

# CHASED

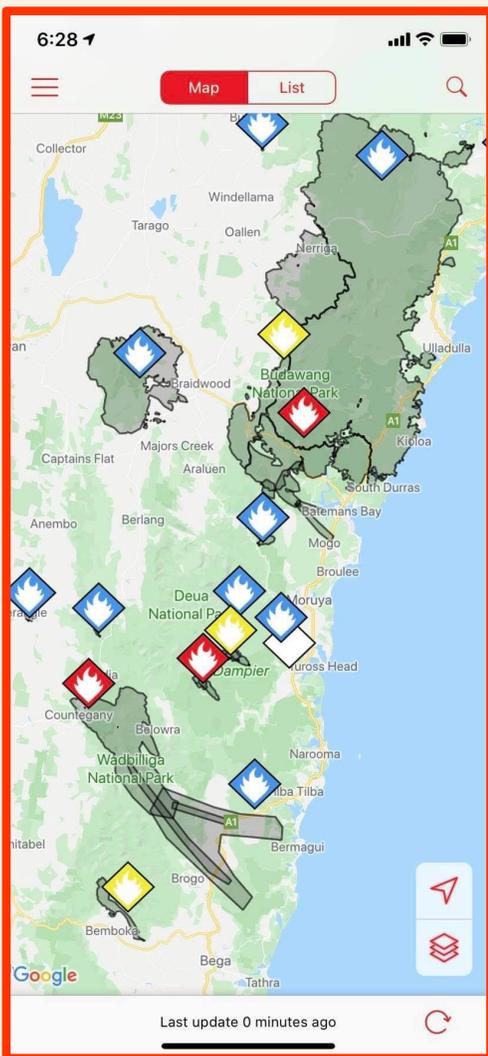
## My story of the 2019/20 Bushfires

Heather Loomes

I felt as if I was roundly chased by the fires of last summer: from Camden to Bermagui to Canberra and in Bermagui again. **Here's how it unfolded for me.**

### ▷ Camden to Bermagui

In Camden through, November and December we lived with the knowledge of fires near to us and with the heavy smoke, almost constantly. Both the tension and the smoke were heavy in the air. We had family and friends in Oakdale who needed to evacuate several times because of fire threats and I stayed overnight



Mark sent us this predicted fire spread map early on 31/12/19. Fire was predicted very close to Bermagui!

with my sister-in-law in Nangarrin, close to Picton, as she was worried about ember attack from the Green Wattle Bushfire. Fires were close, the danger imminent and the effect of the smoke was suffocating. My sister-in-law's daughter and family fought fire around their home at Werombi. Everyone was affected in some way and all were oppressed by the poor air quality.

My husband, Greig and I managed to get away for Christmas with my Dad in beautiful Bermagui, on the far south coast of NSW. Our youngest son, Andrew, was joining us there but he travelled separately.

As we stopped for lunch at Nowra on our way down the coast, we noticed the growing queues of cars waiting to go down the Pacific Highway. The smoke we could see to the south made us realise that the queues were bushfire related, so we decided not to risk being caught up in it and travelled back up Kangaroo Valley towards Moss vale and then continue to travel inland. We took 10 long hours to get to Bermagui via Queenbeyan, Cooma and Cobar-go, which at that time was not fire affected. It was the best decision.

Our eldest son, Mark, travelled after Christmas to join us in Bermagui. After a few days altogether, Andrew travelled home for New Years. Mark left Bermagui to drive home to Camden very early on the morning of New Year' Eve, a Tuesday. He was aiming to get ahead of proposed road closures on the Princes Highway.

Mark was listening to news on his radio and began to call us at 5.30am. As my phone is usually off overnight, the first I knew of it was that my Dad's house phone was ringing. That was the beginning of another brush with the bushfires that summer.

My dad fielded Mark's call which was saying that there was fire on its way to Bermagui and we should all evacuate to the water. My dad had also received a recorded call from the RFS saying the same, but as he walked outside and did not see any imminent danger, or smoke, he decided that we didn't need to respond and let us sleep on. Not the best decision!

However, as we all woke up to the sound of the house phone, and got our heads around the situation, we collected a small amount of stuff and headed in our car down towards the water. There was a massive queue of cars heading in towards Bermagui, so we decided not to go that way and we parked opposite the Service Station, near the boat ramp on the edge of the Bermagui River.



We sat in our car for a while wondering what was next and got out to stretch our legs and watch the pieces of black ash falling from the sky.

