

# A ravaged country is a



**Paul Sheehan**

*A revolution in land practices is needed or fire and drought will be the norm, not the exception.*

**A**T WHAT point does the message sink in? Great tracts of the nation's capital are in ruins and people are arguing and finger-pointing over piddling surface issues such as the amount of backburning.

"If we needed another symbol of the scale of our mistakes, this is it," Tim Flannery, the director of the South Australian Museum and author of *The Future Eaters*, told me this week. "These giant fires are the backlash from our vision of terra nullius - that Australia was an empty continent waiting to be shaped and occupied."

"With fire, we're still way behind; we still haven't realised the gravity of the situation. For the last 150 years, each conflagration has been bigger than the one before. These fires are getting worse because each fire cycle strips nutrients from the soil and destroys biodiversity."

The fires that have ravaged the capital and Sydney are symptoms of something much more profound, a continent growing increasingly desiccated by poor management. The problem involves such fundamental issues as land ownership, land-use rights and the right to water. What takes place on properties is impacting communities down-



...and Gary Demerle, an economist with the ...

upriver is impacting communities downstream. Fire and water have no respect for Torrens title or boundary fences.

"This fire is perfect for making people come to terms with the extent to which we have wrecked the country," says farmer-turned-conservationist Peter Andrews, who has successfully developed a system for conserving water in the landscape, but believes Australia is heading towards economic collapse unless it arrests the worsening salinisation problem.

"We've built a planned city, the bushland capital, and a lot of it has just burned to the ground. What does that tell us? Yet our reaction is to make the problem worse by more burning. Environmentally, backburning solves the problem but in the long term, it makes the underlying problem worse," Andrews says.

"Fires decrease the nutrient value of the soils and thus the plant life and the fertility provided by dense bird populations. This whole area is dying and has been for 30 years. You can see all the marshlands in the region around Canberra are dead or dying. The reservoirs are down, and the amount of blue-green algae is up. That tells you the environment is regressing. The whole area has been over-managed, using European practices... We're losing fertility from the surface everywhere now, losing biological energy from the surface of the soil.

"Once you get a cycle of nutrient loss in the soil, it also creates a cycle of a drying environment, less fertility, and an increasing cycle of fires. When you get a proliferation of thistle plants in the environment it tells you

the land is trying to repair itself. And what do we do? We burn the thistles out."

The urgency of his message, which challenges some conventional wisdoms, has begun to reverberate. Even though the CSIRO produced a positive report about Andrews's methods at his property at Bylong 10 years ago, nothing has ever developed. Tired of the inertia, the billionaire Gerry Harvey has undertaken to finance Andrews's work as he develops other examples which show how his system works. Another billionaire, Dick Pratt, is financing a scientific review committee to analyse Andrews's progress.

The Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the National Party, John Anderson, has allowed Andrews to begin working on his drought-affected property. The head of the CSIRO's land and water division, Dr John Williams, a guru in the field of land conservation, is has become an active supporter of Andrews.

At 2.30 on Monday afternoon, while Canberra was still shrouded in a surreal haze and fires were burning near the city's edges, Williams, Andrews and several land scientists, including Dr David Mitchell, gave a briefing to federal officials at the Edmund Barton Building about the underlying causes and solutions of the nation's chronic fire and salinisation cycles.

"I was shocked by the response [by Friday]. I couldn't find a room big enough to accommodate all the people who wanted to come,"

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said Gary Reynolds, an economist with the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, who organised the briefing. "We got about 60 people, even though by Monday a lot of staff were away because their suburbs had been burnt over the weekend and we only had about a third of the staff here."

Some of what they heard was shocking. The briefing was told that without major reforms the city of Perth could become "extinct". Perth is dependent on a fresh water bubble beneath the city but if that water level is further depleted by another 20 metres, the water pressure will decline and saltwater will begin to seep into the system from the nearby sea. That would be the end of Perth's water supply.

Inevitably, there are contradictions to the alarm of people like Flannery, Andrews and Mitchell.

"A reversion of the Australia that has been created this past 200 years to some premodern paradise cannot provide us with the quality of life we want," says Dr Alan Moran, director of the Deregulation Unit at the Institute of Public Affairs, in the latest IPA Review.

"The very hot forest fires that have been experienced in areas locked up in national parks is one consequence of attempting to forgo management and use of the forests."

He is stridently suspicious of the agenda of the Wentworth Group, the 11 scientists advising the Federal Government on soil and water

depletion, of which Flannery and Williams are leading members. In November, the Wentworth Group issued a report, *Blueprint For a Living Nation*, which warned: "Our continent is falling apart."

Moran dissents: "The Wentworth Group offers us little useful guidance for the future. With Rousseau-like nostalgia, the group harks back to an Arcadian Australia in the 45,000 years before European settlement... [But] the premodern environment was bitterly hostile to mankind, with starvation and massive floods punctuating great periods of drought..."

"We do need to make changes to retain a sustainable agriculture. We do need proper allocation of rights to water and an accurate definition of those rights. We do need means of ensuring that one farmer's negative impacts are not borne by another."

There may be fierce debate over solutions, but a big shift has taken place over admitting the scale of the challenge.

"The nation has set a new direction on the issues of soil and water management, which is really encouraging," says Flannery, "but we still haven't realised the gravity of the fire situation. And there is a huge amount of inertia built into the system."

Not as much as a week ago. With Canberra under an Armageddon sky, a sense of the scale, urgency and interconnectedness of Australia's problems with fire and water may at last be taking hold.

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