

Press Commonwealth Enquiry Bushfires Chair Garry Nairn 3.4.03

Public land management of fuel loads & invasive ferals must change.
Noeline Franklin Brindabella.

There is no doubt in the minds of established rural communities that the recent bushfires burning mercilessly across the Snowy region in January 2003 could have been alleviated in severity and more amenable to containment efforts had the huge fuel loads in public land been sympathetically addressed by proven effective land management strategies endorsed by promotion of abundance of wildlife and wildflowers. Public land management reform must occur if we are to maximise recovery and prevent the reoccurrence of such catastrophic fires at a greater frequency in future.

These fires burning comprehensively over millions of hectares in the height of summer are arguably the worsts in possibly 30000 years. Our family have put in public submissions for about 30 years opposing park and wilderness expansion asking that invasive ferals and fuel loads be addressed in existing crown managed land before more land is subjected to degrading processes of predation, competition, stagnation, starvation and high temperature incineration to erode the high standard water catchment and conservation values local communities achieved over the previous thousands of years. Non Interventionist Conservation is a failed experiment. Many submissions of a similar stance lodged by local communities have been suppressed, lost and ignored. The Snowy reached world heritage listing by the nurturing efforts of our families. We feel a great loss, betrayal, chronic misrepresentation of our land management approaches and hijacked achievements.

Superficial small area traditional fire has been excluded for in some cases 40-50 years from public land including the Canberra Cottor catchment allowed to accumulate atom bombs worth of fuel loads in uniformly unkempt forests. Our community has been harassed and obstructed when carrying out hazard reduction burns to protect ourselves and provide supportive habitat on our own land. The grazing dominant ecology we achieved maximising biodiversity in a fire prepared bush attracting park and wilderness nomination has been lost first by policy excluding large domestic grazing animals as habitat management tools then more completely as wildlife are removed as a consequence of wild dog plague and starvation. The wildlife populations we recovered and kindled are fed to the dogs, our livestock killed and threatened, our families and farms showered in embers and fire balls for weeks. Our mountains turned to baked enamel burning remnant wildlife, bird life, top soil, seed reserves, all elements of recovery incinerated. Environmentalism and the public consultation process has lost any credibility in rural communities after this holocaust we had to have. Land management advisors paying themselves wage loadings to preside over disaster and projected as sooty heroes in the eyes of the community have no incentive to change their land management advice from doing nothing about invasive ferals or accumulation of fuel loads.

I am appalled how authorities have abandoned public land and nearby rural communities as vulnerable, deprived of policy input, waiting beside the bomb before ignition as farmers, foresters, volunteer fire fighters. Canberra people left complacent and unprepared even for the 10 days as their water catchment burns to bedrock 8.1.03 to 18.1.03 when it eventually blew into town. Multiple fires in thick bush converging producing vast quantities of flammable gases were said to be contained when arguably they were **uncontainable** given the fuel loads and summer climatic conditions ready to blast fire balls across kilometres of bare paddocks. I'm amazed that the pine mulch is now going back in around suburban houses to catch embers for next time. Have we learnt nothing? Will surviving biodiversity be nurtured to the best recovery possible or allowed to slip away with successive large fire events? Public land across the mountains has been generating a fire defect notice for 40 years or more. These fires were no accident, they were inevitable and largely preventable. Local communities have previously nursed the mountains through worse climatic challenges with less resources and better results by having a fire prepared environment. As we gather our traumatised communities set about repairing the damage we are saddened, angry and grieving for what has been lost and may never recover but are galvanised to bring about change to how our public land is cared for! The environmental travesty of these Jan 2003 fires, unacceptable!

VOLUNTEER BUSHFIRE FIGHTERS OPPOSING WILDERNESS AND NATIONAL PARK EXPANSION

Dear Sir,

Too many bushfire fighters have died needlessly in poorly prepared environments during fire outbreak.

As a bushfire brigade volunteer implicated in the protection of families, assets and land to the west of Canberra I must strongly oppose further expansion of Wilderness or Park in the region and continued erosion of effective local fire fighting capability. The National Park and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has a disproportional influence on fire policy in the region assuming extraordinary expertise and control. This has resulted in harbouring an unsafe, very poorly prepared environment in the event of bushfire.

Large area intense burns are historically put out by a change in the weather, not by fire fighters.

Extremes of weather conditions will eventually combine with what have become horrific fuel loads across 1000's of hectares of bushland. Fuel loads are in excess of 80 tonnes / ha. With the best of fire fighting capacity, fire behaviour can be **moderated only** with fuel burdens of 20 tonnes / ha or less.

