

March 2020

Submission by: Alan Farrar, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

A conversation

The trip

Sick of the Hume, I returned to Melbourne via the Princes Highway.

Leaving Pambula early in the morning, I drove south passing through Eden and then, about 5 miles further on, the landscape changed. Dramatically.

The ground was charred, the trees black. Everywhere I could see. All the result of the recent devastating fires along the far south coast of NSW and in East Gippsland.

This hellish wasteland continued for about 170 kilometres until I had nearly reached Orbost.

Thinking of the impact those fires had and was having on all the people and wildlife living there and, in so many cases, now not living there, was numbing.

The journey took nearly 2 hours.

I found it impossible to comprehend the sheer scale of the horror.

Orbost

I stopped at a café in Orbost for a cup of tea.

Sitting outside that café, at the table next to mine, were 3 blokes. Looked like they were in their seventies.

We started talking.

All were locals, retired from work. An electrician, a teacher and the third, the most vocal of the group, a timber worker. Colin.

I asked if they would mind telling me about their experience with the fires. They agreed.

None had directly suffered any loss of family or property. They all knew friends who had.

Colin said:

“I was living here in 1965 when there were bushfires around Cann River. I was a (volunteer) fire-fighter. They were bad. But they were mild compared to this one. I’ve also been involved fighting other bush fires in Gippsland over the years. None of them were anything like the intensity of this one – the size of it and the speed it moved. The sky was red.”

“Hell, on earth!”

“It was terrifying! And it went on day after bloody day.”

“And all those stories we heard, particularly those about friends and others who’d lost family and everything.”

The discussion continued in this vein for a while.

Climate change

Then Colin said:

“Mate, I used to think greenies were just a pack of wankers. Climate change a load of bullshit. Climate changes, of course it does. All the time.”

“But not now. No.” “If those @#&^%+ bushfires did one good thing, they opened my eyes. We’ve never had bushfires anywhere near this bad!”

“I worked in the timber industry all my life. Enjoyed it. Never questioned why I was doing it. Timber was essential for building, paper and so on.”

“Yeah, well, times change.”

“I’m no expert on climate change. But I know now we need to keep all the trees we can.”

“See, trees are great at soaking up carbon. And all this bloody carbon in the atmosphere is what’s causing climate change.”

“If we don’t fix it, we’ll have more fires like this one. Or worse!”

The other two agreed. The conversation went on for about another hour.

I asked whether they thought their views on the impact of climate change were widespread in their community.

Too early to tell, they all agreed. Each, though, had talked with others who were reconsidering their views on climate change.

Afterwards

Once I was out of town, I took notes of our discussion.

The devastation and trauma of the fires has scarred all that lived through them and are still living with the consequences.

Yet, continuing driving, I felt strangely optimistic. And as I noted the optimism, my resolve to act intensified.

What I resolved to do

I determined to increase my participation in:

- Actively persuading politicians and the population at large, that climate change is real and requires “whole of country” action now;
- Campaigning to end logging;
- Supporting the switch from fossil fuel to renewable energy; &
- Protecting all wildlife, particularly endangered species.

And you?