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FREE ARTICLE
Level 2, 2019/2020: Issue 5

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Australia is burning. The worst bushfires in the country’s history have incinerated 10.3 million hectares since July 1. That’s an area about twice the size of Nova Scotia.

The fires have leveled entire communities and forced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. Over 2000 homes have been destroyed, at least 29 people have lost their lives, and the hungry flames show no signs of dying.

To put it in perspective, they’ve charred an area 10 times bigger than B.C.’s 2018 wildfires, and 20 times bigger than the Fort McMurray fires – with at least two months of fire season left to go.

HEATWAVE

Bushfires always flare up during Australia’s dry season. Why is this year so much worse?

A three-year drought has left the continent hotter and drier than it’s ever been. The country’s average temperature reached a record high of 41.9 degrees Celsius in December, while temperatures on the southeast coast hit a sizzling 49.9 degrees Celsius.

FROM SPARK TO FLAME

Wildfire season started weeks early, sparked by record-low rainfall and record-high temperatures, and fanned into fury by high winds.

In some places, flames rose 50 to 70 metres high. They burned so intensely that the aluminum on cars melted into puddles, and water boiled in the tanks of a fire truck caught in the fire.

TRAPPED ON THE BEACH

People in Mallacoota had a close call on New Year’s Eve. Fire raced toward the small coastal town, trapping 4000 people.

They couldn’t escape by road or by air, so they ran to the beach. The fire followed, forcing them closer and closer to the water’s edge.

“Ash started to fall from the air,” said one resident. “And then the embers started to come down. At that point, people started to bring their kids and families into the water. Thankfully, the wind changed, and the fire moved away.”

TO THE RESCUE!

Australia has the biggest volunteer fire service in the world. These highly-trained and dedicated men and women can be teens or grandparents, teachers or taxi drivers. They are typically granted up to 10 days a year to suit up and protect their community.

Almost 4000 volunteer and professional fireys are working side by side to battle this year’s blazes, aided by 750 fire trucks, bulldozers and other vehicles, and 500 aircraft. Meanwhile, some 3000 army, navy, and air force reservists are tackling search and rescue and cleanup, while almost 500 police and emergency personnel are supporting evacuees.

The U.S., Canada, and New Zealand have sent firefighters and equipment to help. One hundred Canadian fire experts are also on hand to help with aviation and logistics.

FIRE COUNTRY

The most dangerous fires are currently threatening highly populated coastal areas in the southeast, including...
Australia’s Bushfires – Is Record-Breaking Fire Season a Foretaste of our Future?

major cities like Sydney, Melbourne, and the capital, Canberra. The biggest fires have been burning for months, consuming forests, farms, homes, and neighbourhoods.

In the state of New South Wales, fires have already roared through five million hectares. Of the 150 active blazes, a third are uncontained. Two are massive megafires, formed when several separate fires merged.

Fire officials are warning people to be alert and stay safe.

“There are simply not enough fire trucks for every house. If you call for help, you may not get it. Do not expect a fire truck. Do not expect a knock on the door. Do not expect a phone call.”

Smoke gets in your eyes

Fire is not the only danger. Toxic smoke has spread across 20 million square kilometres. Nationwide, air pollution is 12 to 20 times above the hazardous level.

“The number of people who’ve been affected by this smoke — it’s not an isolated event,” said Dr. Fay Johnston, an associate professor of public health at the University of Tasmania. “It’s every major capital city in the country having severe smoke impacts.”

It’s endangering the short-and long-term health of pregnant women and people with heart and breathing problems. Even in regions far from the fires, emergency room visits are up.

Blaming the dipole

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, a keen supporter of Australia’s coal industry, was forced to apologize for going on a holiday to Hawaii in early December as the crisis escalated. Many Australians say he’s not doing enough to address climate change.

The nation is one of the world’s biggest per capita greenhouse gas emitters. It is the world’s largest coal exporter and coal burning is the main source of electricity in Australia. Despite its pledge to lower emissions, Mr. Morrison’s government has done little to fight climate change.

The prime minister maintains that the positive Indian Ocean Dipole is responsible for the fires, and experts agree it’s certainly been a factor. This cyclical ocean phenomenon changed Australian weather patterns by pushing weather systems northward away from Australia.

Facing Facts

However, the government’s State of the Climate Report reveals a different picture. It shows that Australia’s high temperatures aren’t tied to the Dipole. In fact, they’ve been trending higher for a century, and they’re outpacing the global average.

“The duration, frequency, and intensity of heat waves have increased across large parts of Australia since 1950. There has been an increase in extreme fire weather, and a longer fire season, across large parts of Australia since the 1970s.”

Wakeup Call

So when will the fires end? Not until the country receives significant rainfall.

Will wildlife recover?

Tragically, the fires have killed at least one billion animals, including kangaroos, koalas, wombats, and other iconic and endangered Australian creatures.

Ecologist Valentina Mella says, “I think that’s actually a conservative estimate. The estimates don’t account for all the invertebrates that we might have lost, which is a really important part of the biodiversity because a lot of animals eat insects. Once the insects go, the animals that survive will not have any food left to eat.”

