

In bushfires, homes are often destroyed some time after the passage of the main fire front. Experience has shown that if the home owner is present he can often control spot fires occurring after the main fire has passed and so save his property. However in Queensland, home owners are forcibly evacuated prior to the fire front with no option to stay and protect their property. This is certainly not the position in some Australian States where property owners make their own decision to stay or leave. I believe across Australia there should be a universal position that it is up to the home owner alone to decide whether he will stay or leave at the approach of the fire front. In conjunction with this decision, it is the important rider that emergency and rescue personnel should not be committed to hazardous operations by a delayed change of mind of the property owner.

The effectiveness of aerial water bombing seems beyond doubt. Large helicopters, because of their ability to operate from small cleared areas with no need for prepared landing strips, implies more efficient water carriage. At present, these expensive aircraft are hired on demand from overseas but I believe a case can be made for purchase so that at the outbreak of the fire season, they can be immediately brought into action. The most effective fire control is rapid deployment of the maximum of suitable equipment before the fire gets too large. Fires started by lightning strike in remote forest country can only be fought by aerial bombardment. Large helicopters are very expensive and might be beyond State budgets for purchase but it is easy to see difficulties in priority of operation if the armed services purchased them and controlled their use.

On my observation, bushfires and grass fires are destructive to the survival of many small plants and small animals. Yes, many Australian plants and animals are adaptive to fire regimes but many are not. I cannot prove my contention but in the best of all worlds I would like fire events left to random chance. However, in much of Australia where fires are inevitable the process of reduction burning must be supported as wild fires at summer peak are much more destructive than cool weather control burns. If there are areas that can be protected from arsonists, then on the grounds of biological diversity they should be left pristine but I concede the difficulty of preventing the combination of immature personality and cheap matches.

National Parks suffer this conflict of interest with each park subject to different risk and varying amounts of biodiversity loss in the event of wild fire. But wildfire is not inevitable – the gully containing the Woolamai Pine has probably been surrounded by countless wild fires but has not suffered one for millions of years.

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