



“The Arc-aftermath of bushfires in the North East.” 2003 by Rick Amor

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Painting reproduced courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries

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Bushfires... Protect Your Precious Possessions





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Summer in Australia is Bushfire Season

The hazards of bushfires are greater in South East Australia than anywhere else in the world. Sadly, lives and property continue to be lost.

Preparing for the bushfire season is the responsibility of everyone who lives in a bushfire prone area. This can include metropolitan suburbs and the suburban fringe.

In a major emergency, fire services may be fully occupied fighting the front of the fire. Fire units may not be able to protect every home, so do not expect a crew to be available to protect you.

Bushfire preparation and survival information is available from a number of sources. CFA (Country Fire Authority) publications and their website are great examples. Visit the CFA site at www.cfa.vic.gov.au

'The Complete Bushfire Safety Book' by Joan Webster, published by Random House Australia 2000 ISBN 1740510348, and its handbook *'Essential Bushfire Safety Tips'* (Random House 2001) ISBN 1740510356 provide detailed information about all aspects of preparing for and surviving bushfires. Information can also be found at the associated website www.bushfiresafety.com.



You are responsible for your own safety and the protection of your assets.





You Need a Bushfire Safety Plan

Prevent, Prepare For, Respond to...are the three standard steps in managing risks.

They apply directly to bushfire safety, and you can plan to protect your precious possessions by applying the same principles.

Bushfires are frightening. Apart from the noise, smoke and heat, if you are not well prepared, the situation can become chaotic, even deadly. The survival of your house, family, pets, and your possessions, depends on preparation before the fire season.

There are aspects of preparation that apply to all households. It is important that you prepare your home and surroundings in accordance with the advice provided by fire authorities such as the CFA.

It is your decision whether you stay and defend your property or leave early on a high fire danger day.

Prepare and practice a bushfire safety plan.



If you live or holiday in a fire prone area, you need to plan in advance what you will do on days of high or extreme fire danger.

Whichever you choose, preparation goes a long way in enabling you to cope with the outcomes of the fire.

Even if you plan to leave, it is important to know how to stay safely in your home in an emergency, in case you don't have time to evacuate.

Well Before Summer...

You may not be able to prevent bushfires occurring in your area, but you can minimise their impact on your home and family.

Prepare your house, outbuildings and environs according to CFA advice. The prime risk to houses during a bushfire is from ember entry. Make your house as air tight as possible. Prevent ember entry through windows, doors and other openings, and the roof and sub-floor spaces.

Prepare an inventory of your precious items. Take photographs of special items. Store a copy of the inventory and the photographs in a safe location, preferably off-site.



- Make a list of your high priority items - those items you would single out for protection.
- Review the location of these items around your home, and choose storage and display locations that provide the best protection. For example, internal walls will be subjected to less heat than external walls – perhaps these are a better location for valuable art works.



- Identify those that you can store off-site for the fire season.
- Identify those that you will take with you if you intend to leave your property.
- Make duplicates of precious photos and store these (or the originals) off-site.
- Or separate your photographs and negatives, and store the negatives off-site.
- Copy important documents and store the originals off site.
- Get up to date valuations of valuable items.
- Review your insurance cover, and discuss specifics of bushfire cover with your insurance company.
- Consider investing in a fire proof safe for storing valuables. Items stored in these or other types of well sealed containers will be afforded greater protection from fire, smoke and heat damage than unprotected items.



- Review and practice your bushfire safety plan.
- Prepare your property according to CFA advice.
- Review and update your inventory.
- If you have decided to move valuables off-site for the fire season, for example, to the home of a friend, discuss and confirm the arrangements.
- Identify a safe storage room inside the house, which can be used to store valuable items on extreme fire danger days. A laundry or bathroom may be ideal.
The best protection will be given by a room with –
 - a fire rated solid core door
 - insulated walls
 - concrete floor
 - reinforced insulated ceiling
 - few windows, the smaller the better.
If windows are present, make sure they have flyscreen or shutters to prevent breakage and ember entry.
- Some residents have saved their valuables from fire damage by burying them in the yard! An underground storage shelter, may also be suitable. Seal the entrance to prevent smoke and spark entry.

