a massive scale across the landscape.

The very fact that burning encourages the regrowth of fire-prone species like Blady Grass, Bracken and Wattles, which actually makes the fire hazard worse over time, is ignored. Also ignored is the fact that frequent burning destroys the humus in the soil's surface layer, along with critical micro-organisms that would normally break down leaf litter, reducing fuel loads and enriching those soils.

Consider this, If an individual captured a native animal and burned it alive, an outraged society would demand jail time for the offender under cruelty to animals legislation. The length of that jail term would likely increase if those animals happened to be listed as endangered yet, to graziers undertaking these unsustainable practices, burning native animals alive is legal and widely considered acceptable. Again, how can that possibly be allowed, much less encouraged as some sort of community favour by reducing fire hazards, even though the burning invariably takes place in remote rural areas?



A 3m long Carpet Python burned alive in bushland during a supposed agricultural burn off at Shannondale, 19th May 2016



Birds nests, often containing young fledglings, are a common casualty of burn-offs.

One of the greatest threats to biodiversity that has emerged over the past 50 years is the loss of old-growth trees, those containing hollows that provide nesting and roost sites for a wide range of native fauna. This shortage is the direct result of 150 years of uncontrolled logging, which has seen the removal of all young and mid-age trees from the landscape. Now, there is an ever increasing loss of these old trees, many of which are over 400 years old, as they succumb to old age, lightning strike and strong winds. With no older trees coming through to replace them, there is an effective 150 year gap until today's regrowth are old enough to form hollows. trees, effectively leading to the current critical shortage.



The aftermath of a burn-off, as old-growth trees crash to the ground.

Under the Threatened Species Conservation Act, Frequent Fire is listed as a Key Threatening Process, a clear acknowledgement of the impacts of fire on wildlife, and something that is highly undesirable. Yet that fact has no standing when it comes to burning off by graziers, who do not need to assess the impacts of fire on wildlife, including threatened species, even if they know the animals occur there.



An old-growth Eucalypt with large hollows, which is probably over 400 years old

While lightning strike, strong winds and even fire resulting from lightning, are natural contributors to the demise of old-growth trees, burning off is once again the greatest threat, with every fire bringing down more and more of those forest giants.

Possums, gliders, micro-bats, and dozens of bird species including parrots, cockatoos, owls etc. all depend on tree hollows.

In fact, almost half the threatened fauna species in NSW are tree-hollow dependent, so the loss of this crucial component is devastating to those species. However, while the law protects them from hunting, or capture and sale on the black market, graziers are issued with permits at any time of the year so they can wreck havoc on those animals and their habitat with impunity.



Homes are lost, homes that were more than 200 years in the making, and will take that long to replace



Up in smoke. Researchers at the Australian National University calculate that hollows of this size take more than 300 years to form

Thus far I have focused on private landowners, but in recent years governments across Australia have increased the burning of public land, including national parks, in a knee-jerk reaction to bushfire tragedies where there has been a massive loss of life. In fact national parks' personnel now have a quota of 20% that they have to burn every year, meaning that all the national park estate is burned on average every 5 years, a rate which is recognised as very high frequency, and listed as a key threatening process to both flora and fauna. And that's not all, the removal of hollow-bearing trees, standing dead trees, and fallen logs are also also recognised key threatening processes, all of which occur as a result of burning.

Frequent fire also reduces the native understorey which, coupled with canopy thinning through the loss of trees brought down by burning, promotes weed invasion by exotic species like Lantana. This entire process is now also recognised as a major contributor to forest dieback.

To compound all these problems it has now become the national parks' policy to knock down all old-growth trees within 30 metres of roads and tracks for Workplace Health and Safety (WH&S) purposes. Of course you won't find this policy in writing, and official guidelines clearly stipulate that old-growth trees are to be protected, but in reality the destruction is happening across the state.



Scores of old-growth trees such as this were 'pushed' over for WH&S reasons during a prescribed hazard reduction burn at Fortis Creek National Park in late 2015.

In our own area, the Clarence Environment Centre took the Office of Environment and Heritage to task over the bulldozing of scores of old-growth trees such as that pictured above, that were 'pushed' over for WH&S reasons during a prescribed hazard reduction burn at Fortis Creek National Park in late 2015.



Subsequent correspondence received, all the way up to the minister, along with documents received through Freedom of Information, showed that what had occurred was fully condoned.

Knowing that critically important habitat features such as hollow-bearing old-growth trees are fast disappearing from the landscape through natural causes is bad enough. To know that these forest giants are burned to the

ground as a result of deliberate hazard reduction activities is even worse, but then to learn that those trees that actually survived the burning are then callously knocked down by the very people charged with protecting biodiversity, is hard to stomach.

The Clarence Environment Centre will continue to speak out against this lunacy.

John Edwards, Honorary Secretary.