



## Cause for hope in signs of recovery, Kinglake

### Extract from *Kinglake-350* by Adrian Hyland

As the people of the community found the resources within themselves to rise from their near-death experience, so did the environment.

Tony Fitzgerald [Parks Victoria Ranger] found cause for hope in fleeting images of resilience: a koala spotted trundling along near the Strathewen school, a lace monitor that must have buried itself as the storm passed over it. His greatest thrill came the day he flew over the ghostly remains of the mountain ash at Wallaby Creek and spotted flashes of green among the sea of brown.

He pinpointed the spot on a map, made a closer inspection on foot and found that maybe as many as fifty trees had survived. Some were even sending up epicormic shoots. In both cases, they were breaking the rules: mountain ash will not normally survive a cranking fire like this one, and, unlike other eucalypts, they don't make use of epicormic growth.

The long-term survival of the many of the drought-stressed trees was still dependent upon rain. The rainfall that winter was reasonable, the next it was incredible, the wettest year the state had ever known. The CFA found themselves rescuing people from floods, not fire. Fitzgerald went into the forest, marked out a couple of metre-square plots, counted around two hundred mountain ash germinants springing through the chocolate soil.

'That was a breathtaking moment,' he says. 'They were coming back. I might be standing in a cemetery of big dead trees, but the forest was recovering.'

It wasn't just the mountain ash, of course. Botanist Carl Just found that the combination of fire and rain was doing astonishing things to the bush. He identified some fifty species — among them tall shaggy peas, bluespike milkwort and long-style bitter-cress — that had never been recorded in Kinglake. The orchids were amazing, tiny medallions of colour amid the black and green: locals had never seen them in such profusion.

There were still heavy losses. A significant stand of old-growth myrtle beech rainforest at the headwaters of the Plenty River, for example, was totally cooked. A handful of mountain ash survived, but thousands died.

'After the rains,' said Fitzgerald in March 2011, 'most areas of the park have now got good, solid vegetation, with 80 to 100 per cent covering. But on some of the dry ridges it's still at around 50 per cent.' The bare, scorched earth is becoming badly eroded, with vicious gullies cutting into the slope, rock falls common. Its long-term prospects are unknown.

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