

SouthEastTIMBERassociation

*Attachment
No 5*

Fire in East Gippsland - Recollections of John Mulligan

A lot is said about the pros and cons of fuel reduction burning (FRB). I would like to share with you, my recollections of growing up in East Gippsland and the changes to fire management, fuel loads and the forests over the past 75 years.

The knowledge I gained from my family, old bushmen and other early European settlers in East Gippsland is very relevant today, as the Government tries to manage the growing wildfire risk across Victoria.

A Little of My East Gippsland Family History

My grandparents came to East Gippsland in the 1880's to join an uncle who had arrived earlier. They settled at Gypsy Point, where they ran a trading store, post office and wattle bark business, among other endeavours. They arrived here before the roads were developed, with most transport using the water. Trading ketches from Eden and Lakes Entrance serviced the area.

My mother was born at Gypsy Point in 1903 and road access arrived in 1913/14. As road transport became more reliable, trade by water decreased and the family store was closed. My family built and operated the Gypsy Point Hotel, continued trading wattle bark and became involved in transport and bush grazing.

I was born in Orbost in 1931. My early life and teenage years, except for time at school were spent at Gypsy Point. I attended the Bairnsdale School of Mines and went on to work for the Country Roads Board, surveying and road building, mainly in East Gippsland.

Later, I went farming at Cann River, utilising bush grazing leases and assisting my wife's family at Fairhaven, who also had bush grazing leases. In the ten years before my retirement, to our farm at Wangaratta, we ran the ~~Wangaratta~~ Gypsy Point Lodge.

How the Bush has Changed

During my life, I have seen big changes in the East Gippsland bush. I have learnt from my family and older bush people and from my lifelong observations. In the early days of my life, subject to weather conditions, there was always fire, started by either man, lightning or reignition from an earlier burn.

When my grandmother's older sister (Mrs Coleman) first came to Mallacoota (ahead of the arrival of my grandparents), she said there was a small band of aborigines, who moved about, burning wherever they went. However, they went with drovers taking cattle from the Bega area to Port Albert for shipping to Tasmania. They never returned.

However, fire was a constant in the bush. Everyone learned to live with it. They had to, as there were no bulldozers, water tankers, aircraft, 4WDs with teams of fire fighters, computer modelling, fire planning, CFA etc.

Bush dwellers of the time had a completely different understanding of the necessity of regular fire in the environment and its acceptance, than that of the majority of people today. Smoke was something we learned to live with. In good weather, particularly the autumn, smoke would lag in the valleys and on the lakes and low lying areas, sometimes making it difficult to navigate on the water.



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The 1939 Fires

During the 1938/39 summer, there were numerous fires in East Gippsland. On Black Friday (13 January 1939), I remember it was a terrible day, hot and windy. I was driving with my uncle to Cann River and we had a lot of car trouble (petrol vaporising before it got to the engine), but no fear of fires.

This was a great contrast to West Gippsland, where it was not safe to be in or near the fires that day. Seventy one people died in Victoria on 13 January 1939, with no recorded fire deaths in East Gippsland. The "History of Club Terrace" mentions the local fires that occurred on Black Friday.

One fire threatened the Cabbage Tree Hotel. The Armstrong brothers from Cann River were travelling to Orbost that day. They stopped to help save the pub and then continued on their way to Orbost. This indicates clearly that despite similar weather conditions, the fires in East Gippsland that day, were nowhere near as fierce as those in West Gippsland.

Forest Management

Why was the fire intensity in most other forested parts of Victoria so much worse than in East Gippsland?

Around the turn of the century, the government appointed a Conservator of Forests. He was an Englishman who was against the use of fire to manage fuel levels. Then in 1919, the Forestry Commission was created and the European trained foresters were also against the use of fire, believing that fire damaged the timber. A light (low intensity) fire does not damage sound trees. So the fuel levels in West Gippsland and the north were allowed to build and in 1939, had 30 to 40 years or so of fuel build-up.

In those early years, the Forestry Commission controlled the forests in West Gippsland.

