

## **10ASM Abstract Submission**

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East Gippsland Recovering Together**

### **Introduction**

East Gippsland is a region in south-eastern Victoria. With 83% of the region as public land, it is known for its natural habitats, biodiversity, pristine waterways, and iconic areas, such as the Gippsland Lakes.

East Gippsland faced an unprecedented bushfire during the summer of 2019/20. The fires, which burnt out of control throughout the summer months, were particularly challenging due to their extent, duration and substantial community and economic impact, which is likely to continue for years. East Gippsland was already experiencing significant drought and there was severe and widespread dryness throughout the region.

Around 46,000 residents from 118 communities were directly or indirectly impacted. By the time the fire had passed, the fires had burnt more than 1.1 million hectares, representing 56% of East Gippsland. Of the public land burnt, 56% National Parks and conservation reserves, 12% other conservation reserves, 11% other State forests and 67% other public land was burnt.

With this scale of disaster, the natural environment was extensively impacted. Rare and endangered species suffering, threatened vegetation communities heavily impacts, habitats destroyed, waterways flowing full of sediment, and natural visitor areas along with visitor infrastructure and facilities burnt to the ground.



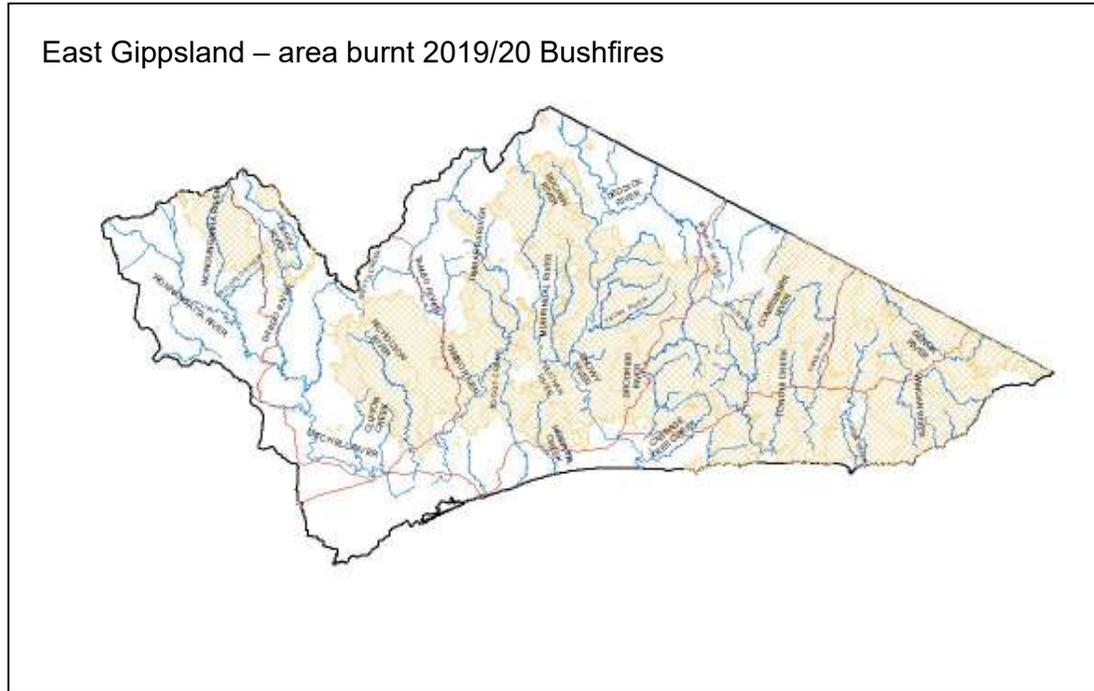
*Photo 1 – The catchment of the remote Benedore River in Far East Gippsland burnt.*



*Photo 2 – The Tambo catchment, showing the scale and intensity of the burn.*



*Photo 3 – Debris build up after the fires and a thunderstorm event on the Tambo River.*



*Map 1 – The burnt area is shown in the hashed orange area, more than 50% of the East Gippsland region was burnt.*

### **Recovery coordination**

In February 2020, the natural resource management agencies from across East Gippsland came together to coordinate and collaborate recovery efforts. The agencies and community groups agreed to develop the Natural Environment Recovery Working Group (the group).

