



A bush beyond recovery? Kinglake after Black Saturday

Extract from *Kinglake-350* by Adrian Hyland

The human desolation was mirrored in the devastation of the natural environment, which had been what drew people there in the first place. There was a general fear that the bush was beyond repair, that it would never recover its former glory. Even to an experienced professional like [Parks Victoria Ranger] Tony Fitzgerald, the destruction was deeper than anything he'd ever imagined.

'Fire like that,' he says, 'all bets were off. We weren't sure what would come back, if anything. Our worry was that we'd be left with just scorched ground.'

The magnificent stands of mountain ash that had been his working day's delight were obliterated, the massive trunks that remained staring out over the land like monuments to dead kings. The hundreds of hectares of the Everard block had formerly been covered with a thick storey of banksias — a pyrophiliac species if ever there was one. Normally in a fire their wafery seeds would fly out of the cones and waste no time re-establishing themselves in the ash bed. After Black Saturday Fitzgerald and botanist colleague Cam Beardsell were shocked to find the trees totally destroyed.

'Even the cones were burnt,' he says. 'You'd find a blackened stump, thick as your thumb. That was it.'

After hours of searching, they came across a single tree that had survived through some quirk of physics or topography. Determined to hang on to any symbol of hope in those dark days, they immediately threw a protective barrier around it. Took cuttings, replanted them at the nursery.

But they were worried. There'd already been twelve years of drought. If the rain failed for one more year there would be unimaginable changes in the landscape. A Burnt Area Emergency Response team carried out a geomorphological study of the region and made a startling discovery: there'd been a shift in the very composition of the earth. The soil to the south side of the park, with its high clay content, had been burnt so deeply it was now glazed, like pottery fired in a kiln.

As Fitzgerald and his crews worked away in the charred landscape, they were chilled by the silence that lay upon it. The sounds that normally formed the soundtrack to their working day — the birdsong and the screeching insects, the thumping kangaroos — were gone.

The bigger birds might have fled before the flames, but the smaller species — the fragile wrens and robins, the treecreepers and silvereye — had been wiped out. Larger animals such as kangaroos would normally outrun a fire, but in this all-consuming blaze they had been trapped. He'd seen it on the day: they'd flee to what they assumed was an island of safety, only to find themselves overwhelmed as the fire swept in from every direction at once.

Bushfire Education



Stella and Allan Reid ran an animal sanctuary named Wildhaven, on the road to Kinglake. Stella, out on a CFA truck when the fire struck, watched from a distance as her life's work — and her home, and very nearly her husband — were incinerated. Touring the property afterwards, she was devastated by what she found: 'Hundreds and hundreds of animal bones: kangaroos, wallabies, possums, echidnas, their little teeth lying in the white ash. Between our home and Kinglake few survived, millions died.'

The rangers made spotlight walks, searching desperately for signs of life and came up with nothing. They found the bones of kangaroos wedged into wombat holes where they tried to shelter. They stared up into the scorched crowns, wondered how anything — any sugar glider or koala — could have survived.

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