

A Case of Burning Neglect

A report from North East Victorians regarding the 2003 bushfire crisis.

30 April 2003



Pictured: Local residents express their views after the 2003 bushfire crisis – Falls Creek road at Bogong Village



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Foreword

At the beginning of this year North Eastern Victoria was devastated by its biggest bushfire in living memory. After consuming more than 1.6 million hectares of land, the immediate crisis has subsided and those affected have been left to pick up the pieces.

The aftermath of the fires is a hardship that country people have learned to live with, and in the cities the disaster has faded to little more than a memory.

As a sixth generation farmer from Mitta Mitta I spend each day with friends, acquaintances and colleagues throughout North Eastern Victoria whose lives, livelihoods and assets have been trashed by this needless disaster.

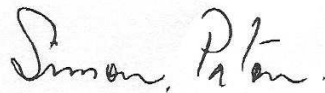
Their anguish is fanned by the certain knowledge that with effective management this disaster could have been avoided. There is a continuing disbelief about the comedy that unfolded as bureaucrats took control of an event for which they were equipped by neither competence nor experience.

Country people have a great affinity for the natural environment and they have a vested interest in preserving and caring for it. There is a simmering outrage about the incompetence, competing agendas and political opportunism that masquerades as conservation policy designed for city consumption.

On top of all this, North Eastern Victorians are numb with the fear that a similar disaster could occur once again next summer. Nothing has changed.

This is their report. To protect these people from unnecessary retaliation, I have submitted the report over my name. However, each of these informants is prepared to swear their evidence in camera if given a meaningful forum to do so.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Tony Cutcliffe, Karen Walker and the team at The Eureka Project for volunteering their time and resources in preparing this report.



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Executive Summary

*When this
fire started,
I could've
put it out
with me
hat.*

Alpine farmer

When the bushfire crisis erupted in North Eastern Victoria at the start of this year, most Victorians were horrified by the intensity of the blaze and the extent of the damage it caused.

For a while, public debate focused on the issue of fuel reduction in State Government controlled national parks and State forests. Forming the centre of a populist debate, those who advocated greater burning off were brandished as rednecks and vandals. Those who insisted that Mother Nature should be left to take control were promoted as the guardians of our environment.

Somewhere in the middle of this debate lies the truth of the matter. This report seeks to uncover that truth and provide the basis of a sensible, unemotional and informed debate. This is a debate that must acknowledge that human beings have become part of our natural ecology and that sustainability by any definition must harness the wider community in managing the interaction between the wilderness and mankind.

More particularly, this report is intended to take the discussion out of the hands of bureaucrats, political minders and 'spin doctors' who govern so much of the information which is disseminated to the public. It is a report that focuses on the development of management devices that enable the Victorian public to make accurate and reliable judgments about the way the public assets, funds and risk are being managed.

In the 2003 bushfire crisis, the State Government tells us that it expended around \$180 million in firefighting and it has since committed nearly \$70 million in recovery measures. The cost to the private sector is estimated to be as high as \$100 million.

In other words, this crisis has conceivably cost Victoria upwards of \$350 million dollars. Yet the analysis of the disaster, the causes and the

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implications have disappeared into an ether orchestrated by the State Government of Victoria. An internal inquiry established by the State Government will consider issues at its leisure and report during the middle of the AFL Grand Final Season in September this year.

In the meantime, the State Government has endeavoured to brush the matter under the carpet amidst a flurry of tourism advertising and a cascade of medals, ceremonies and certificates for those involved in firefighting. Like motherhood and apple pie, it has become politically incorrect to denounce the circumstances surrounding the fire. To do so is to denounce the heroism and sacrifice that the government would have us believe that it orchestrated and inspired.

The real story lies not only in the mismanagement and negligence associated with forest management provided by the State Government.

Perhaps the most damning conclusion of this report is that the Country Fire Authority (CFA) has been emasculated by the ambitions and dubious competence of its leaders. The CFA was once regarded as a world model for a volunteer based rural firefighting service. Its stealthy 'professionalisation' has seen the vast experience, leadership and cost effectiveness of its volunteer forces reduced to little more than a rump.

The 2003 bushfire crisis provided an unambiguous indication that the role of the CFA volunteer has been thrown on the junkheap in favour of highly paid, undermotivated firefighters governed by an Occupational Health and Safety strategy that leaves them far from harm and productivity. The overlay of bureaucracy from the Department of Sustainability and the Environment means that major bushfires have become a metaphor for the bureaucratic warfare that goes on between government departments in the leafy streets of Melbourne.

The State Government is concerned about people docking their terrier's tail, yet they seem completely unconcerned about the thousands of native animals and farm stock incinerated in the fire

Tallangatta farmer

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Few people, if any, in North Eastern Victoria were surprised by the eventuality of the 2003 crisis. It could be seen coming for years despite the avalanche of warnings and concerns expressed by knowledgeable and experienced country people.

***The CFA
appears to have
become the
asphalt fire
service***

Tallangatta farmer

What's more, the same people deduce from government responses and attitudes that this will be the first of many major bushfires which we can expect to experience in the years ahead. Forest management and intervention will remain artificially constricted in order to appease city based, and generally uninformed, green voters.

The determination to sideline communities and fight fires with paid staff operating in monumentally risk adverse frameworks completes the folly. A folly which imposes all the risk and the burden of costs upon unseen and unheard country people.

The 2003 bushfire crisis was not a clash between political or environmental ideologies. It was the manifestation of a bureaucratic and political agenda imposed on a population whose numbers are too small to warrant continued political priority.

Somewhere in the stories recounted in this report lie the basis for legal redress associated with the negligence and culpability regarding the duty of care which a government must exercise in relation to its people and its belongings.

Equally, the stories represent a search for accountability and for State Government responses calculated to analyse the facts rather than apologise for the bureaucracy.

This report seeks to encourage the identification of key public figures who will meet their responsibility to ensure that the truth is eventually told.

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1. Recent History

*If you look
around you
can't see a bird
or a wild animal
for miles. The
place looks like
it's been
sterilised.*

Mt Beauty farmer

In August 2002 community leaders from around Mt Beauty invited the then Minister for Environment and Conservation to meet with them and discuss concerns about the Victorian Government's conservation policy. The meeting was one of a series of country forums conducted by The Eureka Project and was also attended by a number of other country leaders who shared concerns about the development and implementation of State Government conservation policy.

The forum was arranged by local people who wanted to establish a dialogue with the State Government about the way in which the government managed the interface between wilderness areas and country communities. It was a conscious effort to dispel the perception that country people were anti-conservationist. Instead, their desire to be involved in the conservation process was motivated by a close understanding of the natural environment and a vested interest in its preservation, management and careful protection.

A detailed case was made for local people to be recognized as part of the natural environment and to take heed of the deteriorating ecological, safety and financial conditions in the Alpine National Park and associated areas during the last decade.

They were concerned that locking up the forests was akin to locking up a heritage mansion that the government may wish to preserve. Locking up without appropriate maintenance and investment leads to dilapidation, and unpoliced exclusion limits access to vandals and improperly motivated activities.

In the case of the Alpine National Park, locking up had led to the proliferation of noxious weeds such as blackberries and briars as well as a spectacular

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growth in the levels of noxious pests particularly wild dogs and cats, foxes, pigs, goats and deer.

Many people from the Licola community and visitors to the area, expect to be misled, frustrated and lied to, when dealing with Parks Victoria

Caledonia Valley fire
community update

In addition, forum participants warned of the reduction in firefighting and emergency capability which followed the withdrawal of the SECV and its state of the art firefighting resources and firetrail maintenance practices. The loss of bulldozers and firefighting teams that followed the scaling down of logging activity had further and seriously depleted the community's ability to defend itself.

A considered and thoughtful presentation also described the manner in which the local resort of Falls Creek was suffering from the 'short-termism' approach to development and management proposals that local businesses had submitted to the State Government.

Local people accepted that their activities would be subject to the implications of long term government plans for the area. However they felt entitled to know what those plans were so that they could structure their life decisions around them, and they wanted to have a part in the development and testing of those plans.

Other members of the group questioned State Government regulations which required nett increases in vegetation on each occasion that the development affected the natural environment. In some areas, the removal of a tree required 100 trees to be planted in its place.

Whilst the government could mandate the planting of trees and vegetation, it had communicated no plan, strategy or incentive to keep them alive. Nor had publish the rationale behind these revegetation ratios.

The Minister arrived at the meeting later than scheduled because she was conducting a press conference in Melbourne about the government's financial payout associated with the resumption of the Seals Rock tourist facility.

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Nonetheless, her Parliamentary Secretary was in attendance for the full meeting and a senior member of the then Department of Natural Resources and Environment.

I've been observing this countryside for 66 years but the experts tell me that they know the land better than I do

Tallangatta Valley farmer

They were left in no doubt that the country people in attendance wanted to establish a partnership with government because they were concerned about the fire danger arising from government processes and the ultimate degradation that government policy was imposing on the Alpine National Park. It was clear that local people had a great deal of expertise to offer, and were prepared to accept a commensurate level of responsibility for managing and enhancing the natural ecology.