'No burn' has been discredited in the USA after traumatic wildfires have reeked irreversible damage.

Low intensity, frequent fire has been a part of the Australian environment for not less than 40,000 years. We cannot control the weather extremes including dry lightning storms in summer but we can control fuel levels to reduce severity, intensity and area affected by any fire. Traditional control burns have been effective in making the region fire safe and 'driving' biodiversity until the post war expansion of bureaucratic 'no burn' philosophy now touted naively by the NPWS. This philosophy has been considered inappropriate by Aboriginal elders and stockmen who know the environment well. This 'no management' policy has been abandoned in the USA from where much of our modern conservation approaches are mindlessly adopted with disregard to local insight or differences in control resources and volatility of environment.

Control burns are on going with local people working with seasonal conditions and should not be dedicated to visiting technocrats assigned a calendar window!

Control burns are essential for technology transfer to perpetuate local fire fighting expertise. Traditional managers also created a variable fire history protecting wet ecologies, stimulating food chains, facilitating thoroughfare, providing fire safe haven and aiding rapid recolonisation among other positive environmental and economic outcomes. Proactive management not only influences fuel levels but can select other influential factors on fire intensity and area burnt such as topography, prevailing weather conditions, moisture content of over burden.

Fire fighters will be put at great peril as will residents, visitors and our assets including the ACT's water and electricity supply, aviation installations and softwood plantations.

Local landholders, local fire brigades and local Government have been stood over, obstructed, harassed and threatened as they have endeavoured to maintain a traditional and cost effective system of cool season, small area, understory burns on land not dominated by NPWS. Much of the land now supervised by the NPWS in the region has a 'no management' history dating back to the 1950's. Stockmen were progressively damned and banished as environmental villains from the region over the period 1944 to 1974, leaving strategically burnt and grazed open bushland that supported thrifty native populations despite the half century of ravages from rabbit plagues which defied control efforts. Rabbits had a profound impact on the ecology, overgrazing grasses and herbs while cultivating a volatile woody understory requiring persistent sympathetic fire management. Myxomatosis released at the behest of graziers almost freed the system of rabbits. Exhaustive poisoning and trapping pressure achieves suppression only. The effect of rabbits led to the wrongful discrediting of grazing as an 'ecofriendly' management tool to reduce burnable refuse. Grazing has been almost completely removed from the system. Native herbivores have vacated traditional feeding grounds through famine in unmanaged bush and displaced because of unchecked predation by wild dogs, foxes and cats. These 'grazing leases' have now become impenetrable, uninhabited and stagnant wasteland which if burnt in the height of summer will produce a wildfire causing irreversible damage. Tax

payers will not receive value for money in environmental preservation.

Authorities have assumed control and expertise but apparently not direct liability or accountability for the development and perpetuation of untenable fuel burdens.

Local knowledge of fire behaviour, ash drift, in combination with freak seasonal conditions known to occur all superimposed on a severely neglected environment will result in a fire of a magnitude that will vapourise much of the bushland in the northern part of the Snowy Mountains and possibly beyond, posing a real threat to suburban Canberra. Spot fires in surrounding grassland can also be envisaged, fanned by 80-100km/hr hot dry winds dissipating fire fighting effort. Conceivably a fire starting on Blowering Dam fore shores or upper Goobragandra one summer could jump from ridge to ridge and start a crown fire in suburban Canberra within hours in the eventuality of severe weather conditions. The unprecedented extremely high fuel loads which have accumulated are not being addressed by the NPWS, Land and Water Conservation authorities, all **remotely located** from the region.

Low frequency, high intensity wildfire is not a compulsory part of the natural ecology.

In 1988 in the Byadbo region near the Victorian border 60,000 ha of Park and private land was burnt mercilessly at one time. At the peak of the wildfire as it emerged from the Park over 50 spot fires were started. In this case fuel loads were less than those present to the west of Canberra, the topography was flatter, the weather was relatively mild and calm. The extent and speed of the crown fire raging up dry ridges can only be imagined. Eye witnesses reported that what remained after the fire were remnant charred tree trunks devoid of branches, sparsely indispersed in a sea of heat shattered rocks, standing in a deathly silent black and grey landscape, testimony to the idiocy of bureaucratic idealism. Vapourised were ageless soil and seed reserves to 50cm or more below what was the ground surface. Recolonisation was compromised by the enormity of the area affected, adjacent bushland being overgrown and in an advanced state of habitat decline and reduced stocking rate. Recovery can only tend towards a monoculture of a select few fire hardened species not resembling the species mix of previous ecologies. Byadbo has joined the ranks of similar wildfires across NSW in the Pilliga, Sydneys' National Parks. The list goes on as environmental management is centralised and master minded from town. Moping up after wildfire consists of misinformation campaigns that try to convince us wildfire is a natural phenomena, and by congratulating the bravery of surviving fire fighters!

