

Burnt trees – A valuable resource

Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery fact sheet

The issue

The February 2009 bushfires left many landowners seeking information and advice about tree health and recovery, and wanting to know whether the trees will regrow or are simply dead.

In some cases the trees will not regrow due to the extreme fire intensity experienced in a number of areas. There are, however, many benefits of having dead trees with hollows in areas affected by bushfires.

Alive or dead?

Many landowners have enquired whether trees with hollows burnt out during the bushfire will regrow or are simply dead. The answer to this question can vary depending on the severity of the fire on the tree and the tree's health prior to the fires. In most cases, burnt trees are still alive and will recover in ways which are outlined in the fact sheet 'Burnt Trees – Will they regrow?'. However, as the ground was left bone-dry by the bushfires and from over ten years of drought, it is likely that burnt trees may take a few seasons to fully recover. Tree recovery is also reliant on sufficient rainfall to rehydrate the soil.

Look-out trees

Even without regrowing, burnt trees still play a very important role. They help to ensure the local environment, including farming land, is kept in balance. Paddock trees which have not survived the fires become perfect lookout posts for Wedge-tailed Eagles and other birds of prey on the hunt for field mice, rats and rabbits. Without perching places for birds of prey, these pests may be left uncontrolled and, in the case of rabbits, will compete with livestock for valuable pasture, reducing farm productivity.

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Nests

In the forests and on the edges of farming land, many trees with existing hollows will have had these cavities made larger by being burnt. Many more new hollows will also have been created. As local animals, including Crimson Rosellas and Sugar Gliders, return to the burnt areas, tree hollows will become prime real estate. These animals, along with countless others, rely on tree hollows to nest in and rear their young. Without suitable habitat such as hollows, the ecology of the local forests and woodlands may become unbalanced and unhealthy.

Ecological services

Many trees in forests and woodlands have evolved to rely on local wildlife to pollinate flowers. Local wildlife also keep insect populations under control. These types of services provided by native animals are known as 'ecological services'.

Hollows are not the only part of burnt trees which provide habitat for animals providing ecological services. The loose bark of burnt trees, along with deep cracks in trunks, can also provide shelter for smaller creatures.

Tiny micro-bats, including Whitestriped Free-tailed bats, which look similar to mice with wings, can often be found huddled in small colonies beneath the bark of trees. They also roost tightly squeezed between the deep fissures of rough-barked Eucalypts. These bats help control insect populations and can often be heard making high-pitched clicking noises similar to cicadas on warm nights.

Burnt trees

The retention of burnt trees plays an important role in ensuring fireaffected farms and bushland recover swiftly. Retaining all trees, including those without hollows, enables the natural environmental balance of these areas to be maintained. Before removing burnt trees from bushland and farming paddocks, consider that you may be removing key habitat for local wildlife which has been providing a free ecological service and maintaining the natural balance.

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For more information on this and other land management issues, please contact Council's Sustainable Land Management Unit on 9217 2437 / 9217 2493 or sustainability@whittlesea.vic.gov.au