

Australian wildfires: Personal accounts

Below are the personal accounts of Melinda Varcoe who lives in New South Wales and Jessica Pickering who was on holiday in Malua Bay.

Melinda Varcoe

‘We left Canberra on Boxing Day to go to my partner’s coast house 2 hours away at Malua Bay. (South coast near Batemans Bay) we go there most weekends in summertime or over the Christmas holidays along with many other Canberra people. Since New Year’s Eve morning (when the fire reached Malua Bay) there has been no power to Malua Bay and limited phone service. Approximately 200m down our street there is bush land that the fire burnt to the other side of the highway. Approximately 43 houses in Malua Bay were burnt down. But many spot fires occurred in people’s front/ back yards. Random houses along the suburban streets burnt. Particularly those in which the residents didn’t stay to defend.’

‘The effect on wildlife has been devastating. Malua Bay in particular has many Australian birds and mammals which I fear will not be there when we return. There will be a huge effect on the tourism industry on the south coast as many of the businesses are small privately owned businesses – these people rely on the tourists to come for their summer holidays.’

‘Experiencing a wildfire is very surreal. We knew there were fires in different parts of the coast, but we just assumed we were safe. I think the fire that reached Malua Bay travelled around 75km overnight which is why we were probably not as prepared as we should have been. I didn’t feel in immediate danger when at our house or when evacuated to the beach but I was worried for others e.g. those who had a fire in their street and we could see it burning from the beach.’

‘The community responded to the fires very well. It was amazing without phones and TV etc., everyone was outside asking their neighbours if they were okay, did they need help, food etc. many people joined there supplies and cooked a BBQ on their front lawn to use their food wisely as we did not know when power would be restored or when supermarkets would be open. In my opinion, there are mixed feelings of the Australian people at the moment. Many people are looking for someone to blame, the government, the greenies etc. however the fires were most likely a result of a mixture of issues including drought (dry areas and a lack of water), a lot of fuel in our forests and bush land due to lack of back burning or maintenance, arsonists who were deliberately lighting the fires and possibly not the most efficient and effective response. As a result, many of the fires got out of control quickly. As no country has ever experienced fires to this level before it is often hard to know how quickly to react/ respond and what to do in an emergency. In general, the Australian people are banding together and helping others in any way they can whether that is donating goods or money or offering services.’

Jessica Pickering

‘Some effects that we struggled with were the smoke inhalation particularly on the New Year’s Eve when we evacuated to the beach for a few hours. Not having power and phone service - we couldn’t call or text family and friends who were worried about us to let them know we were okay. We couldn’t cook, have a hot shower, keep food in our fridge/ freezer for long but also couldn’t access shops because they were also closed. A bigger issue was that we couldn’t get back to Canberra because so many roads were closed and we couldn’t get fuel as every other Canberran was trying to get fuel to get back home. A trip that normally takes us 2 hours took us 7 hours to get home.’