People talked quietly in small groups. There was no real panic. We were wisely complying with instructions of authorities. We listened to news reports on the radio and watched as cars filled up at the service station – how I wish I did the same, as petrol became hard to get after a few days. It was so impressive and reflected massive community spirit, that the servo owners were offering egg and bacon rolls and tea and coffee for free that morning.

(I went back weeks later to offer a donation but they wouldn't accept it.)

Over the next few hours, the sky should have been lightening with the new day but instead it became a variety of dark brooding greys and threatening oranges. It was almost red at 8.30am. It was eery and foreboding but we had no other information about what was happening locally.

Ash on my dad's head!



I am not sure at what time, but the sky started to lighten again and things seemed to return to normal.

There was no announcement from police cars or radio, but people sensed that the crisis had gone and started returning to their homes. We headed home soon after 11am, relieved but unsure what had happened.

Later we saw the extent of the migration into Bermagui and that the oval in town was covered with cars and caravans and tents of people sheltering away from the path of the fires. We found out that there were also people sheltering at the local Country Club.

Much later, at the end of January, we learned that Bermagui and all of us had been saved from the fires that day by a late wind change. I heard it from several different sources, including a fire and later a local who was listening to the chatter on the RFS radios on New Year's Eve and heard the countdown to the fires reaching Bermagui. The last one he heard was a 15 minute warning. We did not realise how fortunate we were on that day!



## NO POWER NO PHONES

The days that followed were somewhat tense, without power and then without phones. It was such a contrast to our usual level of connectedness to family and to news. It was hard to keep abreast of the unfolding situation and to be informed enough to make potentially life-saving decisions. The only way we could access radio broadcasts were via the car radio. We listened closely amid long reports for information about the Badja Forest Fire which was the one threatening our area. Sometimes, however, we were aware that reports were outdated, so it was hard to trust the only source of news.

A further problem was that every time we listened, we were using precious battery power in a hybrid car and I did not have much petrol either. As local petrol pumps required power, no petrol was available locally at that time.

Adding to the tension of the situation, the smoke was thick in the air and time outside was limited. Holiday activities were on hold, that was for sure! We were also concerned for family with whom we could not be in contact – to let them know we were OK. It was all very weird in our day of constant media updates and communication with those we love.

We managed with the food we had left over from Christmas and what was in Dad's freezer. We heard that supplies were very low in the local Woolworths. We used a gas BBQ to boil water and cook.

On the upside, **neighbours kept in contact and we shared whatever news we could each glean.**

I was also very thankful that my Mum, who also lives in Bermagui but has dementia, was away on holidays with my brother in Queensland.

After dinner on New Year's Day, my husband Greig and I went for a walk after dinner because the smoke had cleared a little and we needed to relieve our 'cabin fever'. As we chatted to people on the way, who were all much more open and communicative given the circumstances, some people said that they had heard plans from Bega Council to evacuate the township of Bermagui in the coming days. It was said that Bermagui would not be protected as emergency services were just spread too thinly. Another hot front was expected on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> January and conditions would be set for real danger for the area.



Greig and I decided to move quickly as I was concerned that we would soon not have enough petrol to drive to the next town with supplies. An enquiry with a police officer that night told us that there was no longer any petrol available in Tathra. That meant we needed to get to Bega, travelling down the coast via Tathra. The police officer also shared that there was no Evacuation Order in place for Bermagui at the time, but we decided to leave anyway. We stopped to listen to a radio on the way home by joining a group who were listening to it on their front verandah. We didn't know the people at all, but they welcomed us close to the radio, knowing that information could be life-sustaining.

We arrived home to my Dad's place and gently said, "Dad, we want to take you for a drive." My 87-year-old Dad flashed with anger immediately. "I'm not going anywhere – this is my home!"

"Dad, that is true, but in the case of fire do you expect to be able to defend your home?"

Dad countered by telling us he didn't mind if he didn't live beyond these fires, always hard to hear. We were stuck – if Dad wouldn't leave, we wouldn't leave him. Once again, the air was thick with tension. Dad agreed to come and listen to the radio in the car and see what else we could find out, but he was very upset and very determined not to leave. We heard nothing relevant and I left Greig to see if he could reason with Dad and went to tell the neighbours what we had found out when we were down town.

**If Dad wouldn't leave,  
we wouldn't leave him**

The neighbours didn't have much petrol either and it was looking hopeful when Dad joined us and offered them a lift in his car. Maybe we could all leave together—neighbours co-operating in an emergency? Later, the neighbours had a change of mind but did encourage Dad to leave with us. We were very grateful and relieved!

