

Fire Dialogue report



Dialogue session at the Knob Reserve, Stratford



Noojee field trip



Bairnsdale field trip

Gippsland Forest Dialogue – Fire in the forest program

August 2026

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Acknowledgement of country

The Gippsland Forest Dialogue organises events across the Traditional Lands of the Gunaikurnai, Bunurong, Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung, Taungurung peoples, and into the lands of the First Nations of far East Gippsland, the Moogji, Bidhawal/Bidwell/Bidwall and Monero peoples. The Fire dialogue was hosted on the lands of the Gunaikurnai.

We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners on whose lands we tread as the original custodians of Country, their enduring rights, and that many of the issues we discuss are the product of settlement.

We open the door to hear and respond, to listen and to learn, to understand and acknowledge their individual and collective voice. We aspire to strengthen partnerships and acknowledge that increasing agency for traditional owners comes through ongoing conversations and working together.



Executive Summary



Acknowledgement

Gippsland Forest Dialogue (GFD) would like to thank all participants who attended the Knob Reserve Fire in the Forest dialogue on the 22nd August 2026 and those who attended the field trips at Bairnsdale and Noojee on the 8th August and our social gathering at Sale on the 21st August.

A list of contributors and participants is contained in the appendix along with an overview of the dialogue.

We would like to acknowledge the continued support of Wellington Shire and a Community Small Grant we received from the Shire which made this event possible.

The dialogue

GFD follow an international model aimed at facilitating a conversation about issues important to the future of our forests in a safe and inclusive manner, where all voices are heard and respected. The theme of the Knob Reserve event was about the role of fire in the future of our forests. Fire was identified early on by Gippsland Forest Dialogue, at its inaugural event held at Rawson in 2022.

Gippsland and its forests have experienced a lot fire in the past 20 years with unprecedented mega fires causing significant impacts on both the community and the forest.

Findings

The dialogue and preceding field trips explored fire in a holistic manner, with the view of starting a conversation, which could continue and focus on various aspects or issues of fire in more detail. The premise of this dialogue was to discuss what we would like fire in our forests to look like over the next 20 years.

It is hoped we can use this discussion to formulate a vision of what we want to happen over the next 20 years, then use proceeding dialogues or meetings to drill down into how we can achieve the various aspects of the vision or what may be stopping us from realising it.

The discussion identified some key concepts to be included in a vision these are:

- Longer term planning
- Inclusive of local communities in decision making
- Shared responsibility – individual, community, government
- Restoring forest health and adapting to change
- Live with variability and extremes

- Adapting to and mitigating the consequences of fire
- Evidence-based approach to fire management
- Culture-informed practise
- The role of fire in a healthy forest

Emerging trends

- Changing climate, more extreme fire weather days
- Global issue
- Changing demographics, more new people in Gippsland
- Decreasing resources
- Traditional owner self-determination and knowledge
- Vulnerable, uninsured people in fire prone communities and equity justice around their capacity to rebuild or relocate

Strategies for Action

- Workshop to formulate a vision
- Report to stakeholders on the dialogue discussion
- Establish a working group to develop a 3-year fire conversation program
- Explore citizen science opportunities and collaboration with other bodies
- Establish an interactive platform to share ideas and knowledge of participants – eg Whatsapp or webpage community.



1. Introduction – what is it?

This document is a record of our recent Fire in the Forest dialogue conducted at the Knob Reserve, Stratford.

Each dialogue we conduct covers a theme of forest management relevant to Gippsland and the future of our forests.

Previous dialogues have considered themes such as recreation (Heyfield), plantations (Yarram), forest health (Orbost) and where to next following the cessation of native timber harvesting in our forest (Kalimna).

1.1 Why Fire

South-eastern Australia is acknowledged as one of the most fire prone environments in the world and fire has played an integral role in shaping this landscape. How we manage fire will also be an important fact in the legacy handed to future generations.

Over the past 25 years we have seen a significant increase in the size and intensity of fires and the subsequent impact on the environment and communities of Gippsland. There has also been continued debate as to how we use fire in the environment. For these reasons, fire was identified as a major theme for investigation by Gippsland Fire Dialogue in its initial gathering at Rawson in 2022

At Rawson the conversation covered the following insights, concerns and knowledge gaps.

Key insights

The opportunity to move from a suppression and asset protection culture to a more holistic approach

The science of risk reduction benefits of landscape level burning is contested

Decentralising and localising fire management,

Involving communities in fire management decision making

Effective application of fire for multiple values

Supporting Indigenous groups in their reconnection to country

Improving communication between authorities and communities

Key concerns

The state of Gippsland's forests given recent large intense fires.

A change in forest structure, more dense regrowth

Climate change driving more intense and frequent fires

Politics and social pressures drive fire management as opposed science

Research community divided on the best approaches

Need to define what a healthy forest is so you can consider fires role

Top down, one size fits all nature of fire management

Knowledge gaps

The absence of indigenous voices or knowledge in fire management

Current best practice fire management is contested and more data or research is needed

Ways to consider multiple values and trade-offs in fire management decision making.

Whilst it was acknowledged the conversation at Rawson was simply an initial scoping session; there was a desire from the Rawson event, for GFD to revisit and explore fire and its role in forests in more depth. This dialogue at the Knob Reserve is the start of that conversation.

1.2 Focus

Each dialogue conducted by Gippsland Forest Dialogue (GFD) is centred around a theme or issue relevant to the future of our forests. The focus of the Knob Reserve dialogue was to discuss the role of fire in the future of our forests.

Dialogues have usually been conducted over 2 consecutive days, to allow time for people to get to know each other, build trust and have both formal and informal time to explore a subject.

This makes the event quite intensive and requires participants giving up two consecutive days. This usually limits the number of participants and views. Following feedback from our last dialogue at Heyfield we decided to try a different model. For fire we decided on a program of events culminating in a one-day dialogue.

A series of field trips were offered in various locations to encourage more people to participate, and the ideas generated at these field trips then fed into the dialogue scoping paper and event.

Fire is a large and complex subject that is difficult to cover in one session. The aim of this dialogue is to introduce this very complex theme, and explore a vision of fire management for the next 20 years.

This vision will then help us break down the subject and explore how we achieve this in succeeding dialogues.

The dialogue explored what fire and fire management means to different stakeholders and communities. The starting point for the dialogue was reference to recent enquiries and their recommendations, and 4 key propositions to test and explore.

The Propositions were:

- Fire is natural
- Fire is dangerous
- Fire is useful
- Fire is changing

Each of these is expanded upon in the dialogue scoping document.

1.3 About the initiative

The Gippsland Forest Dialogue (GFD) was launched in early 2022 and aims to build understanding and agreement among stakeholders around the opportunities, challenges and knowledge gaps required for the sustainable management of forests in Gippsland. The GFD creates space for diverse stakeholders to come together to discuss how to look after the region's forests, for people and the planet, and to explore, agree on and facilitate collaborative actions that bring about positive changes. The emphasis is always on creating safe environments to discuss issues and opportunities, and a diversity of perspectives and comments are welcomed. The Knob Reserve Dialogue was the eighth convened by the GFD.

We aimed to explore a wide range of stakeholder perspectives on fire's role in our forests and its impact on people living in or near our them. The aim was to look at fire holistically: its natural role, how it is used, the risk it poses to people and how it is changing.

The Dialogue explored what the four propositions mean to different stakeholders and communities. The field day allowed people to get out bush and stand in a forest whilst considering these things. To visit a planned burn, to talk to local people about their experience. It also enabled them to form relationships with others and get an appreciation of what the dialogue is and how it is conducted.