Oppressive, illconceived legislation in Native Vegetation, Land And Water Conservation, NPWS and Wilderness, Threatened Species among other Acts must be repealed immediately to facilitate rational fire safety and appropriate environmental stewardship. The urgency of this process cannot be understated as the unseasonably dry winter persists in the region.

Current fire suppression policies are suicidal for bushfire fighters and disasterous for the long term protection of the environment. Expansion of Wilderness or National Park will effectively obstruct the construction and maintenance of critical firebreaks weakening further the preparedness of the regional network of firebreaks and access tracks. Mandatory environmental assessments prior to dry matter control burns must be abandoned. NPWS must **not** be exempt from obligation under the Rural Fire Act. Local landholders, local fire brigades and local Government must have autonomy and support to maintain the fire safety of their region regardless of land title. The coroner who investigated the circumstances surrounding the 1988 Byadbo fire concluded that the NPWS was not a competent land steward. Fuel loads of the Kosciusko National Park have **not** been addressed, on ground, but are left to ignite and cause inevitable, **inexcusable wildfire**. The tortuous bureaucratic process now in place is preventing 'on ground' action from an exaustive planning process, a form of procrastination soaking up finite budgets to no effect other than busily employing 'experts'! Many critical bushfire trails within the Park now covered in forest refuse and neglected must be retrieved for regional fire insurance and made serviceable rather than closed for obscure political objective.

