

Submission into inquiry by Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications into the response to recent fire in the remote Tasmanian wilderness affecting the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area and the lessons learnt from those fires.

15 April 2016

There is a long history of ignoring or failing to take due account of arson or negligence as a cause of bushfires in Tasmania where lightning strikes, like those that caused this year's major outbreaks, have been a lesser factor.

Escapes from logging regeneration burns have had a major impact on forests and reserves in recent decades. A section of the Mathinna Falls reserve was burnt out. The largest known tree in the Southern Hemisphere, El Grande, was burnt to death. Many creek-side reserves were incinerated, as were trees retained for wildlife including, for example, a Tasmanian wedge-tailed eagles' nest.

However, the phenomenon of deliberate arson will become more concerning as greater efforts are made to avoid escapes from officially-sanctioned fires. The last few decades have seen deliberately-lit fires incinerate more than 10,000 hectares of the Tarkine wilderness rainforest, thousands of hectares of the Tumbledown wilderness (now part of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area) woodlands including important Aboriginal heritage sites, and smaller but numerous parts of the northeast coastal woodlands, Great Western Tiers and South Pieman Heads.

None of the culprits for these fires has been brought to book. There appears to be a great reluctance to indicate arson, especially early in a fire event. So the media regularly reports, wrongly, that a fire has 'broken out' (and that, wrongly, 'no property is threatened'). The consequences for the public, both for its private property and wild lands, is so great that we believe a new protocol is required to indicate from the outset whether a fire is suspected to be from human or other (natural) causes.

The problem of arson requires a wider rethink. So much is at stake that the public ought to be encouraged to take details of vehicles, for example, on fire-prone days in areas most vulnerable. Neighbourhoods might organise a road watch specifically for this purpose.

A better understanding of pyromania, which is a particular neurosis, should be part of the public debate on bushfires and central to a full preparedness and prevention strategy. Pyromania, like kleptomania and gambling addiction, is present in all communities but is particularly deadly for Tasmania's future and deserves greater attention. This should include a real effort to reach and help men, women and children who suffer from pyromania. A dedicated police flying squad to investigate fire outbreaks is warranted.

We support the concept of Tasmania having at hand Canadian-style water bombing aircraft and for the earliest possible efforts to douse remote fires before they become unmanageable. The Commonwealth is best placed to co-ordinate and fund the availability of such a facility for all states and territories.

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