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Do Bush Fires Only Occur In The Bush?

by David Cox May 31st, 2017

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For many years, the majority of Australians have been comforted by the thought that the prevalence of bush fires doesn't concern those living in urban areas. Whilst there might be empathy for our 'country cousins', many don't consider these fires to be a direct threat.

So is this assumption correct or just a misguided myth? A look at recent events and data sheds light on the issue.

This year's relatively wet conditions in Australia have kept devastating bush fires at bay, but whilst we enjoy the lush regeneration of the landscape now, we are also building up fuel loads for next summer. This is the cycle we must accept and deal with or face the consequences of our unpreparedness.

Historically, Australia's deadliest bush fires recorded are as follows:

Black Saturday, VIC	7-8 th Feb, 2009	- 173 fatalities - Over 2000 homes destroyed
Ash Wednesday, VIC/SA	-8 th Feb, 1983	- 75 fatalities - Approx 1900 homes destroyed
Black Friday, VIC,	13-20 Jan, 1939	- 71 fatalities - 650 homes destroyed
Black Tuesday, TAS	7 th Feb, 1967	- 62 fatalities, - 1300 homes destroyed.
Black Sunday, VIC	Feb- 10 th March, 1926	- 60 fatalities - Unknown homes destroyed

[click to enlarge](#)

(Ref: Liz T. Williams, Nov 3, 2011, Australian Geographic, 'The Worst Bush fires in Australia's history')

These historical records of fatalities, however, do not explain the increased prevalence or recent bush fires in urban areas. Furthermore, as with bush fires, the fuel load in urban areas has also increased, which may be due to such factors as dried out timber dwellings, the increased recent use of flammable and toxic materials in buildings (such as PVC, Styrene foam and the like) and the increased vegetation in suburban areas. Some of the more recent and less published fires include:

The Canberra Fires, ACT	8 th Jan, 2003	- 4 fatalities - 470 homes destroyed - 2000 businesses damaged - Repair bill - \$450 million
Black Sunday Fires, WA	5 th Feb, 2011	- 0 fatalities - 72 homes destroyed
Yarloop Fire, WA	8 th Jan, 2016	- 3 fatalities - (including emergency services worker after fire) - 121 homes destroyed (in the town)

[click to enlarge](#)

(Ref: ABC news; 8th Jan 2016, 9:43 pm)

Internationally, the following fires have proven fatal in recent years:

- 1. The Texas Fires, US, 2011**
 - four fatalities
 - 1,000 homes destroyed (600 homes in urban areas around Bastrop)
- 2. California Fires, US, 2016**
 - seven fatalities
 - 663 homes destroyed (urban and rural)

I visited Western Australia during the bush fires of 2016 to learn from these events and meet with the authorities. The town of Yarloop was razed, and while it was not the only town damaged by the fires occurring throughout the south west



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region of WA, the devastation it faced demonstrates the vulnerability of these towns under such events.



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At the time of the fires, extreme heat and wind had dried the grass to crisp. It powdered when walked on, just as it would as if you were walking on frosted grass. Clearly many areas were in extreme danger. The only apparent factor which seemed to reduce the fires spreading much further than they did was that the fuel load in the majority of rural areas visited seemed exceptionally low.

“Climate change projections suggest an increase in days conducive to extreme wildfire events by 20 to 50% in these disaster-prone landscapes,” said David Bowman, Professor of Environmental Change Biology, School of Plant Science, University of Tasmania.

“Our validated global database of extreme wildfires shows that those reported as being economically or socially disastrous are concentrated in suburban areas intermixed with flammable forest in the developed world.”

Bowman further advised that people who live near the bush in cities and regional areas in Australia need to expect their houses to burn down.

So globally how much of our metropolitan development has peripheral suburbs potentially at risk? Through an examination of case studies completed in the USA, [Ross Elliot](#) maintains that suburbs are expanding faster than other areas of their cities.

“We are living in a global suburban age. While statistics demonstrate that the amount of the world population in metropolitan areas is rapidly increasing, rarely is it understood that the bulk of this growth occurs in the suburbanized peripheries of cities,” Elliot wrote. “Domestically, over 69 per cent of all US residents live in suburban areas:”

Australia, like America, has a similar and significant problem. Given that bush fires do not only occur in the bush, what is the best way forward to address this issue?

A good place to start is simply to clarify the meaning of word ‘bushfires’ so that the public understands that these fires we are discussing are not only applicable to remote bushland areas of Australia. The term ‘wildfires’ is now commonly used by academics and possibly this is the right term to use, but whatever term is adopted, it should not be prefixed with the word ‘bush.’

The second is that notwithstanding our ability to respond to these events by the use of our emergency services, we should be designing our urban areas in such a way to either prevent or mitigate the spreading of such fires and the sooner the better.



by David Cox



David is a widely experienced architect who has worked on major projects in the private and pub....

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Amanda Wilson

9/06/ 2017

Little overkill on the language Margret. Clearly Sourceable, in conjunction with David Cox, have done a great job in highlighting this tragedy; your comment was extremely inappropriate – this clearly was not done intentionally. Great job Sourceable on the article – please ignore Margret, she is clearly having a bad day.



margaret

1/06/ 2017

As someone who until recently lived in the SW of WA and knows the town that was destroyed and its lovely people, I find it highly insulting that the name of the town id incorrect. It is NOT Jaloop. It is YARLOOP.



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