The fortnight between the field trips and dialogue allowed time for reflection and preparation for active participation in the dialogue. Whilst there was continuity between the program events, this approach also allowed flexibility, people could come to and contribute to which ever field trip or event was convenient.

Over 60 people attended the field trips, 15 the social night and 30 the actual dialogue. With 80 individuals total participating in the program, compared with our normal 2-day format where attendance is usually 30-40.

1.4 About this report

This Co-Chairs report is a synthesis of the process, discussion points and key themes arising from the Fire Dialogue. The report content was compiled from a combination of participant generated information gathered during the field day, dialogue conversations, presentations from participants, the input of co-chairs and reflections of participants shared post event.

The report was tabled with the GFD Steering committee for endorsement prior to release to members. Following any comment or additional thoughts from members it will be made public on our website.



1.5 Dialogue co-chairs and organising committee

Jess Reeves – Co chair of Knob Reserve dialogue

Jess is an Associate Professor at Federation University and a member of the Steering committee of Gippsland Forest Dialogue. Jess recently joined the Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board, which oversees the joint management plans for PV/GLAWAC managed parks in Gippsland including the Knob Reserve.



Steve Pascoe – Co chair of Knob Reserve dialogue

Steve Pascoe is passionate about community led approaches to bushfire preparedness and disaster recovery.

He has been involved in emergency management for over 35 years, firstly volunteering with CFA and VICSES, then working as a community educator in bushfire safety, as an emergency management coordinator in local government, and as a disaster management consultant working with local, state and national governments.

In 2009, Steve's community of Strathewen was devastated by the Black Saturday bushfires. 80 out of 100 houses were destroyed (including Steve's), along with the school and community hall. 29 people died. Steve was one of a small group of Strathewen elders who initiated the Strathewen Community Recovery Association and was Deputy Chair of the association for 2 years.

Organising committee

Ewan Waller – Steering committee lead

Wally Notman – Noojee Field trip host

Peter West – Bairnsdale Field trip host

John Schauble – Sale social night host

2. The dialogue process

2.1 International dialogue process

The forest dialogue is an engagement approach developed at Yale University and practised in a number of countries around the world. It involves a process of engage, explore and change. Gippsland is the first Forest Dialogue group in Australia, formed in 2022 and this is the 8th dialogue that has been conducted in that time.



What you can expect

The purpose of the dialogue and the group is to build trust and connection across stakeholders and community members interested in the future of our forests. Our intent is to provide a safe and respectful space where people can come and share their thoughts and importantly listen to views of others.

The group is not a decision maker or an advocate for any specific view or position. Whilst we look for opportunities for collaborative change, we do not force this.

Part of that safe place is that whilst we report on the conversation, but we do so in a way representing the various views but not specifically identifying individuals or their particular comments.

There is no guarantee of any specific outcome from a dialogue other than the building of relationships and learning you may take away for yourself or your work or interests.

What we expect of you

We expect you to approach the dialogue consistent with this in mind.

To share your knowledge and perspectives

To listen to others and show them respect and encourage their voice

To be open and curious and willing to empathise with others

To respect the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of what is shared

The dialogue model

The model as developed at Yale, and practiced in the Forest Dialogue community around the world has 3 phases

Engage – bring people together and build trust amongst those interested in the future of our forests

Explore – share information and perspectives on the subject and gain understanding of points of agreement or common ground and “fracture lines”

Facilitation of collaborative action – report on findings, identify actions or advocacy where consensus or collaborative approach

Gippsland forest dialogue sees its key aim and building relationships and trust, and from this action will flow. This has been demonstrated in the relationships formed at dialogues and the reflections of attendees.

Exploration of themes identifying common ground and points of contention are captured in dialogue reports.

Specific actions usually flow as a consequence from the dialogues but some examples include submissions to enquiries, collaboration on funding bids between partners, advocacy for vulnerable or unheard voices

2.2 Agenda

- 9:30 Meet at Knob Reserve, at the oval shelter (morning tea)
- 10.00 Dialogue commence
- Acknowledgement of country: Chris McEvoy
- Welcome to country and smoking ceremony:
- GLaWAC: Gavin O'Shanassy
- 10:30 Co-Chairs introduction: Chris McEvoy
- Gippsland Forest Dialogue Background: Chris McEvoy
- How today will work: Peter West
- Intent, Agenda, Housekeeping
- 11:00 Participant introductions – Steve Pascoe
- 11:45 Field trip report backs
- Bairnsdale – Peter
 - Noojee - Wally
- 12:00 [Lunch](#)
- 12:45 What do we know about fires – John Schauble
- Reflection on evolution of thinking on fires
 - Discussion of recent fire Inquiries (trends)
- 1:15 Dialogue – Socratic circle – Steve and Jess
- Reflection on the 4 propositions - Steve
- A vision: the future we want to see
- “In 20 years, how will we be living with fire in forests”
- 2:15 [Short break – walk to lookout,](#)
- Fire and orchids – Mitch
- 3:00 How might we get to our vision – Steve and Jess
- What is stopping us
- 3:30 Where to from here – Peter
- 3:45 “The Wrap” – Steve and Jess

2.3 Aims and objectives

The aims of the Fire in the forest dialogue were to:

- Bring a broad range of community and stakeholders together to investigate the issues in managing fire in our forests.
- Foster collaboration among stakeholders, allowing interested parties to learn from one another, trust each other, and synthesise current knowledge and
- Provide a Gippsland perspective on fire to government in response to the past 25-year history of fire in Gippsland
- To start a process of continued dialogue on fire – a potential 3-year program

2.4 Emerging trends

- We are experiencing larger and more intense fires
- Current fire response is not keeping up with increasing risk
- We have new people living in or close to the bush (tree change)
- Volunteerism is declining
- There are new ways of doing things

- Hotter, drier conditions driven by climate change
- Longer fire seasons and overlapping hemispheric fire periods
- More frequent extreme fire behaviour
- Increasing lightning ignitions
- Expanding settlement into forested areas
- Declining forest health and fuel accumulation
- Greater social and economic impacts of fire

- The resurgence of indigenous fire knowledge
- A shift toward ecological burning
 - Fire used to maintain grasslands
 - Burning designed to support biodiversity
 - Burning for weed control and habitat creation
- Targeted risk reduction burning – precision over area
 - Burning around towns
 - Many international examples
- Increased use of aerial firefighting
- Remote sensing and real time intelligence
- Strategic suppression rather than direct attack
 - Use natural barriers
 - Fuel breaks
 - Indirect attack – containment lines, backburning
 - Defensive strategies during peak conditions (asset protection)

- Landscape level planning – long term forest health interventions
- Community led fire management
- Recognition that fire cannot be eliminated – internationally

Future fire management will be shaped by

- Climate change
- Forest condition
- Cultural leadership
- Technology
- Community involvement

2.5 Opportunities for change

- Recognition of changing climate and worldwide issue
- Growing recognition of the role of traditional knowledge and practice
- New technologies and innovations
- Involving the community
- Recognition of growing risk and willingness to change or improve
- Recognition that there is no silver bullet (planned burning) but a collection of improvements, innovations and integration of strategies

2.6 GFD strategies for action

- Initiation of ongoing contact with dialogue participants to build on the conversations
- Establish a working group to map out a fire dialogue program
- Report to government on the dialogue and value of this mechanism to give voice to local communities in Gippsland
- An information session with stakeholders on the dialogue process, learnings and collaborative opportunities
- Greater engagement of key voices not at the dialogue including First Nations
- Follow up dialogues on specific issues or opportunities in fire management
- Partnerships or collaborations with other bodies

2.7 Next steps

Investigate ways to keep the conversation and formed relationships going

Looked to international best practice via the international FD community of practice

Take advantage of opportunities such as the pilot Forest Health plans to promote the views and perspectives of the people of Gippsland.