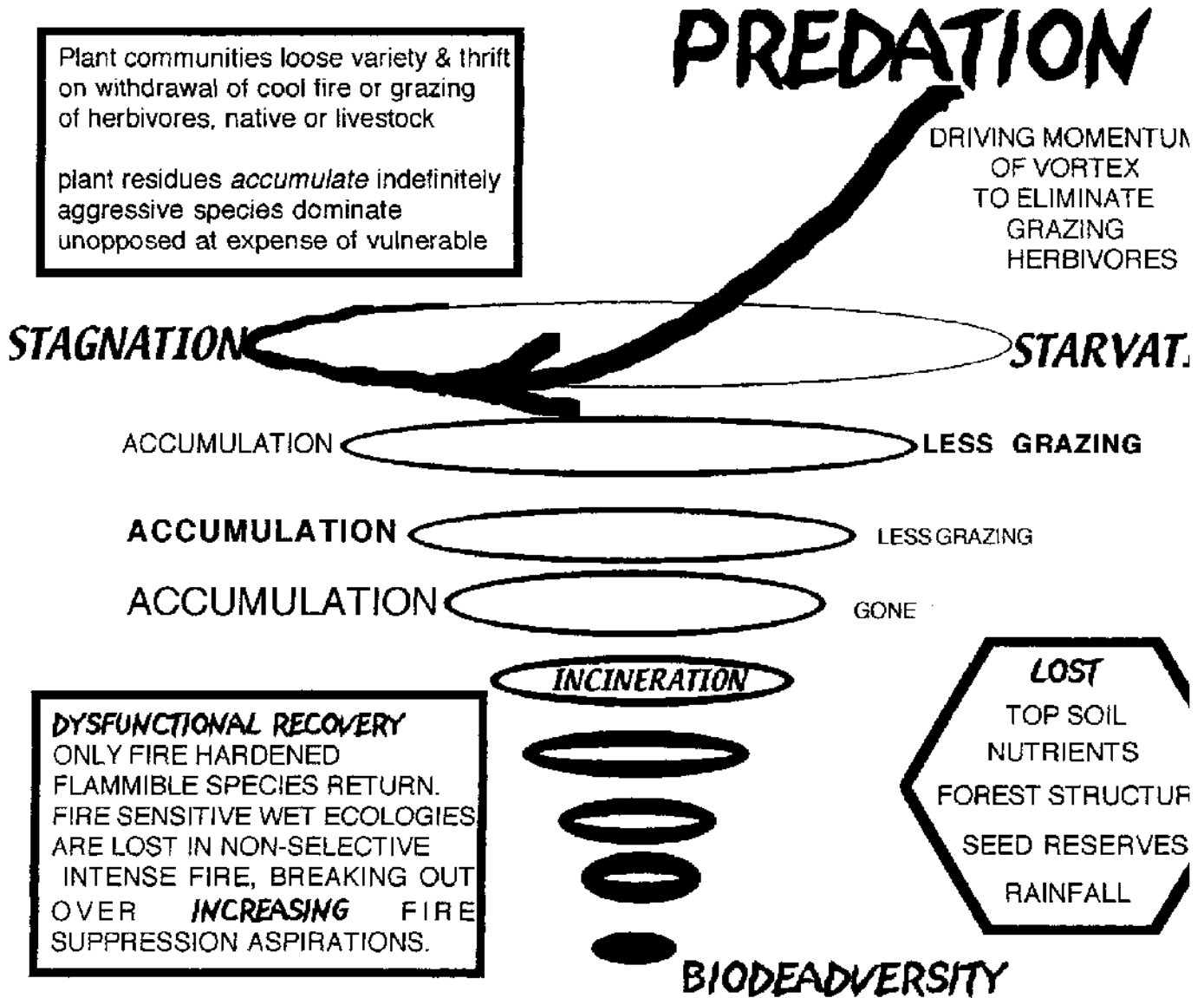
Written and circulated in 1998-9

**THE CONSERVATION VORTEX SENDING BIODIVERSITY DOWN THE DRA
THE STOCKMAN'S MODEL**

PURSUING THE COEVOLUTION. CHAOS, COMPOST AND CAVE IN THEORIES

OF PASSIVE NON-INTERVENTIONIST LAND MANAGEMENT

endorsed by urban economic rationalists but *not* native species or rural communities observe disappearance of their conservation achievements on their public land



DOOMS DAY WISH OF SPECIES LOSS GRANTED IN FULL
TO NON-INTERVENTIONIST CONSERVATION

BY STAGNATION, STARVATION, PREDATION LOOP
FOLLOWED BY SEVERE LARGE AREA INCINERATION
OFFERING FEW FIRE SAFE HAVENS

AS FIRE SUPPRESSION CAPACITY INCREASES

THE INTENSITY OF UNCONTROLLED FIRE INCREASES

STOP CONSERVATION VORTEX SENDING BIODIVERSITY DOWN THE DRAIN
NOT PURSUE THE COEVOLUTION, CHAOS, COMPOST AND CAVE IN THEORIES
OF PASSIVE NON-INTERVENTIONIST LAND MANAGEMENT
CREATING ECOLOGICAL ARTIFACT

MANAGEMENT FOR A SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM

BIODIVERSITY DEPENDS ON RIPPLES OF CHANGE (eg SMALL FIRES & GRAZING) TO OPPOSE AGGRESSIVE SPECIES CREATING OUT OF PHASE OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH, SUCCESSION & REGENERATION PROVIDING MAXIMAL CHOICE OF MICROCLIMATE, SMORGASBORD OF FOOD CHOICES ALL YEAR, EVERY YEAR!

PREDATION BY AGGRESSIVE NATURALISED?? EXOTICS
 SUPPRESSION AND CONTAINMENT

STEP ONE IN RECOVERY OF HABITAT THRIFT

STOP STAGNATION

STOP STARVATI

STOP ACCUMULATION

GRAZING ENCOURAGED

STOP ACCUMULATION

RESTORE FOOD CHAINS
 mow, prune & recycle
 STRATEGIC GRAZING
 SMALL AREA
 SUPERFICIAL FIRE

STOP ACCUMULATION

STOP **INCINERATION**

IGNORING FUEL MANAGEMENT
 BRINGS ABOUT LARGE AREA NON-SELECTIVE FIRE
 INEVITABLE, PREVENTABLE
NOT ACCIDENTAL

BIODIVERSITY SAFE STRATEGIES
 PROVEN EFFECTIVE OUTCOMES
 CAPACITY TO MOVE FURTHER FORWARD PLACING EMPHASIS ON HABITAT THRIFT INSTEAD OF COMPROMISING FOR ECONOMIC SURVIVAL ONLY

BIODEADVERSITY

AVOID DOOMS DAY WISH OF SPECIES LOSS GRANTED IN FULL TO NON-INTERVENTIONIST CONSERVATION BY THE STAGNATION, STARVATION, PREDATION LOOP FOLLOWED BY SEVERE LARGE AREA INCINERATION
SMALL PREDATION = SMALL FUEL LOADS = SMALL FIRE

N A F Franklin B Sc Hons PTC M Med Sc 160 years of family land management meets Park approval!!
 our environmental enlightenment nurturing biodiversity rewarded by resumption of leasehold, wild dogs trying toover run our freehold from adjacent crown managed land previously offering similar habitat thrift. Our farms are wildlife refugee camps offering predator suppression, supportive habitat, regular food supplies for vulnerable native species. As our livestock too are threatened, killed, runs destocked our ability to continue wildlife protection is severely compromised.