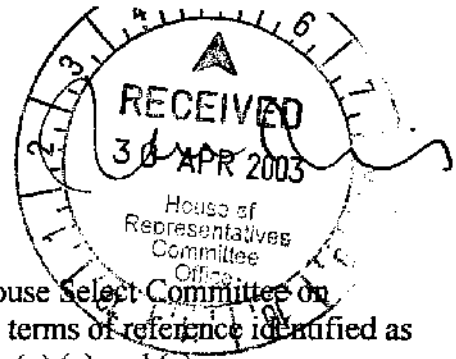


Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Aust Bushfires
Dept of House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600



Dear Sir/Madam

With respect I present herewith a submission to the House Select Committee on Bushfires. This submission addresses in particular the terms of reference identified as (b) and (d) but also concerns matters pertinent to terms (a) (c) and (e)

SUBMISSION SUMMARY

My primary concern lies with the policies that determine the management of Alpine landscapes within the Kosciuszko National Park which I hold responsible for the scale and severity of the fires that occurred across this area during this past summer.

I submit that such occurrences were rare before European settlement destroyed a natural order in the environment that had prevailed for thousands of years. This environment was largely determined by two factors. Firstly by the interaction between an abundant population of native fauna species and the vegetation and secondly by the regular use of fire by the Aboriginal people. In combination these two factors prevented the accumulation of fuel loads necessary for the development of the catastrophic fire storms that have frequently occurred in recent times.

Fire has played a major role in the evolution of the Australian environment and will continue to do so. However when bushfires escalate into fire storms that not only do serious damage to the native flora and fauna but are the precursor of severe soil erosion then we cannot avoid the conclusion that today's management policies are in urgent need of review.

The need for change can be seen to be even more urgent when we consider the severity of the threat posed by firestorm to the lives of firefighters and the lives and livelihoods of those resident within National Parks or in neighbouring districts.

I further submit that before an appropriate management regime can be designed a full understanding of the natural order that prevailed prior to European settlement must be established. The prime aim of management must then be to return the landscape to pre-settlement conditions within practical limitations and keep it there.

It is inevitable I believe that an objective and rational assessment of all relevant factors will produce a management policy that includes an irregular but sustained pattern of burning in conjunction with the strategic use of grazing animals to replace the contribution once supplied by the native fauna population.

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

To-days conservation establishment is well entrenched within government, the bureaucracy, academia, the media and non government organisations.

Once upon a time they were the radicals in the conservation debate but by the 1950s their ideology prevailed and has dominated official policy ever since. The beginnings of this movement however can be traced back to the 1890s when an amateur naturalist R. Helms who had migrated from Europe just two years before said in an address to

the Royal Geographic Society:

Not satisfied with what nature yields, the herdsmen, in order to improve the growth of the feed and make it sweeter, as they say, yearly burn large tracts of the grass and scrub... That ignorance and maybe greed should be allowed to interfere so drastically in the economy of nature is pernicious, and should not be tolerated.

Such statements initiated a campaign against controlled burning by graziers among inexperienced academics and the urban population. They failed then as they fail today to appreciate the vital importance of hazard reduction. It is the build up of combustible material on the forest floor that generates the heat that turns bushfires into the massive firestorms that so ravaged the mountains this summer and on previous occasions.

Before European settlement the combined effect of grazing by the many species of herbivores in existence at that time and the firestick farming system practiced by the Aboriginal people prevented major conflagrations. Regular burning also created a landscape devoid of thick timber with its understory of scrub and debris and in which fire is much easier to control. Early settlers and explorers described the countryside as being park-like, that is, grassland with single trees well spaced.

After the Aboriginal way of life was destroyed and the animal population much reduced, descendants of the early settlers learnt by bitter experiences such as Black Thursday 6th February 1851 that regular controlled burning was of paramount importance to their very survival and for the sustainability of the landscape.

Dame Mary Gilmore in her book *Old Days - Old Ways* recounts how her father was told by the Aborigines that white invaders and usurpers of their country would cause terrible fires and destroy the land. Now their descendants in turn have suffered much the same fate, their ability to manage and exercise the lessons they learned from the Aboriginal people have been quashed by the prevailing and deeply flawed conservation orthodoxy that reigns today.

The scale and regularity of burning by the Aboriginal people in association with animal activity evolved over thousands of years a landscape of mainly open woodland, well grassed and devoid of understory and combustible debris. This situation has been witnessed and recorded by many people from Abel Tasman in the south of Tasmania in 1642 to people such as Leichardt, Gilbert and Carron in their travels across the north of the country during the mid 1800s.

Joseph Banks in his diary of 1770 wrote of:

...fires which we saw so frequently as we passed along shore extending over a large tract of country and by which we could constantly trace the passage of the Aborigines...

He then described how they spread fire by carrying a burning stick from one site to the next. Summarising the results of this burning, Banks wrote:
Trees stood separate from each other without the least underwood... grass tall enough but thin sett, and trees of tolerable size never however near together, in general 40, 50 or 60 feet asunder.

Explorer and surveyor Townsend (after whom our second highest mountain is named), travelling the ridges of the Snowy Mountains, recorded how the Aboriginal people lit fires all along the crests and burnt the dry grass.