The group is made up of the following organisations:

- Department of Environment Land, Water and Planning
- East Gippsland Landcare Networks
- Parks Victoria
- Environment Protection Authority
- East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority
- East Gippsland Shire Council
- Gunaikurnai Land and Water Aboriginal Corporation
- Agriculture Victoria
- Federation University
- East Gippsland Water

The role of the group is to provide strategic direction and leadership to coordinate the rehabilitation of the natural environment in the municipality e.g. waterways, parks, wildlife. The group was developed to support the coordination and implementation of Natural Resource recovery at a local level; and monitor and mitigate any known and potential risks to effective recovery.

The group agreed that it will be accountable for:

- Coordination of the rehabilitation of natural environment including parks, waterways, and wildlife.
- Coordination of preservation of community assets e.g. reserves and parks.
- Ensuring community consultation and involvement in the decision-making process.
- Ensuring a coordinated approach to the housing related strategies in partnership with relevant organisations.
- Ensuring disaster risk reduction is considered in planning of rebuilding and reconstruction.

Since February 2020, the group have continued to meet. At the start, the group were meeting on a weekly basis as recovery efforts were being developed. In mid-May, (three months on) the group decided fortnightly meetings would be sufficient, then in August (six months on) moving to monthly meetings. The group continues to meet regularly.

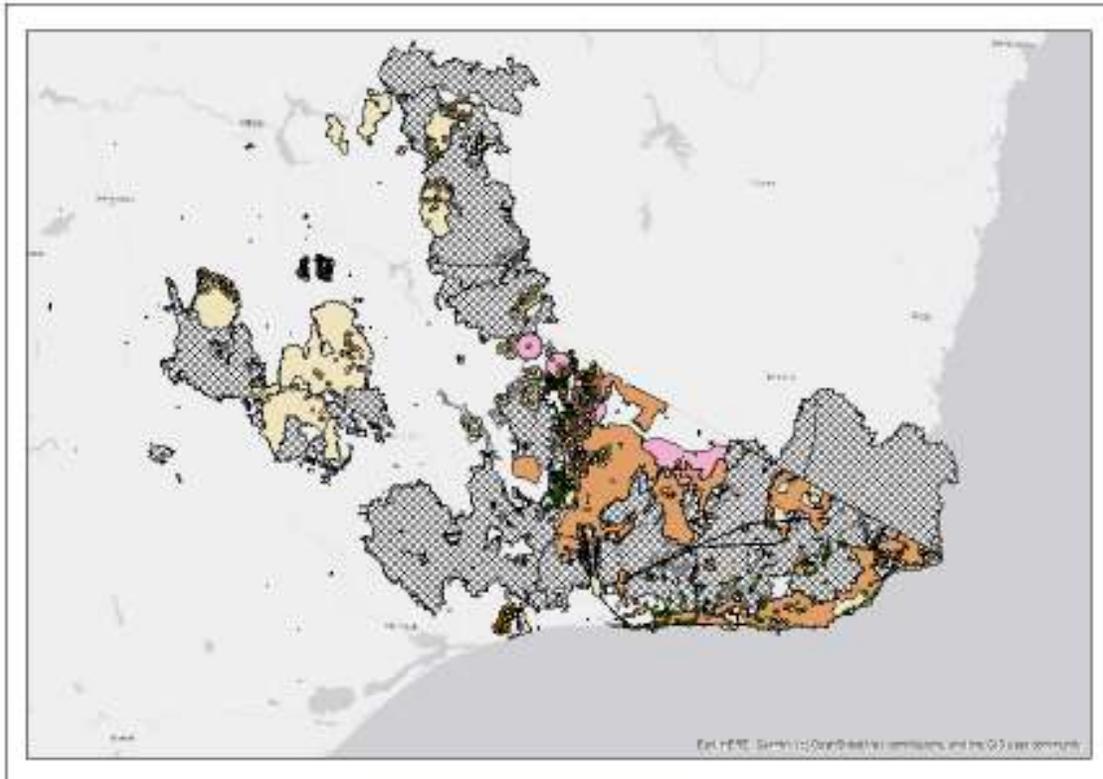
### **Outcomes**

With the coordination and collaboration between partner agencies and communities continuing to strengthen, the Natural Environment Recovery Working Group has delivered many important outcomes, including many social outcomes, since recovery commenced. With favourable weather conditions helping recovery efforts, some of the highlights from the program have included:

