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From the Ashes: Ecological Ethics and the Australian Bushfires

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In late 2019 and early 2020, months before the World Health Organization had declared the coronavirus a global pandemic, catastrophic bushfires in Australia were garnering international headlines. Almost every state in the country experienced bushfires during this period, a product of sustained drought and significantly higher (indeed record-breaking) temperatures. These temperatures had increased the volume of dry fuels but also minimised the number of days in which fuel reduction burns could be undertaken safely (Sharples et al., 2016). The largest of these fires were in southeastern Australia, where huge tracts of forest were engulfed in flames and suburbs in the country's largest city—Sydney—were threatened.

By the time the fires eased, dozens of townships and thousands of properties had been evacuated, with 3000 houses ultimately lost (Richards & Brew, 2020). At least 34 people were killed directly in the fires, while one analysis suggested that up to 400 further human deaths were caused by the smoke haze the fires produced (Pickrell, 2020a). With smoke haze blanketing Australia's two largest cities (Sydney and Melbourne) and the national capital (Canberra), particularly around the new year, many people suffered as a result of respiratory illnesses. The fires therefore had a significant human cost, but also came with a significant literal (economic) cost. One analysis suggested that with costs (of recovery and income loss in particular) approaching $100 billion Australian dollars, the fires constituted Australia's 'costliest natural disaster' (Read & Denniss, 2020).

These accounts of 'cost' were (perhaps understandably) central to discussions of the bushfires' effects. A parliamentary research paper outlining frequently asked questions associated with the fires listed questions about human fatalities and houses lost first (Richards & Brew, 2020). A BBC report on the fires, meanwhile, attempted to situate them in terms of Australia's 'worst fires' according to two key criteria: 'houses destroyed' and '(human) deaths' (BBC, 2020). By this account, the bushfires of 2019-20 were not nearly as 'bad' as others Australia had experienced. This was even while the scale of land and forests burnt, and the number of animals' lives lost, dwarfed earlier fires that had affected areas of human habitation more directly.

By the end of February 2020, over 18 million hectares—more than 180,000 square kilometres—had been burnt in the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season. This amounts to an area larger than the average European Union country and is an area considerably larger than England and Wales combined.

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A WWF report indicated that almost 3 billion animals were killed or displaced by the fires, with the report describing the fires as one of the 'worst wildlife disasters in modern history' (WWF, 2020). This number excluded insects, with that number reported in the hundreds of billions (Mannix, 2020).

As a result of the fires over 40 threatened animal species lost 80% or more of their habitats (Richards & Brew, 2020). Over 100 plant species had entire populations burnt, while more than 800 other species had at least half of their areas of growth burnt (Readfearn, 2021). Ancient plants from Australia's network of Gondwana rainforest reserves were destroyed. There was in turn a key concern for surviving animals here. While the immediate threat from fires was direct and existential, surviving animals also faced extreme vulnerability and starvation events as a result of the loss of habitat, of breeding grounds, and of food sources such as berries or insects. In this context, scientists warned of an 'ecological catastrophe' as key habitats of (often rare) plants and animals were incinerated (Pickrell, 2020b).

This notion of 'ecological catastrophe' is telling here. The term 'ecological' necessarily speaks to an inter-connectedness between beings and space, eliding the distinctiveness readily apparent in modern accounts of 'nature' or 'the environment' (as separate from humanity, or something 'out there'). But if discussions of the fires were anything to go by, it would seem that we still struggle to get our minds around what inter-connectedness really means when thinking about ecosystems and the conditions of our own existence.

In Australian public debate and in external accounts of Australia's fires too, the loss of plants and animals and the (in some cases irrevocable) damage to the spaces in which they lived was frequently noted. But in major news reports at least, it was almost always as an addendum to discussions of the devastating effects of the fires on property, on people, and on communities. It seemed difficult for us to see the effects of the fires in holistic or ecological terms, to recognise how implicated we are in the worlds affected—how we redefine those worlds for development and through modernisation, rely on those worlds for our survival, all while rendering those worlds (and inhabitants) acutely vulnerable through our actions. The latter particularly applies to climate change of course, which creates conditions in which natural disasters generally, and bushfires in places like Australia in particular, are likely to increase in frequency and intensity.

While simplistic to render public debate in these terms, bushfires are frequently depicted as things that happen in other (natural) places and become significant—visible, consequential, threatening—when they invade or reach *our* places. There is an anthropocentrism—arguably an hypocrisy and a hubris—about this view. But getting past anthropocentrism is easier said than done. This is even the case when we examine the politics of the environment in a country such as Australia.

Australians—like many others throughout the world—can and do respond to threats to natural spaces, and can rally to protect distinct ecosystems as well as flora and fauna. A long history of well-supported and protected national parks and a significant number of large-scale conservation-orientation environmental NGOs (Hutton & Connors, 1999) speak to this willingness. But the focus here tends to be on conserving and protecting (particular) natural spaces, rather than engaging with dynamic processes of environmental change and confronting the role we (as individuals and societies) play in that change.

This is evident even in recent climate campaigns in Australia, which have focused significantly on the threat of climate change to the Great Barrier Reef. This focus is no accident. Environmental NGOs are only too aware that pitching action on climate change is easier if we focus on the challenge posed to pristine wilderness areas—part of our natural heritage—rather than amorphous concerns with the rights and needs of future generations or the most vulnerable beings in other parts of the world (see McDonald, 2016). And certainly, building a case for action on climate change should avoid a focus on how implicated we are in the processes of environmental change to which we are responding. In this sense, in Australia even the environment movement has tended towards reaffirming anthropocentrism.

The telling thing in Australians' embrace of conservation, ultimately, is that natural spaces viewed as worth conserving are seen as *separate* spaces in which non-human life can flourish. Human lives and communities are cordoned off from these spaces, allowing us to view ecological devastation as something happening out there, something which we need to protect ourselves from but not something in which we are implicated. While bushfires should remind us of our embeddedness in ecological worlds that ultimately provide the condition for human existence, we still find ways to present the ecological devastation wrought as a separate, and frequently secondary, concern.

There is arguably nothing new or particularly surprising about this. Indeed, an underlying and almost always unacknowledged anthropocentrism is in part what the founding and mission of this journal responds to. Our existing accounts of ethics, of politics, of economic exchange, and of the environment all serve to reinforce a notion of separability from the natural world that looks less tenable by the day. Australia's experience with—and response to—the 2019-20 bushfires is just a particularly noteworthy account of an 'ecological catastrophe' rendered in non-ecological, largely anthropocentric terms.

That does not mean things cannot change. Natural disasters may serve to change the way we think of our place in the world, or less ambitiously might serve to change the way we view our priorities and concerns. Australian opinion polling in the wake of the fires saw steadily increasing support for strong action on climate change, and a poll released as the fires were burning indicated that Australians identified climate change as *the* most pressing threat to Australia's vital interests (Baker, 2019).

More fundamentally, Danielle Celermajer's (2021) profound reflections on her own experience with the fires on her property—bringing to life (in the face of destruction) the world of plants, animals and things with and within which that property exists—points to the possibility that we can escape anthropocentrism and reflect fundamentally on the conditions of our existence. Doing so might be the only hope we have of avoiding what she describes as our 'vanishing future'.

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