



The inferno in Australia

By Zach Dickerson
Editor in Chief

With a combination of record breaking temperatures and months of severe drought, the massive bushfires of Australia that have been burning since September continue to intensify and rage on.

So far, many towns have been evacuated (many of these towns being totally destroyed with 2,000 homes gone), at least 25 people have been killed, an estimated one billion animals have been killed and 15.6 million acres have burned (roughly the size of West Virginia).

One of the states that has been affected the worst is New South Wales, located on the lower east coast of the country, where fires have burned roughly 12.4 million acres and destroyed 1,300 homes. As of Monday, Jan. 6, about 130 fires were burning across the state in the bush, mountain forests and national parks.

Billions of animals that are unique to Australia

are also dying or at risk. In New South Wales alone, a third of their koala population have died and a third of their habitat destroyed as well, according to federal environmental minister Sussan Ley in December.

Other animals that have been greatly affected are wombats, who can't cope with heat or stress and panic at the smell of smoke, as well as kangaroos and many other native animals.

Both officials and even regular citizens are desperately working to save, protect, care for and rehabilitate all of these animals. But these fires are obliterating Australia's iconic ecosystem.

Once fires have started, other areas are at risk, with embers blown by the wind causing blazes to spread to new areas. Bush fires themselves can also drive thunderstorms, increasing the risk of lightning strikes and further fires.

While the fires have been traced back to being started either by lightning strikes or people, either through accident or deliberately committing arson (with some people currently

in custody), scientists have stated that climate change is a big proponent to why the fires are so massive and spreading like they are.

Hot, dry weather combined with a long drought period and strong winds have created the perfect conditions for the fire to spread rapidly. According to the Australian Bureau of Meteorology, "Climate change is increasing the bushfire risk in Australia by lengthening the fire season, decreasing precipitation and increasing temperature."

2019 was also both the hottest and driest year ever measured in Australia, according to the Bureau of Meteorology, with December being one of the top two hottest months on record.

Also, according to Climate Signals, while climate change might not ignite the fires, it is giving them the chance to turn into catastrophic blazes by creating warmer temperatures, increasing the amount of fuel (dried vegetation) available and reducing water availability because of higher evaporation.

While Australia is no stranger to drought, climate change has worsened drought conditions so that when droughts occur, the conditions are in a much hotter climate and, in some cases, with lower precipitation, according to Climate Signals.

The Climate Reality Project also reports that making the connection between global temperature rise and wildfires is also pretty simple science. As droughts dry out the land, killing plant life, which then also dries out itself, becoming far easier to ignite.

Professional firefighters in Australia and thousands of volunteers are working to combat the flames, as well as firefighters from other countries such as the United States, Canada and New Zealand. Australia's police, military and navy are also working on rescue and evacuation efforts.

The firefighters are working to combat the flames by spraying water and fire retardant from planes, helicopters and from the ground. But because the fires are extremely difficult to fight, authorities often have to turn to just stopping the spread of the flames rather than putting them out.

They work to contain the spread by digging earth boundaries to stop them. The main priority is to work on saving lives.



This photo of a kangaroo near a burning home in New South Wales, Australia by New York Times photographer Matthew Abbott has come to symbolize the destruction wrought by the wildfires in Australia. Taken in the middle of the day Dec. 31, it appeared in the Times and has since been shared widely in social media, even garnering more than 2 million likes on the Instagram page of Greta Thunberg, the teenage climate and environmental activist who was named Time magazine's 2019 Person of the Year last month.