

Reading One

The Roots of Australia's Wildfires

Australia is experiencing its worst wildfire season in decades. As of late January 2020, some 33 people had died in the fires, and many more have been wounded. The scope of the damage was reported by Aylin Woodward, a science and environment reporter, in a January 8, 2020, article for Business Insider:

Australia has become an inferno. More than half of the country is choking on smoke, and the skies glow orange as bushfires continue to ravage the continent.

Since the start of the bushfire season in September, an estimated 25.5 million acres have burned in Australia, according to Reuters, and at least 25 people have died. More than 1 billion animals are feared dead, and an estimated 2,000 homes have been destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to evacuate.

The total damage and economic losses will exceed \$100 billion, according to Accuweather. Australia experiences fires every fall, but this year's crisis — which comes on the heels of a heat wave and prolonged drought — is unprecedented....

It's hard to comprehend the size of the affected area in Australia. Added up, the burned land is the size of South Korea or the U.S. state of Virginia. Compared to the amount of land that burned during California's 2018 wildfire season — its most destructive ever — Australia's [burned] acreage total is more than 13 times bigger.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/australia-fires-burned-twice-land-area-as-2019-amazon-fires-2020-1>

In a January 8, 2020 article for The Nation, Edward Cavanaugh, an Australian policy researcher, provided a more close-up view of the inferno:

Smoke choked Australia's cities, and the Sydney Opera House disappeared behind a brown haze. Children wore face masks as the air quality deteriorated, leading to canceled sporting events and mail delivery in Canberra, Australia's capital. At least 25 people died, and many remain missing, not to mention the more than a billion animals and plants incinerated. Thousands of people stood under blood-red skies on sandy beaches, awaiting rescue by Australia's navy—the largest peacetime evacuation in the country's history.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/australia-fires-climate-morrison/>

While bushfires in Australia are nothing new, scientists say that climate change is making them worse. Australia's Bureau of Meteorology has stated that 2019 was both the hottest and driest that the country had ever recorded. As global temperatures trend upward, annual heat waves and droughts intensify. These more prolonged droughts and heat waves turn the already-dry forests and bush of Australia into the perfect kindling for wildfires.

"Climate change is exacerbating every risk factor for more frequent and intense bushfires," Dale Dominey-Howes, an expert on disaster risk at the University of Sydney, told Business Insider Australia. "Widespread drought conditions, higher-than-average temperatures — these are all made worse by climate change."

The current crisis poses a challenge for Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who has long refused to acknowledge the scientifically confirmed link between the fossil-fuel industry and climate change. Instead, during 2019, Australia's driest year on record, Morrison continued to champion a pro-fossil-fuel policy, including a new coal-fired power plant.

The spread of wildfires is not a problem limited to Australia. Throughout the world, such fires are spreading at alarming rates. Indeed, the fires in Australia come on the heels of increased burning in the Amazon. Some 76,000 wildfires burned across the forest in 2019, an 80 percent increase from the previous year. Much like the burning in Australia, fires are not new to the Amazon, but recent ones have been notable in their ferocity and longevity. Fires have also raged in Northern forests in Russia, Canada, and Alaska. Closer to home, the West Coast of the U.S. has seen significant damage. In California alone, wildfires have claimed the lives of over a hundred people and cost billions of dollars since 2017. These fires release catastrophic levels of CO₂ (carbon dioxide), a greenhouse gas. Thus, fires fueled in part by climate change are in turn further exacerbating the problem. This is called a "feedback loop."

Bill McGuire, director of the Hazard Research Centre at University London College, described the global scale of the problem in a January 10, 2020, article for BBC ScienceFocus. He wrote:

On our overheating planet, wildfire is now one of the most terrifying and costly of all natural disasters. From California to Russia, Australia to the UK and Greenland to the Amazon, record temperatures and tinder box conditions have, in recent years, driven conflagrations that have taken hundreds of lives and immolated many thousands of properties – in some cases entire communities.

