

# IS IT SAFE TO WALK?

Bushwalking and bushfires  
Matt McClelland (aka Wildwalks)



A bushfire is the stuff of nightmares. I doubt I could imagine anything more terrifying than having a bushfire bearing down on me on a hot and windy day. On such a day the fire front can throw hot embers many kilometres, starting new fires and causing the main fire to spread rapidly. The radiant heat from a fire like this would be so intense that even 100 metres away it can cause serious burns to your skin. There is no jumping in a creek or wombat hole to avoid this fire. The only way to be ensuring your survival is to be somewhere else. And then, on a day only halfway up the Fire Danger Rating scale, it can get very ugly out there.

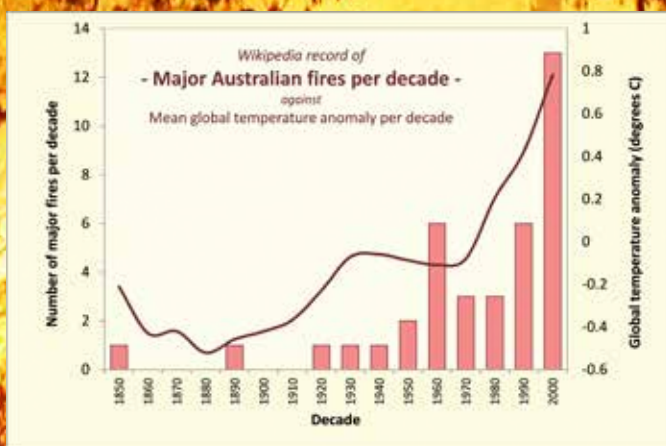
A large bushfire releases so much energy that it can create it's own weather system. Fires can create wind, clouds and even tornadoes (a pyro-tornadogenesis event) - like the one that destroyed homes and lives in Canberra.

Historically, Australia received occasional very bad bushfire seasons. In the past few decades we have seen more intense, fast moving and devastating bushfires than we imagined possible. It now seems that this is a pattern set to continue and get worse. Last year the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) predicted that "in south-eastern Australia, the frequency of days when extreme fire danger threatens will increase by up to 25 per cent by 2020, and up to 70 per cent by 2050."

As bushwalkers we love to get out and explore. It is very hard to call off a walk because of a potential risk - especially when there is no actual fire. This year we have been reminded that devastating fires can sneak up on communities. In Spring (October 2013) we saw around 200 homes destroyed and large areas of the Blue Mountains burnt. We need to be particularly mindful of bushfire risk in spring, summer and early autumn.

**So how do we make the decision to go or not go on a walk considering the bushfire risk?**

Each state has their own agency responsible for bushfire around Australia. In the past few years a consistent approach fire danger rating has been adopted across the country. In NSW the RFS is the lead agency on bushfires. So, by way of a starting point the RFS say that "Severe, Extreme and Catastrophic Fire Danger Ratings mean a fire will be unpredictable, uncontrollable and very fast moving. This means that you may have little or no warning about the threat of a bush fire." They also say for these days that "Leaving early is the safest option for your survival". The RFS also say that "a Total Fire Ban is declared for days when fires are likely to escape and be difficult to contain. This is caused by a combination of dry vegetation and hot, dry, windy weather." It would seem the context of their advice is for people living or working in Bushfire prone areas; how much more should we heed this advice in a nylon tent?



"The number of major fires per decade recorded on the Wikipedia... The line shows the global temperature anomaly, and the arrow marks the point when scientists first began warning that excessive fossil fuel use would warm the globe."  
Philip Zylstra

**What is a Bushfire danger rating?** It is a forecast of a potential fires behaviour, the difficulty of suppressing a fire, and the potential impact on the community should a bush fire occur on a particular day. The rating ranges from low-moderate for days where fires are likely to be slow moving and easy to control - to Catastrophic for those days where a fire will be unbelievably hot, fast-moving and uncontrollable (think Canberra 2003 and Victoria 2009).

**What is a Total Fire Ban day?** It is a day where open fires are banned by the RFS Commissioner. The ban is put in place to limit the number of fires that escape and threaten life, property and the environment, especially on days when it is very hot, dry and windy. This means that it is illegal to use portable camping stove on a bushwalk, including inside a tent.

Fire danger ratings and Total Fire bans are usually announced at about 5 pm the day before they come into effect. Some park managers will close track and trails during total fire bans. Park managers may not get closure information on their website for several hours after the announcement, if at all. Bushwalkers need to be proactive about our safety and chase the information when we need to make a decision, not leaving it up to chance.

It is safest to first assume you will cancel you walk on days of total fire ban as well as on severe, extreme or catastrophic fire danger rating. If you think it still safe to continue then chat with the park manager to see what they say, they may also think that the specific conditions means that the planned walk is still safe to go ahead. Fire Danger Rating regions cover a large area, therefore due to local conditions some sections may have a lower risk then the whole region - but it is important that we seek advice from the park managers who have a broader knowledge of the conditions, fuel loads and other activities in the park.

On days of Extreme or Catastrophic Fire Danger Ratings the weather conditions will be uncomfortable and the risk from fire will be very significant. I would recommend you postpone your walk even if the park remains open - it is just not worth the risk.

On longer multiday trips this obviously becomes more challenging. Carry non-cook meals and wa-

ter purification systems that do not require a stove. Always register your walking plan with local Police or NPWS office. If there is a significant risk of fire during your walk and it is possible to leave the walk early, then this is the safest option. If leaving bushfire-prone area is not possible then ensure you consider the safest areas for retreat and possible shelter from radiant heat. Stay alert to weather conditions and keep an eye out for any sign of fire. Check the local fire website if in mobile phone range or monitor local ABC radio stations for emergency broadcasts.

Phone for help or use your PLB if there is a threat of grave and imminent danger. Do not presume that rescue can make it in time. Rescue is challenging in high winds and when resources are stretched.

If you are in doubt play it safe: there are another 51 weekends in the year. Equally, don't let this scare you off - pick the days and have alternative activities planned during fire seasons. Wild places by their nature present risks, lets take them seriously but still enjoy these amazing places at the right times.

Matt McClelland

This article is adapted from an article Matt wrote for the NSW National Parks Association journal 'Nature NSW' December 2013.



# TOTAL FIRE BAN

## Helpful links

Please check weather, park closure, fire bans and fire danger rating before setting off for your walk. Each state and territory has different rules for what is allowed on a total fire ban. Please check your state fire agency and parks manager for local information.



## Weather forecasts - Australia wide

<http://www.bom.gov.au/>