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BUSHFIRES- What's in a name?



by David Cox

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This article is the fourth in a series of articles which deal with the damaging effects of bushfires in Australia, including current issues, and the development of better resilience against these fires.

The articles will attempt to collate different aspects of research on the subject and to stimulate discourse in order to assist with our better understanding of the same.

RESPECT:

I do not consider it is a time for Australia to seek blame. Nor is it a time to denigrate our authorities or politicians or for championing a particular ideology. The Australians who lost their lives in the recent fires including those volunteers lost whilst trying to help others, deserve our deepest sympathy and respect and this should be allowed to happen. However, it is a time for all of us to quietly reflect upon the seriousness of the recent bush fires in Australia and to accept that we must change in our ways and we must act to prepare ourselves for these events.

GENERAL:

I have been undertaking academic research, writing papers and developing appropriate construction systems appropriate for our harsh Australian environment for several decades. Much of this work relates to fire research. These following articles, however, are purposely direction finding in approach and therefore it is hoped they will be relevant to various disciplines and professions.

The reason for undertaking this fire research referred above is simply because it was considered that by constructing buildings, seeing them burn down, then building them again in the same way as before is a wasteful and futile exercise. I remain perplexed why we, as a nation noted for our cleverness and resourcefulness, continue to allow this to happen.

One reason for Australia's procrastination on the adoption of new technology to help prepare us for the effects of our harsh environment is because most believe nothing can be done to protect us from bush fires. The reality, however, is that this is simply not correct and doing nothing is a symptom Australia can ill afford at these times or in the future.

Another reason for this procrastination is because of the commonly held belief that most of us who live in urban areas are not affected by these fires because bush fires, as the name suggests, only occur in the bush. This article will deal with this concept.

ARTICLE:




I refer to the Queensland fires which started in Applethorpe on the 6th September 2019. Although this fire, and the other Queensland fires which occurred that weekend, were small in comparison to the extensive fires in Victoria and New South Wales in the months since then, they are relevant for this discussion.

The Applethorpe fire (see photo attached – top image) had crossed the main highway and had spread into the town. The Peregian fire, which had commenced in the thickly wooded area surrounding a relatively new housing estate, spread into this urban area. Both fires caused significant damage which was minimised by the very quick and effective response from the QFES and the RFS.

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The growing phenomenon of out of control bush fires extending into and damaging urban areas is described in a [previous article](#) from this author in May 2017.

The article on page 1 describes a complacency of these events as follows:

“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 it to be a direct threat.”

And further suggests:

“I think 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.”

Because virtually all Australian press articles still refer to ‘bush fires’ it is pointless in trying to change the term immediately and I will continue to use this term. However, I suggest a name change may assist with the understanding that we are dealing with a far greater problem than only fires in remote areas of Australia.

The predictions raised in the above referred article (31/5/2017) unfortunately been validated by the events of the recent fires which have spread across Australia in the past 3 months. The key points relative to this article are:

- City dwellers and particularly urban areas close to bush land areas, are not immune from bush fire or ‘Wildfire’ attack
- The commonly held belief that bush fires/wildfires only occur in rural areas, is simply not true.

By David Cox, Director, Cox Architects



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