

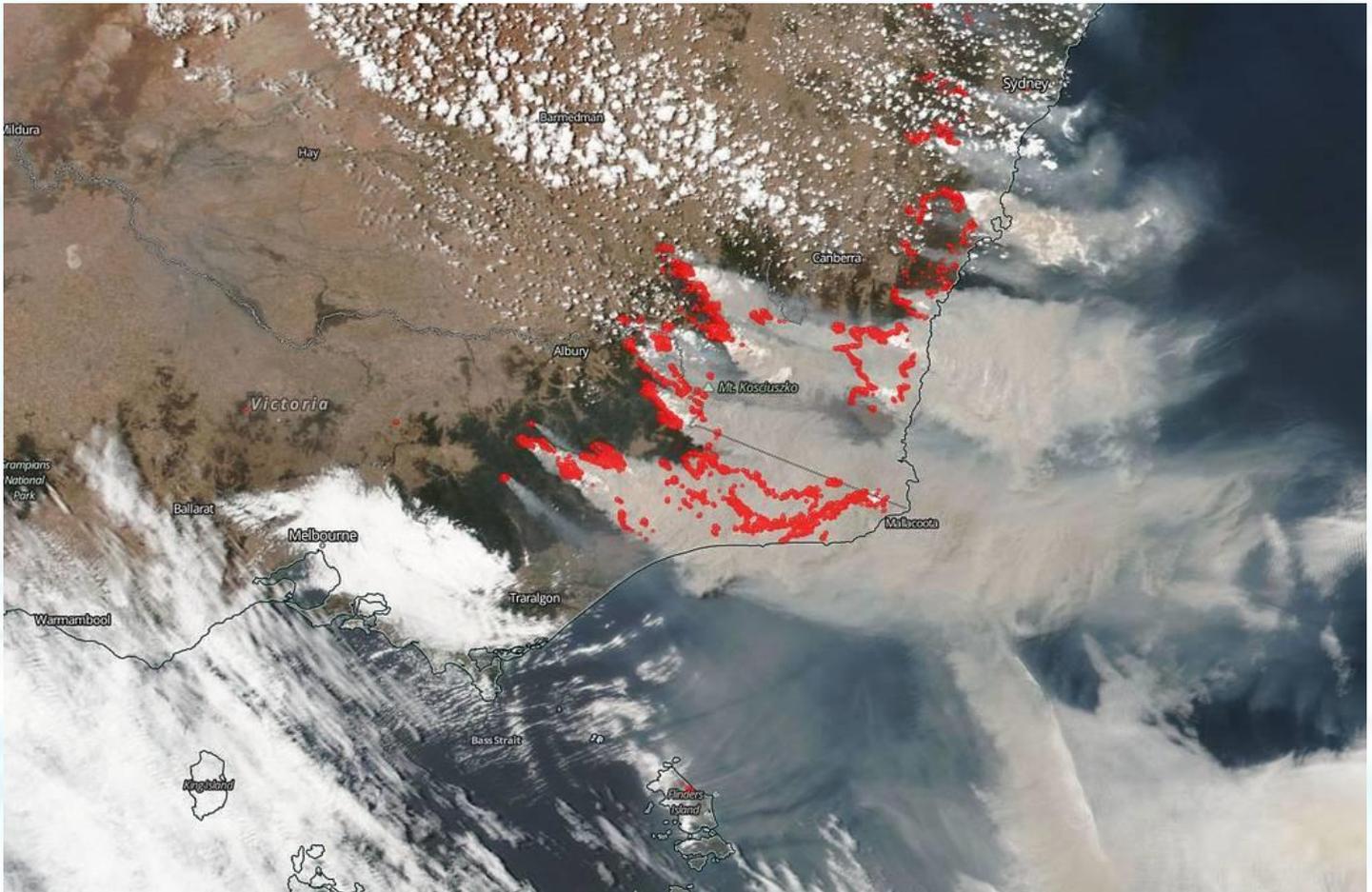


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dispatches from the wild, weird world of humanity and its biosphere

By Sam Matey, January 8 2020



Australia Is Burning: An Unnatural Disaster. In one of the worst climate crisis disasters yet, vast swathes of Australia are aflame. Australia's spring this year was the driest on record, (Australia is in the Southern Hemisphere, so the Sep-Nov months are spring, and the Dec-Feb months are summer) and summer saw a huge heatwave, with a national average maximum temperature of 105.6 degrees Fahrenheit! (For more, see tinyurl.com/ygfa3b9d).

Unsurprisingly, the spring-summer bushfire season has been horrendous, without parallel in modern Australian history. Since September, bushfires across Australia have killed 25 people, destroyed thousands of homes, and burned over 8.4 million hectares, or 20 million acres of land. (For more, see tinyurl.com/yh4yeyhn). That is a scale truly hard to comprehend. An area twice the size of Massachusetts (and nearly the size of Maine, which has just under 23 million acres of land) has been burned, more than the area burned in the 2019 California and Amazon fires combined. Stop and think about that for a moment. Twice the size of Massachusetts, *burned*. That area, rendered as a red square by the Guardian's interactive map, is viewable compared to New England in the image below.