## ▷ Bermagui to Camden

After Greig and I grabbed most of what we had brought with us on holidays and Dad grabbed a small case of clothes, we set off about 9.45pm, driving south out of Bermagui in two cars – with Dad and Greig in Dad's car behind mine. The road was clear of traffic. We had beaten the exodus, but soon found ourselves driving towards fire, which was unsettling. When my mobile phone burred into life some way out of town, I stopped to see if I could find out where the fires were and if there was any risk to us on that road. I didn't get any real answers and as we continued, we seemed to go beyond the fire glow we could see and felt a bit better.

We drove to Tathra, where I stopped to let family know we were ok and what our plans were, then drove on to Bega, where no service stations were open, as it was late at night. Having heard about some activity at the Bega Showground we headed there for toilets and maybe a safe place to sleep in our cars. We were surprised and pleased to find a welcome at the showground with food on offer, a registration process and mattresses and bedding for a night in the hall. We were very thankful to all who were working and volunteering there. It was encouraging to see such an organised relief effort which had anticipated an exodus from the fire-threatened coast. It was a collaboration of government and community organisations — people are good!

About an hour after we were settled, we heard that there was a group of about 50 on their way from Bermagui and were pleased we had made the move earlier than later.

We did not get a lot of sleep, largely due to another guest who almost moved the walls of the building in and out as he snored! Early the next morning, Dad and Greig we were able to buy petrol as the service stations opened. After a supplied breakfast and sandwiches for lunch to boot (!), we were able to being the journey home to Camden.



## People are good!

Travel was slow that day and it was sombering as we saw large stretches of fire damaged country in the daylight. At points we waited in long queues of cars and in thick, thick smoke. The smoke was prevalent all the way from Bega through the southern highlands right up to Camden. It was all across New South Wales from fires burning on the coast as well as inland.

In the days following, as people were evacuated from many coastal holiday towns, the queues were worse and we know of some who cried in fear as they navigated the roads and smoke for hour after hour. Stories were later told of epic journeys of 14 hours up to 27 hours to get from places on the coast below Nowra back to greater Sydney, via Cooma and Canberra.

We arrived home safely at Camden about 5pm and enjoyed a meal prepared by our daughter. We were exhausted but OK. We were the lucky ones! It was daunting to watch the news again and see pictures of the devastation wrought by that wave of the fires.

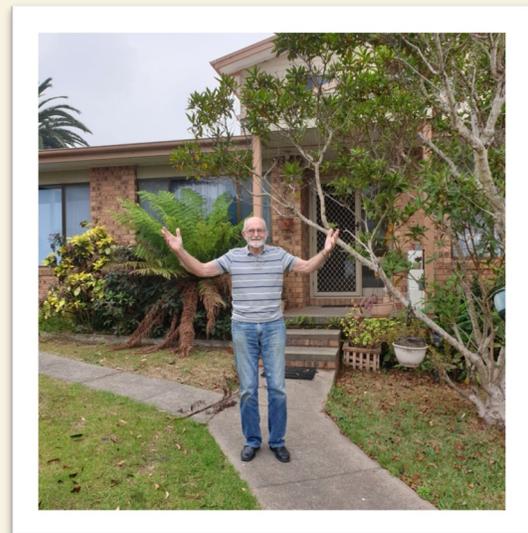
## ▷ **Back to Bermagui**

On 6<sup>th</sup> January we were advised that those who had left Bermagui could now return, so Dad, Greig and I travelled back so I could help him with the clean-up, of fridges and freezers in particular, at both Mum and Dad's places.

'On the way between Nowra and Bateman's Bay, "Black, black, black and beige, black and beige! Lots of burnt paddocks, smoke, several burnt houses, lots of burnt tree stumps, people fixing everything, lots of signs thanking fires" was Greig's summary of that drive south in a text send to our kids. It was quite sad to see it all, but we cheered each time we saw houses surrounded by black but still standing and we too thanked the fires!