On Days of Extreme Fire Danger, or if a Bushfire Threatens... Enact Your Bushfire Safety Plan Early

Regardless of whether you leave or stay:

- Aim to protect your valuables from heat, smoke and water damage.
- Remove valuable items from external walls, near doorways etc, and cover with woollen blankets.
- Move special items to the designated safe room. Cover them with woollen blankets, or fire blankets.
- Place valuable items into well sealed containers or tins.
- Make your house as airtight as possible.
- Close windows, doors and shutters.
- Close all internal doors.
- Put non-flammable draught stoppers, or wet towels at doors and other gaps.

If you leave, take your most precious possessions with you.

Return as soon as it is safe to do so. Hopefully, your home will have survived, but there may be spot fires that still pose a threat. Burning embers can continue to be blown onto houses for many hours after a bushfire.



Houses burn because embers gain entry into the roof space or inside the house. Aim to leave as little loose material and flammable items lying around to feed a fire.



If your house is damaged by fire, your valuables will most likely have suffered fire, smoke, heat and water damage. In the case of serious fire damage, very little may remain, and badly burnt items may be beyond salvage. Yet, sometimes it is surprising what survives.

Don't assume everything is lost.

Partially burnt, wet, smoke or soot damaged items can be saved.

Personal safety is your first priority. Ensure the area is safe to enter, and that you have authority to do so. You may need to check with the fire authority.

Notify your insurance agent as soon as possible.





Wear protective clothing and footwear, as there may be sharp or other hazardous material around. Disposable or work gloves and face masks are strongly recommended, as debris from fires can present a hazard.

If practical, take photos of items in situ, these may be useful for insurance purposes.

Retain any items that are recognisable, it may be possible to restore them.

Remove fragile items from further risk, but try to handle as little as possible.

If it is safe to do so, it may be best to leave undamaged items in place, and concentrate on retrieving damaged pieces. At this initial stage, avoid cleaning, just provide protection in boxes, trays or plastic bags.

A handy rule to keep in mind at this stage, and until proper salvage of each of your items begins is:

- If it's dry, keep it dry
- If it's damp, keep it damp
- If it's wet, keep it wet.





Salvaging Your Precious Possessions...

Watch out for mould on wet items. It can grow quickly in warm conditions. Mould spores are a health hazard. Protect yourself by wearing a mask and disposable gloves.

Around this time, you will also probably be talking with a number of agencies, including your insurance assessor. Decisions regarding the priorities for salvage and therefore the costs involved should be discussed at this time. You do have a say about how your insurance claim is allocated, and this can include professional conservation of valuable items. If you would like specialist advice from a conservator, contact your state museum, library or gallery, or the AICCM at www.aiccm.org.au

Smoke contains small particles of unburnt material, and can be toxic. Protect yourself with a face mask. Smoke may seem to disperse quickly after a fire, but much of it remains in the form of residues and odour. Removing the odour may prove to be one of the more difficult tasks after a fire. Rigorous cleaning and removal of soot from all surfaces is the first step. Some items, such as varnished timber, may retain the smell for a very long time, as soot particles can become impregnated into the surface finish.



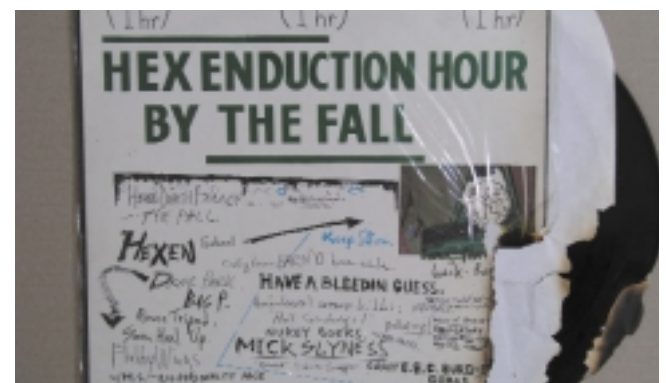
One way to remove the smell from smaller items is to place them in a sealed bag containing baking soda, which absorbs odours. Wrap the object in tissue or soft paper first, to protect it from direct contact with the baking soda.

