

How to make a pyre of the bush

By Roger Underwood, former district and regional forester, now the Chairman of The Bushfire Front, Quadrant Online, 8 Feb 2015

Not too long ago, Western Australia was a textbook example of astute fire management. Now, if you wonder why the state is burning once again, look to the green-minded romantics, public service careerists and academics who are wrecking the very forests they profess to love.

The debate about hazard-reduction

One of the invariable outcomes of a major bushfire **like the one that is lashing the karri forest as I write**, is that the debate about hazard-reduction burning always resurfaces. The Greens and their supporters in the leafy suburbs and university campuses, who are never threatened by bushfires from one year to the next, all oppose it. The emergency services bosses, whose status and budgets would decline if hazards were reduced, talk it down (while all the time calling for more firefighters and greater investment in helicopters and tankers). The wine-grape growers, concerned only for their profits, threaten to sue if the merest whiff of smoke blows across their vines. The media, which love a big fire almost as much as they love stirring possums, are ambivalent — they can't really come out and say that they don't like it ... after all, if you oppose hazard reduction you are basically saying you support hazard retention. But journalists find irresistible the battle scenes associated with the bushfire disasters that result from failure to put a hazard-reduction program in place.

About the only people who speak up for it are the actual firefighters who put their lives on the line in tackling the fires, and the farmers, foresters and rural residents who know that their assets cannot be protected from wildfires if bushland fuels are allowed to accumulate to dangerous levels.

Reducing bushfire hazards in the ascendancy

For many years in Western Australia, all through the 1970s, '80s and early '90s, those in favour of reducing bushfire hazards were in the ascendancy. The program was achieved, year by year. It didn't cost much and nobody took much interest in it. The main thing was that the community and the bush were spared the horror, ugliness, waste and heartbreak of big, angry bushfires. Then the Greens, the lefties in the ALP, the doctors' wives, the grape-growers, the bush hippies and the inner-city academics got control of the game and the whole thing unravelled.

These days we get a nasty fire just about every time there is a hot day, and our poor firefighters are out there busting their guts for weeks on end. Every experienced bushman knows that hazard-reduction burning does not prevent bushfires and is not a silver bullet. However, it does reduce bushfire intensity and makes firefighting easier, safer and cheaper.

I had a fascinating insight, many years ago, into a perspective on all this that came from a quite unexpected angle.

It was the spring of 1968, and I had just been appointed the DFO (district forester) at Pemberton in the lower south-west of WA. This job meant that I was responsible for bushfire management for most of the beautiful and valuable karri forest. My boss was the great forester Steve Quain, a man who taught me almost everything I knew about forests and bushfires. One day, Steve

phoned up from his office in Manjimup and said he would be down for the day next Monday and he wanted me to accompany him on a mission from Head Office. The Conservator of Forests, Steve told me, had received an important letter from a Northcliffe resident, and he (the Conservator) instructed Steve and me to go down there, meet with the resident, and listen to his concerns.

“You’ll learn something today”

When Steve arrived at Pemberton that day he had a rather quizzical expression. “You’ll learn something today” he said mysteriously.

He also showed me the letter to the Conservator. It was hand-written in beautiful copperplate script, possibly with one of those old pens with a nib, with immaculate spelling and grammar. It was only a page long, but the writer had packed in a number of allegations of mismanagement by the Forests Department, especially in relation to bushfire control. It was signed with a flourish “Mr. S.L. Mottram, Esq.”

“This guy must be Northcliffe aristocracy” I thought.

Steve and I drove down to Northcliffe and out the Boorara Road and over the East Branch of the Gardner River. “This is the place, pull in here” said Steve. He pointed to what I thought was an old cowshed, crouching under a dripping peppermint tree, amidst a sea of kikuyu grass and a few dozen huge, dead, ringbarked karri trees. It was a scene typical of the old Northcliffe groupie blocks of the day; in agricultural terms they were not far advanced up the evolutionary scale from virgin bush.

From the door of the hut emerged an old, bent bushman. Although it was a chilly day and drizzling, he was wearing a tattered blue singlet, raggy trousers and bare feet. He was snaggle-toothed and bushy-browed, but his eyes glittered with enthusiasm. “G’day, Steve!” he cried, and “G’day, Bub!” replied Steve. I could see as they shook hands warmly that they were old mates. Steve introduced me. “Meet Bub Mottram” he said, “one of the last of the south coast pioneer bushmen”.

Bub welcomed us and invited us in for a cup of tea. His hut was single unlined room with walls and roof of corrugated iron, measuring about three metres by five. At one end was a wire-framed bed with blankets that looked to me like they had been sewn together from sugar bags. At the other end was an open fireplace, and into this he had inserted the end of a long, dry jarrah log that went out through a hole in the wall. This he barred up a few inches to get a good blaze going under the billy.

