

BOOK REVIEW

Firestick Ecology: Fairdinkum Science in Plain English. 2015. By Vic Jurskis. Connor Court Publishing, Redland Bay, Queensland, Australia. 325 pages. Hardcover. AU\$34.95. ISBN: 978-1-925138-74-0

The ecology and management of fire in the Australian landscape elicits strong opinions from many groups including farmers, land managers, academics, and organisations concerned with the conservation of nature. Public discourse on fire management is always spirited and sometimes acrimonious, particularly in the wake of major bushfires that result in loss of life or property and have significant impacts on infrastructure and natural resources. This debate plays out in print and electronic media, in community forums, and in the pages of scientific and professional journals.

In *Firestick Ecology*, author Vic Jurskis argues the case for fire having a fundamental and essential role in maintaining ecosystems throughout the vast Australian continent. His views are unequivocal and well summarised in the closing paragraph of the book where he states,

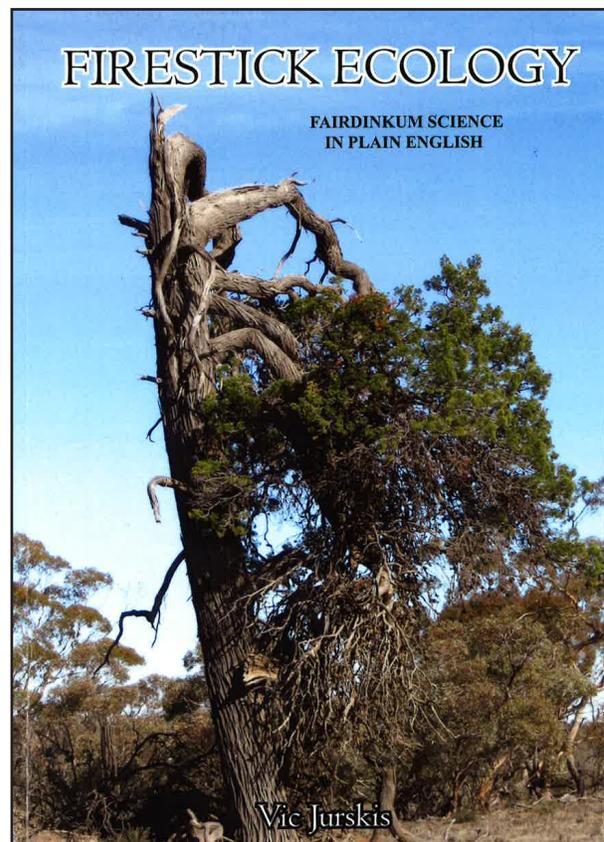
There is only one legitimate perspective. The firestick created and maintained the biodiversity and the fire-safe environment that greeted European settlers. To conserve biodiversity and live safely we need to apply it willingly, frequently and, with practice, skilfully.

Jurskis develops and illustrates this theme in considerable detail throughout the 325 pages of his book.

Jurskis is a professionally trained forester with many decades of experience in practical forest ecology and fire management in New South Wales, Australia. He is widely read and displays a comprehensive knowledge of landscape ecology and the history of European ex-

ploration and settlement in eastern Australia since the late eighteenth century. In addition, he has written extensively on a broad range of topics ranging from ecological history to interactions between fire, nutrient cycling, and forest health. Jurskis has a direct writing style and leaves the reader in no doubt as to his views on a topic. He also brings a personal touch to the book with recollections of his schooling, his working career as a forester, and an account of how his father bluffed his way through an advance guard of Red Army conscripts during Stalin's invasion of Lithuania in 1944, to eventually make his way to Australia and find work on the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme. This forthright spirit and preparedness to confront adversaries has evidently passed from father to son.

Firestick Ecology opens with a discussion of the scientific method emphasising the importance of thorough observation as a precur-



tor to development of hypotheses. This relatively brief chapter outlines the key issues of concern to the author and directs the reader to particular chapters where these issues are addressed in greater detail. Three following chapters then describe in considerable detail the condition of the country at the time of European colonization, drawing heavily on written accounts from explorers and settlers who took up land for grazing and observed at first hand the relationship of aboriginal people to the land and their use of fire as a tool for land management. Jurskis draws on these accounts to argue that human fire was the major force in Australian ecology and that rapid changes in the structure of forests and woodlands took place as aboriginal people were dispossessed of their land, with the resulting lack of regular firing leading to woody thickening by saplings and shrubs. Subsequent chapters then examine interactions between changed fire regimes, ecosystem health, and the occurrence of high intensity bushfire conflagrations, amongst other things. This discussion is framed in the context of prevailing social attitudes to the environment, contemporary political events, institutional arrangements for land management, and the rise of fire ecology as an academic discipline.

Jurskis is openly critical of much of the fire ecology research conducted in Australia in recent decades and goes to considerable lengths to describe what he sees as flaws in framing research questions, in study design, and in the interpretation of findings. He ar-

gues that these flaws stem primarily from a lack of understanding of fire behavior and the way in which fire interacts with landform, edaphic characteristics, and vegetation structure. Indeed, there will be few who have published on Australian fire ecology who do not rate a mention in the book. Jurskis's plain speaking will inevitably irritate some, and find favour with others. This may cost him some book sales, although I daresay that most who work in the fields of fire ecology and environmental history will sneak a look to see what has been written about them. The book has focus on south-eastern Australia but does draw upon examples from other parts of the continent. Readers from other countries may identify with many of the broader issues, but perhaps be inclined to gloss over some of the detailed accounts of early European colonists and be puzzled by the lack of consensus on basic aspects of fire regimes and the role of fire in maintaining plant communities.

Jurskis is unashamedly an iconoclast and in *Firestick Ecology* he sets out to provoke discussion on the fundamental issue of fire's place in the management of Australian landscapes. In doing so he makes an important contribution to furthering the discipline of fire ecology in Australia.

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