

Canberra Dispatches

23 April 2020

Matter of Degrees, Series

By **Cameron Muir**

The smoke has been here hanging all day or blowing in of an evening for weeks now. The kids have been indoors most of this time. Even for the last two weeks of school, before the summer holidays, they were ordered to stay inside and spent their lunches and recesses in the classroom or hall because of the heatwaves.

Some days you can see plumes of white dense smoke rising from the Tallaganda fires on the eastern horizon. We'd ridden bicycles on the trails through this state forest only six months ago. Now ecologists are saying it's the "last nail in the coffin" for some of the birds, insects, animals, and trees that live there.

Usually, summer means camping and bushwalking. The most benign of outdoor pursuits, slow and attentive to your surroundings, now seems risky. I don't think we'll ever feel at ease again in warmer months.

The hospital Leanne works at is in lockdown because the smoke is getting inside, tripping the fire alarms, and affecting patients with heart and respiratory conditions. Security guards stand in front of the doors. Leanne texts me photos of the lights inside the hospital illuminating shafts of smoke.

We consider getting the boys to Dubbo or up to where my father is (100 kilometres or so north of Sydney) where there is less smoke, but we don't know if we should be among the holiday traffic, with so many evacuating along the coastal hinterlands.

Newspapers report people traumatised after hearing animals screaming in pain in the forests. More than a billion animals have died in the fires, according to conservative estimates.

My mother sends me a photo of a dust storm rolling over Dubbo. There is no rain forecast there until May. Some smaller towns further west have water trucked in. The rivers are so low or dry that NSW Department of Fisheries staff have been transferring fish into larger waterholes by hand. They're calling it a Noah's Ark operation.

I write this under an orange sky—dust blowing from the inland, a brief reprieve from the smoke. Just as the sun begins to set, the wind shifts to an easterly, bringing dense smoke from the coastal forests which have been burning for weeks. The smoke is a constant reminder of the loss and suffering along the coast and south towards Mount Kosciuszko and of the intransigence of our politicians.

The sky turns black. New Year's Eve is usually a big party in our family. We cry in the hazy living room.

The air quality in Canberra is the worst in the world. An elderly woman disembarks at Canberra Airport, breathes the air, immediately suffers respiratory distress, and dies.

Kirsten Wehner, Jenny Newell, and I are working on an anthology titled, *Living with the Anthropocene*. Contributors begin emailing to check if we're safe—and to say they feel that their own contributions aren't sufficient, as they don't capture the scale. This is what the book is for, to prepare for this, we knew it was coming. It's already here.

We haven't heard from Jenny for days. She's with her family in Cobargo on the south coast. The township is surrounded by fire. All communication is cut.

My brother is stuck with his three-year-old son on the highway between Canberra and Sydney. The fire has closed the road. Eventually, he gets through with a police escort.

Canberra experiences its hottest day on record.

Australia shares firefighting equipment and sometimes workers with the United States and Canada, but our respective fire seasons are so long now they're starting to overlap. Normally we'd have the Californians over here, but they've had fires in late October.

The kids become adept at reading the colour-coded maps on the Fire Near Me app. A new language, a different representation of the natural world, nature as threat.

Jenny makes it out of Cobargo along with her family. We hear a father and son died there. Jenny sees our Prime Minister heading in the other direction, towards Cobargo, where he'll be confronted by angry residents.

Videos circulate showing scorched corpses of sheep piled up along fence lines where they'd tried to flee the smoke and flames.

The smoke is relentless and oppressive. For 56 days, the smoke pollution exceeds air quality safety standards. We can't help thinking about other countries whose cities experience hazardous pollution much of the year.

People rally in the streets across Australia.

A hailstorm tears through Canberra, punching holes through roofs. Trees are stripped of leaves and branches. Over 30,000 cars are written off. But the air is clear. After the storm, people emerge from their houses in the evening to exercise in the first breathable air for months. Rain is novel. Kids play cricket on the street in their pyjamas.

The roads open and we visit a friend's property. On the way home, we see plumes of smoke at Canberra's border. The Orroral Valley fire spreads through Namadgi National Park and burns a quarter of the Australian Capital Territory. Canberra is placed under a State of Emergency. In the evenings, you can see the flames on the peaks of the mountain ranges, glowing like Mordor. It's Canberra's worst environmental catastrophe.

The summer's smoke is linked to the deaths of 31 people in Canberra.

On 10 February it rains more than it has in the last two years. It keeps raining in March. After years of drought, heat, and a summer of smoke, the living world seems confused. Trees and plants are thrown into bloom.

Namadgi remains closed.