Promote the report

3. The Conversation – what was said

3.1 Welcome to country – Gavin O’Shannassy

The day commenced with a Welcome to Country and smoking ceremony led by Gavin O’Shanasy representing GLAWAC and his people, the Gunaikurnai.

Gavin began by explaining how Gunaikurnai was a term created by Europeans, and it refers to two separate nations the Gunai and the Kurnai.

Gavin noted:

“I am a really proud person standing here”

And that.

“The Knob reserve is in good hands with joint management”

In reference to the smoking ceremony: Gavin said “When I use Cherry Ballard...I use it to symbolise the younger generation that need nurturing and guidance” ... “I use gum leaves – grandfather gum – to represent wisdom from our elder generation”
“Together it’s about sharing knowledge”

He then wished us well with our yarnning.

3.2 Introduction to a dialogue – Peter

“It’s about building relationships and trust”

“Outcomes are a by-product”

Dialogue intent

- Introduce the dialogue process and GFD
- Practice dialogue – talking and listening
- Start a conversation about fire
 - Look holistically
 - Discuss what we want the future to look like
 - Use this vision to shape an ongoing conversation
 - “If that is what we want, how do we get there, what is stopping us”

Safe and respectful conversation

- Safe
 - Be aware of fire as a traumatic experience that has impacted many of us in attendance and look out for each other. If you need to step away, do so, if you need someone to support you, we have people here
 - The dialogue operates on Chatam house rules, you can speak understanding your confidentiality will be respected, we will report the conversation but identify people and we ask you to do the same.
 - There is no outcome or position we are looking for, there is no pressure to agree or conform to any view.
- Respectful
 - Everyone is entitled to speak and be heard; no voice is more important than any other
 - Listen to understand, not to respond, it's not a debate, there's no point scoring
 - You're here as an individual not a representative, your background gives your valuable insight to share, but you're not here to defend an organization
 - Be curious not judgmental
 - Support and encourage others, success if everyone feels confident and able to speak, you are a part of creating that environment

3.3 Attendee introductions – All

Each attendee introduced themselves and what motivated them to attend

Backgrounds of participants included:

- Farming
- Forestry work
- Soil science
- Forest historian
- Government land management
- Noojee resident and community advocate
- Nursery owner
- Field naturalist – interest in orchids
- Landcare
- Fire ecology student (Phd)
- Grew up on a Swifts creek farm, experienced a number of fires from 2003
- Stratford farmer – long family connection to forest
- CFA volunteer
- Burnt out in 2003,

- Lifelong scout – out in the bush
- Government land manager
- CFA fuel management officer
- Yarran, plantation owner and timber producer
- Forester
- HVP plantation
- Dandenong resident
- Dargo resident – lost his home in a fire
- CFA community educator
- Community engagement and communication role around forests
- Sarsfield resident on a small acreage
- Gembrook resident
- Paynesville resident
- Berwick
- Bushfire research – landscape flammability and fuel management
- Cann River, Orbost, Bairnsdale
- Knob reserve management board

Motivation to attend included:

- Work history
- Impacted by the Black Saturday fires and involved in recovery
- Interest in fire ecology, interest in forest history
- Hearing other voices and perspectives on fire
- Interest in transition away from native forest logging
- Research on how different stakeholders view forests
- Fire recovery and passion for trees
- Interest in biodiversity and landscape values
- Concept of healthy forests, what are they
- Sustainable plantation management
- Active forest management
- To hear community perspectives on fire and fire risk
- Impacted landholder
- The dialogue process – a way to talk and share ideas, experience from previous events
- Using fire for land management – esp weed control
- Interest in the environment,
- Lives near a plantation
- Interest in dialogue process
- Linking private and public forest management

Quotes around the fire:

- After losing our home in the fire, my wife said “I think we need to go back to our place and heal”
- “Mapping the knowledge and skills in our community is really important for fire awareness”
- “Complacency is not the right word because new people are coming into communities, so it is about getting education right, and an appreciation of the risk of fire”
- “Managing forests versus not managing forests and what does managing actually mean”
- “What are we managing for and burning for, and what are the implications of a changing climate”
- JS in response to climate skepticism “I am sorry but I have been fighting fires for 40 years and things **have** changed”
- “In the landscape we have created today, fires may start natural, but they don’t run natural – the whole picture has changed significantly”

3.4 Field trip report back

Noojee

A discussion process was undertaken to allow all participants to voice their thoughts

Stop 1 - views of Toorongo, Baw Baw plateaus from the south (Cheryl Drayton, Owen Salkin)

- Discussion on indigenous perspectives - we are invited (with accountability) to "look at, preserve and protect Country." Local TO boundaries are in dispute.
- Local geology influences distribution of forest types. We need to be mindful that forest succession cycles could be viewed in geological time scales. E.g. Over a 10,000-year period, this equates to 20 x 500-year cycles of transition between eucalypt dominated (drier) and beech dominated (wetter) forest.
- Fire history has influenced the distribution of patches dominated by eucalypt Vs acacia Vs Nothofagus. Some discussion around impact of fire frequency on recovery of species that regenerate via seed vs lignotuber. We are due for another fire!
- A wide range of local interests present. Several people with forest management background present - plantation and native, local and elsewhere. Local land owners, community members and leaders of community enterprise, climate change activists, recreation enthusiasts, families, people who've experienced the pointy end of wild fire, those who declare a "love of trees and forests!" Researchers, state & local government.

- Some notable statements during attendee introductions:

From a teenager who has just moved to the region: "I'm curious - what's this place actually like?"

From a local young woman: "I think trees are cool!"

From a land manager & farmer who experienced the Black Saturday fires: "I have strong opinions!"

From Indigenous rep: "The Kurnai are warriors."

Stop 2 - Owen's place (management of fire risk on private bush block) (Owen Salkin)

- This is hard country for farming. Government encouraged clearing, but then it was too steep to farm easily. Most of the bush is regrowth forest. Regeneration of cleared land is harder now due to deer browsing pressure on young seedlings.
- Owen loves living in the bush, but understands the fire risk. He knows he has a responsibility to manage his site to reduce the risk for himself and his neighbours. He considers himself a custodian of the land. He is focused on protecting the house.
- Owen practices active prescribed burning on a yearly basis. He likens this to "gardening" the bush. He understands where and when different parts of his block should be burned (north, east and west aspects to deal with). He considers both risk to the house and species ecology. Eg he burns ~ 0.25 - 2ha per year, each patch may get burned every 5-10 years. He has the experience and access to friends/ infrastructure to know how to do this and when (how can his less experienced neighbours access support to build capacity for this type of activity)?
- Owen feels safer from the risk of wildfire knowing that he has reduced the risk via prescribed burning. He plans to "stay and fight" in the event of another wildfire.
- He discussed BAL ratings and the risk zones for houses in the bush - how it is possible to choose building materials that reduce fire risk.
-
- Noojee township declared as not able to be protected from a significant wildfire event - upsetting/ surprising to some. Owen can speak to this with the integrity and confidence of an experienced fire manager and a local with skin in the game who is committed to doing what is possible to protect the town.

"I believe in the science (of forest fire management/ behaviour). I like learning from observation."

"Burning is not for everyone, or every location, or every time."