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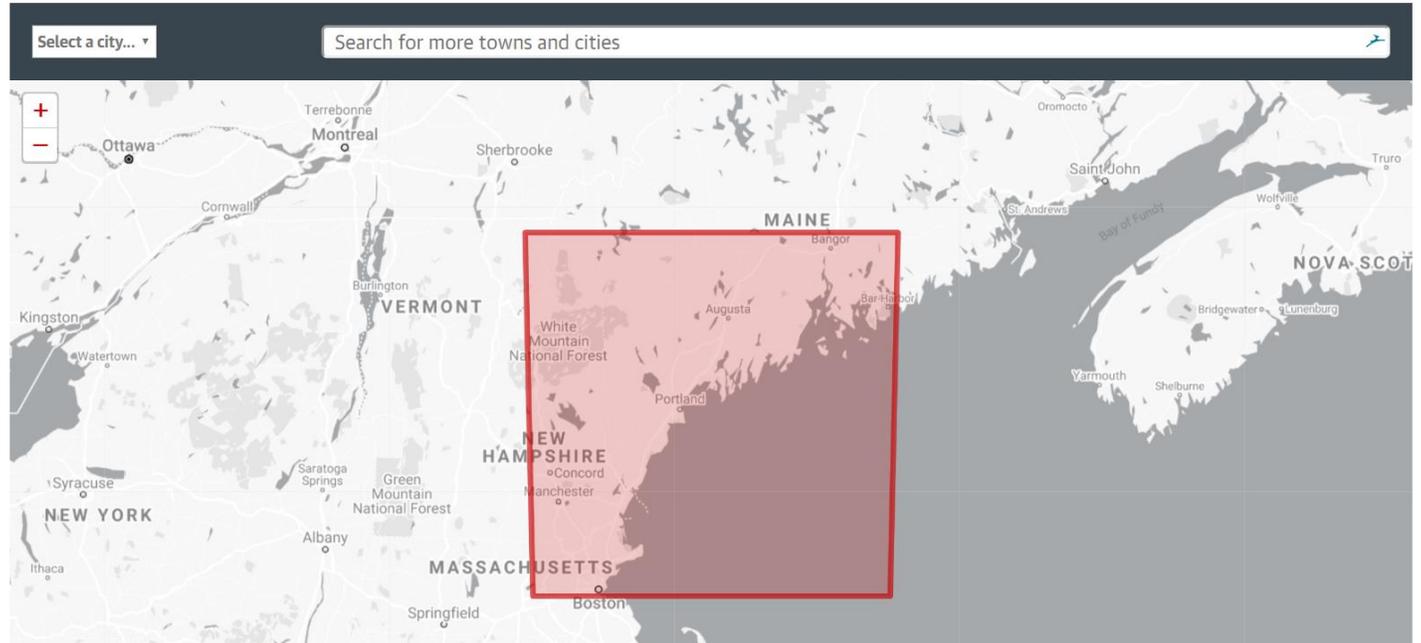
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Total area burned in NSW, QLD, SA, VIC and WA

At least **8.4m hectares has been burned** in all states and territories excluding the NT since the start of the 2019 fire season, with 4.9m of this in NSW

Currently showing: Total area burned in NSW, QLD, SA, VIC and WA



The situation worsened substantially in early January, as three active fires in Victoria combined to form a single active blaze bigger than Manhattan. The Sydney suburb of Penrith reached a temperature of 120 degrees Fahrenheit, and the national capital, Canberra, reached 111 degrees Fahrenheit. (For more, see tinyurl.com/qr539jl). Rain provided some temporary relief on Monday, January 6th, but the fires are expected to spring back to their former state, or worse, by Thursday the 9th, expected to be a hot, dry, and windy day. (Pictured on previous page: NASA satellite imagery of the fires, with coasts delineated and fire locations highlighted in red. In true color, they would be shrouded by their own smoke. For more, see tinyurl.com/yzuk96yp).

These bushfires are on a truly unprecedented scale and have had shocking effects. Volunteer firefighters, worked to exhaustion, eventually came to rely on the Australian military for help. One town even had to have many of its vulnerable residents evacuated. On Friday, January 3rd, the Australian Navy vessel *HMAS Choules* evacuated about 1,000 residents of the beach town of Mallacoota, in the state of Victoria, which has been encircled by wildfires and is now only accessible by sea or air. Thousands had retreated the





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beach for shelter from the flames, which had devastated the town and made the sky appear an eerie blood-red. Hundreds more have been evacuated since. For more on this harrowing story, see tinyurl.com/ydq2enal. (Pictured above: Mallacoota Wharf. For more pictures, see <https://tinyurl.com/yk622sul>).

