

Australia firefighters save world's only rare dinosaur trees

January 16 2020, by Rod McGuirk



In this photo taken early January 2020, and provided Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020, by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Wollemi pines tower above the forest floor in the Wollemi National Park, New South Wales, Australia. Specialist firefighters have saved the world's last remaining wild stand of a prehistoric tree from wildfires that razed forests west of Sydney. (NSW National Parks and Wildfire Service via AP)

Specialist firefighters have saved the world's last remaining wild stand of a prehistoric tree from wildfires that razed forests west of Sydney, officials said Thursday.

Firefighters winched from helicopters to reach the cluster of fewer than 200 Wollemi Pines in a remote gorge in the Blue Mountains a week before a massive wildfire bore down, National Parks and Wildlife Service Director David Crust said.

The firefighters set up an irrigation system to keep the so-called dinosaur trees moist and pumped water daily from the gorge as the blaze that had burned out of control for more than two months edged closer.

Firefighting planes strategically bombed the fire front with fire retardant to slow its progress.

"That helped just to slow the intensity of the fire as it approached the site," Crust told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

"The Wollemi Pine is a particularly important species and the fact that this is the only place in the world where they exist and they exist in such small numbers is really significant," he added.

New South Wales state Environment Minister Matt Kean said the operation had saved the stand, although some plants had been singed.

"These pines outlived the dinosaurs, so when we saw the fire approaching we realized we had to do everything we could to save them," Kean said.



In this photo taken early January 2020, and provided Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020, by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, a Wollemi pine tree sapling grows on the forest floor in the Wollemi National Park, New South Wales, Australia. Specialist firefighters have saved the world's last remaining wild stand of a prehistoric tree from wildfires that razed forests west of Sydney. (NSW National Parks and Wildfire Service via AP)



In this photo taken early January, 2020, and provided on Jan. 16, 2020, by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Wollemi pines thrive in a canyon in the Wollemi National Park, New South Wales, Australia. Specialist firefighters have saved the world's last remaining wild stand of a prehistoric tree from wildfires that razed forests west of Sydney. (NSW National Parks and Wildfire Service via AP)



In this photo taken early Jan. 2020, and provided Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020, by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service personnel inspect Wollemi pine trees in the Wollemi National Park, New South Wales, Australia. Specialist firefighters have saved the world's last remaining wild stand of a prehistoric tree from wildfires that razed forests west of Sydney. (NSW National Parks and Wildfire Service via AP)



In this photo taken early Jan. 2020, and provided Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020, by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service personnel use fire hoses to dampen the forest floor near Wollemi pine trees in the Wollemi National Park, New South Wales, Australia. Specialist firefighters have saved the world's last remaining wild stand of a prehistoric tree from wildfires that razed forests west of Sydney. (NSW National Parks and Wildfire Service via AP)



In this photo taken early Jan. 2020, and provided Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020, by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service personnel inspect the health of Wollemi pine trees in the Wollemi National Park, New South Wales, Australia. Specialist firefighters have saved the world's last remaining wild stand of a prehistoric tree from wildfires that razed forests west of Sydney. (NSW National Parks and Wildfire Service via AP)

The Wollemi Pine had only been seen in its fossilized form and was thought long extinct before the stand was found in 1994.

The fire that threatened it was brought under control this week after razing more than 510,000 hectares (1.26 million acres). The fire also destroyed 90% of the 5,000-hectare (12,400-acre) Wollemi National

Park, where the rare trees grow, Crust said.

The exact location of the stand remains a closely guarded secret to help authorities protect the trees.

The Wollemi's survival is one of the few positive stories to emerge from the unprecedented wildlife crisis in southeast Australia.

The fires have claimed at least 28 lives since September, destroyed more than 2,600 homes and razed more than 10.3 million hectares (25.5 million acres), mostly in New South Wales state. The area burned is larger than the U.S. state of Indiana.

But the fire danger has been diminished by rain this week in several areas. The first green buds of regrowth have already emerged in some blacked forests following rain.

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