"I like setting fire to things! There is a satisfaction in doing it well."

Stop 3 - boundary between management zones with different harvest & burn histories (1989 regrowth next to 2011 regrowth) (UoM - Jane Cawson, Tom Fairman, Patrick Baker)

- The region is a mosaic of forest types and structures and age classes resulting from influence of geology & topography & harvesting, wildfire & prescribed burn histories.
- The area that has been disturbed more recently (2011 regrowth) looks like it has a more dynamic & vertically/ horizontally connected forest structure, as the dominant eucalypt storey is shorter, the understorey and mid storey are younger with full crowns. This connectivity may make it more flammable. The area that has been undisturbed for longer has greater separation between eucalypt overstorey and shrubby understorey. Some of the acacias have senesced or been outcompeted. The overstorey is quite dense and shading out the understory. Mostly silver top, messmate, Mt Grey. A lot of rough-barked species that will carry fire to the canopy. Both patches likely to progress in the same direction towards similar forest structure/ composition.
- (Jane & Tom) - discussion on what influences flammability, and how this is measured. How does this differ between the forest patches observed at the site.
- Question from group on relative flammability of mature foliage Vs young foliage (oil content) - research on this is uncertain.
- Discussion on how fuel assessments feed into models predicting fire behaviour and risk.
- (Patrick) - discussion on how we can use silviculture (ecological thinning) to manage forest regrowth so that more trees get bigger faster, thus increasing their resilience to fire, and reducing fire risk in the landscape. Different species grow at different rates (e.g. to fast track a shift from 2500 sph to 250 sph over a shorter period than 400 years)! Eg - thinning from below.
- Now that public native forest is no longer managed for economic outputs, it is hard to find budgets and resources to encourage thinning practices. How receptive will the community be to finding economic uses for thinned materials to pay for the need to thin for ecological protection.

Stop 4 - prescribed burn site next to farm (Patrick's farm) (DEECA - Quinton Pacan)

- Legislation and policy provide a framework for how each patch of public native forest is zoned and prioritised for fire risk and management strategies. These take into account risk to houses, infrastructure, economic assets (farms, fences, industrial estates, plantations), ecological assets etc.
- Recent bushfire management strategies have increased attention to interaction between public and private fire risk management. CFA & DEECA have developed joint fuel management plans where public and private estates intersect.

- Tolerable fire intervals are different for different zones (eg asset protection zones 5-10yr burn frequency, bushfire moderation zones 10-20yrs, landscape management zones 15-20yrs +). Management prescriptions are allocated to different localities depending on objectives, risk levels, forest types etc.
- As climate conditions get more inconsistent and extreme, and the public appetite for fire management activities gets more fraught, the prescriptions increasingly require "goldilocks conditions" to achieve a good prescribed burn. Not too windy or wet or dry. Windows of opportunity for this are getting smaller.
- There are treatments other than burning that are available for managing fuel - mulching, chopping etc. Research into alternative strategies is ongoing. How to find strategies that are financially viable?
- The neighbouring farmer said he considers this prescribed burn as significant insurance for his farm and Noojee.
- Some observed that young regeneration under 5 years of age have been shown to be less likely to burn - and can provide a "fire break" effect in a mosaic landscape.
- Discussion around whether collecting fuels and processing through a pyrolysis plant for soil ameliorants that can be used/ sold in the local economy etc is a viable alternative to burning - likely to require a self-driven market.
- Example of Kinglake community in previous wildfire being able to respond more effectively through having engaged proactively before the fire season in fire preparedness, good local emergency response network, "phone tree" etc.
- There is a need to educate newbies to town that in an isolated community like Noojee, individual properties must be self-sufficient for power and water to bother "staying to fight" a fire - can't rely on mains supply etc.
- DEECA has less resources than ever before - community needs to be more involved in fire preparedness and more proactive in driving engagement with DEECA in a targeted way to help get what they need.

From farmer Patrick adjacent to public native forest: "this fuel reduction burn is worth \$1M insurance for our farm and for the (nearby) township of Noojee."

Farmer Patrick: "if we are going to protect small communities, we need to do fuel reduction burning."

Bairnsdale

GFD Host: Peter West

Intent:

- Introduce GFD and process
- Get out bush and see with our eyes, and meet people
- Introduce some of the concepts around fire and forests
- Influence the conversation at the Knob Reserve

Safe and respectful conversation:

- Trip safety briefing
- Mental health awareness, measures in place
- Safety – confidentiality, free to say what you think and not get quoted
- Safety – no GFD position or agenda
- Respect – every one entitled to speak, no voice more important than any other
- Respect – listen to understand not to respond
- Respect – you’re here as you not as an organisation
- Respect – be curious not judgemental
- Respect – support and encourage others

Stop 1: Cultural burning

Cultural burning, at its core is about caring for the country. Given the significant changes to the landscape with European intervention and the past 25 years of fire there is also a belief it is about healing the country and people.

Typically, cultural burning is about “Small scale, low intensity frequent burns”. At this site, near the GLAWAC office (Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation) we inspected forest where GLAWAC has practiced cultural burning.

Cultural burning is low intensity burning: a manifestation of connection to the country and community. Traditional Owners have an obligation to care for the land. In undertaking cultural burning, it is important to listen to the land, and not just burn by numbers.

An important aspect is getting people on land and connecting with one another, rather than how many hectares are burnt. Unfortunately, GLAWAC were unable to be in attendance during the day, so there was a level of discomfort in speaking on their behalf but it was important to share our understandings. It is hoped a representative will be able to make it to the Knob Reserve dialogue.

In talking to Aboriginal groups as part of an inquiry post the 2019 fires it was evident, different Aboriginal groups in Victoria had different views on the fires and their impacts. A key theme was that people can’t be healthy if the land and forest aren’t healthy.

It was noted in the discussion that “for a long time, we didn’t talk to Aboriginal people about fire and healthy forests. Thankfully, now we do more so”.

What do Aboriginal people view as a healthy forest? A view put forward was that healthy forest includes large and small plants, as well as those that are missing—not only endangered species, but also a decrease in deadwood, and an increase in medicinal plants. Forests are open, you can see through them.

Traditional owners have been shut out of forests for so long and have lost some of their cultural burning knowledge. They need space to relearn and then implement at scale. We need to work in partnership with them to do this. To boost forest resilience, we need a lot of learning from Aboriginal peoples.

Another aspect of the discussion was, “what is cultural burning”.

The question was asked, are we misinterpreting cultural burning, Do we value forests and cultural burning through a Western lens rather than an Aboriginal lens?

A view was put that Cultural burning is being used for an agricultural purpose rather than an ecological one. It assists in hunting, medicine, food, and foraging. Boosting biodiversity can be impacted as 95% of biodiversity is in leaf litter.

There are many nuances in cultural burning: Early settlers saw forests that were vastly different from today’s — densely cluttered landscapes.

A trial currently being undertaken in the Strathbogies was discussed, it is a “Two Worlds Forest Management” concept aimed at bringing traditional knowledge and science together. GLAWAC strongly support using both knowledge bases and collaborating with land managers.

We then discussed examples of GLAWAC working with DEECA. This involved joint training in firefighting, land management and forest management. GLAWAC are now partners in Forest Fire Management Victoria and can respond to bushfires, not just be consulted. A formal agreement has been signed that gives a legal framework to make it easier to undertake cultural burning on public land. This is paired with arrangements that make GLAWAC a partner in bushfire suppression.

Information exchange and knowledge sharing are part of the agreements. It was also stated that Indigenous people, when they undertake cultural burning, don’t want to have “green overalls” looking over their shoulders.