Despite extensive undertakings, neither the then Minister nor bureaucrats delivered on their promises to begin involving local expertise in the development of management practices for the Alpine National Park and associated forest areas.

In October 2002 locals were flabbergasted when State Government inspired environmentalism saw the destruction of dozens of pine trees at Falls Creek. These pine trees had been treasured by the local community since the pines were planted by the SECV around fifty years earlier because they gave the area a 'little Canada' feel. The locals were shocked also because at the time these trees were felled, State Government agencies were crying poor-mouth about their ability to conduct fire reduction works in the surrounding national park.

Since then, the bushfire disaster has hit North-Eastern Victoria and the dangers predicted by the local people have been realised on a scale which has shocked even the most informed and concerned local leaders.

For country Victorians this was a case of double jeopardy. Their worst fears materialized in the face of government indifference, and to top it off, their communities' very ability to defend themselves were rendered impotent when

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bureaucrats and city based fire controllers decided to sideline the hard won experience and ‘on ground’ familiarity offered by local volunteer firefighters.

***The problem is
DSE and the
CFA use
different
channels on the
fire front***

Volunteer brigade debrief

What concerns these people is not just the fact that their fears and concerns fell on deaf ears. They are concerned that even despite the raging firestorms, government policy seems to be set in stone. It’s as though the State Government has painted itself into a corner and is not prepared to examine its position despite a responsibility to do so.

With this in mind, leaders from that original forum asked The Eureka Project to visit them again and record their concerns, frustration and fears for the future. This submission has been prepared by Eureka on an honorary basis and represents the views expressed by people from Mt Beauty, Falls Creek, Tallangatta and surrounding areas. These views were recorded during two days of interviews and visits during 7 and 8 April 2003.

Many of these interviews were moving as hardened men and women described the sense of isolation and desperation which engulfed them as the fires devoured the parkland, stock, fences, housing and private landholdings.

During the crisis one experienced rural firefighter was told by a firecontroller “I’ve been to university for four years, so I’m not going to have a volunteer tell me what to do”. That one line goes a long way towards describing the arrogance and conceit which characterized the State Government’s control of the fire crisis.

The people of North East Victoria have reflected on the fire crisis with notable composure and clarity of thought. They offer a powerful and well argued case for local involvement in managing and implementing conservation policy, and for gutting the CFA of its highly paid policrats in return for reinvestment in grassroots firefighting capability.

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For fear of retaliation, those contributing information and examples have asked not to be identified. However, all contributors are willing to give evidence under oath and in-camera.

2. Major Issues

The fire trucks were sitting in irrigation paddocks or on roads, when in many cases, flames from spot fires were only a foot high

Tallangatta grazier

The bushfire disaster in January and February 2003 destroyed approximately 1.6 million hectares of national park and private landholdings compared with an average wildfire destruction of only 80,000 hectares per year for the same period in previous years. It is generally accepted that the majority of the 2003 fires were started by lightning produced by 'dry storms' in the area. The fires grew and then began spotting when burning debris was distributed. The debris started additional fires which eventually joined to form one front which at one stage extended to a 1,700km circumference.

As a result of the fires, 41 homes were lost together with 11,000 head of stock and at least 3,000 kilometres of fencing. Extraordinary good fortune meant that the loss of only one human life was directly attributed to the fires. This was when a volunteer firefighter drowned when her vehicle was washed away during a flash flood in the Buckland River.

A number of major issues were voiced by the north east Victorians who contributed information for this report. Whilst many of these concerns emanated from different parts of the region there was a powerful consistency amongst the the concerns which they expressed and which are summarized below.

1. The overwhelming concern is the manner in which the fires were fought. The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) assumed direct control over the firefighting exercise, because fires within a national park are subject to the Department's exclusive jurisdiction. Whilst the Country Fire Authority (CFA) was directly involved in fighting

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the fires, its efforts were specifically governed by the DSE firefighting strategy.

*We had been
out all night in
the fire and on
Crown land with
no radio contact
and nil support
crew*

Farmer left minding a
DSE bulldozer

The DSE and CFA operated under a centralized incident command system which meant that huge ‘control centres’ were established and all useful authority was vested in city based staff – or inexperienced or unqualified ‘ring ins’ - who were brought in to direct the firefighting effort with little or no local knowledge.

DSE officers and paid CFA officers effectively stripped all autonomy and authority from volunteer Captains and other CFA volunteers who collectively offered literally thousands of years experience in firefighting, and were intimately familiar with the local terrain and the characteristics of its wildfire behaviours. This was the cause of many volunteers resigning from the CFA.

Consequently, significant numbers of CFA appliances and volunteers became redundant. This was because of the limited and inferior knowledge of those who were directing the firefighting effort and because they were only allowed to work limited periods and were required to ‘knock off’ at night.

2. Local people watched the fires ignite as a result of lightning strikes during the dry storms of early January. In previous years such fires would have been promptly extinguished by firefighters rappelled into the bush from helicopter. Instead, these fires were allowed to burn for days whilst local residents watched them spread across the mountain terrain.

By the time the central command deployed resources to extinguish the fires, north winds had begun to gust causing widespread spotting with inevitable joining of uncontrolled fires into a major bushfire emergency.

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At 9.15am the bar was full of DSE men drinking pots with about 15 of their vehicles parked out the front

Callaghan's Creek
volunteer

3. Throughout the fire crisis, evening weather conditions provided good opportunities for fires to be fought and contained during the night as has been the usual custom in the region. However, the centralized control directed by paid officers of the DSE and CFA meant that Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) procedures took priority and most firefighting efforts ceased at around dusk. Firefighting crews were stood down in favour of skeleton watches at the very time when firefighting conditions were at their best. This was especially the case early in the fires when southerly winds kept the fires much cooler than the north westerly winds which were the norm for the area.

4. The centralization of incident control by officers unfamiliar with their areas of jurisdiction meant that resources were often wasted on 'wild goose chases'. In one example, chartered buses were brought 100 kilometres from Wangaratta to transfer firefighters the six kilometres between Mt Beauty and Towong. Valuable time was lost whilst a fleet of commercial buses sat idle in Mt Beauty.

5. Firefighting crews were unable to use access trails to reach the fires because the DSE had previously obstructed the trails with logs or trenches to stop the local people using them. In other cases the trails had become overgrown with trees and blackberries. This frequently meant that new trails had to be established alongside the ruined ones so that fire crews could access the fires.

6. Bulldozers brought in by DSE to clear new fire trails during the nights became lost or disoriented because the paid DSE / CFA officers who were expected to direct them had been stood down at the 5.30pm knock-off time. Mt Beauty's water supply was twice interrupted when bulldozers ripped up the pipes. In another case, a dozer driver was nearly incinerated in a blackberry patch and was saved by a helitanker.

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The roads were littered with the carcasses of burnt wombats, kangaroos, wallabies and lizards

Tallangatta volunteer

7. Communications between firefighting crews and incident control frequently broke down as there was no uniform radio frequency or radio protocol in place. This meant that one firecrew could be about to backburn on one side of the ridge, whilst a crew on the other side could be trying to put it out. A compelling example of this problem is still talked about at Callaghan's Creek.

8. DSE officers frequently required containment lines to be constructed on private property because they were unable to gain the necessary permits from the DSE hierarchy to cut firebreaks in the national park. Similarly, CFA volunteers were required to sit still for up to three hours whilst DSE approved tree-fellers arrived to cut down burning trees.

9. Highly experienced volunteers had their offers of help turned down because officers at central control did not regard them as sufficiently accredited. In one example, a former deputy group fire officer offered to provide his bulldozer and his labour – free of charge- to help build containment lines. Instead, he was offered a job 'washing cars'. A local farmer's wife began delivering food to a fire crew which had not been fed all day. She was ordered to stop because she did not have an accredited kitchen.

10. Civil disobedience was necessary when it was clear that central command was unable or unwilling to authorize remedial action. For example, the historic Wallaces Hut was saved when 'divine intervention' bulldozed a 12' firebreak around it whilst the DSE withheld approval.

11. Where CFA volunteers were able to extricate themselves from the close supervision of the central command, they were able to achieve outstanding results. The Falls Creek village for example, is credited with being saved by two CFA strike teams under the command of the local Falls Creek fire captain.

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Hot changes on the fireground were requested on numerous occasions but never happened

CFA volunteer debrief

12. Firefighting infrastructure was depleted following the withdrawal of appliances and skilled crews with the winding-down of the SECV and timber mills in the area. Subsequent reliance on aircraft was undermined by the capacity of the Mt Beauty airstrip. When some adverse weather conditions combine, the airstrip becomes unsuitable for full aerial firebombing loads and the access for air ambulances is restricted. In other cases aircraft were stabled in locations where smoke density prevented them from being utilised.

13. Firefighting efforts took second place to conservation regulations, with the result that DSE officers frequently appeared to operate on the basis : “If I do nothing, I’ll do nothing wrong”. In one case, a bulldozer brought in to create fire containment lines was turned away from duty because of a variance in its blade width against DSE specifications.

