

WHY SHOULD WE PRESCRIBE BURN? A case study on 153 years of neglect

Phil Cheney

The first European explorers of Australia described much of the countryside as thinly treed with extensive tracts of fine grasses. Dry forests were described as thinly spaced woodlands with a grassy understorey. Maintenance of this condition in dry eucalypt forest requires regular burning with intervals of no greater than 3 years. Today dry forests accumulate enough fuel after 5 years to support a crown fire in extreme weather.

The landscape painter Eugene von Guerard (1812 -1901) was recognised for the physical and botanical accuracy of his landscape paintings. At times he would introduce exaggerated features in the foreground, often with people standing or fishing, to emphasise the scale of the scene and at times was stylistic with backgrounds. His painting of the Junction of the Snowy and Buchan Rivers in 1867 can be compared with recent photographs (2019, 2020), or with a ground view from Google Earth from locations near where he viewed the scene.



Figure 1: von Guerard's painting of the Junction of the Snowy and Buchan Rivers in 1867 compared with a recent photograph (2019, probably at a point a little higher than the artist).

His representation of trees is somewhat stylistic, particularly in the distance, but those in the immediate foreground are a pretty accurate representation of the form of eucalypts complete with hanging streamers of bark (see the tree in the right corner).

The view of the scene is to the north-east and the painting seems to depict strips of open grassy woodland on the south-west aspects, as is the case in the middle foreground, with denser forest on the north-east aspects. I believe this is an accurate representation of woodland on broken terrain with a clear view to the ground on the aspects facing towards the viewer (SW), and only the crowns of the trees on the aspects facing away from the viewer (NE). Therefore, I consider that the painting is a fair description of a grassy woodland, which would have back then been maintained by the local Aboriginal Australians (perhaps a cohort of the Gunai/Kurnai, Waveroo, Daung Wurrung, and Jaitmatang Peoples who all seem to have a reasonable proximate association to the area).

The area was burnt by wildfire in January 2020. The fires were started by lightning and not controlled by rapid initial attack. Much of the area was impacted by crown fire under extreme weather conditions. This wildfire will promote the regeneration of eucalypt and wattle scrub which will inhibit management by low-intensity burning until the overstorey crowns recover. The immediate impact of this fire is shown in Figure 2 below.

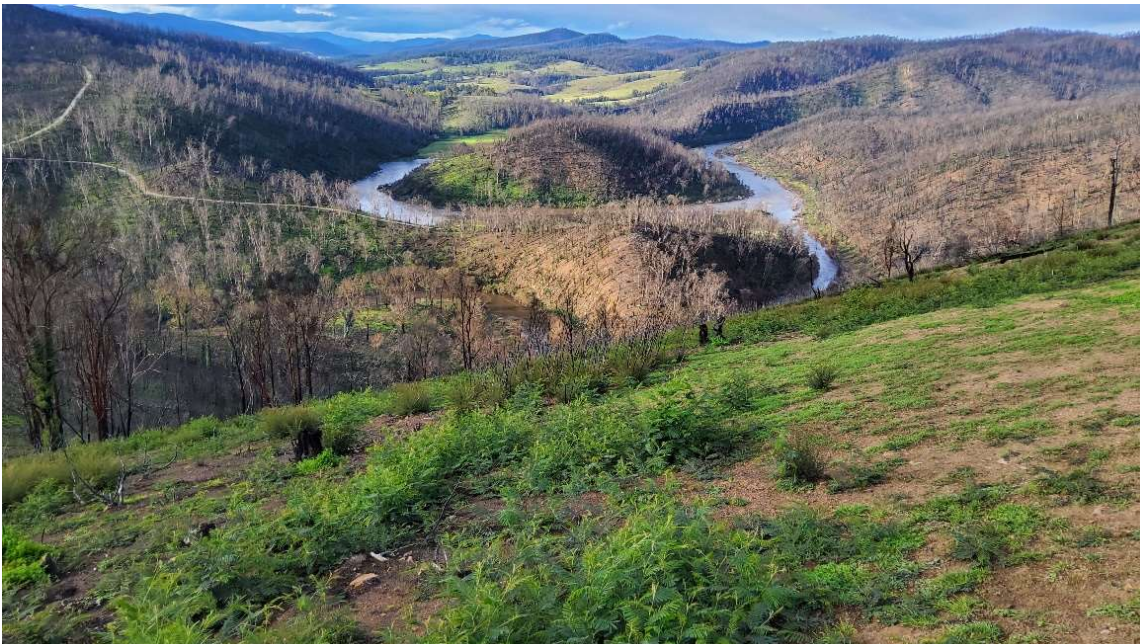


Figure 2: Taken October 2020 by Helen Bull, Mallacoota

Reducing fuels to a level similar to the pre- European condition is the only way we can reduce this level of devastation to our native forests, fauna, soils and catchments, and provide adequate protection to the wider community. Understanding and acknowledging the condition and dynamics of our landscapes prior to European settlement is a crucial step in this process. Forest Fire Vic. are considering the integration of Cultural and Traditional burning with a widespread prescribed burning program in dry forests as a way forward in Victoria.