It was noted that there’s increasing literature on cultural burning and the NIDA conference was referenced.

A reflection was that cultural burning is about community, not ecological values or fuel management; it’s about “Sharing a fire, with friends and forging connection.

One concern raised was that more and more burning of scarce resources is wasteful behaviour and we should be more measured in how much burning we allow, whether that is bushfire, fuel reduction, ecological or cultural. Shouldn’t we be using our resources better? “We are a country, a part of the landscape and ecosystem. Little kids miss out on future forests if we burn them now.

Humans living approximately 23,000 years ago thrived in these forests in East Gippsland. Some things respond to fire and come back over time. “Fragmented forests are what we have now. There was a bigger estate, and it could handle fires better.

“Should we be managing our remaining forests by using fire We now put out fires in summer that used to happen naturally. Refer to Susan Sinard’s book on underground fungal networks in forests. Listen to the landscape and respond accordingly. “Different seasons require different management. Detritus and dead sticks and ecologically important but detritus build up leaves’ community members feeling uncomfortable as they are a fire risk, but they are an asset to biodiversity.

Stop 2: A planned burn

We inspected a planned burn with a DEECA representative explaining the process and strategy behind where they burn, how they plan and implement it.

We visited a burn on Wards Road.” This burn was conducted two years ago, in the autumn of 2023.

The Code of Practice guides overall management and zoning systems, including landscape management zones and exclusion zones. However, we have three-year operational plans, which show where burns are actually targeted. This burn occurred in a “Bush Fire Moderation Zone” which is for large hinterland areas and involves moderately large fires.

“When planning a burn, we assess a number of values prior to doing the burn: Effects on road access, safety, and biodiversity, cultural values, operational feasibility, and other factors. “We must wait for the appropriate weather.” We do not just burn at any time.

There are resource pressures. “Planning is done at the state level; The actual burn area is unspecified. It is usually much smaller than the planned burn area shown on a map. For example, there may be exclusions to habitat or areas simply too wet to carry fire in the fire perimeter. “Nuance like this isn’t communicated well to the public.

Different techniques are used for ignition, eg, spot ignition, aerial ignition (in more inaccessible areas) and strip burn. “Crews will patrol for 4 to 5 days after ignition to ensure it doesn’t escape. At this burn, there are a number of She oaks which are feed trees for Glossy Black Cockatoos. So, we had an ecologist monitoring the feeding trees both before and after the burn. DEECA worked in collaboration with Birdlife Australia on this monitoring and consider submission of Citizen Scientist data. Monitoring, as well as communication management, is challenging. DEECA try to put more detail in community information. However, if the community is dispersed, it can be hard to get nuanced information out. “When forest users may come from an outside area, such as

Melbourne it can be difficult to get the message across, cultural burn communication is undertaken through traditional owners. “However, engagement and communication sometimes present resource challenges.

Forest Fire Management Victoria is led by policies that operate at a high-level state level; Sometimes, however, these policies may lack local nuance in their communication. “A few people raised concerns. “From communities about Plan Burn impacts, we discuss strategies for getting information out to stakeholders, partnering with community groups, land care, and using social media networks, etc.

Resource constraints can limit these efforts to engage with the community.

Stop 3 Lunch and dialogue discussion

Over lunch a handout on the four propositions was provided and discussed. It was explained these may be used to shape and stimulate the discussion at the dialogue.

Discussion included: Were the propositions true in the past? Was fire always dangerous? Have our landscapes become so modified that fire is no longer a threat? Fire behaves in a way that it is no longer natural. “We discuss the importance of getting out to see the effects.

Stop 4 2019 fire reflection

“The fires in 2019 and 2020, which occurred due to multiple lightning strikes, over 30 in the one afternoon. Priority was given to asset protection.

“Victorian resources were already deployed in New South Wales and Queensland from early on in that fire season Given the circumstances, there was a national resource issue.

“Every fire that occurred from those lightning strikes was responded to: for each there was someone on it in the first 24 hours. But that wasn’t enough, whilst most were put out, 4 were not and these grew into the large mega fire.

Prepare for fire by conducting landscape burns in all zones. “Strategic planning and fuel reduction facilitates suppression when bush fires occur.

A question was raised that” There was a 14-to-15-year program of burning prior, yet the fires still occurred, was planned burning useful”. We discussed whether the fuel reduction burns prior to the wildfires of 2019-20 prevented them, and what their effectiveness was in megafires, given that planned burns are most effective one to two years after completion and their impact diminishes past that.

It was discussed that planned burning is only part of a fire program, fuel is one driver of fires we can influence, it is hard sometimes to quantify their impact.

“We discuss where fuel reduction burns are still helpful in suppressing fire.

Stop 5 Sarsfield

Visit the community hall and Sarsfield community association. Sarsfield was one of the first communities in East Gippsland to be significantly impacted by the 2019 fires. Two hundred properties were impacted, and eighty houses were burned down. “Half of Sarsfield’s land area was burned, particularly more in the densely populated part of town.

“The community hall was not impacted and became an important gathering place. Recovery funds were available for the community. “This process brought the community together to determine what was needed. Sarsfield Community Association was born out of this process. The Council took over. “And \$3 million was allocated for the community hall. “However, due to delays in application, this sum may not have been enough. The cause of delay is the bureaucratic process,

Since the fire many houses have been built. There has been a fair turnover in people since the 2019 fire. This means there’s a need to build capacity and community to prepare for the next fire season. The Sarsfield Community Association is involved in coordinating the Bush Reserve, located near Sarsfield, which is considered a fire hazard by some community members. “The Sarsfield Community Association’s remit in reserve management is unclear.

The community’s attitude and feeling toward fire risk have become more blasé over the last five years, as the weather has been wetter and fire seasons quieter. “Also, because houses that have been built subsequently tend to be more resilient, which may suggest that people aren’t as prepared; people perhaps feel that they won’t experience another mega fire in their lifetime.

“Fire also creates positive connection in the community. In Sarsfield. “The fires created the impetus for community connection. Working with neighbours before and after the fire in the recovery phase, and this still persists to today.” The community received funding to employ someone part time to do admin and manage membership for their association which was important.

Every community that experienced Black Summer fires experienced it differently. “The fire created opportunities to connect with individuals doing similar work in other places across the state, which helped the community, especially the mentor relationship with people from Strathewyn. One observation is it is difficult to pick yourself up from scratch after an event and set up community structures so good to have this in place before a fire.

You should not attempt to set it up after a disaster, but have mechanisms and structures in place beforehand. Some ongoing challenges with the hall, include determining responsibility, insurance. “Minor damage may not meet the excess as stipulated by the Council. The statement is that the committee would have to cover that cost. It could also be relevant for daytime groups, although there are fairly high annual costs associated with starting a community association, including administration, electricity, and other similar expenses.

Emergency planning, the hall is not a safer place for refuge, but rather a secondary space.

Some themes that have emerged from the field trip:

- There is power in talking about the forest. “In the forest, there is also power in talking about planned burning while you’re looking and walking in planned burns,
- Forests are a huge mental health resource. They offer the quiet, reflective space, and should be valued as such; as an important contributor to mental health.
- Cultural burning is not ecological or fuel management. It is more natural resource management, and people connection, and cultural knowledge transfer.
- Planned burning is important but has its limitations and impacts.
- Whilst planned burning, ecological burning, cultural burning and natural fire all have their place, there should be some limit to the amount of fire in the landscape

3.4 Formal mechanisms for fire review - Inquiries

John Schauble led a discussion on fire inquiries

Initial reflections on the evolution of thinking about forest fire over the last 40 years.