14. An absence of effective de-briefing meant that lessons learnt from each day’s firefighting were lost to subsequent days and as a result mistakes were repeated. Local volunteers continued to be overlooked or ignored, despite the fact that some had as many as 50 years firefighting experience. Repeated calls were made for crews to be changed over at the fire front for example (“hot changes”), however management insisted that fire trucks return to base for changeover. Each changeover had the propensity to interrupt firefighting for two or three hours, sometimes more.

15. The frustration of local volunteer firefighters was exacerbated when at meal breaks the paid DSE / CFA firefighters talked about the earnings “I’ve earned \$3,600 this week” whilst others complained about the tax they would be paying. In fact the penalties and overtime being paid to non-volunteer firefighters was considered responsible for reducing the urgency of the firefighting effort on many occasions. This imposed a substantial deterioration on the morale of the volunteers who had left their own jobs to fight the fires, losing wages and leaving their own assets unprotected.

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*During the fire,
1,000ha of
control lines
and helipads
were cleared by
bulldozing.*

Caledonia Valley
newsletter

17. There is a strong recognition amongst residents that the fire danger has not been eliminated by these fires. There is still a huge amount of forest ready to burn and apparently no plan to reduce this fuel load before next summer. In those unburned areas, the forest litter (the fuel load) has been measured at up to 95 tonnes per hectare, when the acceptable level of load is around 9.5 tonnes per hectare. Burning forest litter is the material which ignites the spot fires up to five or six kilometres ahead of the firefront.

18. There is a lingering element of shock and duress within the communities which were blanketed by thick smoke for up to four continuous weeks. Residents report that a thick haze of smoke reduced visibility to as little as three metres, whilst a pall of smoke hung at eye level within the homes themselves. This was described as a 'nuclear winter'. All this time, they were living on high alert, with their cars packed with belongings. The effect of such an extended emergency period appears not to have been recognised in government aid measures.

20. Large acreages of fire destroyed Alpine Ash are left standing amidst proliferating undergrowth, yet local mills have not been permitted to remove these. Removal is permitted in a state forest but not a national park controlled by the State. Furthermore, DSE has indicated that it does not intend to re-cultivate these areas, which means that ugly scars will remain visible along the spurs and mountain ridges for possibly 100 years or more. This presses the case for an independent, professional assessment of the impact of the fire upon native flora and fauna in the area. At present, the landscape appears to be sterilized of wildlife, birds and vegetation.

21. At least three thousand kilometres of fencing have been destroyed by the fires yet the State Government's regularly announced recovery measures do not assist in replacing these. The only fences which attract a

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subsidy – and a small one at that – are the more expensive dog-proof fences; and then only available in declared wild dog areas.

22. Residents do not believe the amount of burning off which the DSE frequently claims to have completed. The DSE figures include areas where the DSE has attempted to burn off – with or without success. Once the incendiary devices have been delivered the DSE regards the area as having been burned off. Shade, wind patterns and various geographical features frequently develop areas that become resistant to backburning with the result that they develop extraordinary fuel loads which blaze during bushfire conditions. Ironically, Parks Victoria argued that only the northern slopes should be fuel reduced because it was considered that fires “didn’t come from the south”.

We lit the tongue of bush [to backburn] with six DSE tankers in attendance. As soon as it began to blaze they departed, as their shift had finished

Mitta farmer

23. Post fire dangers appeared to have been overlooked by central command. The phenomena of ‘beaver dams’ for example, occurs when trees, rocks and other debris form blockages in streams and tributaries. These tend to give way under heavy rain, with domino effect. It is believed that this occurrence was at least in part responsible for the unfortunate death of the female firefighter following rainstorms after the bushfire disaster.

24. The lingering delays by DSE in declaring walking tracks etc open again means that local businesses, tourism and leisure pursuits are left to languish. DSE and Parks Victoria argue insufficient resources to do this any faster. In so doing, they ignore the valuable opportunity for partnership with local people who would be qualified and delighted to do much of the inspection work for them.

25. Government policy and approaches appear to have learned nothing from the hardship and dislocation suffered in the major Caledonia Valley fire in Gippsland in 1997, despite intensive research and representation by the local community. The debrief after the Big Desert

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fire in January 2003 also highlighted poor communication technologies and methods.

Most importantly, the bureaucracy appears to have learned nothing from the State Coroner's Linton Inquest which reported in 2000. The bureaucratic response to the 2003 bushfire crisis in North Eastern Victoria contained all the hallmarks of the Linton tragedy from five years earlier – poor communications, unskilled or inexperienced firefighters at the firefront and disjoint coordination of the firefighting response.

3. Local Context

Victoria's township of Mt Beauty (pop 2300) sits in valley surrounded by Alpine ranges and is the principal service point for the nearby Falls Creek resort. The Kiewa hydro electric power scheme operates from Mt Beauty and until the 1990's sell off, Mt Beauty was a major SECV town.

Leave aside the economic or political debate around the privatisation of the SECV. Locals are more interested in recalling the SECV's excellent track record in managing the forest, providing highly trained fire crews and maintaining a high level of community safety and cooperation.

The forest area formed the catchment for the hydro power generation and upon the sale of the SECV the forest was declared to be a national park. Forty square kilometres of forest was handed over to Parks Victoria in pristine condition for a peppercorn sum of \$1. Management of the park was taken over by DSE (then DNRE) with some elements of maintenance responsibility allocated to Southern Hydro who had purchased the Kiewa hydro electric installation.

The demise of the SECV also led to the demise of the community's firefighting resources and capability.

*The DSE
seemed
reluctant to
fight a fire in
the bush for
"safety" reasons*

Callaghans Creek
volunteer

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At the same time, the winding down of the logging industry in the area, saw the demise of more firefighting teams, earthmoving fleets and forest maintenance.

The change in management of the Alpine National Park brought with it a policy to minimize the fuel reduction burning-off which had been a regular occurrence under the forest's previous management. Concern about the risk to 'freehold property' has been cited as the reason, but locals suspect that the real reason is linked to conservation and personal agendas within DSE.

Most people doubt that the Minister is genuinely in control or abreast of the activities or practices of the DSE and Parks Victoria.

Under the SECV's management forest litter – the fuel load of bark, leaves, sticks and so forth was kept at or below a level of 9.5 tonnes per hectare. Under DSE management, that fuel load increased by 1,000% to the current estimated level of 95 tonnes per hectare.

***CFA volunteers
were stuck on
the back of
tankers while
the paid crew
drove around
eating cakes***

Effectively, firefighting infrastructure around the national park was dismantled at the same time as the fuel load was increased to the highest levels in living memory.

At the same time as this, DSE established exclusive jurisdiction over firefighting responsibility in the Alpine National Park, as well as the implementation of Government conservation and management policy.

Mt Beauty CFA volunteer

It is difficult to find a resident of the fire areas who has respect for the DSE, or faith in its competence. It is always difficult for locals to convey this concern because of the absence of key performance indicators for the DSE and Parks Victoria with which the community can identify. Country people are calling for such KPIs to be established and published around issues such as the level of weed growth, the populations of feral animals, catchment

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management and the level and diversity of recreational land use to name a few.

Living in the country makes us part of the environment too. We are entitled to be heard

Mt Beauty resident

Fire trails established and maintained for generations by the SECV were deliberately allowed to deteriorate and 'return to nature'. Other trails had logs felled across them, whilst others had trenches ripped into them by bulldozers. These measures were taken for the additional purpose of excluding local people from using the tracks for recreation, leisure or tourism.

The DSE continues to insist that it conducts a rigorous backburning programme aimed at reducing the fuel load on the forest floor. Whilst large acreages are claimed by the DSE to have been burned-off, further questions reveal doubt about the accuracy of their figures.

The DSE admits for example, that an area is considered to have been backburned once the incendiary devices have been delivered. So even if it begins to rain, or if the vegetation is too green to burn, and no fire is ignited, the area is still deemed to have been 'burned-off'. Leaving aside this anomaly, the level of burning-off – real or 'administrative' – is considered to be far too low for community safety and environmental prosperity.

4. At the CFA

Just as the forest management endured a 180° change in philosophy over the last decade, so too the Country Fire Authority (CFA) had a revolution all of its own.

The CFA used to be regarded around the world as a model for a rural firefighting service. The State was divided into zones and in turn the zones were divided into regions. Each of the regions were administered by a paid regional officer and an assistant and from there on, the running was taken by

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unpaid, volunteer firefighters organized around groups loosely aligned to shire council boundaries.

The road hadn't been patrolled during the night, but the departing strike team captain had signed a paper saying it had

Tallangatta CFA volunteer

In the case of wildfire, this structure ensured that those firefighters with detailed local knowledge of terrain and fire behaviour were placed in the best position to extinguish fires quickly and were in charge and control.

Over the last decade or so, the CFA embarked on a radical reorganization based on a 'professionalisation' of its approach to firefighting. The number of paid staff on the CFA payroll was radically increased and the authority and autonomy of local volunteer firefighters was correspondingly downgraded.