Nor, she says, will they have anywhere to live if they do.

“It will take years to get the habitat back where it should be for animals to survive properly.”

“…This is a real wake-up call, not just for Australia, but for the world,” said climate scientist Nerilie Abram. “We need to be looking at this and saying, ‘How much worse do we want to let this get?’”

“We tend to have this idea that our climate is gradually warming and these types of impacts will be gradual… but the Earth system doesn’t work like that.”

Climatologist Michael Mann said, “What is happening in Australia is a harbinger for other countries — a taste of what our future will look like if we don’t act now.” ★

Definitions

Biodiversity: the variety of life in a habitat or ecosystem
Climatologist: a scientist who studies how climate changes over time and is affected by human action
Harbinger: a warning or sign of things to come
Iconic: very famous and well known, and believed to represent a particular idea
Invertebrates: animals with no spine, like insects
Toxic: poisonous and harmful to people, animals, or the environment
Uncontained: uncontrolled
Answer the following in complete sentences:

1. How much territory have Australia’s bushfires burned in recent months?

2. Describe the damage caused by these fires.

3. Why are this season’s wildfires so intense? Explain.

4. Which region of Australia has been most affected by the wildfires?

5. How have the blazes affected people far away from the fires?

6. Describe the efforts being made to fight the bushfires.

7. What natural phenomenon does Australia’s prime minister say is to blame for the wildfires?

8. Explain why Australia can expect more frequent and intense fires in the future.
INTERNATIONAL
AUSTRALIA’S BUSHFIRES
– IS RECORD-BREAKING FIRE SEASON A FORETASTE OF OUR FUTURE?

BETWEEN THE LINES

An inference is a conclusion drawn from evidence. A plausible inference is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.

What inferences can you draw from the fact that “the duration, frequency, and intensity of heat waves have increased across large parts of Australia since 1950”?

JUST TALK ABOUT IT

1. As you see it, what is the significance of this article? Explain.

2. What is your understanding of the cause of Australia’s record-breaking fire season? Explain.

3. Imagine you had a chance to speak to Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. What advice would you like to give him regarding the bushfires in Australia? Explain.

ONLINE

Note: The links below are listed at www.lesplan.com/en/links for easy access.


2. View photos of the fires at https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2020/01/photos-australia-bushfire-catastrophe/604492/ [WARNING: Some photos show dead animals that may be disturbing for your students.] After viewing these photos, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper:
   a) Describe what you see in the photos.
   c) After viewing the pictures, what questions do you have about the bushfires? Share your questions in a class discussion.


4. Watch a YouTube video called ‘The Science of Wildfires’ at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8OrmGAIqI4

5. Learn the basic science of climate change in 24 easy steps by watching the video “Climate Science: What You Need To Know” at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffjlyms1BX4 [6:19] Then check out the sister video, “Why people don’t believe in climate science.”

6. Learn from environmental icon David Suzuki what you can do to fight global warming at http://www.davidsuzuki.org/what-you-can-do/reduce-your-carbon-footprint/?gclid=COPnq9iYhr4CFZNIOgodNVYAkA ★
Directions: Respond to the infographic below. What information conveyed in the infographic is new to you? What is interesting to you? What seems to be especially significant? Why? Overall, how does the information in this infographic enhance your understanding of the bushfires in Australia? Explain.

Australians flee as heat, winds fan bushfires
Australian authorities have urged almost a quarter of a million people to evacuate their homes as hot, windy conditions fuel deadly bushfires along the southeastern coast.

Bushfire crisis: At least 10.3 million hectares of land burned in Australia since Oct 2019 – area equivalent in size to South Korea.

Victoria / NSW
Two fires set to merge into mega-blaze covering almost 600,000 hectares.

Kangaroo Island
At least one-third burned away.

Victoria state
Authorities send emergency text messages to 240,000 people, telling them to leave.

Sources: Associated Press, Reuters, local fire services

© GRAPHIC NEWS

Level 2 • No. 5
What in the World? • Sample Page 8
WHAT ARE EDITORIAL CARTOONS?

Editorial cartoons are found in the editorial – or opinion – section of a newspaper. They are created by cartoonists as a way of visually commenting on and often criticizing the world around them – with humour. Editorial cartoonists express their ideas and opinions about issues (for example, what to do about Canada’s economy), events (such as the Olympic Games) or public figures (like the Prime Minister).

Because cartoons are drawn from the viewpoint of the cartoonist they do not tell the whole story about the event, issue or individual, but they reveal important messages. Their purpose is to grab people’s attention and cause them to re-examine their views on a subject. Editorial cartoons typically send a particular kind of message. The message is conveyed through images and wordplay. Their tone is generally ironic (portraying events in ways that are unexpected or contrary to how they seem), satiric (ridiculing the event, individual or issue), or humorous (inviting readers to laugh at themselves or at others).