- Fires were something that happened “out there”
- Changes in approach to fuel management and control ... burning, mulching, etc; broad scale v. targeted
- Current debate around efficacy of fuel reduction burning
- Now more likely to affect interface areas (e.g. Hobart, Sydney, Canberra)
- More a global issue, with a continuous cycle of fire
- More frequent fires and evidently driven by climate change... noticeably in Gippsland (1965 - present)

Inquiries

- In 80 years to 2019, 51 inquiries into fires & major natural disasters across Australia & 1700 recommendations
- 10 major bushfire inquiries in Victoria since 2002, ranging from coronial inquests through to a royal commission

Inquiries are at once about blame and learning. These are effectively mutually exclusive terms. Inquiries are also about trust in government and its agencies.

Inquiries are increasingly about participation - affected communities

Types of inquiry

- Departmental Inquiry
- Ministerial Inquiry
- Inquiry by officer with statutory powers
- IGEM (Gov in Council appt)
- Parliamentary Inquiry
- Coronial
- Board of Inquiry
- Royal Commission

Rachel Doyle KC's speech

- acknowledgement of significance of reforms post 2009
- Recommendations need to be implemented – process since 2009 of having an Implementation Monitor (also a role played by IGEM)

Royal commissions are *meant to be* inquisitorial rather than adversarial ... this is not how they play out in practice. Impact on personnel of appearing before legalistic inquiries

Other legal actions ... civil, criminal – an increasing trend in America.

- Parliamentary inquiry in an election year ...
- Broad, loaded terms of reference; short time frame
- This one added another 80 recommendations

We need to get smarter in post-fire inquiry in a post-truth world

- Impact of climate change
- Impact of social media
- Some collapse of industry structures/representation
- Loss of trust
- A standing commission?
- Restorative justice?

“Australia has a tendency to rely on formal, ad hoc learning institutions after major events, such as bushfires and floods. These range from operational reviews to administrative and parliamentary inquiries to the peak investigative body, a royal commission. These inquiries are supplemented by the coroner who is available to investigate deaths and fires.

Royal commissions and coroner's inquiries are extremely powerful but also daunting and their tendency to adopt traditional court room procedures makes them intimidating. Limitations on their fact-finding mandate mean that the lessons they

identify may not be accepted as legitimate and may not be learned by those that need to learn them.

The community needs to move beyond developing policy by royal commission and instead engage in the realities of life in the Australian context. As part of that reality, there needs to be a more mature approach to post-event inquiries that recognizes the need to learn lessons ‘without sacrificing the good will of responders’.”

Eburn & Dovers, 2015



Recent inquiries

Year	Event	Type of inquiry	Death toll	
1900	1898 fires	Royal Commission	12 dead	
1926	Widespread fires	Coronial	39	
1932	Gippsland	Coronial	9	
1939	Black Friday	Royal Commission	71	CFA formation recommended
1942	Yarram, Sth Gipps	Coronial	1	
1943	Wangaratta	Coronial	10	
1944	Gippsland, Central	Royal Commission	49	CFA formed
1962	Widespread	Coronial	8	
1965	Longwood	Coronial	7	
1965	Gippsland	nil		
1968	Dandenongs	nil		
1969	Lara, Central	Coronial	22	
1977	Black Saturday	Board of Inquiry	4	
1983	Ash Wednesday	Review Committee	47	Minister as Co-ordinator in Chief
1985	Maryborough	Coronial	3	
1997	Dandenongs	Coronial inquest	3	
2000	Linton 1998	Coronial Inquest	5	
2003	Alpine	Inquiry by govt officer stat power		Esplin
2005	Wilson Promontory	Inquiry by govt officer		With statutory powers
2005-06	South west Vic	Parliamentary inquiry		
2006-07	Great Divide	Parliamentary inquiry		
2009	Black Saturday	Royal Commission	173	FSC/EMV follow, major changes to EM
2011	Tostaree	Inquiry by govt officer		With statutory powers
2013	Harrietville	Inquiry by govt officer / Coroner	2	With statutory powers
2015	Lancefield/Cobaw	Independent inquiry		Appt by Vic Govt
2015-16	Wye River	IGEM		
2019-20	Black Summer	Royal Commission	5	iGEM
2026	Widespread	Parliamentary inquiry	1	IGEM

3.5 Socratic circle comments

A discussion process was undertaken to allow all participants to voice their thoughts and listen to those of others. The discussion was framed around articulation of a vision.

Given how significantly things have changed in the last 20 years, what do we want things to look like in the next 20 years

Some comments from around the circle

- “If we don’t change what we are doing now, then we won’t have any forests left”
- “Retreat and resettlement; I envisage that this is going to come back in the next 20 years”
- “If you choose to live in a bushfire area, you need to accept the associated risk”
- “People who live in the bush probably can’t get insurance but it might be more impactful; for those low socioeconomic people that can’t afford get insurance”
- “Living with fire will be more present in people lives:”
- “When you make people safer, they sometimes act more risky.” - in regards to bunkers and safer places
- “In 20yr time do governments need to pick what we save and what we let go?”
- “Communities and people come together, are connected to each other and the forest and other matters are worked through”
- “Enabling all people to be able to live in the community so communities have the resources they need”
- “Keeping fire out of our forests totally”
- “Traditional owners have more ability to experiment”
- “The ecological infrastructure that we are reliant on should bubble up to be a key focus on what we do”
- “Community led discussion and that government actually listens to that”
- “Being serious about fire adaptation – how do we arm ourselves for impacts of on people with regards to housing stock, mental health and education levels”
- “We need to think ahead about consequences”
- “In the future there will be carbon management”
- “Fire is inevitable, it can’t be excluded from the landscape. We need more management and I agree that it must be more community led.”
- “Our resources that go into suppression are equalled for mitigation and prevention”

3.6 A vision for the next 20 years

Socratic circle discussion...

The following are key points from the discussion of what we want the next 20 years to look like.

Participants spoke about:

- how we need to prepare for a life with fire
- how fire connects people, it is an issue we all have to face
- fire is inevitable – it is a natural process and a part of our environment
- we need to integrate all values in how we manage fire

The discussion highlighted the following points

- Fire will become a new normal with flow on to all aspects of life. Climate change is uncertain and will create both wetter and drier conditions
- Social media and AI are gone and people are coming together in place, sharing knowledge and expertise
- People and ecosystems are embracing change, caused by disturbance, through connection
- Need to make new comers to fire prone regions aware of the risks and how to live safely (insurance premiums will signal this, although loss of life is not condoned)
- Forest and fire management (?) led by community, supported by government to enable a diversity of people to live and connect safely with forests
- Triage priority areas – both biodiversity and communities, for where to focus resources (and awareness of the rationale behind this)
- Must change what we are doing now and endeavour restore to a pre-European forest mosaic
- There will be inevitable shifts in biodiversity as environment adapts to change – creating novel ecosystems
- Decentralisation of agencies and empowerment of communities to have a role in, act for and live with forests and fire
- More people moving into forest, but more ‘locked up’. Need active management for a range of values
- More safe places established – but when people feel safe, they take higher risks and less responsibility (caution)
- Retreat and resettlement – not current policy, but soon could be or, choose to live in these areas and accept the risk – learn to live safely
- Socioeconomic inequity impacting people’s ability to prepare and respond – must be a focus for those who cannot afford to move or rebuild (e.g. uninsured)
- Community-led decision-making actually informing government
- What does ‘management’ mean?