After some reminiscing about past football matches (Steve had once played for Northcliffe and Bub had been a great supporter) and fishing trips to the coast, we got down to business. Bub did not mince his words (and here I pause to remind readers that all of this took place nearly 50 years ago).

“The trouble with you forestry blokes”

“The trouble with you forestry blokes”, he told us, “is that you don’t do enough burning. Nothing has been burnt around here or down to the coast for years, and there is going to be a disaster”.

In earlier days, Bub explained, before there had been any foresters around to discourage him, he had put himself in charge of burning for nearly all of the unoccupied bushland between the farms on the Boorara Road, the Gardner River to the west, the Deeside Road to the east, and the ocean to the south. This was done in the full knowledge and with the absolute approval of the settlers of the district. He would roam far and wide through the bush on horseback, hunting roos or rounding up stray cattle and lighting up whenever it was a good burning day. Because the bush was always “young and fresh” the fires didn’t get away. This year’s burn would trickle into last year’s or the year before’s. What’s more, there were big herds of cattle down on the coastal leases over summer in those days, and they would graze the native grasses that came away after a nice little burn, keeping the area clean.

“Burn, Steve, burn!” he admonished

Bub advocated a complete return to this approach. “Burn, Steve, burn!” he admonished. “The bush loves it, and you’ll get no big fires. Just get a team of bushmen on horses and equip them with matches and away they’ll go!”

Steve said he had to admit that Bub’s system met with his complete approval. But then he mentioned a few little constraints that impacted on the way we did our job, like the Bush Fires Act, the fact that we were employed by the government and were not free agents, and the risk of legal repercussions if we made a blue. In short, Steve gently pointed out, the world that Bub was describing had passed thirty years before and would never return.

We thanked Bub for his interests and hospitality, and commended him for his concerns, then eventually we made our way home.

Steve and I were both gravely concerned about the fire threat in the karri forest at that time. Steve had worked at Northcliffe and Shannon River when he was a young forester and had been involved in all the big fires of the 1950s. I had been a firefighter in the 1961 Crowea Fire, which started just south of Pemberton and ended up running into the sea near Windy Harbour. But it was one thing to want to do more burning, and another to get it done. Karri forest fire behaviour is tricky to predict, as the bush is a mixture of different fuel types that burn at different rates and times, and the long-unburnt forest is too thick to walk through. Early attempts at broad-acre burning had some nasty consequences, including on one occasion the death of two forestry workers.

The story of our meeting has a tragic postscript

The story of our meeting with Bub Mottram has a tragic postscript. A few months later, in March, 1969, a massive bushfire started on a farm in the Boorara area and took off with a searing nor’wester behind it. The Great Boorara Fire was (until February, 2015) the biggest and nastiest fire in the karri forest since settlement. The fire swept through the old groupie blocks, took out Bob’s shack on the way, and then devastated thousands of hectares of forest all the way across the southern Shannon basin, eventually running into some burnt country near Crystal Springs. Most of this forest had not seen fire since Bub had last conducted his one-man fuel reduction program in the 1930s, and it was burned to a crisp.

I made inquiries and found that Bub had survived the fire alright. Although he had seemed to me to be an old man at the time, I understand he lived on for several more years before dying in his late 70s. He had never married, preferring his solitary rambles and camp life in the bush. There was also a positive outcome. Eventually we got control of the fire problem in the karri country, mostly by implementing an effective, and cheap, program of regular, mild-intensity spring and autumn burning, using aircraft. For almost a generation, the Big Karri Fire was a thing of memory.

The whole region is a ticking bomb

But the politically-conning greens, the breast-beating lefties, the unaccountable academics, the ill-advised journalists, the self-serving grape growers and the emergency services officers who need big fires to justify their budgets somehow, they were allowed to take over — and they succeeded in turning back the bushfire clock to pre-1970. Almost no fuel-reduction burning has been done in the karri forest for years now, not even in the highly valuable and beautiful regrowth forests, and the whole region is a ticking bomb. All it needs is a relatively dry winter, a few hot days in mid-summer and a lightning storm for the unstoppable inferno to break away and do its horrible work.

I often think of Stanley Lancelot “Bub” Mottram. He was a memorable character, maybe the last of the old-fashioned bushmen in that part of the world. In a long and interesting life he was a farmer, droved cattle to the coast, caught fish, and explored (with box of matches handy) great swathes of the karri forest on foot and horseback. Like so many bushmen of his generation he was well-spoken, articulate and with a well-established set of values and a positive philosophy of life.

I also remember Steve Quain with respect and affection. Both Bub and Steve would be turning in their graves if they could see the ghastly mess down that way today.

Roger Underwood is a former district and regional forester, now the Chairman of The Bushfire Front where he lobbies for a return to responsible bushfire management in WA.