Two years ago, major burns in California resulted in the deadliest and most destructive wildfire season ever recorded, with more than eighty deaths and three-quarters of a million hectares scorched at a cost of \$12 billion. In 2019, it was the Brazilian Amazon that burned, helped by fires started deliberately by farmers and loggers.

<https://www.sciencefocus.com/news/australian-wildfires-is-there-anything-that-can-be-done-to-stop-the-world-burning/>

Rather than considering the fires in Australia and beyond as natural disasters that are inevitable, if regrettable, the evidence suggests that we should examine humanity's role in furthering climate change and work, as best we can, to limit future calamities.

For Discussion:

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. Historically, wildfires have not been uncommon in Australia. What is different about the current fires?
3. What role does global climate change have in making wildfires worse?
4. What are some of the effects of these wildfires? Which of these effects matter the most to you, and why?
5. Wildfires are becoming more common and severe not only in Australia, but in many parts of the world. Have you had experiences that have made you aware of this issue before?
6. Is this an issue that feels relevant to your life currently? Why or why not?

Reading Two

Our Responses: From Grief, to Relief, to Political Action

It is impossible to comprehend the total loss and to account for all of the sacred sites, plants, animals, and medicines that have been turned to ash in Australia, the Amazon, and beyond. Given the scale of the crisis in Australia, and the fact that wildfires are intensifying across the globe, feelings of sadness or grief are understandable.

A second common response to this crisis – and to other climate-related catastrophes – is a desire to help in disaster relief efforts. Seeing people come together to fight the fires, rescue wildlife, and support victims can give hope in hard times. In the case of Australia, people have mobilized large-scale relief efforts. Some 195,000 Australians are volunteering with the nation's eight main fire services. Other people are hosting fundraising events across the country and providing food and shelter to those in need. Tracey Shelton, senior correspondent at the GlobalPost, highlighted some of these relief efforts in a January 25, 2020 article for Al Jazeera:

This year, as fires have raged across Australia, consuming homes, farms and towns, people have rallied to help, raising tens of millions of dollars for affected families, volunteer firefighting units and wildlife devastated by the blazes....

In New South Wales, the Rural Fire Service has received donations that have now surpassed 50 million Australian dollars (\$34 million) said RFS spokesman James Morris. The funds have come from everything from fire-helmets and donation buckets placed in local shops to celebrity GoFundMe campaigns, he said....

Children have also been donating pocket money to their local fire brigades and one primary school student from Western Australia raised \$500 and delivered half to the Lakes Entrance crew and half to the Save the Koala fund.

James Pendlebury, a call centre team manager in Melbourne, has been finding creative ways to raise funds in his office... Among the initiatives so far have been raffles, bake-offs and an office artisans' market....

Benefit concerts are also being used to raise funds as local bands play pub gigs and international stars including Alice Cooper, Olivia Newton-John, Queen and popular children's group the Wiggles organize concerts in the coming weeks with all proceeds donated to fire relief causes.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/australians-open-wallets-hearts-fire-ravaged-communities-200123033619085.html>

Likewise, CNN has [reported](#) that “Acts of kindness, including images of people giving water to koalas and waiting in line for over an hour to donate to the food bank, have been shared across social media. Australian comedian Celeste Barber has raised more than \$26 million in under a week to her Facebook fundraiser.”

Moving beyond relief efforts, a third possible response to the fires in Australia and elsewhere is to engage in collective action to combat the underlying challenge of climate change. The gradual warming of the planet is often treated as a problem that is distant and far away, not as an immediate crisis. However, the increase in the number and severity of wildfires illustrates how we are already feeling the

impacts of a changing climate. This reality can create urgency around taking steps to reduce CO2 levels now, rather than thinking that the issue is not relevant to our lives today.

The crisis in Australia has led to escalating challenges to Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Thousands of people marched in nine cities across the country on January 10, calling on Morrison to resign. “We are running out of time to act on climate,” said Anneke Demanuele, a convener of [Uni Students for Climate Justice](#) at a protest in Melbourne.