At the same time, the CFA introduced the concept of centrally managed incident control loosely based on a United States model which has since been dismantled. Central incident control meant that when a major fire incident occurred, then fire controllers and bureaucrats from the CFA head office and other agencies would move in to control the firefighting effort.

When the fire was occurring in a national park, the DSE bureaucrats and central controllers would become an additional overlay over the CFA emergency control structure. At the third level were the designated strike team leaders and below them the volunteer brigade captains and firefighters (often however, sent to areas which were 'foreign' to them).

During the Victorian bushfire crisis incident control centres were established in locations such as Mt Beauty, Swifts Creek, Dartmouth and Corryong with remarkable numbers of bureaucrats and controllers in each. In Corryong for example, up to 72 staff were involved in management chain. Even allowing for the usual 'confusion of battle', this approach to emergency response produced outcomes which might reasonably be described as a comedy of errors.

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Volunteer firefighters were allocated to areas and types of fire with which they were completely unfamiliar. Volunteers from the flat western districts for example were assigned to mountain fighting without local or knowledgeable supervision. Firefighters who were intimately familiar with say the Mt Beauty region were assigned to fight over at Mt Buffalo, and so on.

The incident controller was pleased with our burn off. When he informed Melbourne of its success they wanted us charged with lighting a fire on a day of total fire ban

Callaghans Creek farmer

The central incident control process also exploded the myth that all volunteer firefighters are equally skilled and experienced. A number of firefighters who volunteered from metropolitan fringe areas were unable to demonstrate the 'bush mechanic' skills that were inherent in the skills and experience of local, largely farm based, firefighters.

It soon became clear that there were three levels of firefighting skills available to meet the crisis. At the control level we see unfamiliar and inexperienced professional managers, below them volunteers unfamiliar with the area and unskilled in the techniques required for mountain firefighting, and below them the highly experienced and knowledgeable local volunteer firefighters. Volunteer crews from NSW vowed not to return if future bushfires were managed in the same way.

There appeared to be little or no capacity for central command to differentiate between the contributions which the various categories of firefighters were able to contribute to the emergency task. Consequently, the DSE / CFA control appeared to adopt a lowest common denominator approach in allocating tasks and approaching the issue of occupational health and safety.

Appliances and firecrews were left to play cricket when situations were deemed to be too dangerous for firefighting. For example a fire in Hughes' Lane was not allocated a firecrew because it was regarded as having only one exit – Hughes' Lane itself. This was despite the fact that emergency egress could be easily obtained by driving a fire truck through the irrigated vineyards

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or tobacco crops which abut the termination of Hughes' Lane, or refuge could be found in the adjacent Ovens River.

The central command process lacked a conduit for such local information to filter up, and as a result many fires were left to burn unnecessarily. Many experienced firefighters were chomping at the bit to contribute expertise and effort and instead were forced to sit on their hands while the forest burned.

A person had been to three training sessions [but] was unable to go on the tankers to the fire

It is fair to say that the “jodhpurs in jeeps” from the city bureaucracy won little respect or friendship during their time in the fire zone.

5. A ‘nine to five’ fire

Volunteer CFA debrief

Local people were rarely able to discern precisely who was in charge of the firefighting in their local region and there were clear examples of the disorientation and insecurity which this evinced. Furthermore, people were usually unable to determine if various directives were being issued by the DSE or the CFA, and it genuinely appeared that more management time was spent on justifying decisions not to deploy assets rather than fighting the actual fires themselves.

Local people and firefighters expressed deep frustration that their efforts to extinguish fires were frequently thwarted by officials citing DSE regulations. Locals frequently doubted the veracity of such directives but were unable to challenge the officials without threat of legal enforcement. When a farmer protested about DSE firebreaks being bulldozed through holding paddocks, telephone lines and irrigation systems, he was told that “if he caused trouble, the Police would be called and he would be wrestled to the ground, handcuffed and taken away”.

Indeed, this bureaucratic approach to managing the fires provided enormous stress for local people. If CFA firefighters encountered a tree that needed to

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be felled for example, they were required to call in a DSE expert who would assess their request, and if satisfied, fell the tree. These requests were comparatively scarce and the authority could have been reasonably delegated to the fire crews. Instead, firecrews had to go into suspended animation for however many hours it took to go through this process of tree assessment.

Country people ridiculed the fire management strategy as being based on a 'nine to five' environment which the controllers seemed determined to preserve. In fact, for most crews, dusk was knock-off time, with volunteers being forced to stand down at the same time as the paid CFA / DSE crewmembers. Even with those crews who did remain firefighting into the night, efficiency was compromised by bureaucratic rule enforcement. Around Dartmouth for example, the fire started to roar at 7.00pm at night, which coincided with knock-off time. Instead of crew changeover occurring at the firefront, the trucks returned to base and did not return with their new crews until 9.15pm. The new crews then required a further one hour briefing, and this meant that three hours of firefighting effort were lost, at the time when they were most needed.

***The person in
the control
office said "I've
been to
university for
four years so I
don't have to
listen a
volunteer"***

Tallangatta farmer and
community leader

This meant that in the cooler evening conditions ideal for firefighting, the fires were left to burn and to spread under skeleton supervision. Having convinced a strike team leader to light a controlled backburning fire, one landholder was dumbfounded when the fire crews immediately left the scene unattended because it was 'knock-off' time. The landholder was forced to find local volunteers to help keep the fire in check.

In another incident, a landholder reported a D7 bulldozer arriving on his property at 6.30pm at the instigation of the incident control centre, to cut containment lines on his and adjoining Crown land. The DSE / CFA support crew arrived with the dozer in order to issue and supervise instructions, but they immediately left because it was 'changeover' time. The landholder was asked to stay with the dozer driver for fifteen minutes whilst a new crew arrived. Thirteen (13) hours later, no support crew had arrived and no radio

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contact had been established, so the landholder gave the dozer driver breakfast and they both went home.

In another incident, a locally experienced and respected former deputy group fire officer and professional earthmover offered the services of his bulldozer and labour free of charge to assist the fire control effort. His only requirement for reimbursement was for fuel and for transport of the dozer. After several calls to the CFA regional office in Wodonga, his offer of the dozer was declined but his labour would be accepted. When he asked what his jobs would be, he was told he would be “running errands and washing cars”.

***When crews
changed over it
took them up to
four hours to
get to the fire***

*Tallangatta CFA
volunteer*

Another former fire controller from the SECV offered his services to assist in co-ordinating emergency response in areas with which he was intimately familiar. His offer was declined by a young officer because he “didn’t have the right tickets”.

On another occasion, a former Mayor, Shire Councillor, farmer and family manager was told by a demoralized and highly experienced CFA official was told that when he offered valuable local advice, he was told by one of the incident control staff : “I spent four years getting a degree so I am not going to listen to a volunteer”.

On yet another occasion, a Tallangatta fire crew needed to be fed, but the incident control centre had failed to arrange it before the local food facility was closed for the day. Whilst food was eventually organized locally, the incident control centre dispatched an SES vehicle from Corryong 90 kilometres away, to deliver the food. At the same time, the SES vehicle based in Tallangatta was sitting idle.

At one stage in the Tallangatta Valley, firecrews were fully deployed for four days before central control began to organise meals for them. A local farmer’s wife recognised the problem and routinely prepared meals for the grateful

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crews. Instead of acknowledging her effort, the incident controllers reprimanded her for distributing food from an unauthorized kitchen.

However, in most cases food was the least of worries for firefighters. In Mt Beauty for example, a catering centre was established to feed around 400 firefighters each day and to prepare 200 lunches for delivery. On some days, because of the OHS restrictions on firefighting, the paid firefighters did little more than eat. Locals shook their heads as these crews drove around town in their firetrucks eating cakes.

In another case, firecrews had been bussed into Mt Beauty for afternoon tea at 4.00pm and it was decided that they needed to have their rosters extended for evening fire prevention duties. Rather than sending the crews out to the job and delivering their food later, the kitchen was instructed to bring dinner forward from 6.00pm to 5.00pm. The firecrews managed to squeeze in the dinner on top of their afternoon tea, and in the meantime their fire duties were left unattended.

*[The tankers']
standard tyres
with road tread
were found
lacking and dirt
or mud tyres
would be more
capable*

CFA volunteer debrief

6. Communications

Throughout the firefighting activity, poor communication was a major concern.

At a high level, this was evidenced in confusion as to who was actually in charge of the firefighting and compounded by decisions made in the absence of local knowledge or 'corporate memory' of fire activity in the area. The incident control centres operated by the DSE and the CFA proved reluctant to share information and to accept advice or new information that conflicted with its own.

At an operational level different control centres and brigades were operating on different radio bands without the ability to broadcast consistent or uniform messages. Fire crews working on one side of a spur might be operating on a

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different band to another crew on the other side of the spur and instructed by a different control centre. This effectively meant that one crew could be carrying out activity unbeknown and detrimental to the safety of another crew a stone's throw away.

In a comparatively recent upgrade, the CFA introduced a new radio system which required the necessary volunteers to purchase new 'listening sets' so that they could keep abreast of firefighting developments. The listening sets had traditionally been an important bush telegraph under the former structure of the CFA, which enabled volunteer groups to muster and redeploy resources before a crisis point was reached.

