

# What we lost in the fire

Around a billion animals have been impacted by Australia's bushfires. It's a catastrophe in which more endangered species will be pushed closer to the brink of extinction

*By Tim Flannery*

Australia's ongoing bushfire crisis is unprecedented. It is having an enormous impact on biodiversity, and there is no doubt that climate change is making the fires more severe. Last year was Australia's hottest and driest ever – part of a decades-long trend in which the country has become hotter and drier. With natural factors alone, just one year in 350 would be as hot as 2019 was. But add the warming of the greenhouse gases, and the figure drops to one in eight. With the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere rising, the chances of severe heat must become even greater.

Climate change deniers argue that bushfire has always been part of the Australian environment. It is true that Australia is an exceptionally fire-prone continent, but today's bushfires are nothing like the bushfires of decades past. I know about the behaviour of fires through personal experience. In 1994 I lost a house to bushfire in Sydney's southern suburbs, and

successfully defended another in 2002 to Sydney's north. And during the 1980s I made a documentary on bushfire which involved visiting a koala rescue centre near Port Macquarie on the New South Wales central coast. Koalas are tough creatures that can survive horrific injuries, and what I saw there broke my heart. Koalas young and old, with claws, hands and faces burned away, but still alive. The carers had the terrible job of trying to determine which should be treated, and which euthanised.

Koalas have experienced bushfires for millions of years, but like that bushfire in the 1980s that inflicted such pain, the fires of years past have been of limited scale or frequency. The new climate-fuelled megafires spreading across Australia today are of such scale and ferocity that they threaten not just individuals but entire species.

Due to its varied soils and geological history, Australia has many species that occur only in tiny areas and are vulnerable to extinction by fire. Gilbert's potoroo is a

rabbit-sized member of the kangaroo family and one of the world's rarest mammals. It was thought to be extinct for nearly 130 years before the discovery, in 1994, of a small population in a national park near Albany in south-western Australia. Gilbert's potoroo occurs within patches of dense vegetation that has not burned for at least 50 years, which it needs for the fungi it feeds on and for shelter. When in 2015 a fire burned through more than 90 per cent of its habitat, few survivors could be found. Were it not for the fact a small number had been translocated to an offshore island in 2005, Gilbert's potoroo may well have become extinct.

Species such as Gilbert's potoroo are in the front line of the extinction crisis, and megafires threaten to carry them away en masse. But Australia's history shows that even more widely distributed and abundant species are also at risk.

Central Australia was arguably the first region of the country to be hit by a change in fire regimes (the pattern of wildfires). –