- Integration of management, Traditional Owner methods, long-term policy and community involvement
- Top down and bottom-up meeting in the middle
- Currently no disaster management plans the consequences or impacts of major fires e.g. housing and ongoing social impacts
- Manage for extremes and complexity
- Traditional Owners given the opportunity to experiment
- Alignment with priorities between different actors
- Local knowledge essential
- “the way it always was” – vulnerability and injustice of people ‘escaping to the mountains’ and not having mobility to be safe
- Connected community – social infrastructure and informed of fire in landscape – take responsibility to get informed
- The climate is changing
- Carbon mis/management – better designed housing and planning; biochar
- Gippsland = 300,000, vulnerable, isolated communities – need to collaborate; Melbourne = 5million+ - where is their responsibility?
- Move beyond meeting fire with fire (keep fire out of the forest – through technological solutions of early detection and quick action)
- Aspire to return to pre-European ecosystems
- Management shift to ecological values, not human values – patchy, prioritise a healthy forest
- Ecological infrastructure
- Mitigation and adaptation

Summary of the key points from the discussion to consider in a vision

- Longer term planning
- Inclusive of local communities
- Shared responsibility
- Restore forest health, adapted to change
- Live with variability and extremes
- Adapt and mitigate
- Evidence-based
- Culture-informed practise

Parking lot – ideas floated but needing more discussion

- Bottom-up collaboration, but hits a regulatory ceiling (currently)
- Purpose of prescribed burns?
- Educating new community members through experiences of living with fire
- Shared spaces for sharing ideas and values
- Education about fire in schools
- 98% fires do not get out of control

- Fire is acting ‘unnaturally’ now due to human intervention, land clearing for farming and urbanisation, climate

Time at an event such as this does not allow for the articulation of a fully formed and agreed vision, but is the start of the process.

Our ambition is to move forward from this collection of ideas, to a vision statement then use this vision to guide our further exploration of fire in our forests.

Our approach is “if we can say this is what we want”, then we can ask “what is stopping us or how can we get there” and answering those questions can be the foundation of future dialogues.

As a starting point, organization of these thoughts and information in the scoping statement provides the following starting point to a vision.

The last 20 years....

In the last 20 years we have seen unprecedented large destructive fires in Gippsland.

The impacts have included:

- 10 fire fighter fatalities
- 180 community people fatalities
- 2822 homes destroyed, 4500 structures
- 93,173 livestock killed
- 4,959,500 hectares burnt
- 2,334,834 reburnt before reproductive maturity

In the 2020 summer fires alone

- 50% of the habitat of 20 fauna species burnt, 187 fauna species impacted
- 50% of the habitat of 224 flora species burnt, 1392 flora species impacted

The social consequences have included

- Rising insurance costs, unaffordable to all
- Increased family pressures – rise in domestic violence
- Impacts on young people – reduced educational

Positive changes have included:

- Recognition of Traditional Knowledge and relearning of cultural burning practices
- Move towards more resilience in buildings, houses and infrastructure
- Growth of community self-help – Blaze aid, wildlife carers
- Use of technology in firefighting – drones, infra-red, modelling, data
- Increased availability and use of aircraft

- A move from planned burning as the answer (the more the better) to a more holistic approach and targeted burn program

Negative changes have included:

- More extreme fire weather days and extended droughts
- More mega fires
- A drop in volunteerism in CFA
- Reduced funding to land managers

The next 20 years....

In the next 20 years we want to see some of the good things enhanced, some issues or impacts addressed and new ideas embraced.

The future is likely to involve:

- Continued climate change impacts including more severe fire weather
- Health impacts of fire included in planning

The future we want is:

- No fire fighter fatalities
- Less impacts on communities
 - Reduced fatalities
 - Reduced house loss – homes and families the foundation of a community
 - Safer places and resilient hubs in at risk communities
 - If you choose to live in high risk areas, accept responsibility
- Less large intense fires
 - Improved fire response using technological change and sustainable funding for response agencies
 - More nuanced fire control strategies, more consideration of values, the level of risk and the impact of intervention. When to be aggressive, when to fallback
 - More response effort on asset protection strategies
 - Enhance first attack
 - Better roads, quicker access
 - More water closer to fires – more efficient water bombing
 - More triage of fire ignitions especially in multi lightning strike events
- A more resilient community
 - Better informed to make good decisions and help themselves
 - Affordable insurance and improved housing stock
 - Shared decision making with authorities – valuing local knowledge
 - Better organised community structures before a fire to help after a fire
 - Improved disaster planning with an emphasis on worst case situations and also on consequences

- More resilient and healthy forests
 - Ecological considerations a priority in forest management
 -
- Focus on priority ecological communities and at-risk human communities
 - Resettlement or buy back, or hardening of assets
 - Relocation planning for vulnerable species, habitat protection strategies
- Learning and adapting
 - Emphasis on education, especially of the young and the new
 - Use of evidence to inform decision making – commit a set percentage of operational funds to monitoring, evaluating and learning
 - More empowerment and support for Traditional knowledge
- Long term planning
 - Move from centralised governance models to collaborative frameworks (US POD model)
 - A move from one off inquiry as key learning model, and a move to a restorative justice, standing commission framework.
 - Learning from others, fire is a world-wide issue

Our vision is:

- We don't want firefighters put at risk
- We want less impact on communities so they can recover better
- We want enhanced response so we have less mega fires, understanding enhanced response includes better preparation and readiness (fuel management, access, training etc)
- We want more resilient communities and forests
- We want more emphasis on at risk ecological and human communities
- We want learning and evidence to be central to policy and well resourced
- And we want a long-term collaborative planning that integrates the before, during and after aspects of bushfires

3.7 Fire and Orchids

During a break in the discussion of a vision and the Socratic circle, Mitch Smith gave a presentation on Orchids and Fire.

Orchids evolved highly specialised biological processes and symbiotic relationships. Have specific Mycorrhizal fungi and pollinator associations. Are strong bio-indicators that can be used to gauge the health of ecosystems. Australian ground orchids dominate in a dry landscape. Terrestrial orchids 'deal' with fire better than epiphytic sp. Fire is detrimental to most orchids including ground dwelling species.

DSE categorizes Vic orchids into 5 fire responses. Fire killed, Fire sensitive, Fire neutral, Fire responsive and Fire dependent. Experts claim only 3-4 so called dependant species I can only cite 1 species that requires fire to flower. Most orchids are in the first 2 categories.

Classifications can only be accounted to natural fire regimes not anthropogenic fire. Planned burns (inc. ecological) reduce orchid biodiversity dramatically. High energy requirements to flower/seed and post fire regrowth limit population reestablishment.

Post fire flowering in Aus. terrestrial orchids is only an "insurance policy" not a biological requirement.

Pollinators Food reward, food/resource deception and sexual deception syndromes most common pollination processes.

Often highly specific one on one pollinator relationships especially with deceptive evolutionary pathways. Pollinators rely on healthy environment for persistence (leaf litter, flower diversity, reproduction). Orchid biodiversity and pollination fitness increases with long unburnt/disturbed environments. Pollinator loss will lead to orchid extirpations.

Case study

Diuris punctata. AKA Purple *Diuris*, Purple donkey orchid. Flowers Oct/Nov for 4-6 weeks. Terrestrial orchid species mimicking vector preferences for Fabaceae (Pea flowers). Once widespread in Gippslands grassy woodlands.

Now mostly relegated to roadside 'remnants', often with historic soil disturbance. Utilises food deception (no reward) strategy which can attract various visitors. Requires one species of native bee, *Lipotriches australica* to facilitate pollination.

