

TO BURN, OR NOT TO BURNby L.D. O'Grady

Despite the tremendous losses, both in life and property, caused by uncontrolled fires there are still many learned, and unlearned, people who for various reasons are opposed to controlled burning.

While the main aim of controlled burning is a precautionary measure against destructive summer fires, the practice is also justified on the score of the improvement brought about in the forest environment and tree growth.

In 1947 the annual spring burning of the Banksia sand plain bush external to the Collier Plantation was commenced and has been carried out annually as part of plantation protection against external fires. Though much of this original country is now occupied by houses a section of approximately 50 acres is still more or less in its natural state. A point to remember is that when an area is burnt over yearly the burn is usually patchy - i.e. a patch burnt this year may not burn the following year, or the year after that, but would burn probably every third year. Under these conditions it is rare to scorch the foliage of the dominant species.

Results over the 30 years show a noticeable increase in Banksia stocking and a more striking and prolonged display of wildflowers. The Headmaster of the local school was so impressed with the wildflowers that he requested we refrain from further burning off. He was still not convinced when told that the healthy trees and the floral display were the result of regular Control Burning. This particular teacher, a very keen nature lover, has left approximately 5 acres of the School Grounds as a native garden. This has been left unburnt, with the following result - after almost 6 years the area is a dangerous fire hazard, scrub growth is dense, and withered looking, and objectionable species tend to flourish at the expense of the smaller floral types. It is also interesting to note that all the Jarrah Trees on the reserve have lost approximately 90% of their crown, are stag-headed, and the trees on the way out.

To summarise - 30 years of annual control burning has resulted in a healthy stand of Banksia and associated species. The scrub has been kept under control and healthy with the result that there is an excellent floral display during most parts of the year.

By contrast - an area not burnt is in a poor state, and the Jarrah trees are dying out. The dense scrub growth has no doubt taken possession of the site to the detriment of the large trees.

It was proved that Pines could not compete with native scrub and it appears that this could also hold true for the Eucalypt.