Two strike teams arrived at the same farm, directed by different control centres. We were told to backburn and they were told to put it out

Callaghans Creek CFA
volunteer

However the new listening sets and the degradation of radio protocols means that the listening sets must be left on constant scan so that information pertinent to a particular geographic area can be assimilated from a range of six different bands employed. The radio system is also linked to the communications trunking system which connects radio traffic with landline telephone sets.

This creates a problem of 'disinformation' because the listening sets can pick up the nearer half of the conversation. For example in one case the family of an overdue volunteer was panicked when half a trunking call appeared to report an imperiled fire unit, whilst the other half was unheard as it reported all-safe. There were a number of examples where resources were unnecessarily consumed in response to fragmented information received over the official listening set arrangements.

At another level, communications were impaired by the lack of firefighting and crisis management exercises conducted amongst the region's population. This meant that basic communications required for teamwork, anticipating needs and responses and joining forces were either absent or frequently ad hoc and chaotic.

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It was interesting that farmers found their CB radios supporting small 4x4 vehicles with 500 litres of water often ended up being more effective than crewed tankers left sitting on the bitumen.

Other communications problems emerged when backburning at Cranky Charlie's point became uncontrolled and took out the 66kv and 22kv power supply. This severed all electrical power to the Falls Creek resort at a time when the resort itself was under serious threat. Most of the establishments at Falls Creek operate electrically powered PABX type systems and the power failure took their telephone services out of action.

Mobile telephones were employed as an emergency device, however the local mobile telephone tower had also lost power and its emergency battery was also exhausted. Locals report that Telstra was unable or unprepared to replace the battery because of OHS concerns and Falls Creek residents were forced to drive to the top of Mt McKay in order to pick up a mobile signal from Mt Hotham.

*Both bulldozers
were sitting
there with a
strike team.*

*Head office had
pulled them out
because it was
too hot and
windy for
'safety'*

Tallangatta CFA volunteer

Local residents were full of praise for the community information role which was conducted by the Albury Wodonga ABC radio station (106.5). Whilst a small number of people were concerned because they are unable to pick up the signal, the strength of support for the ABC's performance was noteworthy.

7. Watching Rome Burn

Lightning fires are not new to the people of Mt Beauty and Falls Creek or anyone else in the bush. They are part of the way of life. They have been a regular characteristic of the dry summer storms and Murphy's Law dictates that they occur in the densest and most inaccessible regions of the forest. During the time when the SECV was responsible for managing the forest, it prepared for these fires by maintaining a comprehensive network of fire trails which enabled firefighters and appliances to reach the most fire prone areas.

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The SECV also maintained an inventory of firefighting appliances and conducted frequent collaborative training exercises between its inhouse firefighters and the local volunteer brigades. Firefighters were trained to rappel from helicopters into areas where road access was unavailable and aircraft were accessed for firebombing as required.

This is not a lament for the loss of the SECV. However this modus operandi was frequently offered by local people as a contrast to the way in which the fires were fought under the DSE regime. The established practice of the SECV and the local community was focused on early extinguishment on the basis that a small fire is easier to put out than a big one.

The DSE approach was described by local people as one of “waiting, waiting and hoping it would go away”. As the levels of fire increased, so did the watching. Crews directed by the central command watched fires during the day, and at night when conditions were optimum for firefighting they were directed to rest.

We asked a DSE man to grab a rake-hoe. He said he “wasn’t qualified to use one”

Tallangatta farmer

Members of the local community watched the lightning strike on Wednesday 8 January and watched the customary puff of smoke emerge from the undergrowth of the forest. From the Mt Beauty township residents saw one strike fire develop on Mt Arthur and another one on Mt Bogong. Interest turned to expectation and then concern when the DSE opted for a deliberate management strategy not to extinguish the fires.

For two days, residents watched the fires burn, whilst DSE spotter craft observed the fires but appeared to do nothing about them. The rationale provided by the DSE was their intention to let the fires run because they were ‘just burning off public land’. They were also destroying native vegetation and animals.

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Mild temperatures and uncharacteristic southerly breezes contained the fires initially and as the blazes grew the smoke levels worked to insulate the fires and keep temperatures relatively low. During the week the fires began to involve larger areas of territory, and failed to respond to the tentative levels of water bombing instigated by the DSE.

As the week progressed, the winds took a north westerly direction and temperatures began to rise. Burning debris caught by the wind began to ignite spot fires and these were fanned by the 'natural chimneys' up to Falls Creek and along Mountain Creek Road. Other fires started to spread from Feathertop, Mt Fainter and further afield at Mt Buffalo.

By the end of the week gusting winds combined with rising temperatures to produce a widening flank as spot fires reached up to 200 metres ahead of the fire front. By around 17 January fires were spreading up the valley in a southerly direction. At this point the fires were generating their own 'weather' with powerful winds and high temperatures creating flashpoint combustibility ahead of the front.

By now Mt Emu, Little Emu, Mountain Creek and Mt Nelse were involved in fire progressing to a combined front with the Mt Arthur, Mt Bogong, Fainter and Feathertop fires.

Workers cutting a containment line at Howman's Gap around four kilometres below Falls Creek almost became casualties of the crisis when they ditched about 20 firehoses and were literally forced to run for their lives to escape a sudden firestorm. Witnesses subsequently watched the fight to save the Falls Creek village and with limited resources hold the line at the groomed ski runs. The ski runs proved that a cleared buffer zone greatly improves the ability to fight bushfires.

By January 26 temperatures had exceeded 40°C and increasing winds joined the fronts with the Mt Buffalo fire to the south. The fires proved to be most

Nine local vehicles arrived with spray carts and rake-hoes but weren't allowed up. So stayed and played 500 on the bonnet of a Toyota

Callaghans Creek
volunteer

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aggressive in the later afternoon around 4.00pm to 6.00pm which was the period during which most of the firestorms occurred.

DSE and CFA incident control used the term 'containment line' to describe a multitude of firebreak techniques which they sought to employ frequently in preference to actually fighting the fire. Some of these containment lines were created by bulldozers whilst extensive firebreaks were created by labouring with hand held rakehoes.

It is conventional wisdom that once the firebreaks have been established, then a fire should be ignited to backburn from the containment line back into the main fire front. The convergence of the combustion sees the smaller fire sucked into the main fire body and this essentially provides the control mechanism for the backburning operation.

In these fires however, the DSE refused to countenance the notion of backburning for 'environmental' reasons. One exception occurred in the Tallangatta Valley when the DSE appeared to panic and torched almost 5,000 hectares 'on the run'.

***In parliament
one Minister
asked our local
MP if he
thought we were
drongoes
because we
wanted to make
verbal
submissions to
the State
Government
inquiry instead
of written ones***

Predictably, this approach rendered the most crucial firebreaks obsolete because spot fires continued to leapfrog over the fire front and usually leapfrogged over the containment lines as well. This often occurred at night when the firefighters had all gone home. This effectively illustrated the firefighting strategy employed by the DSE and central control: plenty of activity but no common sense.

It is worth noting that by now the fires were creating their own cyclonic force winds which uprooted trees and twisted others up to 5' diameter off their stumps. These are the conditions which volunteer firefighters were required to contend with whilst operating in a strategic environment which was redolent of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party.

Mt Beauty resident

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By now, fires in the neighbouring Mt Kosciuszko national park crossed the border from NSW and the circumference of the active fire front reached some 1,700kms – the same distance from Melbourne to Brisbane.

As locals recount these examples, it becomes less and less difficult to understand how 1.6 million hectares was allowed to burn in North Eastern Victoria.

8. What price a life?

It is a source of amazement to anyone who visits the burnt out areas of North Eastern Victoria that hundreds of lives weren't lost. There is wide awareness that if the same approach to fire suppression were to be taken with a major grasslands fire, then the casualties would hardly bear thinking about. Nonetheless, the State Government has exuded a sense of triumphalism over the low level of loss of life, with its official statistic being one unfortunate soul.

We therefore have two separate bodies who are not in communication with each other, controlling the same fire on the same property – and each with different strategies, agendas, radio frequencies and crews

The fact is that no-one yet knows the real death toll created by the fire crisis. Indirectly attributable deaths on the road, or from subsequent heart attacks or stress are never likely to be recorded as part of the true death toll of the bushfire crisis. The health concerns which will emerge after the constant smoke inhalation, the stress of living on full alert status for more than a month and the illness and suicide which emerge from lost livelihoods, bankrupt businesses and physical and mental exhaustion will always remain hidden from the political costs of this avoidable disaster.

For over four weeks the people of Mt Beauty and surrounding areas were engulfed by smoke which imposed a perpetual twilight over the area. Visibility was frequently restricted to as little as three metres and residents described the effect as how they would imagine a nuclear winter. The oppressive nature of the dense smoke created substantial demoralization as its smell and fine particulates infused themselves throughout homes, belongings

Mitta CFA volunteer

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and lungs. Residents describe walking around their homes with a pall of smoke floating at eye level.

