



Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

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Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

2019 -2020 Bushfires in the Blue Mountains A statement from the Society

The massive fires occurring across Australia are devastating. The extent, duration and ferocity of the fires is unprecedented in recent times. The Blue Mountains Conservation Society (the Society), is deeply saddened by the loss of life. We offer our heartfelt sympathy to those who have lost a family member, friend or acquaintance. Our thoughts are with all who have been impacted by the fires.

We thank those who have, and who continue to, work to suppress and contain these fires. We applaud the courage of the fire fighters on the frontline and continue to be concerned for their safety. We think of communities directly impacted by fires. We recognise the efforts of rescuers and carers who are working to aid wildlife.

Prolonged and extreme high temperatures coupled with greatly reduced rainfall, extraordinarily low humidity and periods of high and variable winds, have produced fire conditions and fire behaviours previously unknown in the Blue Mountains and Australia. The extreme and erratic weather behaviour and resultant conditions exemplify the predictions of climate scientists in regard to the impacts of global warming and rapid climate change.

Impacts on the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area

In the Blue Mountains, we, like many people in Australia and world-wide, are shocked by the extensive burning that has occurred, and is still occurring, in the national parks that we live beside. These parks are a part of our being. Almost 80 per cent of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWA), which covers over one million hectares, has now been burnt. As yet, we do not know how severe or patchy the burning has been across this area.

The impacts of a rapidly changing climate, including extreme drought and devastating fires, are now being played out on the biodiversity of the GBMWA. It is too soon to accurately quantify the impacts on the plants and animals of the area. Initial estimates are that at least 800 million animals have died in NSW alone.

In the GBMWA it is estimated that over 838,000 hectares have been burnt as of 13 January 2020 and 140 million reptiles, birds and mammals (excluding bats) have been impacted.¹

Certainly, genetic diversity in the area will be greatly reduced, species may be lost from the area. Many species, and possibly ecological communities, will be locally threatened. Our world renowned biodiversity is at risk and it is imperative that we work to restore and protect it.

What should be done for the Greater Blue Mountains environment?

Just as the fires are unprecedented, so the magnitude of the required recovery effort must also be unprecedented. The recovery effort will need to be well resourced. We are well aware that the fire season is not over. However, we believe governments should already be setting out what needs to be done immediately to address the massive impacts on the plants, animals and the forested environment across Australia.

The efforts to recover our natural environment as well as any government inquiries, reviews or assessments should be guided by evidence and scientific expertise.

Immediate, fundamental and medium term actions needed

The Society calls on the NSW and Commonwealth Governments to, in relation to the whole GBMWA, prepare a full assessment of the impacts of the fires on the GBMWA and develop a comprehensive well-funded recovery plan for this area.

This work should, among other things, include

- biodiversity protection and recovery as a fundamental goal;
- comprehensive fire intensity mapping ;
- assessment of fire behaviour in areas previously burnt by wildfires and planned fires and whether these assisted control efforts;
- identifying unburnt areas which in the past have provided refuge areas but, in the current situation, may be compromised by the on-going drought and extraordinary temperatures;
- assessment of how fire behaved in existing hazard reduced areas; and
- fully utilising the experience and expertise of the GBMWA managers, that is, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service as well as independent scientists from other institutions and the community:

The recovery plan should, among other things,

- utilise local and external scientific expertise;

¹ Preliminary estimate by Peter Smith, local ecologist and co-author of *Native Fauna of the Greater Blue Mountains World heritage Area*. For more see <https://www.bluemountains.org.au/>

- include adjacent high conservation value lands (Crown land, state forests and private land) which could assist with species recovery and work on this with landowners;
- specifically address the impacts of the fires on the Outstanding Universal Values of the GBM WHA (that is, on the reason for its World Heritage recognition);
- identify opportunities for community participation in actions relating to the assessment and/or recovery plan;
- consult with indigenous organisations; and
- regularly report to the local community about findings and actions.

Blue Mountains Conservation Society calls on both the Commonwealth and State Governments, in the light of this unparalleled fire season, to take immediate action to mitigate rapid climate change. Unless this is done, efforts to address this fire season will be wasted.

The Society also calls on the State and Commonwealth Governments to

- recognise the intrinsic value of biodiversity and its contribution to our World Heritage Listing,
- immediately restore and increase funding and staff who look after biodiversity for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service,
- urgently increase funding to control feral animals and invasive species to give native fauna a better chance of survival;
- employ more government naturalists with long term job tenure,
- support restoration of habitat and biodiversity on surrounding lands,
- forensically examine fire management. This should be part of any government review. Issues to be included: more resources for rapid fire suppression, the adequacy of resources available for rapid fire suppression and the role of all agencies involved. It should acknowledge that future fires will be different,
- allow and encourage public servants to speak freely at any inquiries,
- investigate new ways to protect life and property.

The Society is working on the details of what we believe is needed. Without a community and political will to value and work effectively to restore the biodiversity of the Greater Blue Mountains, the future of the area's biodiversity is bleak and we all will have failed both the biodiversity and future generations

We will continue to update fire information on our website www.bluemountains.org.au.