To illustrate the contrast that exists between the natural order that prevailed before white settlement and the establishment line of today, A.B. Costin's paper *A Study of the Ecosystems of the Monaro Region* issued under the authority of the Hon. A.G. Enticknap, Minister for Conservation 1954, is a classic, as the following extract affirms:

In the more important interests of catchment area preservation, the prevention of fires is thus necessary. In the absence of grazing also this restriction would probably not cause any appreciable spread of heath since invading shrubs are unable to develop successfully in the naturally closed and compact alpine herbfield and sod tussock grassland vegetation.

We have seen the reality in the buildup over years of invading heath, shrubs and scrub and accumulation of combustible material that led once again to the massive destruction of the Snowy Mountains fauna and flora by firestorms this summer, the precursor of soil erosion that will inevitably follow. The graziers of Monaro are tired of seeing their predictions come true and angry because of the threat to the lives and livelihood of their families that is a direct consequence of flawed management policies and they are sad to see our beloved mountains condemned to such a shameful fate.

The future well being of the Snowy Mountains is dependant on policies with a primary aim to return the area to a pre-white settlement status and to keep it there. Such a management system will be founded on two main components. Firstly regular controlled burning as practiced by the Aboriginal people and secondly through the strategic employment of domestic animals to mimic the role originally played by native fauna. Achieving this objective will require a major input from people with practical experience in fire control and pastoral management.

The concept of partnership between academic and specialist expertise on the one hand and practical down to earth experience on the other is not new, but essential to the achievement of sustainable conservation outcomes.

Famous French scientist, Louis Pasteur appreciated the importance of this partnership. He would question farmers and helpers and listened in particular to the opinions of shepherds, who, on account of their solitary life, devote their attention to nature and often become acute observers. He said:

Nothing should be neglected and a remark from a rough labourer who does well what he has to do is infinitely precious.

We the farmers and graziers of Monaro are today's equivalent of Pasteur's shepherds and rough labourers. We know in our hearts and minds that current conservation policies are a recipe for ongoing environmental disasters and must be changed.

Success in environmental protection and conservation cannot be achieved without a major contribution from practical people who across the generations accumulate a shared and unbroken history of experience. This experience is "infinitely precious"

References to burning by the Aborigines and descriptions of landscape that evolved

Abel Tasman	South Coast Tasmania	1642
Joseph Banks	Eastern Coast	1770
Captain Hunter	Sydney	1778
Surveyor Evans	Blue Mountains	1813
William Cox	Bathurst	1814
Hume & Hovell	NSW & Victoria	1824
Dr George Bennet	Yass	1832
Charles Darwin	NSW	1836
John Morphett	South Australia	1836
Edward Curr	North Victoria	1840
Dr Alfred Howitt	Victorian Alps and Gippsland	1840
Captain Stokes	Albany WA	1846
George Angus	South Australia	1846
Surveyor Townsend	Snowy Mountains	1846
Botanist W Carron	Northern Australia	1848
Explorer Leichardt & Naturalist John Gilbert	Cape York & NT	
Surveyor General Sir Thomas Mitchell	NSW	1850s

FIRE HAZARD REDUCTION

In the combination of strategic grazing by livestock from January to June each year followed by hazard reduction burning there are synergistic opportunities to be exploited. Firstly grazing by domestic animals can to an extent replace the contribution once provided by a large assortment of native animals now sadly depleted or extinct. That is, they reduce the volume of debris that otherwise must be burnt. They recycle nutrients through faeces and urine. Grazing allows light to reach the soil surface and so reduce smothering of the smaller and more delicate species. The action of animal hooves create seed beds, assists water penetration and accelerates natural decay and composting of inert plant material. A disadvantage is compaction due to the weight of the animals in some soil types. However weathering and unimpeded spring growth of the flora during the six months when the animals are excluded counteracts this effect.

Secondly domestic animals require the presence of people with the appropriate skills and experience to look after them and to care for the land on which they graze. Lease

arrangements would include requirements concerning control of noxious weeds and feral animals as well as instructions regarding the burning of excessive fuel remaining at the end of the grazing season. (early winter.)

Thirdly leasing fees can yield considerable financial resources for the support of Park administration and for the care of areas unsuitable for grazing or other activities.

And fourthly areas of the Park managed under a cool burn /controlled grazing regime provide quick and safe access for the deployment of fire fighters during bushfire emergency.

This submission reflects the views held by my peers in the grazing community of Monaro and elsewhere and of particular interest to those who share a more intimate knowledge of those sections of the alpine environment appropriate for the controlled fire and grazing system of management I have outlined.

My competence in the assessment of the views expressed in this submission is based on long experience in the pastoral and agricultural management of our large family owned business that is now in the fifth generation of ownership. The core activities of this business are the production of seed stock for the sheep and wool and beef cattle industry of Australia. It is conducted from production centres in four states.

Neither I nor members of my immediate family harbour ambitions to exploit opportunities that may arise if grazing is re-introduced as a management tool in National Parks.

Yours Faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'James Litchfield', written in dark ink.

James Litchfield