HOTSPOTS FIRE PROJECT

Case Study: Fire planning makes good sense

Jo and Phyllis Sternbeck believe that living with fire is a part of life in the Macdonald Valley.

Learning from the locals

For the locals of the Macdonald Valley, using fire for property protection goes hand in hand with looking after the bush, the same as it always has.

Living with fire

Jo Sternbeck has lived in the Macdonald Valley his whole life, just like his father Clarrie, and his father before him. In fact Jo's family has been a permanent part of the valley since his ancestors first arrived as one of the founding families around 200 years ago. Back then, everyone had to work the land or risk losing their leases. It was a hard life, but one that forged a strong relationship with country.

For Jo's family and the close knit community that calls the Macdonald Valley home, an important part of that relationship is, and always has been, acknowledging and respecting the role of fire. They appreciate that fire is part of the environment they live in, and a part of life – shaping everything from farm duties and neighbour relations to the location of their homes. For long-time locals like Jo and his family, acknowledging the need for fire is part of understanding life in the valley.

Age old skills

For generations, bush skills including fire knowledge have been passed down through families in the valley; skills many believe were originally learnt from local Aboriginal Australians. The need for regular burns was recognised not just for property protection but also because fire was seen as helping to revitalise the bush. Jo recalls that his father, like his grandfather, would take cattle up to the ridgeline each winter where they would feed on the grass leases. When mustering the cattle back down to the valley floor each spring he would burn these grassy patches to ensure fresh growth for the following year. Jo and his mother would keep track of his progress "by the trails of smoke he left behind as he came down the mountain." Jo stresses that burning was not something you did lightly, but came from years of experience with the local conditions: "if the weather wasn't suitable on the day, you didn't burn – when it looked right, you did."

Timing was an important consideration. Jo recalls that low intensity burns were usually carried out in late autumn through to early spring in patches of about 20-40 acres so that not all the shrubs would be burnt at once. They were usually slow moving fires, allowing time for animals to escape ahead of the flames. Jo was always careful to never burn after late spring as the smaller woodland birds would be nesting and vulnerable to fire.

Property protection of course was (and still is) a very real issue but it was always considered just a part of regular farm duties. Everybody knew that fire did not respect property boundaries and neighbours would help out if the need arose. Houses were always situated in the safest location on the property: the closer to the valley floor and the further away from the bush, the better. Everyone had a responsibility to clean up their property and keep fuel loads low. For Jo, "it was just common sense really."

Sign of the times

Local Fire Captain Greg Bailey also knows the valley's fire traditions. Like Jo, Greg's family was among the first settlers in the Macdonald Valley. Greg remembers that as a kid, he would watch in fascination as the fires burnt, sometimes for weeks, on the rocky mountain sides. He recalls that "flames were always low and slow moving and at night the fires stretched across the mountains like a long necklace crackling amongst the rocks." When Greg was growing up, there was no such thing as canopy fires and he doesn't recall a house ever being lost.

Of course times have changed and Greg has seen the use of fire decline since the late 1960s in line with changing attitudes. Recent decades have seen more people and smaller properties (some with houses and assets set close to bushland). The changes in landuse and potential legal implications mean that land managers today tend to use less fire - often excluding it altogether.

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As a local, Greg is concerned about how the change in fire regime is impacting on the surrounding environment. Much of the Australian bush has evolved with fire and many plants need fire to ensure they remain a robust part of the plant community over time. Many of Australia's unique animals also benefit from the range of habitat that becomes available in the months and years after a fire. Given the changes in the landscape, Greg knows that local fire management planning will need to draw on both old and new knowledge about fire in order to protect native plants and animals as well as property.

Coming around again

Lately, the topic of fire management has been making a comeback. Local residents and the valley brigade are working together with the Rural Fire Service and National Parks and Wildlife Service to improve fire safety for the valley while also considering the needs of the bush. They know that any fire management planning process will have to consider a variety of opinions and priorities. For many, property protection is high on the agenda, for others a balance with conservation is also important.

Already residents have held two successful Fire Forums, helping to build relationships with all parties and get the issues 'out there and on the table'. Communication is a fundamental part of the process and one that continues to develop. For many in the valley, the process of establishing and building on relationships with others in the community, including the Rural Fire Service and National Parks and Wildlife Service, is proving just as valuable as the fire planning itself.

For Jo, fires will come and go, just as they always have. He acknowledges that it is harder to use fire these days as there are more restrictions and less people with fire knowledge. Yet despite the modern trend for people to live more independently of each other, Jo is encouraged to see the residents of the Macdonald Valley taking the initiative and working together. For the residents of the Macdonald Valley, improved relationships all round will no doubt contribute to a future of informed and successful fire management planning.

Effective fire management practices are needed to protect farms and the bush.

WHAT LAND MANAGERS CAN DO

Get to know your neighbours and your local brigade.

Consider undertaking fire management planning in collaboration with your neighbours and local brigade to try to minimise the likelihood or impact of a devastating wildfire (recognising that sometimes even the best planning may not be enough to avert such a fire).

Don't burn the whole place at once. Patchiness provides refuges for animals and a seed source that lets plants recolonise burnt areas.

Stay informed. Talk with others about your observations and concerns. Seek advice from your local Rural Fire Service and other fire and vegetation experts.

Further Information

The Hotspots Fire Project is funded by the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust. For further information contact the Project Coordinator on (02) 9279 2466, email hotspots@nccnsw.org.au or visit www.hotspotsfireproject.org.au.

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