

Governments *Gone Wild*

Jennifer Marohasy

The ACT Government recently spent \$1.8 million in an unsuccessful attempt to disqualify its own coroner from overseeing an inquiry into the January 2003 bushfires. Issues of alleged bias were cited by Jon Stanhope, ACT's Chief Minister and Attorney-General. But the real point of contention is the nature of Nature and whether wilderness should be managed.

Coroner Maria Doogan began the inquiry believing that it would be a fairly straightforward investigation. She wrote in a Macquarie University Alumni magazine that

I was on duty when the disastrous ACT fires erupted last January, so I'm the coroner presiding over the inquest into the loss of life and property that resulted. A coronial inquiry is inquisitorial not adversarial—the job is to find out and report what happened and make recommendations.

It was never going to be this straightforward.

The Federal Government had already undertaken a seven-month national inquiry into the 2003 bushfires that burnt over three million hectares across Australia, including three-quar-

ters of Kosciusko National Park. This inquiry received more than 500 public submissions, but the ACT, New South Wales and Victoria governments had refused to participate.

By law, the ACT Government was required to hold its own coronial inquiry into the fires that took four lives and destroyed 500 homes in Canberra.

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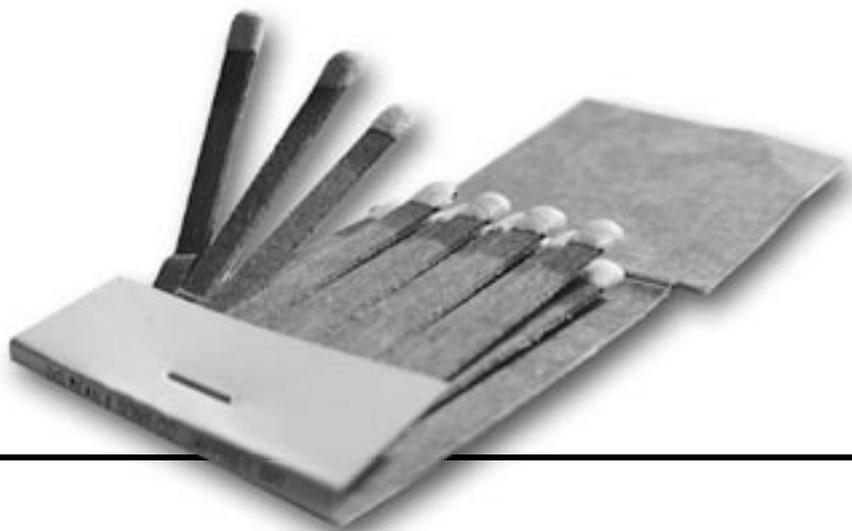
CSIRO bushfire expert Phil Cheney was appointed by the ACT Government as an 'independent witness'. However after a lawyer assisting the inquiry referred to Cheney not as an 'independent witness' but as 'the Coroner's witness' the ACT Attorney-General claimed that Cheney could be seen to be biased.

In August the ACT Supreme Court dismissed the issue of any supposed bias and explained that if the evidence given by Mr Cheney had favoured the ACT Government, a finding of apprehended bias may well have been inescapable. This, however, was not the case—Cheney's evidence was critical of government. The Court judgment noted that the views of Cheney were at odds with the views of the ACT Government, including its Emergency Services Bureau, and that Cheney's views on 'wilderness' were controversial.

What precisely is so controversial about Cheney's views? In his draft report for the ACT's bushfire inquiry Cheney describes 'wilderness' as 'an outdated 70s concept' that is 'dangerous' because, in its pure form, it prohibits active management of the environment. For centuries 'the environment' has been managed by humans, but it is only relatively recently that it has come to be accepted that 'the environment' must be pristine and untouched.

Thirty years ago fuel reduction through controlled burning was written into forest management plans. The purpose of the plans was not to prevent bushfires, but rather to mitigate the potential of their threat to life, property and the environment. By reducing fuel loads the intensity and rate of spread of fires can be controlled.

