

EAST GIPPSLAND WILDFIRE TASKFORCE

Fire in East Gippsland - Recollections of John Mulligan

A lot is said about the pros and cons of fuel reduction burning (FRB). I would like to share with you, my recollections of growing up in East Gippsland and the changes to fire management, fuel loads and the forests over the past 75 years.

The knowledge I gained from my family, old bushmen and other early European settlers in East Gippsland is very relevant today, as the Government tries to manage the growing wildfire risk across Victoria.

A Little of My East Gippsland Family History

My grandparents came to East Gippsland in the 1880's to join an uncle who had arrived earlier. They settled at Gypsy Point, where they ran a trading store, post office and wattle bark business, among other endeavours. They arrived here before the roads were developed, with most transport using the water. Trading ketches from Eden and Lakes Entrance serviced the area.

My mother was born at Gypsy Point in 1903 and road access arrived in 1913/14. As road transport became more reliable, trade by water decreased and the family store was closed. My family built and operated the Gypsy Point Hotel, continued trading wattle bark and became involved in transport and bush grazing.

I was born in Orbost in 1931. My early life and teenage years, except for time at school were spent at Gypsy Point. I attended the Bairnsdale School of Mines and went on to work for the Country Roads Board, surveying and road building, mainly in East Gippsland.

Later, I went farming at Cann River, utilising bush grazing leases and assisting my wife's family at Fairhaven, who also had bush grazing leases. In the ten years before my retirement, to our farm at Wangaratta, we ran the catering at the Gipsy Point Lodge.

How the Bush has Changed

During my life, I have seen big changes in the East Gippsland bush. I have learnt from my family and older bush people and from my lifelong observations. In the early days of my life, subject to weather conditions, there was always fire, started by either man, lightning or reignition from an earlier burn.

When my grandmother's older sister (Mrs Coleman) first came to Mallacoota (ahead of the arrival of my grandparents), she said there was a small band of aborigines, who moved about, burning wherever they went. However, they went with drovers taking cattle from the Bega area to Port Albert for shipping to Tasmania. They never returned.

However, fire was a constant in the bush. Everyone learned to live with it. They had to, as there were no bulldozers, water tankers, aircraft, 4WDs with teams of fire fighters, computer modelling, fire planning, CFA etc.

Bush dwellers of the time had a completely different understanding of the necessity of regular fire in the environment and its acceptance, than that of the majority of people today. Smoke was something we learned to live with. In good weather, particularly the autumn, smoke would lag in the valleys and on the lakes and low lying areas, sometimes making it difficult to navigate on the water.



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With the government preferring or directing that burning not take place until after the Easter holidays, some of the best autumn burning conditions are missed. The opportunity to fuel reduce even small areas has contributed to the mess we now have.

In the early to mid-20th century, the only tools we had to combat fire when it threatened our assets, were hand tools and fire its' self (backburning). In those times in the bush, everybody knew what to do to look after themselves and their property. I do not remember any isolated settlement or farms east of Orbost being burnt out in those years.

In those early times, our cattle were in the bush year-round. We never shifted them because of fear of fire, but I wouldn't like to risk cattle in the bush now, if there was a fire about. The feed has gone anyway, crowd out by dense understorey and tens of tonnes of bark and leaf litter across every hectare.

The bush was more open, with mature trees and a more grassy understorey than today. It was easy to canter along on a horse. Although the European rabbit has also contributed to the loss of native grasses in some places dense understory and an increasing layer of litter has largely been responsible for choking out native grasses in most of the East Gippsland forests that had a grassy understory prior to, and in the earlier days of European settlement.



1926 Forests With Open Understorey (Source: The South Eastern Gate Twofold Bay – Published by the Twofold Bay Development League 1926)

Light (low intensity) fires caused little of no damage to sound trees, unlike many of today's fires that severely scorch the forest canopy, defoliating or killing the mature trees. The loss of the mature canopy allows dense undergrowth to grow, contributing to the decline in many bird, mammal and reptile species. Most birds and animals can avoid the effects of low intensity fires. Even birds have no hope of avoiding holocaust type fires.

