



# 'Grass half full or grass half empty? Valuing native grassy landscapes'

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Friends of Grasslands Inc. (www.fog.org.au) supporting native grassy landscapes

## Paradoxes of native vegetation management in the context of bushfire

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Land management agencies are confronted with costly and escalating impacts on social-ecological systems. This situation has arisen as a consequence of European occupation of Australia, combined with impacts of climate change. An example is current management effort to respond to changes in the frequency and intensity of bushfires in south-eastern Australia, involving complex and contradictory issues. This research explores paradoxes to contribute to environmental management agencies' greater understanding of how perceptions of 'realities' are framed by language. This exploration will inform native vegetation-management policy development and implementation in the most fire-prone region of Australia. Two of the most destructive and widely reported bushfires in Australia provide diverse forms of data in two qualitative case studies: the Canberra 2003 and Victorian Black Saturday Central Highlands 2009 bushfires. Themes found in mass media, policies, environmental histories, poetry and art, and perspectives of land-management practitioners are analysed using a paradoxical lens. This method will illuminate complex and contested multi-disciplinary management issues following major bushfires.



### Paradoxes of native vegetation management in the context of bushfire

Sam Strong, PhD candidate

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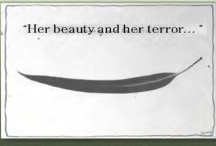
Figure showing 2003 Canberra & 2009 Victorian 'Black Saturday' bushfires case study areas in relation to other major 21st century fires in SE Australia.

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**Paradox:**  
*A perverse irony or contradiction*  
(Allen, 1990; Chesebro, 1984)

**Greening a brown land:**

Since 1788, human land use practices have centred on transposed European values and interpretations of indigenous knowledge: wild fires and native vegetation. For example, continued adoption of the 'aspirational' description for the colonial landscape as "a gentleman's park", belies the reality of the Australian environment.



Cartoon: M. Leung, 11.2.09, p80. Courtesy 'The Age'

Preliminary analysis indicates there are rich layers of meaning concerning management policy and responses in relation to knowledge and research, policy and history. In particular, some themes suggest conflicting responsibilities around risk management of ecological systems and human settlements.

A range of narratives contain powerful, mythological themes enriched with metaphorical influences (see image right). How these and other themes contribute to the framing and construction of meaning, in terms of management efforts and influences, will be explored in more detail.



Fire had a mind of its own, like a beast'

"...the...absolute fulcrum point for me is...a ranger...saying to me: "If I burn the bush in this particular spot, over at \*\*\*, I can be prosecuted under the EPBC Act. If I don't burn the bush in that particular spot, I can be prosecuted under the (emergency) Act." So if we don't get the words right, if we don't get...the structures and the policies right, we're actually putting people at risk. And it's not foolish for him to say that, because he actually went through the (bushfire inquiry) where they were being blamed. For not burning the bush. And there (was) talk of criminal charges. Fortunately none of them came, but the impact on some of those rangers was profound."  
Interview participant, 2014.

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Map courtesy www.wikimedia.org



Image: #ayashika/istockphoto

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Sam lives on the family farm near Seymour, Victoria. After completing a degree in Landscape Architecture (RMIT) in 1992, she worked both overseas and in Victoria until 2007. Work in community engagement around natural resource management led to post-graduate study, and Sam completed a Masters in Environmental Management at Charles Sturt University (CSU) in 2010. During this time Sam worked in bushfire recovery in the Central Highlands of Victoria following the 2009 bushfires. Questions arising from her Masters qualitative research project inspired her to undertake a PhD at CSU, to explore paradoxes of native vegetation management in south-eastern Australia this century through two bushfire case studies.