One new mother sought to escape the health hazards which the smoke was creating for her week old child by staying with relatives in Melbourne. On her return to Myrtleford she was involved in a motor vehicle accident in which she and her infant child were both killed. They are another road statistic, but the true reason for their death lies elsewhere.

The fires delivered a scorched earth in every sense of the word. The absence of ground vegetation and the impact of heavy rains immediately after the fires has meant that boulders, boughs and logs are able to roll unimpeded into streams, creeks and rivers that characterize the area. In a common phenomena this debris forms blockages or 'beaver dams' in these waterways which become subject to substantial pressure by an increasing body of withheld water.

The fire controller kept talking about the "rules of the chain of command" and trying to give yesterday's picture of the fire that is on our back doorstep

Mitta farmer

Once one of these dams break, there is a domino effect on similar dams downstream with the resulting danger of powerful and destructive flash flooding. Local people suggest that this phenomena may have been responsible for the unfortunate death of a female firefighter whose vehicle was washed away whilst crossing the Buckland River. There is no public evidence that suggests that the firefighter was made aware of this danger.

The real death toll of the 2003 bushfire crisis will never become a reality in Victorian public discussion.

9. Bereft of Partnership and Trust

The environmental policy debate is one which has been characterized by populist politics of a State Government determined to secure the green vote in order to retain the power and perks of office. This is a widely held and

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carefully argued position held by country Victorians in the north east of the state.

The formulation of government policy is based on the premise that country people are determined to ruin, exploit and destroy the natural environment, whilst the same resources are stoically defended by metropolitan green voters.

Whilst public servants developing and enforcing environmental policy do not necessarily accept the logic of that contention, they have been quick to acquiesce in the face of political expedience. The outcome is that all discussions between city controlled bureaucrats and politicians, and country people in Northern Victoria, are based on a foundation of mutual distrust, antipathy and disdain.

Discussions are invariably based on the pretence that a level playing field exists between the two interests. The fact is however, that country people have nothing to bargain with and with unprecedented metropolitan electoral support behind it, the State Government of Victoria no longer has a need to listen and needs only to pretend to have meaningful discussions with people in the country.

The outcome is that few if any discussions are held with any real prospect of mutuality or goodwill, country people are spoken to in a patronizing and condescending manner, and at the end of discussions the bureaucrats make it clear that it's 'my way or the highway'.

It is ironic that country people have been totally sidelined in an environmental debate where they have a greater vested interest than any other stakeholder involved in the political theatre. This vested interest includes conservation in the most important way : their lives depend on it. At the same time, the majority of metropolitan green voters – the self styled guardians of the wilderness – will never depend on the environment which they claim to protect. Inaccessibility predicated by government, long traveling distances,

***Black embers
were falling so
five tankers
were deployed
around the
paddocks. 1^{1/2}
hours later three
of them were
ordered to pull
out because it
was lunchtime
and lunch was
to be eaten 2kms
down the road***

Callaghans Creek
volunteer

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incomes sourced to city origins and the extended time required to nurture an appreciation of environmental interaction, are just some of the barriers between green voters and reality.

Country Victorians around Mt Beauty and its region are desperate for a partnership with government in managing, maintaining and nurturing the natural environment. They are prepared to invest unpaid volunteer time to fill in the maintenance gaps left by the demise of the SECV and loggers, and for them this would be a 'labour of love'. The disparaging retort from State Government agencies denies any superiority in the expertise of government employees. Instead, it verifies that bureaucrats and politicians alike have simply not been clever enough to take advantage of the offer on the table.

In a public meeting six weeks after the fires, the Mt Beauty locals complained that an inordinate amount of time was being taken by Parks Victoria to reopen tracks and forest access for leisure and tourism. The Parks Victoria representative responded with an attitude approaching contempt, to say that he had limited personnel to allocate to safety assessment in the forests, and therefore locals would simply need to be patient because access would not be provided until he was comfortable that conditions were 'safe'.

I facetiously asked one of the tanker men where the water comes out as I haven't seen one use its hoses yet (after two weeks). He very seriously pointed out the hose outlets

Mt Beauty farmer

Why has it not occurred to Parks Victoria that it could enlist knowledgeable and experienced locals to assist in this surveying task? Why has it not occurred to them to utilize experienced volunteer labour to walk, ride or drive the tracks and trails and report on the conditions they find? These volunteers could be sworn as 'deputies' and if need be their reports could be filed as statutory declarations. Why can't the locals be trusted? Why can't a partnership be formed instead of a war, and unnecessary hardship prolonged?

Why can't locals be given additional access and autonomy within the national park and forests, in return for policing local access behaviour and assisting in the supervision, maintenance and monitoring of protected areas?

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It is very clear that local community people are prepared to support and implement public policy and comply with the professional standards required by insurance, corporate and regulatory frameworks. All they want is the chance.

Despite the grandstanding and public pronouncements of government, there is probably no single event that furthers the divide between country and metropolitan Victorians. Well intentioned but frequently ignorant city voters see their misguided aspirations fueled by the hardship imposed by country Victorians.

The answer lies in the politics of expedience and opportunism.

Found the strike team. The were sitting in deck chairs at a table playing cards and reading newspapers. Had a cricket match going and some were apparently fishing

CFA volunteer firefighter

10. Some Environmental Truths

Grab a piece of cardboard 1m², lie this down on the forest floor and assess the amount of leaves, branches and combustible debris which this covers and extrapolate the result. This is one of the standard measures used to measure forest litter or 'fuel load' sitting on the ground in national parks and state forests.

When the SECV managed the Alpine National Park, this fuel load was capped at 9.5 tonnes per hectare. This level was maintained by a rigorously enforced burning-off schedule which ensured that grid referenced areas were cleaned up by fire at least once every three to five years.

Under the DSE's management, the burning off process appears to be half hearted one at best. Last summer for example, the DSE claimed to have burned off 140,000 hectares. If true, even this amount of burning would be fractional in the context of total Crown lands and national parks operated in the area of Mt Beauty.

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The fact is that no-one in DSE or Parks Victoria can genuinely or remotely attest to the veracity of this figure. Certainly, forest management targets certain amounts of land for burning off each year. However, the process of burning off is considered to have been achieved simply by delivery of the appropriate number of incendiary devices.

Experienced professionals point to the need for verifiable standards to be imposed upon the DSE and Parks Victoria. One example cited is the pre-bushfire audit which is conducted upon the electricity transmission groups by the office of the Chief Electrical Inspector each year. Involving local community representatives and emergency volunteer groups, these inspections ensure that a great deal of the power companies' management resources are devoted to productive safety and environmental management techniques. The community verified audit provides a benefit to the country residents as well as a potential bonus to the commercial power companies.

If for example, undergrowth is wet and doesn't ignite or maintain a fire, then it is still considered to have been burned off. If the fires are retarded by winds, shade or dampness, then they are still regarded as completed. Understandably, there is little confidence in the DSE figures relating to burning off acreages, because the burning off is a bureaucratic exercise, rather than a process based in reality. Other factors suggest that figures may have been falsified in places.

***There's still
enough timber
left to burn the
towns out again,
but nothing
seems to have
changed***

Falls Creek business
operator

The great fallacy is that the burning off process somehow defiles nature. Authorities are therefore hesitant to propagate the practice. In fact when incendiary devices and other processes miscue, local residents believe that they can hear a quiet bureaucratic hooray.

The reality is that the fuel load is far higher than is believed to exist during the time prior to European settlement. The density of afforestation, measured in terms of stems per hectare, is in places, up to ten times higher than the level that was believed to exist in the late 18th century.

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This increased density and the exponential growth in combustible detritus, provides a compounding volatility in the fuel load. Furthermore, the reluctance to burn off during the last decade has magnified the problem. Unbeknown to most city greens, the fuel load is greatly increased by exotic blackberry vines which climb up to ten metres from the forest floor.

Once this fuel load begins to burn, it forces enormous heat up through the leaves of the eucalypts, causing inflammable oils to vaporize and ignite. The result is the notorious firestorms or crown fires which race through the tree tops at up to 50kmh generating flames which reach up to 40 metres into the sky and windspeeds of up to 250km/h.

These firestorms ravage the forest and leave little standing except the ghostly and denuded tree trunks known as stags. In the case of eucalypts, the epicormic growth sees bud nodes protected behind a couple of layers of bark. These are responsible for the rapid profusion of growth which can be seen to spring from these trees very soon after any major fire.

Further up, the snow gums are also burnt and their regeneration occurs through shooting from the base of the tree. Many of the snow gums affected by the fires are believed to be up to 300 years old.

***I used to be the
fire controller
for the SECV
but the control
centre told me I
didn't have
enough tickets
to help***

Mt Beauty resident

Many city people observe this bud growth and regard it as some sort of cleansing miracle that returns the forest and natural habitat to its optimal condition.

Often unnoticed between these two layers of forestation lies the vast population of the venerable Alpine Ash reaching up to 80m into the sky. Under less intense fire, the Alpine Ash spreads its powder fine seeds to begin new growth and to replace those trees which have died, been firekilled or otherwise removed. Looking like finely ground pepper, these seeds await the

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winter because they won't germinate until they have been frozen by the winter snow.

