

# BUSHFIRES IN SOUTH EASTERN AUSTRALIA A LOCAL ARBORIST'S PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

The 'Black Summer' of 2020 pushed bushfires to the forefront of the Australian media and caught the full attention of the Australian public. While COVID-19 currently holds the mantle, Summer will soon be here again and, it is paramount that we are mindful of the experiences and lessons learnt.

This presentation is a recollection of my personal experiences dealing with bushfires as a consulting arborist. Starting in 2006 with the Grampians bushfires, followed in 2009 with Black Saturday, 2014 the Mickleham Fire and again this year in 2020 with the East Gippsland fires.

Injuries and deaths following a fire appear to be closely correlated with tree or large branch failures. In 2020 during the East Gippsland Fires, there were deaths and serious injuries as a direct result of branch and tree failures, particularly within the fire crews.

Fire is a significant part of the Australian landscape and its frequency and ferocity is unlikely to reduce any time soon. Through my experiences, it is apparent that our responses to bushfires are reactive and inconsistent.

- Tree assessment following a fire has no benchmark or standardised process.
- There are numerous and inconsistent labelling, flagging and paint marking systems which all lead to confusion.
- Completing the tree pruning and removal (primarily tree removal) is extremely difficult and dangerous work, post fire
- The comments received from other arborists and my own experience indicate that the use of heavy logging equipment in East Gippsland in 2020 was very innovative and increased safety dramatically in comparison to 2014, 2009 and 2006.
- Personal experiences indicate that training in tree risk awareness varies dramatically in quality and quantity between the various Emergency service personnel.

## Recommendations for fire management/recovery in the future:

1. Ensure that all emergency services undergo formal basic TREE RISK AWARENESS training
2. Ensure that Arboriculture as an area of expertise is present within the Incident Control Centres
3. Develop a standardised criteria for tree assessment at different times
  - a. First response – Emergency works or Emergency Access
  - b. Second response – Recovery works
4. Use 24 months as the inspection timeframe and focus on structural stability and strength rather than tree health.
  - a. At the end of the 24-month inspection period a follow up assessment may be warranted to account for trees that have not recovered adequately from fire damage.
  - b. Tree removal based on health alone prior to the 24-month timeframe is generally premature.
5. Utilise a recognised Tree Risk Methodology such as TRAQ
6. If using TRAQ, I recommend the following as a guide for action vs no action
  - a. Probability of failure = Possible, Probable or Imminent
  - b. Likelihood of Impact = Medium or High
  - c. Consequences of Failure = Significant or Severe
7. Implement a standardised system for works verification – Labelling
8. Initiate a change in public attitude to fire (we have a very different attitude to floods)
9. Engage the experts to help manage fire in the future – Fire Ecologists and Traditional Owners