The scars from this season of conflagration will be deep and long-lasting. First of all, the vast lands of forest and scrubland going up in flame have contributed further to the climate crisis. The Global Carbon Project estimates that the fires since September have emitted about 350 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide, or about two-thirds of what all of Australia's human civilization emits in a normal year. That's absolutely horrifying—a huge additional emissions boost just as the country suffers from the effects of the emissions of past decades. In a double whammy, the burned forests used to serve as carbon sinks, and are now ashy wastelands, meaning that less carbon will be removed from the atmosphere even as a huge load more is added. This is a particularly awful example of unexpected and dangerous “climate feedbacks”—effects of climate change causing their own second-order problematic effects and feeding back into the problem, making climate change worse and worse. For more, again see tinyurl.com/yh4yeyhn.

The fires are also causing problems beyond Australia's borders. Smoke from the Victoria/New South Wales megafires has drifted to New Zealand, to the extent that Christchurch residents have widely reported actually smelling the smoke and burning. (Keep in mind it's over *two thousand kilometers* from Christchurch, New Zealand to the Australian shore, more than the



distance between Maine and North Carolina!). Worse, the dust and ash particles carried in the smoke have settled on the glaciers of New Zealand's South Atlantic, tinting vast areas “caramel-colored” and likely greatly accelerating the year's melt. Professor Andrew Mackintosh of Monash University told the *Guardian* that this level of dust transfer was unprecedented in his two decades of studying New Zealand glaciers, and estimated that the ashy coating would increase this season's glacier melt by 20 to 30 percent. For more on the New Zealand effects, see tinyurl.com/yzygv6y4.

(Pictured, from the Guardian: helicopter on ash-covered New Zealand glacier).



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Furthermore, these mega-fires have been a tragedy not just for humans, but for much of Australia's unique wildlife. (Pictured: a kangaroo running by a burning house in Conjola, New South Wales, Australia. See

tinyurl.com/yfmx6vxy). Although no full tally can yet be made, horrific images and personal experiences of burned-alive animals are circulating on the Internet, and impromptu rescue shelters and kind citizens are treating iconic wildlife like koalas that are fleeing the flames. The

Australian Environment Minister, Sussan Ley, estimates that perhaps as many as to 8,400 koalas have been killed, based on the fact that 30% of the New South Wales mid-north coast, home to about 15,000-28,000 koalas, has burned. Other imperiled creatures affected by this nightmarish bushfire season include the western ground parrot and the Kangaroo Island dunnart. For more, see

tinyurl.com/wq72hmc. (Pictured: a noble and kind firefighter offering a koala water in Cudlee Creek.

See tinyurl.com/s3s3d38 for more).



In a shocking yet all too believable twist, the government of Australia's Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, is continuing in their manifestly delusional climate change denialism. In November, Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormick said that those trying to point out the link between climate change and the bushfires were ""pure, enlightened and woke capital-city greenies"" and ""inner-city raving lunatics."" In early December, Morrison's government worked against any action at the UN climate talks, effectively sabotaging advances in the Paris Climate Agreement while their country burned. In mid-December, Morrison went on an unannounced holiday to Hawaii in the middle of the bushfire crisis, and then had his office lie that he wasn't there, before eventually fessing up and returning home. To top it all, on December 23rd, Morrison (back from Hawaii) said that calls to reduce carbon dioxide emissions were ""reckless,"" refused to hold a meeting with state governments to address the monstrous bushfires, and said that Australia didn't need to do anything



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more to address the world climate crisis (despite the fact that it's doing worse than nothing, still heavily supporting coal mining and export). Then, on January 4th, Morrison called in the army reserve to help fight the fires (as he should have done months ago) and finally fulfilled an 18-month-old request to increase funding



for aerial firefighting. Based on that too-little too-late bare-minimum action, he then had the nerve, while the people of Mallacoota huddled on the beach and watched flames devour their homes, to release a partisan ad set to jaunty music boasting of his response to the fires. Morrison is simply despicable. He's less unhinged on the world stage, perhaps, but just as divorced from reality and criminally negligent of his duties to his country as Donald Trump. Already, the Australian people are responding. On December 30th, 2019, Melinda Plesman, who lost her family home of 35 years to bushfires on November 9th, dumped the charred remains outside the Australian Parliament in protest against Morrison's cowardice and prevarication (pictured, see tinyurl.com/yhadpt96). Let us hope that Morrison will be forced into action by the apocalyptic events unfolding, and will then pay the price for his failures at the ballot box at Australia's next elections. In Australia, America, and Brazil, ruling parties and heads of government are dangerously and willfully ignorant about the greatest challenge of our time. Political action is increasingly one of the most important areas of fighting climate change. For more on Morrison's bushfire fiascoes, see tinyurl.com/yjgstptr.

In sum, much of Australia is now confronting the brutal reality of the climate crisis head on. It's not just rising levels of a colorless gas in the atmosphere or melting ice caps far away anymore, it's devastated towns, burned-alive animals, destroyed livelihoods, vast swathes of devastation, and blood-red skies right in developed Western countries. As the 2020s begin, the urgent need to get rid of fossil fuels, transition to renewable energy, and do everything possible to draw down the thickening blanket of human-emitted greenhouse gases has never been clearer. This will be the struggle of the century, and its triumphs and tragedies will be written in our lifetimes.