

Extreme bushfires

– a new and terrible reality



COVER:
White-breasted sea eagle
PHOTOS: STUART GIBSON (see Portfolio)

The terrible bushfires, still raging in Victoria as I write, started two weeks ago when the combination of searing record temperatures, high winds and very low humidity contributed to Australia's greatest peacetime disaster.

Climate change and the resulting seemingly endless drought have dried naturally fire-prone eucalypts to a point where major fires are inevitable. We must learn to live with this new reality in south-east mainland Australia and Tasmania. Already called into question is the 'stay and fight or leave early' advice that had been accepted. These fires were so fast moving and the temperatures so high, however, that they were beyond the experience of even the hardened fire crews.

We have slowly, as a nation, begun to accept that we are not masters of the environment, but a part of it. We have learned too that 'environment' with all its connotations is incredibly complex; we have only recently begun to develop some understanding of how to live in this country and how to leave it in better condition for succeeding generations.

As Tasmanians many of us well remember the 1967 Black Tuesday fires that cost so many lives and so much. (See Issue 43.) Our profoundest sympathy is with the people of Victoria who have lost loved ones, homes, livelihoods and irreplaceable memories. Our admiration is for the 'fries' who risk their lives in the bush.

As Australians we must continue to try to understand our vast country. The best memorial to all the people who lost their lives in this tragedy is to learn from these events and minimise the harm that may befall future generations.

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