The open forest structure, with denser gully vegetation and some rougher patches, was typical of coastal, foothills and drier tablelands forests of East Gippsland up until the 1940's. These forest generally did not support high intensity bushfires.



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The 1939 Fires

During the 1938/39 summer, there were numerous fires in East Gippsland. On Black Friday (13 January 1939), I remember it was a terrible day, hot and windy. I was driving with my uncle to Cann River and we had a lot of car trouble (petrol vaporising before it got to the engine), but no fear of fires.

This was a great contrast to West Gippsland, where it was not safe to be in or near the fires that day. Seventy one people died in Victoria on 13 January 1939, with no recorded fire deaths in East Gippsland. The history of Club Terrace mentions the local fires that occurred on Black Friday.

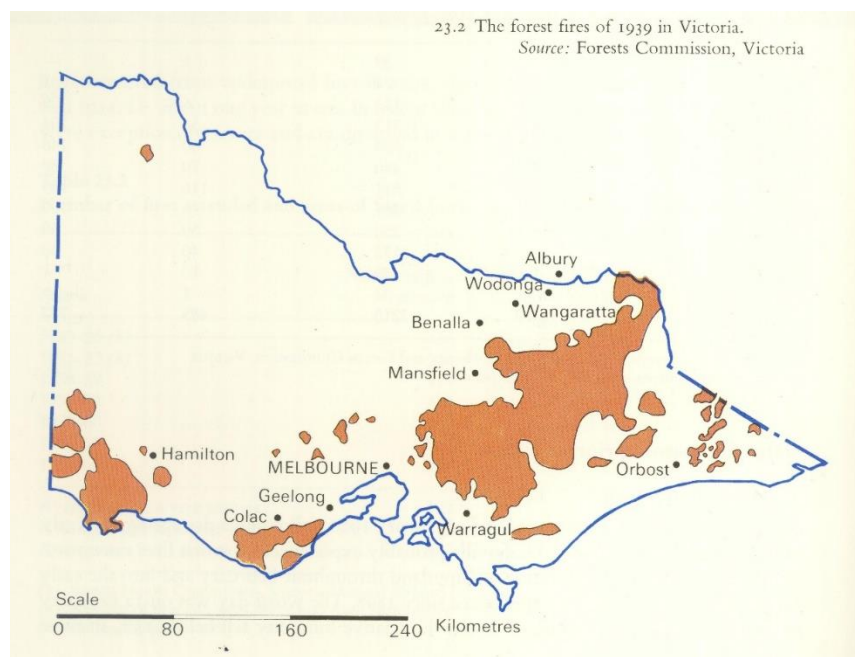
One fire threatened the Cabbage Tree Hotel. The Armstrong brothers from Cann River were travelling to Orbost that day. They stopped to help save the pub and then continued on their way to Orbost. This indicates clearly that despite similar weather conditions, the fires in East Gippsland that day, were nowhere near as fierce as those in West Gippsland.

Forest Management

Why was the fire intensity in most other forested parts of Victoria so much worse than in East Gippsland?

Around the turn of the century, the government appointed a Conservator of Forests. He was an Englishman who was against the use of fire to manage fuel levels. Then in 1919, the Forestry Commission was created and the European trained foresters were also against the use of fire, believing that fire damaged the timber. A light (low intensity) fire does not damage sound trees. So the fuel levels in West Gippsland and the north were allowed to build and in 1939, had 30 to 40 years or so of fuel build-up.

In those early years, the Forestry Commission controlled the forests in West Gippsland, whereas east of Orbost, the bush was largely controlled by the Lands Department, who weren't concerned about the burning. As the Forestry Commission had insufficient staff to police the area, the local people stuck to their established burning practices.