The Romantic poets of 200 years ago wrote longingly of wilderness—of areas of special beauty unspoilt by man. US President Theodore Roosevelt commented in 1903: 'Leave it as it is. The ages have been at work on



it and man can only mar it'. But it was perhaps the counter-culture movement of the 1970s that really gave rise to the modern environment movement which is underpinned by the romantic notion of Nature.

After 10 years of campaigning, the NSW Wilderness Act became law in 1987. This Act defined wilderness as areas that are in a state that has not been substantially modified by humans and their works, or is capable of being restored to such a state. Since this time, there has been a doubling in the area of National Parks in NSW on the basis that, by removing grazing, logging and other forms of human disturbance, areas can be returned to their natural and wild state.

At stake in the ACT bushfire inquiry are two irreconcilable views of the environment. On the one hand there is the view that the price we pay for pristine wilderness is occasional horrific bushfires. On the other hand there is the position that through controlled burning wilderness can be managed to prevent such devastation. On the second view the governments that do not engage in controlling burning are guilty of negligence.

Writing for *Orion Magazine*—a US publication that wants to reshape the relationship between Man and Nature—Rebecca Solnit commented:

One thing is certain: A century of management based on fantasies of a static, separate nature has taken its toll. Since Yellowstone (National Park) burned fifteen years ago, the nation has had a long lesson in fire ecology. What's amazing is that we seem to have learned that lesson in principle, if not in practice.

When I was poking around Yosemite at the beginning of the 1990s, people still seemed to believe Smokey Bear: fire is bad, end of story. Only ethnobotanists, ecological historians, and Native Americans themselves seemed to

talk about the native practice of setting fires to manage landscapes.

Somehow since then this notion has become commonplace—the kind of knowledge newspaper editorialists reference offhand when talking about forestry policies and the catastrophic fires of recent years. This modified mindset might seem minor, but it required reimagining some huge subjects: the nature of nature and the role and pervasive presence of Native Americans.

A Western Australian ecologist, David Ward, recently e-mailed me:

... frequent burning is the only (repeat only), way to maintain a reasonably fine grained fire mosaic, with small, mild, and controllable fires; a rich diversity of habitat for plants and animals; and protection of small fire refuges for that minority of plants and animals which are not adapted to frequent fire. Aborigines clearly knew, and still, in some parts, know this. Anyone who does not understand should go and talk to an Aboriginal Elder.

It can be demonstrated, with geometric certainty, that any deliberate long fire exclusion over large areas, such as a National Park, will lead inevitably (repeat inevitably) to large fierce fires, and a coarser mosaic, with little diversity of food and shelter for animals. Small refuges, important for some rare plants and animals, will be destroyed by the ferocity of the fires.'

But how do we reconcile the idea of wilderness with the idea of active management—including management by deliberately lit fires?

It all depends on the mindset.

According to Deborah Bird Rose, writing on Australian Aborigines' views of wilderness:

A definition of wilderness which excludes the active presence of

humanity may suit contemporary people's longing for places of peace, natural beauty, and spiritual presence, uncontaminated by their own culture. But definitions which claim that these landscapes are 'natural' miss the whole point. Here on this continent, there is no place where the feet of Aboriginal humanity have not preceded those of the settler. Nor is there any place where the country was not once fashioned and kept productive by Aboriginal people's land management practices.

Foresters and farmers followed Aborigines with active land management practices. These practices were generally supported by government policy until the 1970s. The consequence of adopting a 'hands off approach' since the 1970s emerged as a key issue in the ACT Inquiry.

The IPA held a conference about the lessons to be learnt from the bushfires in March 2003. Graham White summarized this meeting (*IPA Review*, Vol. 55, No. 1) with the comment:

The overwhelming view of delegates at the IPA Forum ... was that only a Federal Inquiry is likely to achieve an adequate result. This is because State and Territory Governments, in their role as land managers, must share direct responsibility for any lack of prescribed burning and other forms of hazard reduction that might have contributed to the fires. This means that they could potentially face hugely expensive legal claims and that, as a result, there could be pressure on them to manipulate terms of reference and other criteria to diminish scrutiny of these important issues.

It may be that as a result of the ACT bushfires governments will now reconsider their approach to 'wilderness'.