

Fire and Forest
Australian Warnings

by Mike Esnard

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Australia is one of the areas on the globe that deals with wildfires every summer, much like the American west, so we should pay attention to what they experience in their fire season. And this past season in Australia is one to worry about.

Australia had many fires throughout the season (September-March), which is not unusual, but January had fires that authorities classed as “catastrophic”. Fires burned all over the country, but particularly in the most populous areas of the east and south-east, in the states of New South Wales and Victoria. Fire plumes and scorched earth were plainly visible from the International Space Station. At one point in the worst of January, 141 fires burned across New South Wales, scorching over 500 square miles. Fires in Tasmania destroyed over 300 square miles.

Most significant was the background temperature. The Australian Bureau of Meteorology declared recently that this past season was the hottest summer on record. On January 7 of this year the average maximum for the country was 105 degrees Fahrenheit, which beat the old record of 104 set in 1972. Average temperature for the summer, comprising day and night temperatures, came in at 83 degrees Fahrenheit, beating the old record from 1997-1998. “One might say this is the largest heat event in the country’s recorded history,” said David Jones, manager of climate monitoring prediction at the Bureau of Meteorology

The Australian Climate Commission, a body formed to provide independent views on climate change, issued a report entitled, “The Angry Summer”, and which states that temperature records were set in every state and territory, and that “no previous event has resulted in so many temperature records.” The report indicates at least 123 temperature records fell during the summer.

Adding insult to injury, but consistent with the physics of warming temperatures, the east coast received record rainfall not long after the worst of the fires in January. In late January 11 all-time records were set for daily rainfall in Queensland and New South Wales, causing billions of dollars in damage.

Climate scientists in general have been very cautious about linking particular weather events with climate change, but Australian researchers seemed generally agreed that significant change has taken place. "I think one of the best ways of thinking about it is imagining that the base line has shifted," Tim Flannery, the commission's leader, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "If an athlete takes steroids, for example, their base line shifts. They'll do fewer slow times and many more record-breaking fast times."

"The same thing is happening with our climate system," he said. "As it warms up, we're getting fewer cold days and cold events and many more record hot events."

Some were very blunt. Elizabeth Hanna, a researcher at the Australian National University in Canberra, told The Sydney Morning Herald. "We are well past the time of niceties, of avoiding the dire nature of what is unfolding, and politely trying not to scare the public."

I don't think we should be scared, but we would be foolish to ignore what happened in Australia during their summer. A large section of our west is in drought, snowpacks are down, and the predictions are not optimistic. Policy changes that would affect this change are beyond our local control of course, but planning for persistent threat from fire is not--that we can do something about.