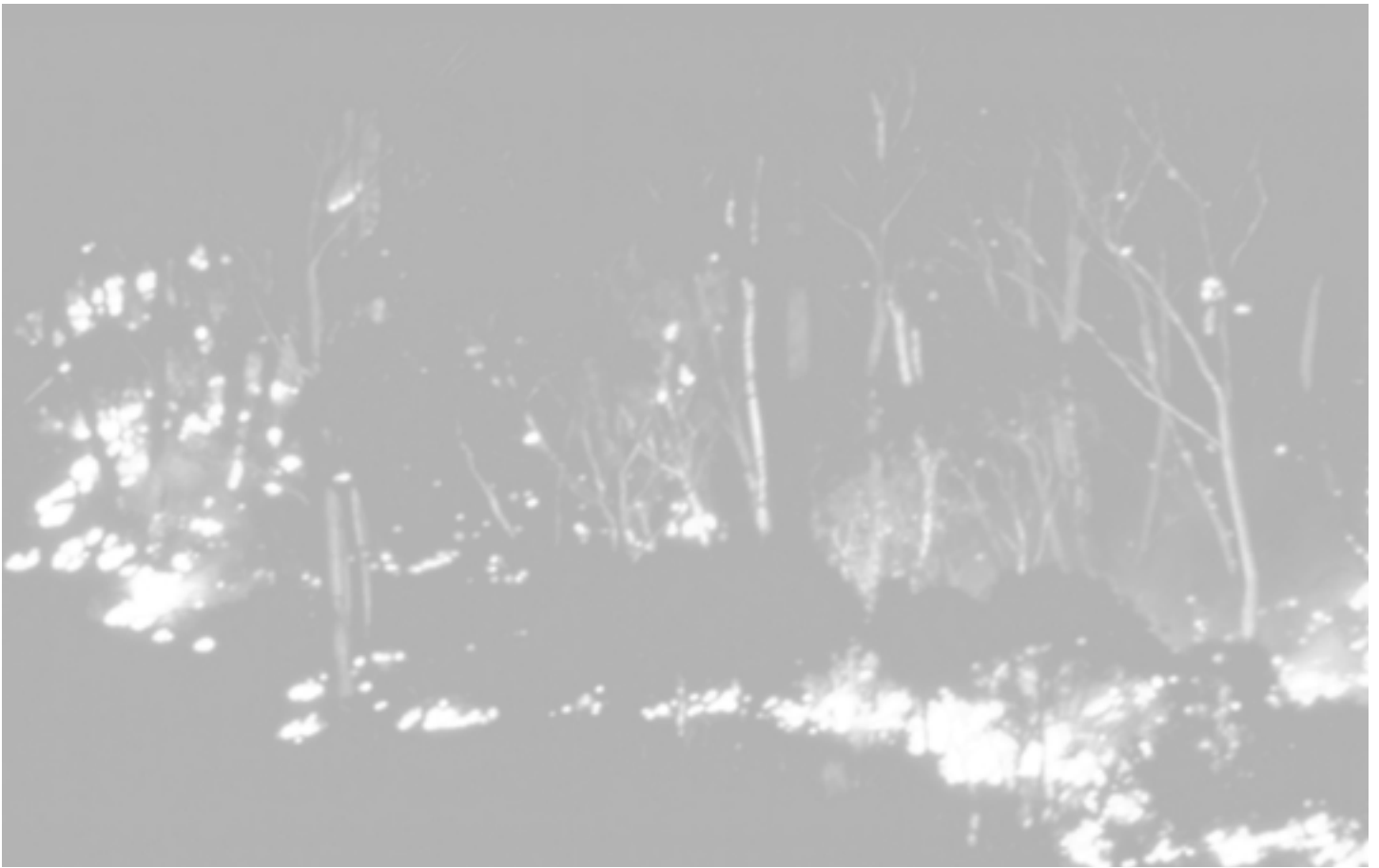
After a fire your possessions will likely have suffered several types of damage. Some will be seriously burnt, charred, melted or distorted. Much of this material may not be salvageable. Handle these items gently, and store for future consideration.

