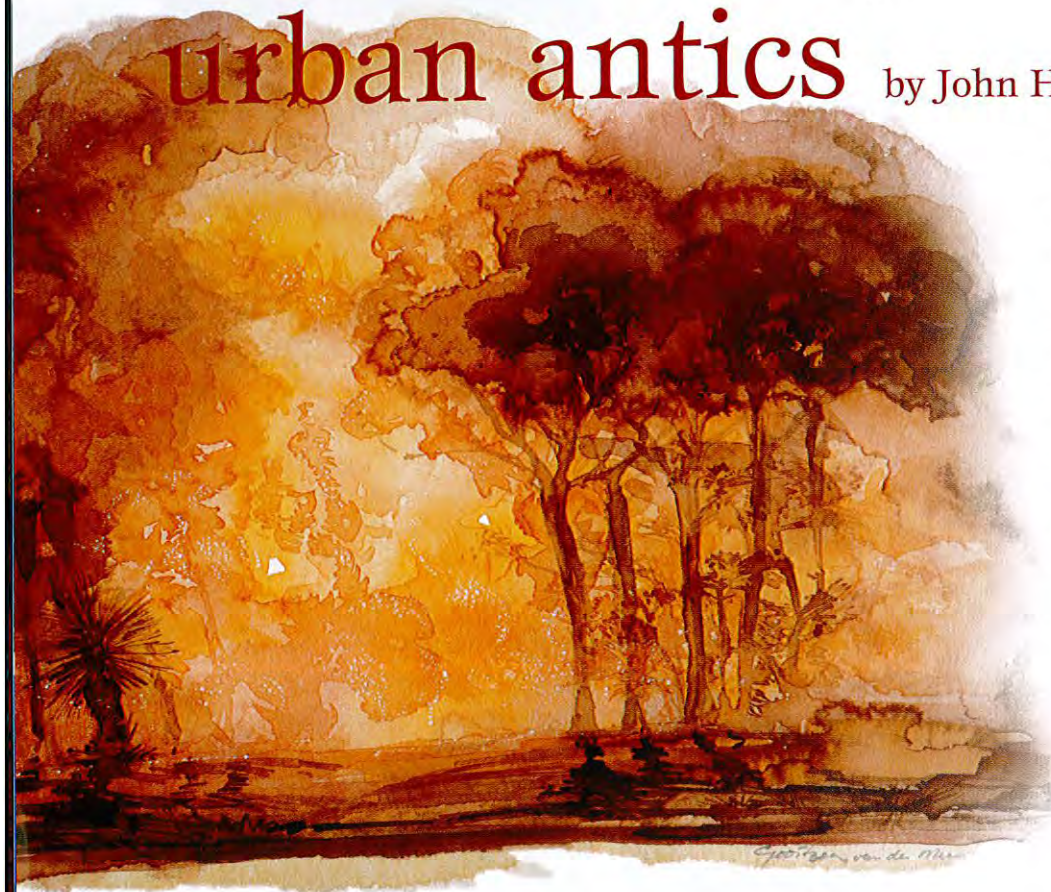


# urban antics

by John Hunter



## Black dirt

Being human sometimes has its advantages. You can fantasise about owning that spare bit of bush nearby which you visit daily to either walk the dog or just escape from the barricades of the 'burbs'.

A remnant area of tall trees and native bush can be intoxicating. To sit quietly and be mesmerised by resident wildlife which come to you and carry on as if you weren't there is more entertaining than a keg of bourbon at a bikies' birthday. Here, the mind can drift back to green cubbies and children playing, or perhaps to the day the bull ant bit your bum, ah... they were the days.

With it being the hottest summer since the 'seventies', I relax back in my favourite outdoor chair and see smoke atop the tuarts in the valley. Bushfire! Here in suburbia, how can that be?

Soon fast-rising black smoke and loud cracking awakes reality and a call to the fire service is made. The next 10 minutes are traumatic, as from only a few hundred metres I see the flames grip trunk and derelict timber and canopies explode as sap

and leaf vaporise into conflagration and chaos.

It took a concerted effort from dedicated professionals and an array of very large and small fire units over the next four hours to save a new electricity sub-station and about five hectares of bush, while losing three hectares of bush habitat. The aftermath said it all.

Where the flames had been there was now an open area devoid of all undergrowth, leaving only the soft black powder of burnt quartz. On a nearby vehicle track were the tracks of a bungarra that had loped away dragging a burnt foot, while dozens of small lizard prints and the slither-marks of a dugite head away

from the scene. The area was now deathly silent. Only the dead grey trunks with high stagheads of former trees had survived unscathed, while rare for the area jarrah, bull banksia and wattles and small sheoaks resembled used sparklers on an odorous charcoal birthday cake. Grass trees now appeared naked without their skirts of grey and only large common banksias seemed saved. A solitary silent lorikeet was the only jewel in a landscape of simmering blackened stumps.

Apparently one of two things caused the fire: humans with matches or humans with rubbish.

Throughout the ash field one could now see the glittering glass of broken beer bottles liberally laced with ancient 1950-something coke bottles. Glass of any description can magnify the sun's rays and cause catastrophic combustion. What was thick bush, was now a graveyard of half bales of fence wire, off-cuts of corrugated roof iron, half-burnt power cable drums, gutter down-pipes and partly melted bagging from a plant nursery.

I now know how our rangers and fire people feel, who are confronted with this every fire season.

While some of the vegetation species will be lost in this fire, the bush generally will return. But I fear for special habitat and irreplaceable nesting holes of felled unsafe trees.

The Department of Environment and Conservation's Keep Australia Beautiful Council has a program for community members to do in dumpers of rubbish... phone us or register online.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- The department's saleable book *Leaf and branch: Trees and tall shrubs of Perth* has just been revised and reprinted. It is a wonderful reference on our urban vegetation and no home should be without one.
- The Keep Australia Beautiful Council office phone number is 6467 5129 or you can register at [www.kabc.wa.gov.au](http://www.kabc.wa.gov.au). Call the illegal dumping hotline on 1300 766 541.

**Drop something sport?**



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### Publishing credits

**Executive Editor** Madeleine Clews.  
**Editors** Joanna Moore, Rhianna King.  
**Scientific/technical advice**  
 Kevin Thiele, Paul Jones, Keith Morris.  
**Design and production** Natalie Jolakoski, Peter Nicholas, Gooitzen van der Meer.  
**Illustration** Gooitzen van der Meer.  
**Cartography** Promaco Geodraft.  
**Marketing** Estelle de San Miguel.  
 Phone (08) 9334 0296 Fax (08) 9334 0432.  
**Subscription enquiries**  
 Phone (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437.  
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