

## “中译国青杯”联合国文件翻译大赛

### 学生组——英译汉【原文】

#### **Australia: Where Nature is Grieving**

“When you walk into a forest that’s been burnt this badly, the overwhelming thing that hits you is the silence. No bird-song. No rustling of leaves. Silence.” This is how Mike Clarke, professor of zoology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, describes Australia’s many forests recently decimated by bushfires.

“This stands out as the worst disaster in Australia’s recorded history,” Clarke says. The figure of the area that has been burnt – 13 million hectares – is “hard to get your head around.” For scale, this is an area bigger in hectares than Holland, Denmark and Switzerland combined. All burnt to a crisp. Homes, forests, animals, plants – everything in the wake of these intense infernos – incinerated. Gone.

#### **Unprecedented scale**

At least a billion animals were killed in the bushfires, according to approximate estimates by Chris Dickman, professor in territorial ecology at The University of Sydney. This figure is conservative, Clarke believes. “That’s just mammals, birds, reptiles. If we added invertebrates to that, the numbers would be astronomical.”

One thing that must be clear, though, is that Australia’s bush has always burnt quite severely. “The severity isn’t unprecedented,” says Alan York, professor of Fire Ecology at the University of Melbourne. “What is unprecedented is their earliness in, or before the usual fire season, and the volume of fires in so many places, which is far more unusual.”

Koalas in northern New South Wales have had most of their habitat burnt. “Speculation is that populations will become locally extinct,” according to York. The iconic nature of the koalas sometimes overshadows other ecosystem horrors, Clarke adds. “They’re the poster child of this crisis. But in reality, a whole suite of wildlife – large possums, all sorts of plants that live in alpine ash, whole communities of organisms – are all at risk now.”

#### **The resilience of the Australian bush in question**

It may take years for these species to recover. And that may require human assistance, with captive-bred frogs in Australia’s zoos, for example. “Otherwise, we’re hoping animals survived in unburnt pockets,” York explains. He remains somewhat optimistic, saying the Australian bush has a “dramatic capacity to recover.”

There are, however, caveats. Rainforests and alpine areas of Tasmania, for instance, don't have much experience of fires, so they're more vulnerable to repeated fires, he says. And under the current climate change model, increasing fires are inevitable.

Some of several "human interferences" that'll most likely hamper recovery include habitat removal from land clearing; introducing feral species which prey on native species (feral cats have been known to come from ten kilometres away to the edge of a fire to pick off prey, usually native); and a lack of urgent political action on climate change.

The problem is, lots of critical resources have been incinerated. For example, many fauna – cockatoos, parrots, possums, bats – rely on hollow logs on the ground, or on trees to den in or breed in. Not only have those logs now gone, Clarke predicts that it will take one to two centuries for them to appear again, hollowed out. "A lot of Australian wood is hardwood. Fungi and termites hollow it really slowly. There are no woodpeckers here," he explains. Suddenly, the capacity to recover seems almost insurmountable within our lifetime. "What could disappear in hours in bushfire could take centuries to replace. Ecologists would call this a 'complete state change'."

### **Immediate measures needed**

Experts say some immediate steps are being taken to help along the recovery of this vast area. A moratorium on logging has been proposed, and pressure is building to act more aggressively on the pest control of feral cats and foxes, in addition to introducing weed removal. "Weeds recolonize areas disturbed by fire. They use resources that native plants and animals might need," York explains.

Identifying and protecting areas that did not burn is also an important subject for debate. Specifically, some are arguing that cultural burns may be better than the hotter, more intense, hazard reduction burning. Cultural burns are cool-burning, knee-high blazes that were designed to happen continuously and across the landscape, practised by indigenous people long before Australia's invasion and colonization. The fires burn up fuel like kindling and leaf detritus, so that a natural bushfire has less to devour.

Since Australia's fire crisis began last year, calls for better reintegration of this technique have grown louder. But they may be of limited value at this crisis point, according to Clarke. "We need to appreciate how different things are now. Cultural burns happened to enable people to move through dense vegetation easily, or for ceremonial reasons. They weren't burning around 25 million people, criss-crossed by complex infrastructure and in a climate change scenario," he estimates.

Concrete measures to combat climate change are indeed crucial for the future of biodiversity. In spite of green shoots of optimism in some quarters, the prognosis of whether the bush will ever recover its biodiversity is looking somewhat grim. Breaking it down, Clarke surmises that "A chunk of it will be good – a third will be able to bounce back. A third is in question, but a third is in serious trouble. I've been studying

fire ecology for twenty years, but we're dealing with unchartered territory changing before our eyes.”

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