Some items may be scorched, and stained, and most will have suffered water damage to a greater or lesser extent.

It is useful at this stage to consider which items need priority attention.

If you have valuable paintings or other unique items that have been damaged, it is best to have them assessed and conserved by a specialist. ***Discuss this with your insurance assessor, and seek advice from a conservator as soon as possible.***





If you have salvaged items that you are going to treat yourself, there are some basic steps you can follow...

- Set aside a clean dry work area, with good ventilation. Open windows, and use fans to create good air circulation.
- Soot, dust and ash can be quite rough, and wiping or rubbing damaged items with a dust cloth, will cause scratches. Instead of using a duster, use a vacuum cleaner, set on low suction, and with a soft brush, gently brush the dirt towards the vacuum nozzle.
- To reduce the risk of tearing, or of fragments being sucked into the vacuum, cover the nozzle with cheesecloth or other soft fabric, secured in place with a rubber band
- If you do have mould, dry the item in sunlight first. The mould can be removed with a soft brush and vacuum. Discard the brush afterwards so as not to spread the mould.





- Remember that soot, ash and mould can be hazardous, and the exhaust of a vacuum cleaner will expel the soot back into the room. A vacuum with a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filter is best. Work in a well ventilated area. Wear gloves and mask for personal protection.
- Soot is also greasy, if brushing doesn't remove it, try using a 'Smoke Sponge' (available from specialty cleaning supplies such as Pro Chem). The photo on the right shows a 'Smoke Sponge' in use. These are made from vulcanised rubber and are very effective at removing soot, when dabbed against the scorched surface. Cut them down to a convenient size, and once the surface of the sponge becomes soiled, cut it away to reveal a clean working surface. Note: these sponges are not used with water, follow the instructions and dab, rather than rub. After use, vacuum the crumbly particles of the sponge away from the object, as they can become sticky over time.





- If **photographs** are soiled, wet or stuck together, immerse them in water and gently agitate until they separate, and the dirt is loosened. Air dry on blotter or paper towels, image side up.
- **Soiled books**, paper and similar materials can be cleaned with a vacuum and brush.
- If you have **wet books**, gently press the water out first, using towels. Then air dry standing them on one end, with the pages open. A fan set on low can assist drying. Take care not to direct a strong blast of air on to the book, as this may damage the spine.
- **Textiles** are best cleaned in two stages. Vacuum them first to remove as much loose dirt and soot as possible. Follow with a 'Smoke Sponge', gently dabbing over the surface. Then wash. Residual stains will probably require the services of a specialist dry cleaner, or a conservator. Dry cleaning tends to be less effective at removing smoke odour than washing.





- **Metals** can generally be cleaned with water and detergent. However if they are left wet they can rust quickly. Rinsing with methylated spirits or acetone will speed up the drying process.
- **Wooden items** can be vacuumed. Use the brush attachment. Follow with a 'Smoke Sponge' if necessary. Varnished items can be cleaned using a clean, soft cloth, lightly dampened with white spirits. Test a small area first.
- **Ceramics** and other decorative items can be gently washed. Watch for loose or broken parts. Air dry.

This photo shows a few of the items you will find useful when salvaging your possessions. Remember, soot, smoke and partially burnt material can be hazardous. Wear protective clothing, a mask and disposable gloves. A vacuum cleaner is more effective than a duster.





The tips provided here are fairly simple measures, intended to provide a practical guide to salvaging your possessions. It isn't possible to cover every type of material, nor every type of damage. They are intended as a general guide only. The University of Melbourne Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, Emergency Management Australia, and the Commonwealth of Australia do not accept any liability or responsibility for the treatments you apply.

More detailed advice is available from conservators at state museums, galleries and libraries or contact the AICCM via the website at www.aiccm.org.au. The task force dealing with the bushfire in your area may be able to assist you in directly accessing conservation expertise.



Notes...



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Images courtesy of EMA

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