The Alpine Ash has a remarkable ability to self select, and those trees which do not flourish will gradually die. Generally speaking, the Alpine Ash will not produce viable seeds until it reaches maturity at about 30 years of age. When the Alpine Ash is burned by extremely intense fire, then its seeds are also destroyed and the species has no method for re-propagating itself. In other cases the seed will have been washed away as rainfall washes off the denuded soil.

Look at the horizon and you will see that massive stands of Alpine Ash have been destroyed by intense fire and will never regenerate themselves. The DSE has no plans to reforest these ugly scars, secure in its belief that the situation is best left to Mother Nature. The reality is that Mother Nature is likely to be defeated in many areas by imported blackberries and a proliferation of dirty scrub, which means that fire danger continues to grow and the scarred landscape remains.

***We couldn't use
the firetrail
because the
DSE had
bulldozed a
trench six feet
deep to stop us
using it***

Tawonga CFA volunteer

It is estimated that around 1,000 hectares of firekilled Alpine Ash are suitable for removal in the Mt Beauty region alone. These stags stand as lonely reminders of the fire and offer no ecological benefit as they stand. The opportunity exists to mill them and revegetate the areas, and in so doing produce up to 100,000 cubic metres of timber with a commercial value estimated as high as \$40 million.

Experience shows that these trees could be felled and kept 'under water' for up to seven years and retain their value as timber. This approach was used after the Caledonia Valley fires in country Victoria some five years ago. However, locals have been told that this process will not occur, simply because the trees are located in a national park. The same trees in a state forest may be authorized for harvesting.

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Ironically, stags from the legendary 1939 bushfires are still in evidence around Mt Beauty and formed part of the fuel load which fired the inferno which devastated North East Victoria.

In the high plains, around 1,900 cattle have been grazing this season – part of the 15 week season during which the cattle graze each year. In response to protests from environmental groups, the amount of grazing land available to farmers has been steadily reduced. It is ironic that the areas of the high plains least damaged by the fires were those that were still being grazed this year and which still are able to carry stock after the fires. In the midst of the blaze there were 4-5,000 hectares of land being grazed by cattle who survived and continued to graze on the same land after the fires.

Throughout the region, the degraded quality of waterflows puts a lie to the notion that Mother Nature can heal the fire damage without the help of mankind's participation in ecological recovery. Aged and experienced locals suggest that 'natural recovery' will require 100 years or more to return water catchments to the condition with which Victorians are familiar.

11. Fire Investigation

In analysis of the 2003 bushfire crisis, the State Government has referred to the 1939 bushfire crisis. The references have been specifically geared to sweep away concerns regarding the extent of the fire, the management of the firefighting response and environmental management of the response. At the Rural Press Club of Victoria for example, a senior Victorian cabinet minister sought to take comfort from the 1939 Bushfire Royal Commission report by saying that many of those fires were deliberately started, whereas the 2003 fires were started by lightning. The other point of the 1939 fires, the government claims, is that major bushfires occur in cycles, and therefore the 2003 fires were essentially an inevitable occurrence.

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The State Government conveniently ignore the fact that in 1939 there was little communication infrastructure, few firefighting appliances, no formal emergency plans and a great deal of manpower was deployed to the Second World War. Isolated communities, timber mill workforces and other volunteers were often left to fight the fires with little more than wet hessian bags and a handful of green boughs.

***Blackberries
and cape broom
are completely
out of control
and choke large
areas of
Wonnangatta***

Caledonia Valley
community newsletter

Furthermore, these glib responses anger many country people because they know that this year's fire was not exacerbated by the same scorching heatwave that prevailed during the 1939 fires, nor was this year's fire fanned by the same aggressive northwesterly winds. If the same conditions had applied, locals say that there would be barely a town left standing in North Eastern Victoria and that the fire wouldn't have stopped until it reached the coast.

More recent experience denies the government's response when the big fires of 1985 around Bright, Tallangatta and Granya demonstrated a highly effective firefighting response under the 'old system' of the CFA.

In addition, responses prepared by the government's spin doctors have not addressed any of the core issues which remain the primary concern of many country Victorians:

- Why was the fire allowed to spread beyond control before a concerted attempt was made to extinguish it?
- Why were skilled, experienced and knowledgeable local CFA volunteer firefighters excluded from key decision making regarding strategy and asset deployment?
- Why was the fuel load allowed to build up to the extent that it did despite the experience of the 1939 bushfires and the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires?

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- How can the government use the drought as a reason for the 2003 fires burning around twice the territory that was burnt during the 1939 fires? In fact the drought had denuded much of the pasture land of fuel and so reduced the intensity of even the 2003 bushfire crisis.
- Why was firefighting strategy focused primarily on private leasehold and freehold land surrounding the national park and crown land rather than in the forest itself?
- What were the implications of the reduction in firefighting resources following the removal of the SECV and the winding down of milling operations and what measures had the government taken to compensate for these?
- Why hadn't 60 years of advances in technology, communications, science and bushfire research provided any assistance in preventing or controlling the fire?
- Why were the findings of the Bushfire Review Committee of 1993, and the subsequent 2000 Coroner's Inquest into the Linton deaths so comprehensively ignored?
- Why was the bureaucratic 'empire building' referred to in the 1939 Bushfire Royal Commission allowed to resurface in the environmental and firefighting behaviour during, and in the lead up, to 2003?

*The fires
generated their
own weather.
Mini cyclones
uprooted trees
and twisted
others off at
their base*

Mt Beauty CFA volunteer

The State Government of Victoria eventually announced that it would hold an inquiry into the bushfires to be headed by the State Co-Ordinator of Emergency Management. Few country people have confidence in this inquiry for a number of reasons:

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- It is being conducted by the person who is the overseeing authority on emergency management and he will therefore be largely inquiring into his own performance and into the performance of other bodies with which he will need to continue working in the future
- The terms of reference are too narrow to examine the vast range of circumstances which contributed to the emergency and the inquiry will therefore be incomplete
- The inquiry will not report until September 2003 – during the football grand final season when people are distracted – and when recommendations will be delivered too late for assessment or implementation prior to the 2003/4 bushfire season
- The inquiry requires country people to prepare detailed, written submissions rather than offering verbal evidence, at a time when they remain under acute financial, time and social pressure because of the effects of the fire
- Lessons discerned by locals after the Caledonia fire have been ignored
- The inquiry is not being held under Parliamentary Privilege and country people are therefore concerned by legal exposure from institutions (and their executives) with very deep pockets, and
- At the time of announcing the inquiry the Premier Steve Bracks foreshadowed the findings that he was confident the inquiry would deliver.

*We were told
that we had to
plant 100 trees
for every one
that we pulled
out*

Delegate at Mt Beauty
forum

Furthermore, country people see the ground being prepared for any fallout which the inquiry might deliver, by vast PR activities celebrating the heroism of the firefighters involved in the crisis. Whilst the fire did undoubtedly produce some heroes, the State Government is essentially felt to have created

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an environment in which the public will be unable to differentiate between the different groups involved in fighting the fire, and therefore any criticisms will be seen as wholesale criticisms of all involved.

Apart from those concerns, people in North East Victoria believe that there is still sufficient unburnt forest to present another crisis next summer. Whilst the footprint of the next fire might not be as large, they are aware that that the danger to the townships has barely abated.

Any country people who were wavering became far more committed to this view when they heard Premier Bracks explaining away the recent burning-off debacle in the Cobaw State Forest in the month after the bushfire crisis. Unlike the North Eastern Victorians, those affected by the Cobaw debacle were compensated fully and promptly, in what is seen as an effort to 'keep them quiet'.

Mr Bracks is seen as an apologist for his bureaucracy rather than a leader determined to seek out the truth.

***The incident
control centres
did not know
what was going
on. They might
as well have
been in America***

Mt Beauty farmer and
CFA volunteer

12. Bushfire Recovery

The State Government bushfire recovery measures attract a great deal of scorn and exasperation from farmers affected by the bushfire crisis.

The fire started on Government land and was managed by government people usually against the better judgement of the locals. The containment lines were bulldozed on private property and much of the fire was fought on private property because firefighters were unable or unwilling to gain access to the fires within the national park. Alternatively, it may be the that firefighting within the national park was prevented by unpublished regulations devised by the DSE.

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As a direct consequence, it's estimated that more than 3,000 kilometres of fencing was destroyed. This is fencing that separates internal paddocks, others that divide adjoining landowners, that divide paddocks from public roads and stockroutes, and fences around haystacks and holding paddocks and the like.

The government's bushfire recovery measures do not provide for one cent in assistance in rebuilding these fences. In some examples, minimal assistance is available to clear the old fences and clear a 3 metre buffer zone as a so-called fire prevention measure. However, the cost of materials for the fences, and the cost of erecting them, is to be borne entirely by the landowners.

Quite apart from the financial issues, locals well know that a bulldozer cannot even turn around in a 3 metre zone, and a further hazard is created when DSE regulations require the highly flammable detritus to be windrowed onto the private property.

