Summer's Tempo: Bushfires, Water, and Time

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Matter of Degrees,Series

By **Ruth Morgan**

For me, the Savage Summer was televised, unfolding in my family's living room in Perth and then a hotel room in Ooty in southern India. I'd expected locals there to ask me about cricket, but all they wanted to talk about were the bushfires that had seemingly engulfed the entire continent. I watched as the Nullarbor's Eyre Highway was shut for days as fires tore through the Great Western Woodlands, stranding travellers at roadhouses I'd visited on a road trip across Australia just twelve months earlier. From Melbourne, my partner sent me photos of the smog blanketing the suburbs as she frantically searched for smoke masks to help vulnerable clients at a medical centre she managed. Social media was ablaze too with videos documenting the fires firsthand, so vivid and visceral.

Among the videos that caught my attention showed a helicopter hovering over a suburban swimming pool southwest of Sydney, scooping up a load of water into a big orange sack that could be dumped on a nearby fire. Summers by the backyard pool took on a whole new light.

Bizarre as that video seemed, it somehow made sense. Just add water—a simple firefighting equation. The more water, the better. Surely.

Apparently not. There's a cruel irony at work when a downpour of rain meets a bone-dry and fire-ravaged land. The rainfall washes ash, debris, and mud into parched riverbeds, choking waterways, starving them of oxygen and making the water so murky that the sunlight can't shine through. Aquatic creatures struggle to thrive in these conditions, especially after a prolonged drought, extreme heat, and fire. Something that

does do well in that situation is blue-green algae—a problem for the quality of drinking water in water catchments, along with the risk of mudslides down eroded slopes.

This long tail of bushfires can go unnoticed, contrasting with the ferocity and violence of the inferno itself. Forest, soil, water—Judge Leonard Stretton's "inseparable trinity"—account then not only for fire's kindling and intensity but also fire's slow and painful expiration.

As I read about the concerns of freshwater ecologists and water managers, I thought back to a tour of the Yan Yean water supply system I'd taken back in November. The tour was as much about the history of Melbourne's water supplies as it was about the lasting effects of the Black Saturday bushfires ten years earlier. The 2009 bushfires damaged nearly a third of Melbourne's water supply catchments, and the slow regrowth of trees in those catchments would reduce the amount of water that could accumulate in the reservoirs for years to come.

We'd paused for lunch that day at Toorourrong Reservoir in the Kinglake National Park, Whittlesea. The park had been destroyed on Black Saturday and even though the reservoir's surrounding parklands had since been restored, the blackened Mountain Ash on the horizon were a grim reminder of that summer. Those trees had been 300 years old, an information panel on the upgraded reservoir wall explained. They'll need time to grow once more, time without fire. They are fitting sentinels to watch over the park's bushfire memorial, a granite structure in the shape of an open seedpod. These are the makings of new beginnings, out of the ashes. Slow, but hopeful.