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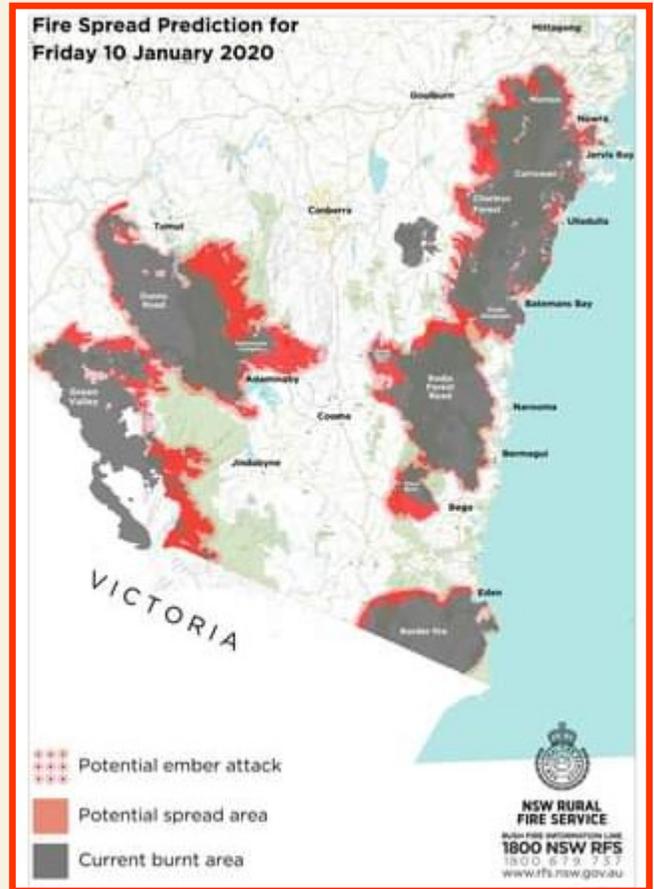
It was a relief to see both Dad and Mum's homes intact and to find neighbours at both places alive and well. They had all stayed when we left and had stories to tell. We are also grateful that they were also looking out for Dad's place and Mum's place in their absence.



My brother brought Mum home to Bermagui on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> January. Mum was constantly concerned about the smoke and where the fires might be. “Where there is smoke there is fire.” She couldn’t grasp the concept that the smoke was pervasive after so many fires and didn’t necessarily indicate a nearby fire, although that was always a threat.

Greig stayed with me in Bermagui longer than planned as winds were gusty and **the fire threat was still real** in the area. On the evening of 10<sup>th</sup> January there were gusty winds again and reports of new fires at Cobargo and in the Bega Valley and smoke in the air.

**It was a relief and a joy** to wake up to a beautiful morning in Bermagui the next morning – smoke free! The beach told the story of the fires all along the coast in the ash still in the water.



## ▷ **Bermagui to Canberra and back**

Some time later, I drove my Mum for an appointment in Canberra on 22<sup>nd</sup> January. Around that time fires were active again around Wallaga Lake not far north of Bermagui. I was concerned about Dad back in Bermagui.

Mum and I stayed overnight in Canberra, went to the appointment for Mum on 23<sup>rd</sup> and had scans done for her the next day. We were going to travel back to Bermagui that afternoon, but we became aware that there were fires around the airport at Canberra and Queenbeyan, which would have been on our route back! I quickly scrambled to arrange more accommodation for us to stay another night and we travelled home the next day via Cooma, and Bega. Mum was blissfully unaware for most of that journey – we sang for about 3 hours of the trip - but there were sobering scenes of devastation as we travelled. Most affecting were the ones close to Bega and close to Cobargo – whole charred paddocks and sometimes charred homes.

More tension! As we were approaching Bega, my dad called me to let us know of more road closures and more fires in the area. Soon, once again, we were travelling through thick smoke and not sure what we would find around each corner. As Cobargo had been badly affected by fires earlier we had to drive up the Princes Highway past Cobargo to the turn off to Bermagui above Wallaga Lake. There was more burnt forest around Spotted Gum Drive and as we entered Bermagui but it was clear of smoke in Bermagui. It was a huge relief to get to Mum's place safely.

After this point I stopped feeling chased by bushfires. Beautiful clear skies returned to Bermagui and green shoots were evident in burnt landscapes along the cost road back to Camden. It is incredible to see the resilience of the bush and the land.

**I am so thankful that all whom I love survived those fires and for the amazing efforts of authorities and emergency services who protected people and property so well throughout the long fire season of last summer.**

**I do feel for those who were much more dramatically affected than I was and for those who lost homes or loved ones and I pray that they will also recover over time - tested and refined by the experience of the fires - not extinguished, but strengthened!**

***It is incredible to see the resilience of the land  
and its people.***