

FIRE AND THE COAST AND THE EARLY DAYS

notes from
a presentation by
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29th September 1989
Manjimup, Western Australia

First, may I introduce myself and give you some of my background - My forebears came to W.A. in 1844 and spent some time at Cape Riche and then moved to Mt. Barker. My Grandfather came to Lake Muir in 1851 with a flock of sheep. He settled at Perup in 1855 and Deeside in 1856. He lived at Deeside except for two and a half years at Eucla, until he died in 1922 aged 93 years. He explored extensively, going at one time to Lake Grace and further out.

The Aborigines spoke of the vast grass land on the coast and showed him the way. Today it is known as the Deeside Coast.

My father was born in 1876 and lived at Deeside until he died in 1966.

I was born in 1920 and lived at Deeside for 30 years except for 2 years at boarding school in Perth and two years away in the army. I took over part of the Deeside property called Padgee and lived there until 4 years ago when I moved into town. My son Jeff now lives at Padgee.

I first helped drive cattle to the coast in 1938 and from then on until 4 or 5 years ago took cattle to the coast, about Christmas time and mustered them in May to August to drove them home.

We would do some burning January, February or March if the weather was suitable, this was the practice of the Aborigines and my forebears and other early settlers.

My father said, the natives would not burn before about Christmas time, they would burn every 3 to 4 years or as often as it would burn - this was the practice in the jarrah and karri forest areas.

Frequent burning kept the floor of the forest clean. The jarrah and karri forest and the coastal areas, were vast grasslands and burning was easy because of frequent burning; big fires did not develop.

About 1935 my father and I rode off the coast on horse across the Chesapeake back up the Shannon River to the well site. We camped one night by the river. The grass was about up to our stirrup irons - we crossed the river a couple of times and a few boggy gullies with Wattle and tea tree thickets. Today we would use a dozer in front of us. (We were looking for cattle).

You may ask why is the area like a jungle today.

In the summer of 1937 a big fire burned from Manjimup to Walpole and almost to Mt Barker. It happened because there were no buffer zones. The Forest Department had decided to keep fire out of the forest and some of the area would have been 10 years old or more, since the last fire. With a wind like cyclone Alby, it was a catastrophe.

My father inspected the area on his way to the coast to check on what may have happened to the cattle on the coast - he said there was not a green vestage to be seen in much of the area.

At Beard Tower on the Deeside Coast Road the farmer there had his car burnt - the fire burnt on the ground and 2 days later came through the tree tops. He had parked his vehicle on burnt ground thinking it would be safe.

Another story is that the Apiarists had left in a hurry, because of the fire further down the South West Highway, a stock of 4 gallon tins of honey - the solder melted on the tins and they burst open and honey ran into the road gutter. How do you think they salvaged the honey? They bought the bees back!

So, with the canopy of the trees roasted they suckered from the trunks and every seed on the ground germinated and grew - as the next fires were not, for a long time a similar roasting went on in 1945.

The Forests Department didn't change its policy much until Dwellingup went up in about 1962 and then spring burning came into vogue to try to reduce the tinderbox that existed. To me it is a necessary evil; necessary to reduce the hazard that exists in some places today.

Coast areas were great grasslands, particularly in the open peppermint country but due to some over grazing, particularly in the fenced paddocks and infrequency of fires much the same happened as in the forest areas further north.

The rabbits along the coast and inland areas had a very marked affect on the grasslands - the area around Fish Creek was a good grassy area even until the 1950s - after a burn the ground would be almost ploughed up by them - consequently the grass disappeared.

Here I might add that we grazed the bulk of our cattle on the coast from January to June and some till August. This gave the grasses a chance to seed but the rabbits were there all year round.

Rabbits in the jarrah forest areas were in plague proportions from the mid thirties until miximatoxis was introduced. Their affect on the grass was devastating. We would poison with apples and strychnine and pick up 200 to 300 on a trail about a mile or so long, in our paddocks. Other animals and birds have had their affect on the ecology.

Many people blame farmers for the many changes that have occurred - but as a farmer I must say - that few people denigrate farmers on an empty stomach.

The Aborigines were I believe, near perfect ecologists. They kept the country in a very healthy and beautiful condition and their only management was with fire.

Where have we gone wrong?

To me, fire is as important as the rain and sun the ecology developed over a long period of time with a summer autumn burn - the fauna and flora are so fire dependant.

Why didn't the early foresters understand this?

The first Conservator of Forests, Lane-Poole, wrote that fire is the enemy of the forest or words to that affect. It is not, it is a friend, but must be managed properly. How often does the emu bush fruit without fire? How often do the Blackboys have canes unless they are burnt?

It is interesting to note that my Grandfather, on his explorations, carried with him a tomahawk, a compass and a bible - to explore the same areas today, the tomahawk would not be adequate to cut a path to follow the compass. One would need to resort to the bible in the hope of finding the way! - 2000 years BC Confuscious said "The is a better witness than the ear". If you had seen the country, as I saw it, in my youth, you would better understand what I have said.

In conclusion, if I appear to be knocking the Forests Department, I cannot deny it but the successors of that Department are doing a good job of trying to correct mistakes of the past.

MUIR FAMILY



Pioneers of the South-West and
Eucla Western Australia

Book available in IFA library
of SF Regional Library.

Kindly donated by Jim Muir.