D. punctata often targeted in "ecological" burning programs. Responds to fire with forced, short flowering times (1 flowering event, occasionally 2). My observations indicate almost no pollinators present when regularly burnt.

Consistent pollination in most unburnt populations every year, no matter the size. Little monitoring if any of “Eco burning” outcomes. If monitored only flowers counted, not seed set, further misrepresenting evolutionary processes. *D. punctata* may persist for some time with frequent burning but declines in biodiversity (including *D. punctata*) are most often seen. *D. punctata* is vulnerable and less resilient to other pressures when frequently burnt.

I have never observed long term success with eco-burning techniques. Most orchid species often extirpated after 12-16 years (3-4 applications of fire) and reductions are exacerbated with other pressures (ie: drought, browsing, extra fire, reduced biodiversity)

Conclusion

Most, if not all orchids don’t require fire for evolutionary processes. Rhetoric around orchids and fire often misconstrue the role of fire and ecosystems. Orchids and anthropogenic fire mostly have poor outcomes.

False baselines and misinterpreted outcomes often cited when spruiking Eco burning methods. Symbiotic relationships not accounted for or unknown in fire “management” strategies. My experience indicates massive orchid declines due to excessive burning of landscapes.



4. Exploration

4.1 Fracture lines

- The inevitability of fire, a view by some that fire can be excluded
- What constitutes a healthy forest, pre-European or a new forest for a new circumstance
- A realistic perspective of the benefits and impacts (or consequences) of planned burning – it's not the answer, it is part of the solution, it has limitations – what is the balance in effort across prevention, preparedness (including resilience, adaptation) and response
- Personal responsibility versus Government intervention or support

5. Reflections

At the end of the dialogue, participants were asked to reflect on the most impactful part of the day. Responses included:

- The power of the welcome to country and smoking ceremony in setting the tone of the day
- Getting to know everyone around the circle and their story
- Strong endorsement of the Socratic circle as a mechanism to give everyone a say and to build up a conversation
- Keen interest in a vision statement and reflection on what the future may look like
- The knowledge regarding orchids and fire shared by Mitch
- The desire to keep talking and working through this subject

One reflection shared post event was:

"I kept coming back to was the suggestion that people who choose to live in high fire risk areas may simply need to accept higher insurance costs, greater risk and more responsibility.

I support personal and community responsibility, but I think the balance of burden matters. If insurance, compliance, risk and land management responsibilities become too expensive, we may simply drive people out of these communities.

I wonder whether there is scope for a different model, where government helps reduce some of that burden through things like subsidised insurance, while also investing in local preparedness, mentoring, training and employment pathways in forest management, ecological restoration, fire preparedness, tourism and other place-based industries.

This could create pathways such as:

mentorship → training → employment → stronger local knowledge → stronger community resilience

I also strongly believe communities need more opportunity to shape and deliver their own place-based projects.

One model could be a State funded community project pool managed locally through a community house or incorporated association. Community members could submit practical project ideas under simple guidelines, such as:

- the project must be manageable by those involved
- include a risk assessment and clear project plan
- have agreed check in points
- demonstrate a broader community or environmental benefit

I also really valued the discussion around mentorship and intergenerational knowledge sharing. There is so much practical knowledge held by people who are willing to share it, and I think stronger pathways are needed to pass that knowledge on.

The idea of testing different approaches through professionally supported trials also stood out to me. Rather than remaining stuck in competing opinions, communities could test ideas in controlled environments, gather evidence and learn from the results. Similarly, I liked the idea of reducing conflict by starting with common ground. People do not need to agree on everything to work together. Sometimes the better question is simply:

What do we agree on, and what can we build from there?

The discussions around education also reinforced for me how much practical nature-based learning has been lost, including environmental safety, bushfire preparedness and understanding the places we live in.

One of my biggest takeaways was simply realising that many of these thoughts are not mine alone. There are a lot of people asking similar questions about how we build healthier systems around forests, communities, education and shared responsibility.

5.1 Learnings for future dialogues

A number of learnings from the previous Heyfield dialogue were implemented for the Knob Reserve, in general feedback was strongly supportive of the programs multi day approach.

However, some thoughts were:

- Three field trips on one day over stretched the organising capacity, it may have been possible to hold over multiple days rather than concurrently
- The social evening was a success and the concept of guest speakers to help frame and prep the discussion could be explored at future events – may even be on-line
- Potential to establish a community pre-event from registrants – eg a Whats app group or website community and allow it to generate conversation and content pre and post dialogue
- Running events across the region is important to ensure equity and access but it takes close liaison with local community, networking and a strong lead. A long lead in time is needed

- The scoping document is important and many people referenced it – needs more effort in development
- A longer lead time would allow more opportunity for scoping and also seeking funding
- Marketing needs a long lead in, you need to grow recognition and expect late registration, one to one marketing more impactful, social media more about recognition.
- Registration makes events easier to manage, and if necessary to cancel, a registration fee was generally accepted and important in managing costs, it doesn't need to cover all costs.

Additional feedback from a participant

One final suggestion would be creating a way for Dialogue participants to stay connected, either by optionally sharing contact details at the end of sessions or through a private Facebook or WhatsApp group. It could help support ongoing conversations, knowledge sharing and future collaboration, I mentioned this to Wally but he asked if I had mentioned this to you so I thought I would add it into my email.

Note – a formal evaluation survey was not conducted for this event, due to low participation rate on previous events and reduce noise in email accounts

Good feedback however was

- Over 100 registrations across the program
- 80 individuals involved
- 40 new associate members
- 35 new Facebook followers
- 100 + Linked in reactions

5.2 Acknowledgements

Sponsors

GFD would like to acknowledge the support of Wellington Shire in the conduct of this dialogue and the provision of funding via their small grants program

Co-Chairs

GFD would like to thank Jess and Steve for their facilitation of the event and production of this report

Scribes

GFD would like to thank Bee Pickering for note taking at the event and Jo Lewis and Dorothy Mason for their notes from the field trips at Noojee and Bairnsdale

Presenters

GFD would like to thank the following presenters and speakers

Dialogue

- John Schauble – Discussion on fire inquiries
- Mitch Smith – Orchids and fire

Noojee

- Owen Salkin – property protection
- Quinton Pakan – Planned burn DEECA

Bairnsdale

- Peter Brick – Planned burn DEECA
- Kate Nelson – Sarsfield Recovery Committee

Sale evening

- John Schauble – reflection on property protection Dargo fire 2026

Providers

GFD would like to thank for following locals for making this a success

Knob Reserve – GLAWAC joint managers

Sale – Dave Willington Sale Event Centre

Noojee – Heritage Park café for catering

Bairnsdale – Sarsfield recovery centre and Sarah Adcock (Bus)

6. Appendices

Please note for background reading and context refer to the Dialogue scoping paper and background information provided on our webpage

6.1 Participant list

Dialogue participants:

Peter West, Liz Langford, John Schauble, Steve Pascoe, Mitch Smith, Jess Reeves, Ross Gilles, Craig Dunn, Jo Lewis, Caherine Clancy, Peter McHugh, Hilary Stripp, Hilary Rigg, Bee Pickering, Chris Neilson, Chris McEvoy, Dorothy Mason, Ewan Waller, Jess Barrett, Wally Notman, Ming Hui Choy, Kelly Thorburn, Rob Willesdorf, Sarah Adcock, Liz Clay, Pauline Pendrick, Daniel Salzman, Scott Dizais, Megan Graham, Maurice

6.2 Friday night presentation and discussion

A copy of John's presentation is included in our background papers on the webpage