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Old-growth areas doomed unless we learn how to manage fire risks

Forests' future at stake



Controlled burns under the direction of Traditional Owners are essential if Victoria is to save its dwindling old-growth forests and native species, writes **TONY BARTLETT**

THE evidence is very clear that Victoria has been experiencing more frequent and intense bushfires over the past 20 years.

It is wrong, as some academics claim, that state forest policies related to timber harvesting and removing fallen trees after windstorms, are making Victoria's forests more flammable. Individual research articles may suggest there is a link between timber harvesting and bushfire risk, but this assertion is not borne out by either observed outcomes at the landscape scale or the underlying science on bushfire behaviour.

Victoria's 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires burnt 1.5 million hectares, of which 88 per cent was public land designated as state forest or National Park. The independent Major Event Review Parks found National Parks made up 36 per cent of the public land burnt, but accounted for 47 per cent of that burnt at high severity.

However, the areas of state forest where timber harvesting was allowed made up 49 per cent of the public land burnt and accounted for 49 per cent of high severity burnt land.

Considering this landscape-level evidence, the harvesting of timber in state forest has not made the forests more flammable than areas of National Park.

Victorians need to understand that intense and more frequent large bushfires are causing great harm to Victoria's forests and their biodiversity and that these undesirable impacts will continue unless there is more active forest management.

Since 2000, Victoria has lost about 60 per cent of its old growth forests from them being burnt by high-severity bushfire. That is equivalent to losing an area four times the size of Wilson's Promontory National Park.

What a catastrophe, which is not being openly discussed.

Equally concerning is the impact that high severity bushfires are having on threatened species such as gliders and large owls. Victorian research after the 2019-20 bushfires found that known populations of these threatened species significantly declined in forests that burnt at high severity, but they were more resilient in forests burnt at low or medium severity.



Fires have devastated Victoria's old-growth forests.

Picture: Zoe Phillips

It is clear that the long-term stability of Victorian forest ecosystems is under threat from intense bushfires and that current forest land management strategies are not achieving the desired conservation outcomes.

Well-planned prescribed burning is one of the most effective active management options that can be implemented to reduce the impacts of high-severity bushfires and improve the resilience of forest ecosystems.

In doing so, forest land managers need to empower Traditional Owners to implement cultural burning and

also adapt these cultural land management principles into their prescribed burning programs.

As the Major Event Review has recommended, there needs to be much better integration of the forest management plans and bushfire management strategies to address the very substantial bushfire challenges that are impacting so significantly on Victoria's forests.

• **Dr Tony Bartlett is a bushfire expert and science policy adviser with Forestry Australia**