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The map above, from *Bushfires in Australia* by R. H. Luke and A. G. Mc Arthur clearly shows that the 1939 fires in East Gippsland were not on the large scale that occurred elsewhere in Victoria. The Royal Commission took evidence at Omeo, but did not come to East Gippsland, which again highlights that the heavily forested area of East Gippsland was not affected by the intense fires that devastated other parts of Victoria.

After the 1939 fires, the government held a Royal Commission, chaired by Judge Stretton. He blamed cattlemen (settlers and graziers) for starting the 1939 fires. but seemed to ignore the fuel build-up, without which, the fires would not have been so severe. His report recorded:

“(b) The Condition of the Forests.—When the early settlers came to what is now this State, they found for the greater part a clean forest. Apparently, for many years before their arrival, the forest had not been scourged by fire. They were in their natural state. Their canopies had prevented the growth of scrub and bracken to any wide extent. They were open and traversable by men, beasts and wagons. Compared with their present condition, they were safe. But the white men introduced fire to the forests. They burned the floor to promote the growth of grass and to clear it of scrub which had grown where, for whatever reason, the balance of nature had broken down. The fire stimulated grass growth ; but it encouraged scrub growth far more. Thus was begun the cycle of destruction which cannot be arrested in our day.

It is clear that Stretton did not understand the role that fire, as managed by the aboriginal people, played in creating the natural, open and traversable forests, including those of East Gippsland.

It was the area east of Orbost that did not suffer the hot tree-killing fires of West Gippsland due to the efforts of the bush graziers. The East Gippsland forests went on to sustain the timber industry for the next 50 years.

Stretton commented on the management of forest fuel levels by Board of Works and the Forestry Commission.

“The Board of Works and the Forests Commission were virtually the only preventive agents in the State-

(i) The Board of Works.—The Board has permitted a condition of great danger to exist in its areas. Being apparently well supplied with money, it has for preventive purposes an adequate staff and good organization. The area which it controls is comparatively small and manageable. For the greater part its methods accord with those which have been practised, but on too small a scale, by the Forests Commission. The difference in substance between the methods of these two bodies is that the Board refuses to use burning as a general preventive method.”

The Forestry Commission:

“Controlled Burning.—This consists of strip and patch. burning. The amount of this burning which was done was ridiculously inadequate. The Commission's officers regard the forest as a producer of revenue and for this reason and because their education appears to lead them to demand that no tree or seedling be destroyed except in the course of silviculture, they are averse to burning of any sort.”



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In a later Royal Commission into fires that impacted Yallourn, he criticised the government for lack of FRB and praised what FRB had been carried out. He said these areas “are now standing as green oases in a wilderness of destruction.”

About 1950, with the timber industry coming to the far east, also came the Forestry Commission of Victoria and minimum burn practices. With new tracks, 4 WDs aircraft etc, they could police local people and put a stop to the old burning practices, so that let the fuel loads build, resulting in the 1983 fires and many other smaller but serious fires.



2pm on 8 February 1983 and an Out of Control Wildfire Burning Through Heavy Fuel Loads Approaches the NSW Border. Photographer Peter Rutherford

Since 1983, the area of FRB carried out has been completely inadequate, with the result that we are now sitting on the biggest time bomb that East Gippsland has faced, because of the massive fuel loads.

Prior to 2009, only 1.7% of forested land had been fuel reduced. The Royal Commission inquiry, into the 2009 bushfires recommended a target of 5 – 8%, but even this was discarded in favour of the “Working Together” plan. This plan does not address the problem in the deeper forest, where if FRB is not increased to 15 – 20% per annum, then, at some time in the future, the massive fire will occur.

Lessons From 1851

If we go back in history to 1851, some people say there were no restrictions on settlers burning then, so why did we have those fires? The same with the old forests of South Gippsland. The reason is, the burning carried out by the aborigines had ceased, because of the decimation of their numbers due to disease.

The settlers had not carried on their burning practices, allowing fuel to build up, resulting in the big fires of 1851.

