

Bush Fires

in the North of Australia



Information for Travellers



TROPICAL SAVANNAS CRC
Cooperative Research Centre for the Sustainable Development of Tropical Savannas



When visitors first see bush fires in the north of Australia it can come as something of a shock—fires and smoke seem common, fire trucks are rare and the country is often burnt and black for many kilometres.

Bush fires are a natural part of the savanna landscape in the north of Australia. But they still raise many questions. What do I do if a fire comes close? How are these fires affecting the environment? Should I report fires to the authorities?

This brochure answers many of these questions and provides contacts for more detailed information on fire.



AM I AT RISK FROM BUSH FIRES?

In most cases no—provided you respect the fire and follow basic fire awareness as outlined in this brochure. These fires are usually much less intense than the bush fires of southern Australia. This is because the vegetation types are different and the level of fuel available to burn is lower.

The intensity of bush fires also depends on the time of year. There are few fires in the tropical wet season (December to April) with its heavy rains. Fires become common in the early dry season (May to June), but cooler conditions limit their intensity.

However, outbreaks can be more dangerous and fires can be hotter in the late dry season (July to November), when the grass and tree litter is drier. Fires can be started by lightning and fanned by strong winds and can be a threat if adequate precautions are not taken.

ARE BUSH FIRES HARMING THE ENVIRONMENT?

Fire has been a part of this landscape for thousands of years; consequently many plants and animals are well adapted to fires. Many trees require fire to germinate their seeds, and various animals use the burnt areas to forage in.



There are some plants and animals, however, which are not well adapted to fire. These are found in places like the rocky country of Kakadu and the Kimberley and the rainforests of north-eastern Queensland. But even these areas can be burnt by the fiercer late dry season outbreaks. Fires, early or late in the season, can damage other animal and plant habitats. The growing environmental concern in the north of Australia is that these fires are becoming more frequent.

SHOULD BUSH FIRES BE REPORTED?

Fires in the early dry season (May to June) generally do not need to be extinguished or reported. They are usually monitored via satellite. Many of these fires are part of land management practice where low intensity fires are lit early in the dry season in key areas to reduce the grass and litter load. The practice may incorporate burning from aircraft and is designed to reduce the occurrence of destructive bush fires.

Fires occurring from July to November are often hotter and may need to be reported (contact details are outlined on the back of this brochure). While these late dry season fires can be used to manage landscapes in parts of the north, they can harm property and the environment if they are fierce or get out of control.



WHAT IF I ENCOUNTER A BUSH FIRE WHILE DRIVING?

If the fire is just burning the undergrowth with little smoke you should not be in any danger. In these northern regions even higher intensity fires that are burning the canopy of the trees rarely put out enough heat to make roadways impassable.

If there is a lot of smoke:

- Slow down and be aware that there could be people, vehicles and livestock on the road.
- Turn car headlights on to low beam and close windows and outside vents.
- If you cannot see clearly, pull over to the side of the road, stop your vehicle, keep the headlights on and wait until the smoke clears.
- Follow directions of police and firefighters if present.

If you become trapped by a fierce fire:

- Stay in your car.
- Park in an area of low or no vegetation, keep the engine running and turn on the hazard lights.
- Close the doors, windows and outside vents.
- Lie on the floor and cover your body with any available woollen or cotton blankets or cloth.
- Do not get out of the car or open windows until the fire front has passed.

WHAT IF I ENCOUNTER A BUSH FIRE ON FOOT?

- Do not panic.
- Move to clear or already burnt ground.
- Don't try to run uphill. Stay low and seek shelter behind a log, rocky outcrop or embankment to protect yourself from radiant heat.
- If your clothes catch fire, don't run—stop, drop, cover your face and roll over and over to extinguish the flames.

WHAT ABOUT LIGHTING CAMP FIRES?

Camp fire safety

Fires are prohibited when:

1. The Fire Danger Rating is Very High or Extreme.
2. A ban has been imposed by local authorities.

Gas appliances are safer than an open fire because the flame is contained and there is little risk of sparks escaping. However, on prohibited burning days, gas appliances can only be used if:

- The area has been set aside by state or local authorities (ie BBQ areas); and
 - All combustible material is cleared around the appliance for at least a 5 m radius.
3. On days when the Fire Danger Rating is Low, Moderate or High, camp fires may be lit when:
 - It is not windy; and
 - All flammable material has been cleared away from the area around the camp fire. The **minimum** distance of the cleared area varies, depending on which State you are in (2m for QLD, 3m for WA and 4m for NT).
 4. A camp fire must be attended by an adult at all times.
 5. Before leaving, extinguish the camp fire completely with water or soil.



CONTACTS

Reporting fires in the north of Australia:

- In Western Australia and Queensland, contact the Fire Services on 000.
- In the Northern Territory, contact the Bushfires Council on (08) 8922 0844.

For further information about fires in the north:

- Visit the Bushfires Council of the Northern Territory website via www.ipe.nt.gov.au
- Visit the Tropical Savannas CRC and Natural Heritage Trust website on www.firenorth.org.au
- Visit the CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, Darwin website on www.terc.csiro.au
- Contact the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia on (08) 9323 9300 or free call 1800 199 084. Visit FESA's website on www.fesa.wa.gov.au

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FIRE DANGER RATINGS

Ratings can provide a guide to appropriate fire use during the dry season.

- LOW:** High humidity, rainfall. The bush is wet.
- MODERATE:** High humidity, rainfall and little wind. The bush is damp.
- HIGH:** Warm conditions, with some wind. The bush is dry.
- VERY HIGH:** Hot, windy conditions. The bush is dry and the use of open fires is prohibited.
- EXTREME:** Very hot and windy. The bush is very dry and fires may be unmanageable. No fires may be lit.