A further 500 or so kilometres of fencing separates private landholdings from the national park and in this case the government has offered to pay for half of the material involved in replacement fencing – providing that the fence is a more expensive dog-proof fence.

Fires were moving at up to 70 km/h but decisions and approvals in strategy often took two hours to be received

Farmers are outraged by this offer. Firstly because dog proof fences are required because of State Government failure to control the feral dog problem in the national park. Secondly, farmers will normally erect a fence made up of four strands of wire, whereas the dog-proof fences requires eight strands of wire. Even if the government pays half the cost of material in this case, the landholder is no better off than he or she is in replacing ordinary fencing.

Mt Beauty CFA
volunteer

Essentially, the fencing offer by the State Government is seen as a sleight-of-hand opportunity to pay for feral dog control under the guise of bushfire assistance. This is supported by the fact that assistance is only available in areas which have been declared as wild dog zones.

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Leaving aside the fences for the moment, many landholders are still waiting for the government to make good their land where containment lines and fire breaks were bulldozed during the crisis. Whilst all this is going on, the people of north east Victoria are trying to get on with their lives.

During a public meeting held at Mt Beauty on 7 April, the government's lack of genuine commitment to recovery was made evident by Parks Victoria. Local people are anxious to use the trails in the national park again to try and resuscitate the eco-tourism where many livelihoods are based. Access has been prevented until Parks Victoria surveys the tracks and surrounding trees to declare them 'safe'.

Despite the urgency of the situation, Parks Victoria refuses to advise of its schedule for this to be completed, citing an insufficiency of resources. The outcomes is that many tracks may not be open until next year.

This is despite the fact, that dozens of experienced, knowledgeable and expert locals would be prepared to assist Parks Victoria – on an unpaid volunteer basis – to check and report on the trails. Despite the hardship being imposed upon local tourist operators, this offer of partnership has been ignored by Parks Victoria.

The government is seen to be papering over this inactivity by promoting tourism in the area and creating an image that all is well again. The fact that Tourism Victoria is being used to head this charge, adds insult to injury. At the best of times, Tourism Victoria is seen as out-of-touch, mesmerized by icon marketing and happy with the trickle down effect for emerging tourist areas. For Tourism Victoria to be involved in assisting recovery after such personally devastating circumstances, is seen almost as a form of community sacrilege.

Most of all, North Eastern Victorians are mindful that the vast majority of the State Government's \$69 million reconstruction package is devoted to

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repairing assets and infrastructure on its own properties. The announced and reannounced support for local communities sits at little more than \$2 million and it is difficult to find any person or business who has received any money from this allocation.

The economic circumstances faced by North East Victorians are immensely difficult and the assistance offered by government is barely a fraction of the cost that will be used by the bureaucracy to administer it.

It's a national park – but it's a changed environment and therefore has to be managed. Humans are now part of its ecology

Mt Beauty farmer

13. Recommendations

The greatest fear amongst many country Victorians is that 'nothing will change' after the 2003 bushfire disaster. The attitude of State Government bureaucrats, the emphasis on public relations by the government, the lack of a credible State Government inquiry and even the incident and government response regarding the Cobaw State Forest fire all suggest that efforts are focused on political implications rather than the welfare of country people. There is an overwhelming view that the State Government's response is intended for the metropolitan market rather than constituents in country Victoria.

If confidence is to be returned to country Victoria, then a number of actions need to be taken:

1. Local communities must be reintroduced as partners in the management of national parks and state forest along with the relevant government agencies. The interface between conservation and community is a matter that requires, and benefits from, contributions from both sides of the fence. Government executives and country people each have a lot to share and a lot to learn, and a common aspiration is the protection and preservation of the natural

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environment. In the first instance, this partnership could begin with the establishment of properly structured Local Management Groups.

***It's no use
comparing the
1939 fires with
this one. They
are like chalk
and cheese***

Tawonga resident

2. Firefighting risk must be recalibrated so that local, volunteer firefighting experience and expertise can be harnessed to minimize risk to life and limb. There is no substitute for local knowledge and local experience. Local teams should be formally appointed to liaise with and assist and advise incident controllers on site. Remote control over fires does not work.
3. Buffer zones of up around 300m should be established within the circumference of the national park and forested Crown land and grassed and grazed. With trees of up to 80metres in height being common in the area, any buffer zone of lesser width is likely to be ineffective. With this type of arrangement landholder cooperation would be increased and they would take an active – and voluntary – role in maintaining fire prevention.
4. Local exercises should be routinely conducted each year involving emergency services and local volunteers practicing emergency drills, plans and coordination so that efforts will be more productive in time of genuine crisis. Local volunteer fire brigades could be used to assist in controlling burning off and other fuel reduction operations.
5. Firefighting infrastructure must be improved throughout the region particularly in view of the depletion of resources over the 10-15 years. For example,

- airstrips must be improved in order to accommodate bigger payloads for firefighting aircraft;

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- local 'posts' and inventories must be established with up-to-date inventories and contact details maintained
- appliances, earthmoving equipment and crews should be kept on standby
- firefighting access trails must be restored and maintained
- communication devices and protocols should be agreed and standardized
- significant water storages should be maintained so that helitankers can improve their turnaround and response times

We just don't have the time or the resources to prepare written submissions for Bracks' enquiry. We're too busy trying to survive

Tallangatta farmer

6. Most importantly, the DSE must be required to acknowledge that it has a duty of care to country Victorians as well as to the metropolitan green voters. This entails the establishment of accountability mechanisms, which would require the DSE to publish details and statistics such as:

- a 'service standard' which guarantees that lightning fires for example, will be extinguished within a set time
- a regular performance report against this standard, based on a community verified audit
- a fuel load index which measures current density against a standard which is clearly agreed and understood by the local community
- a burning-off plan identifying the areas and acreages to be burned within a specified period
- a report on verified, successful burning-off compared with the targeted volumes and areas
- an infrastructure and personnel index which regularly reports on the level of fire related

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infrastructure and personnel levels against an agreed and understood level

- a firetrail remediation and maintenance plan should be established and published and regularly reported against; and
- forest visitation and activity levels should be publicly targeted and reported against.

The bulldozer was sent back by the DSE because it had a blade that was wider than DSE regulations permitted

Mt Beauty CFA volunteer

7. A whole of government approach to conservation, emergency management, tourism and agriculture should be constructed to deliver on these targets. The salaries of responsible departmental secretaries should be linked to performance against these measures and details reported to parliament.
8. A commitment must be made that fires in the national park and state forests will be fought on Crown land rather than private leasehold or freehold land.
9. Permits should be granted to enable firekilled Alpine Ash to be removed from the Alpine National Park for milling.
10. Strike team leaders should be appointed from local, experienced CFA firefighting volunteers.
11. Volunteer firefighters should be classified and identifiably differentiated between those with active country experience and those whose experience is predominantly bureaucratic or outer urban fringe experience.
12. Fences destroyed by bushfires emanating from state forests or national parks should be replaced by the government at its own expense.

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13. Evening firefighting and 24 hour duty must be aggressively reintroduced.

14. Fires must not be left unattended.

15. Municipal emergency management plans should be revised so that local communities understand them and know what roles they should play.

14. State Government Consultation

The contributors to this report offered to provide the relevant State Government Minister with a briefing on this report ahead of its publication so that recommendations and concerns were not written off to 'politics'. Offers to the Minister's Chief of Staff, and subsequently the Premier's Chief of Staff, were both ignored.

***Hollywood
Bracks is getting
away with this
because no-one
died in the fire***

Mt Beauty business
operator

15. Conclusion

It is strongly held that the State Government of Victoria devises and implements its conservation and environment policies in order to meet the expectation of predominantly metropolitan green voters. In turn, it's believed that these expectations are frequently misguided or ill informed. There is a strong view that the State Government has a responsibility to foster an educated and productive debate in regard to environmental protection rather than continuing to marginalize the people who suffer the consequences.

North Eastern Victorians are concerned that little has been learned from the 2003 bushfire disaster. What's the plan to prepare for next summer? What is 'different' as a result of this disaster?

Inevitably, the level of exclusion from Crown wilderness and forests will begin to effect metropolitan constituents anyway, as increasing curiosity and disposable incomes will be met with a brick wall by the State Government

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bureaucrats. City people will not be able to visit or share that which they believe they have saved.

Country people view the 'locking up' of national parks much as they would the 'locking up' of a heritage mansion. 'Locking up' doesn't preserve, doesn't restore, doesn't educate, doesn't encourage shared responsibility or aspirations. The 'lock up' mentality has produced distrust and animosity between bureaucrats and country people and this has permeated almost every aspect of their relationships. In turn, State Government Ministers have acted with political spin rather than a commitment to education and shared understandings.

This poisonous relationship which vests all authority in metropolitan Melbourne has delivered a frightening outcome in 2003. Just contemplating the potential loss of life is enough to send a shiver down one's spine.

The undeniable conclusion is that the current State Government and bureaucratic management policies have led to unprecedented levels of damage from which it will not be possible to recover within ten generations.

The so called experts have effectively sterilized the very asset which they were charged to protect and nurture.

Who will be called to account?