

Shock, fear and sadness grip Australia's 'bushfire refugees'

4 January 2020, by Holly Robertson



Towering bushfires in Australia have turned the sky red and forced thousands from their homes

Thousands of Australians forced from their homes by rampaging bushfires now find themselves stuck in makeshift camps, fearful for the future and turned refugees in their own country.

On [golf courses](#), cricket ovals and showgrounds—anywhere with a minimal amount of combustible tree cover—Australians are sheltering from a climate-fuelled disaster.

At the Catalina Country Club in Batemans Bay, New South Wales, rows of caravans, 4x4s, pick-up trucks and tents are pitched cheek by jowl.

The golf club's [dining room](#) has been converted into an evacuation centre.

Instead of players supping a beer after a summer's day of play, elderly displaced ladies huddle around cups of tea and play cards to pass the time.

Stacks of donations—food, clothing, water—are piled high and there is a steady stream of people walking in and out.

Some new arrivals quip that they are refugees.

But even in a country accustomed to bushfires and which prides itself on resilience in [extreme conditions](#), the last few days, weeks and months have been shocking.

Towering blazes have turned the sky black and choking smoke has covered whole cities—as well as parts of neighbouring New Zealand and New Caledonia—amid searing images of families forced to wade into the ocean for safety.



Many people have taken refuge in spots where there is minimal amount of combustible tree cover

For many, the future is riddled with uncertainty: about whether their homes still stand, when they can return and—with months of summer still to go—about when all this will end.

Many are facing this uncertainty while dealing with the trauma of what they have lived through.

Narelle Coady, 54, took refuge at a Batemans Bay beach on Saturday when her [home](#) came under threat for the second time in five days.

"We defended on Tuesday and it was just too scary," she told AFP. "Really bad, couldn't breathe. Oxygen gone. It was horrible."

"That was my first and last time."

Batemans Bay motel owner Justine Donald, 40, evacuated her home on New Year's Eve in a scene she described as looking like "the end of the world".

"The town went black," she said. "It was black, orange and so thick that to breathe it in, you thought you were going to suffocate."



For many who have fled the fires, there is uncertainty about whether their homes will be standing when they return

"That frightened me so much for my life that now I don't even think about the properties."

"It's devastating," she said, at times becoming tearful. "My main thing is I just want to be alive and for all of us to be safe."

"If that's going to happen again today, I'm going to need a good big bottle of wine and hopefully be stuck inside with towels under my doors because I'm not going to go outside into that again."

Mick Cummins, 57, also recalled New Year's Eve when he left his home as fires tore up the east coast.

"Hellfire came over the hill," he said. "We just sat there and watched explosion after explosion, the bowling club went up, the houses down the street went up."

He remembered the fires from 1994 as particularly bad. But compared with this year, they were "just a barbeque", he said.

"We're here until we can go home," said his wife Ulla. "They're saying we're probably not going to have power until next week. And if we've got no power, we've got no phone service either. We're stuck."



One resident of Batemans Bay described the scene as she fled as looking like the 'end of the world'

Wes Moreton, a 30-year-old father of five left his home, but then was forced to leave his place of refuge as the fire front moved north.

He took no chances and headed with his family to Sydney. Like so many, he is unsure whether they will have a home when they return.

"Fingers crossed it's still standing," he said.

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