Australia’s Aboriginal people, who have sustained huge losses in the fires, are speaking out and demanding changes in policy. “We were raised with the knowledge that our ancestors have adapted to changing climatic conditions here [for millennia](#),” wrote Alexis Wright, a member of the Waanyi nation and a professor of Australian literature at the University of Melbourne. “And yet our knowledge of caring for the land is questioned or largely ignored. In the face of catastrophic fires, Australia’s leaders need to recognize the depth and value of Aboriginal knowledge and incorporate our skills in hazard management.” This includes the age-old tradition of lighting small patches of low-intensity fires during the cool season, which can prevent catastrophic fires later.

Among those who have argued that the fires in Australia should be a call to action is Greta Thunberg, whose solo weekly school climate strikes eventually led to #FridaysForFuture, a youth-led movement to fight the climate crisis. On January 3, 2020, her 17th birthday, Thunberg posted on Facebook a horrific image of a kangaroo fleeing flames as a forest engulfed a home. She [wrote](#):

500 million (!!) animals are estimated dead because of the bushfires. Over 20 people have died and thousands of homes have burned to [the] ground. The fires have spewed 2/3 of the nations national annual CO2 emissions, according to the Sydney Morning Herald. The smoke has covered glaciers in distant New Zealand (!) making them warm and melt faster because of the albedo effect.

And yet. All of this still has not resulted in any political action. Because we still fail to make the connection between the climate crisis and increased extreme weather events and [natural] disasters like the #AustraliaFires... That has to change. And it has to change now.

My thoughts are with the people of Australia and those affected by these devastating fires.
<https://www.news.com.au/technology/environment/climate-change/climate-change-activist-greta-thunberg-takes-swipe-at-aussie-leaders-during-bushfire-crisis/news-story/fecbf4a0d1c2712306dca0b3061cd019>

Note: The “*albedo effect*” refers to albedo, a measure of how much light that hits a surface is reflected without being absorbed. Something that appears white (like snow) reflects most of the light that hits it and has a high albedo. Something that looks dark (like soil) absorbs most of the light that hits it. This produces heat that, on Earth, adds to global warming.

Major youth-led protests are planned across the globe for Earth Day 2020. A large coalition of groups has announced that on April 22, the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, young people will follow up on the massive student strikes of September 2019. In that global action, more than 6 million students in 120 countries left their schools for a day to participate in climate actions.

In a call to action for the 2020 actions, posted on MTV.com on January 13, sponsoring groups including the Sunrise Movement, Extinction Rebellion, and Fridays for Future USA vowed:

Earth Day will launch three consecutive days of massive strikes, fulfilling our promise to take the climate strike movement beyond what we achieved on September 20.

Inaction is not an option...We have had enough of the inaction of government and business leaders.

Now is our time to come together and be unified in our demand for change.

However, marching and striking for a day is just a start. It's now time to take it to the next level and sustain this momentum over time. Indigenous youth and youth of color, who are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis, have claimed their rightful seat at the table. We are uniting all youth and adults across nations and movements. We call upon everyone — every single one of you — to join us as we strike for climate justice on Earth Day.

<http://www.mtv.com/news/3152275/earth-day-2020-strikes-coalition/>

“Anyone who is not grieving is not paying attention,” Lyn Bender, an Australian psychologist, [wrote](#) in an article for Independent Australia. “The kids know what the adults try to hide. The activists know what the politicians deny. The time has come to awaken.”

For Discussion:

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. In what ways might we feel impacted by the disaster in Australia, even if it is taking place far away?
3. According to the reading, what are the various ways in which people are contributing to relief efforts to address the crisis in Australia? What did you think were some of the best responses?
4. What do demonstrators hope to accomplish by their actions? Who are they hoping to encourage to take action to slow climate change? Why are they focusing on this group (or groups) of people?
5. What are some ways in which you and your peers can take collective action around this issue? What approaches do you think might be most effective?