

Bushfires at Flinders Chase National Park

Accurate at 16 March 2020

The 2019-20 bushfire event on Kangaroo Island was the largest in the island's recorded history and burnt more vegetation than any other bushfire on the island.

The bushfire event was ignited by lightning strikes on 20 December, which started the Duncan and Menzies fires, followed by more lightning strikes on 30 December, which started the Ravine fire.

In total, about 200,000 hectares of the 440,500-hectare island was burnt – that's almost half the island.

The western end of the island, home to the internationally renowned Flinders Chase National Park, was heavily affected by the bushfires – 96 per cent of Flinders Chase and the adjoining Ravine des Casoars Wilderness Protection Area was burnt, and 98 per cent of Kelly Hill Conservation Park was burnt.

The Country Fire Service – the control agency for bushfires in all areas of South Australia – declared the bushfire zone contained on 21 January and safe on 6 February 2020. Hundreds of firefighters were involved, supported by other agencies, private industry and the local community.

The fire and recovery cycle

Bushfires have played an integral part in shaping the ecology of the Australian landscape for millions of years. Warm springs, hot summers, dry vegetation, strong winds and low humidity all create the ideal conditions for fire, with lightning the primary trigger.

The last major bushfire in Flinders Chase National Park was in 2007, but there were others in 1970, 1968, 1958, 1954, 1953 and 1931 (when records began).

The December 2007 bushfire was also caused by lightning strikes and burnt more than 90,000 hectares, of which 75,000 hectares was park and reserve land.

Not everything burnt is lost

Much of the infrastructure in Flinders Chase National Park was destroyed, such as the visitor centre, heritage

cottages, campgrounds, toilets, walking trails and picnic areas.

The exact number of native animals that perished has not been confirmed.

Although the vegetation has burnt, it is not lost, and most is continuing to grow since the bushfire. It doesn't take long for the bush to start recovering. Many native plant species are adapted to survive, regenerate and thrive after fire. New shoots are already visible on eucalyptus trees and other vegetation across Flinders Chase National Park.

Burnt trees that are still standing can be havens for insects that feed birds and small mammals. These trees help protect recovering vegetation and stabilise soils against erosion. Fallen burnt trees provide new homes for smaller animals, especially reptiles.

Fire plays an important role in the ecology of the environment, and is needed to trigger some natural processes, such as stimulating seed germination.

Looking ahead

The western end of Kangaroo Island has long been known as one of the most botanically unique areas in South Australia. It is also home to the global tourism drawcards of Cape du Couedic Lighthouse, Admirals Arch and Remarkable Rocks – all within Flinders Chase National Park.

National Parks and Wildlife Service South Australia (NPWSSA) has about 127,000 hectares of parks and reserves on Kangaroo Island. Of this, more than 90,000 hectares were in the recent bushfire zone. And of this land, about 86,000 hectares were burnt.

NPWSSA is working hard and leading the bushfire recovery of Kangaroo Island's affected parks and reserves, including supporting native wildlife recovery, rebuilding parks infrastructure and creating a process to reimagine nature-based tourism in parks. There are still hundreds of opportunities to experience South Australia's natural and heritage wonders, with more than 300 bushfire-unaffected parks across the state and six unaffected parks on the island, including the iconic Seal Bay Conservation Park.