

Witnessing Australia's deadly bushfires

January 10 2020, by Matt Reeder



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A few weeks ago, Robert Huish was on a jetliner headed for touchdown in Sydney, Australia when the pilot came over the speaker system in the cabin with a warning for passengers.

It was early December, meaning it was the start of summer there, and

evidence of a particularly brutal bushfire season was already mounting.

"He said, "You're probably going to see landscapes in Sydney that you've never seen before, so be ready for that," recalls Dr. Huish, who was headed to the country on academic business related to an adjunct position he holds at Western Sydney University.

Sure enough, in the following weeks, the Dal professor got to experience first-hand some of the intense effects of the mammoth fires spreading across the country's southeast. Even in downtown Sydney and in the city's western suburbs, where Dr. Huish spent much of his time, the impacts were visceral.

"The skies were just tainted red," he says, noting the city's location in the state of New South Wales—the region most heavily hit so far. "You could not escape the poor air quality and haze."

A terrible toll

Hot weather, [high winds](#) and prolonged drought conditions in Australia have fanned the flames in the country, bringing threats to [small towns](#) across states in the region and beyond. Thousands of people have become homeless, with even more people having been evacuated to escape fires that have torched more than 25.5 million acres of land so far—an area slightly smaller than the size of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick combined and about the size of South Korea. Twenty-seven people have died from the fires to date, according to the federal government.

While none of Dr. Huish's own colleagues or friends there have been directly impacted by the fires, he noted that he saw naval ships harboured in Sydney when he was there—part of active rescue missions picking up stranded victims on beaches along the coast.

The impacts on wildlife have also been severe. Accurate figures are tough to come by at this stage, but one estimate from ecologists at the University of Sydney suggests as many as a billion mammals, reptiles and other wildlife have been killed or injured.

"Wildlife, such as kangaroos, were visibly distressed and displaced," recalls Dr. Huish. "They were trying to get away from the flames and heat."

Lending a hand

For the first time in more than a decade, Canada has sent firefighters to the country to assist with the blazes. Another 140 or so from Canada and the U.S. are expected to join in the coming weeks as Australia faces down a bleak forecast of more hot and dry weather ahead.

There's been an outpouring of support for Australia from millions of people around the world, with celebrities such as Elton John and Chris Hemsworth as well as business leaders raising tens of millions of dollars in funds to help with [disaster management](#) and eventual recovery efforts.

"In any emergency when there's all this outpouring and a desire to help, the question is what is most effective," says Dr. Huish.

He notes that some [small communities](#) in Australia are already starting to be overwhelmed by physical donations such as food and clothing. Instead, he suggests offering support in other ways. Firefighting, emergency wildlife management and first aid are among the skills in high demand right now, he says. Donations can be made to local firefighting services in the states of Victoria and New South Wales, for instance, or to [koala recovery](#) through the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital. Nonprofit [GIVIT](#) also has a list of [specific items](#) needed by charities and a form for donating money.

With no end in sight for the disaster, Dr. Huish says another way to lend a hand is to raise awareness that this is a political emergency as much as a climate emergency.

"There are a lot of friends and colleagues I have there who are completely enraged in that the government of Australia has ignored climate change issues for so long," he says. "People are very aware that this is a climate emergency and that it won't be the last one. And the fact that there is so little done to prepare for it has really angered a lot of Australians."

Provided by Dalhousie University

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