

Submission Number: NND.001.00988

Submission Of: vanessa cavanagh

Your Details

Email address:

Phone:

Preferred means of contact: Email

What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my personal situation

What was your personal situation in relation to the 2019-20 Bushfires? I co-own a property that was affected by the Gospers Mountain fire. Structures on the property I co-own was destroyed. My brother was living at that property at the time. I am an academic at university and my research is focused on fire management

Where do you live? Towradgi NSW

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

None. If things worked well there wouldn't have been all the death, destruction and damage that occurred. The first responders, as usual did a fantastic job of trying to mitigate the effects of the bushfires. But it should never have got as dire as it did.

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

I believe that Australian officials at the higher levels should have listened and taken action based on the expert advice that fire officials and scientists and communities have been trying to communicate for several years. What didn't work well was not being prepared and not managing the whole of the landscape well over many decades.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

All of Australia needs Caring for Country to be lead and undertaken under the guidance of local Indigenous people. This includes Sea Country areas (surrounding islands for example Torres Strait Islands) and terrestrial landscapes across the Australian landmass. Aboriginal burning regimes have beneficial outcomes for protecting the health of all Country (Aboriginal English use of the word), and bushfire hazard reduction as well as a plethora of positive social outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal people's relationships with Country needs to be reinstated in the way that all of Australia is cared for.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

Anyone involved in caring for Country anywhere in Australia needs to be working in real partnership with local Indigenous people. Indigenous caring for Country must be made mandatory for all environmental related position descriptions, as well as all university degrees related to environmental management degrees.

Reading for all staff in environmental management includes books by Indigenous authors: Dark Emu (Pascoe), Fire Country (Steffenson 2020), and a wealth of non-Indigenous author's work.

All environmental management employees should partake in a cultural burning workshop (National Indigenous Fire Workshop held annually - see Firesticks Alliance website for details).

All environmental management employees should partake in cultural competency training run by Indigenous experts such as Blackcard Course, <https://www.ccca.com.au/content/home>, or others listed on Supply Nation

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name

Supporting material provided:

Royal Commission submission VCavanagh_28april2020.pdf

Bushfire Royal Commission SUBMISSION_VCavanagh_28April2020_v0c

Vanessa Cavanagh

28 April 2020

Dear Director,

Submission on the Royal Commission (RC)

This submission comes from an individual resident of NSW. I am an Aboriginal woman (from the Bundjalung and Wonnarua nations), mother, home and property owner (bushfire affected in Gospers Mountain Fire December 2019), prior employee in the environmental conservation sector, academic and taxpayer.

As a human, I have deep concerns for the wellbeing of Country. I acknowledge the evidence of failing relationships between humans, and humans to Mother Earth. These failings manifest as human-induced environmental damage such as climate change, extreme social disparity with life-threatening poverty at one extreme and catastrophic events in nature such as the 2019-2020 megafires, which have direct and severe human-related implications.

As an Aboriginal woman of the Bundjalung and Wonnarua nations, I have connections to Bundjalung and Wonnarua Country that extend into time immemorial. These connections nurture and define my responsibilities and desires to care for Country in respectful and reciprocal ways. These principles extend to the lands on which I live, where I gratefully raise my family and work, and to all other Country too.

All of Australia is Indigenous land, with many distinct and present Indigenous nations occupying, identifying with, and striving to maintain positive relationships with Country.

Indigenous peoples successfully thrived across the Australian continent for thousands of generations. However, since British invasion and European colonisation, both Indigenous peoples and Country have experienced significant change and considerable damages. Evidence of this are the numerous and mounting failures that are experienced by Indigenous Australians, and the environmental deterioration that exists. Brief examples of these failings are present in Commonwealth Government's Closing the Gap initiative, as well as the range of environmental degeneration identified in Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. Furthermore, there is a plethora of relevant, current data and reporting on the social disadvantage that Indigenous people experience, and environment decline.

In relation to the nature of this RC, it is pertinent to note that I have over 20 years experience in environmental conservation management in NSW, in government and corporate sectors. I have practical, operational and research experience, including bushfire first responder (experienced remote area fire team member in NPWS). I am currently completing a PhD at the University of Wollongong, my topic is Aboriginal women and cultural burning in NSW.

I strongly advocate for a reform of the structural approaches to bushfire management.

The reform that I support is to reinstate Indigenous caring for Country systems and knowledges, within an Indigenous-led approach and framework. Such an approach would impact on and benefit the people and environment of Australia.

Bushfire Royal Commission SUBMISSION_VCavanagh_28April2020_v0c

I call for immediate and long-term resourcing of Indigenous-led caring for Country initiatives. Any such initiatives must be locally specific and culturally appropriate. Examples of local fire-specific Aboriginal initiatives include: Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation, Indigenous Mitigation Crews, The Koori Country Firesticks Aboriginal Corporation, WINBA – Wattleridge IPA, Mudjingaalbaraga Fire Sticks Project, and Murumbung Rangers Program (ACT). Many other local and community-based examples exist.

In relation to my own experiences of bushfire, I attach links to my Friday Essay published in The Conversation (24 January 2020). Additionally, links to an article that I co-authored (also published in The Conversation 10 January 2020) outlining the unique experiences of grief for Aboriginal people resulting from the 2019-2020 megafires.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the RC. I hope that this submission contributes to the development of more effective bushfire management. I would be pleased to participate in future discussion forums on this topic and provide my contact details for that purpose.

Kind Regards,
Vanessa Cavanagh

LINK to FRIDAY ESSAY <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-this-grandmother-tree-connects-me-to-country-i-cried-when-i-saw-her-burned-129782>

LINK to Williamson, Weir and Cavanagh <https://theconversation.com/strength-from-perpetual-grief-how-aboriginal-people-experience-the-bushfire-crisis-129448>