In order to interpret the message of an editorial cartoon it is helpful to understand the context – the time, place and situation. It is also useful to understand some of the common art techniques used by cartoonists to emphasize their points. Considering these things will help you better decode and appreciate the message behind the cartoon.

WHAT COMMON ART TECHNIQUES ARE USED BY EDITORIAL CARTOONISTS?

Caption (a sentence or phrase that is the title or explanation of the cartoon);
Labels (words or numbers in the drawing to identify people, objects or dates);
Relative size (some images are drawn much larger or much smaller than others);
Light and dark (use of dark shading and white space to create an effect);
Composition (the arrangement or location of figures or objects in the centre or background);
Symbols (a sign or image to represent something else);
Caricature (a distorted, simplified or exaggerated representation of a figure).

(To learn more about interpreting political cartoons, read the Toolkit: Decoding Political Cartoons by Charles Hou on the Library and Archives Canada’s web site at http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/education/008-3050-e.html)
YOUR TASK:

Examine the editorial cartoon. Then, use the questions below to help you decode the cartoon’s message. Be specific and include as many details as possible in your answers.

INITIAL READING: What can an initial look reveal?

1. Glance quickly at the cartoon. What is your first impression – your “gut response”?
2. Consider your background knowledge. What do you already know about the context of the cartoon – the time, place or situation? (List key facts.)

CLOSER LOOK: What’s happening in the cartoon?

3. Describe what you see and read in the cartoon.

DRAW CONCLUSIONS: What overall impression can you draw?

4. Identify possible biases. Whose perspective or point of view is expressed in the cartoon?
5. Explain the overall message of the cartoon in a paragraph. (Remember, a good interpretation is specific and detailed.) ★
MAP ASSIGNMENT

Complete this map assignment to better understand the article *Australia’s Bushfires*.

**INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Obtain the required resources and read all the instructions before starting.
2. Colour your map after all labelling is completed.
3. Print in pencil only first, then go over the printing in black ink.
4. Work carefully and neatly.

**Resources Required:** pencil, black pen, pencil crayons, ruler, eraser and an atlas.

**Part A** Locate and label the following states and territories in CAPITAL letters and shade each as indicated:

- Western Australia (orange)
- Northern Territory (yellow)
- South Australia (green)
- Queensland (purple)
- New South Wales (brown)
- Tasmania (yellow)
- Victoria (pink)
- Australian Capital Territory (red)

**Part B** Locate and label the capital city of each state or territory and underline each city name.

**Part C** Locate and label the following cities:

- Gold Coast
- Newcastle
- Geelong
- Bunbury
- Mount Gambier
- Alice Springs

**Part D** Locate and label the following deserts:

- Great Victoria Desert
- Great Sandy Desert
- Tanami Desert
- Simpson Desert
- Gibson Desert

**Part E** Locate and label Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock, using a symbol.

**Part F** Locate and label the following lakes and shade them light blue:

- Lake Eyre
- Lake Torrens
- Lake Gairdner

**Part G** Draw and label the following rivers and shade them light blue:

- Darling River
- Murray River
- Flinders River
- Cooper Creek

**Part H** Locate and label the following and shade all salt water dark blue:

- Indian Ocean
- Gulf of Carpentaria
- Coral Sea
- Bass Strait
- Timor Sea
- Great Barrier Reef
- Tasman Sea
- Great Australian Bight

**Part I** Draw and label the Tropic of Capricorn (23° S).

**Part J** Complete your map with a frame, title, and compass.
A. Write the letter that corresponds to the best answer on the line beside each question:

1. How much land have the recent bushfires in Australia destroyed?
   a) 400,000 hectares  
   b) 800,000 hectares  
   c) 6 million hectares  
   d) 10 million hectares  
   d) 25 million hectares

2. Which of the following was NOT a contributing factor to these fires?
   a) drought  
   b) high temperatures  
   c) poor firefighter training  
   d) high winds  
   e) global warming

3. What does Australia's prime minister say is the main cause of the bushfires?
   a) Indian Ocean Dipole  
   b) El Niño  
   c) Gulf Stream Current  
   d) Indian Ocean Gyres  
   e) La Niña

B. Mark the statements T (True) or F (False). If a statement is True, write one important fact to support it on the line below. If a statement is False, write the words that make it true on the line below.

4. True or False? Over 200 Australians lost their lives because of the bushfires.

5. True or False? The most dangerous bushfires are in southeast Australia.

6. True or False? Wildfires in Australia are expected to decrease in coming years.

C. Fill in the blanks to complete each sentence.

7. Australia has experienced a ________________ year drought.

8. The bushfires have killed one ________________ animals.

9. Australia has the biggest ________________ fire service in the world.

D. Respond to the following question in paragraph form. (Use a separate sheet of paper if necessary.)

As you see it, what is the significance of the Australian bushfires? Give reasons to support your response.
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3) You can import the entire Word file into LibreOffice (or another similar program) and then save as a new file.

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- LibreOffice is a free alternate to Microsoft Office and offers the same functionality. It’s easy to install and use.

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D. Faerber, Pembroke, ON

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