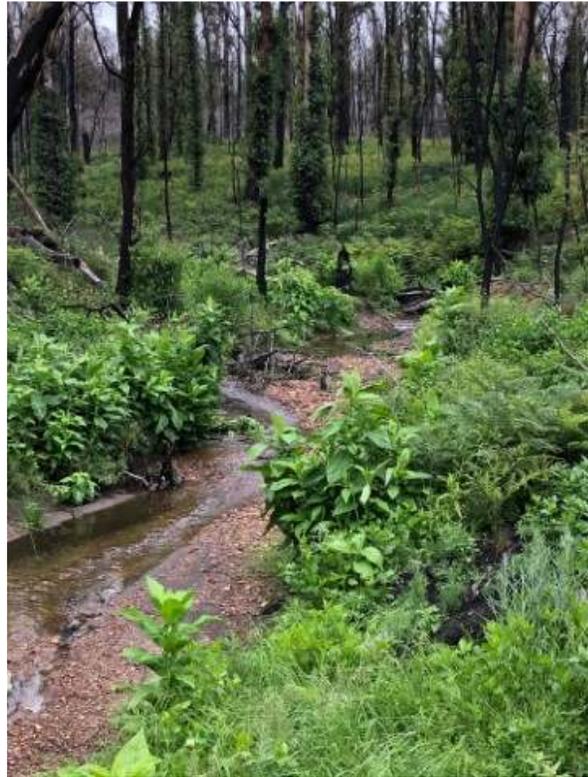
- The Bushfire Biodiversity Relief and Early Recovery program now includes \$54.5M of State and Commonwealth funding providing recovery actions for wildlife and biodiversity impacted by the fires across the state.
- The largest pest animal ground shooting program undertaken in Victoria has occurred as part of recovery effort, including over 250,000ha of priority area under management treated. Targeting deer, pigs, cattle, and goats.
- Studies and assessments completed on 8 threatened frog species in East Gippsland riparian areas.
- The Community Bushfire Connection webpage established and live for community contribution <https://www.communitybushfireconnection.com.au/>
- East Gippsland post bushfire revegetation guide published
- Over 90% (7,100km) of roadside hazardous tree assessments completed, includes roads and walking tracks.
- Over 80% (20 sites) of recreation and visitor sites assessed and many re-established.
- 50 nest boxes constructed and installed for Glossy Black Cockatoos.
- Over 90% of fencing along waterways is reconstructed or repaired.
- Assessment on 8 species of frog has been completed. Some species of frogs are recovering well, while others appear to be heavily impacted.
- Whilst undertaking woody weed control in the Upper Mitchell catchment, contractors discovered a spotted tree frog, these frogs haven't been seen since 2019.
- Ongoing water quality monitoring and debris build up in waterways removed.
- More than 1,000 community members actively involved and engaged in natural environment bushfire recovery efforts.

- Social outcomes achieved, including employing 57 farmers and people directly impacted by fire through the drought employment program and providing more opportunities for recreational fishers and visitors to the area with the release of 42,000 Flathead in the Gippsland Lakes.

The group continues to work together to deliver and report on progress of outcomes and targets achieved.



*Map 2 – An example of recovery works delivered by various partners across the region. This map shows the different pest animal control works, including bait stations, aerial and ground shooting, overlaid over the burn area.*



*Photos 4 and 5 – An example of photos that there is hope. Bills Creek, in Far East Gippsland. Photo 4 - A few weeks after the bushfires, then photo 5 showing Bills creek naturally regenerating 8 months following the bushfires.*



*Photo 6 – The Mallacoota community enjoyed a boat cruise with scientists from Arthur Rylah Institute, including fish ecologists, botanists, and more general environmental scientists to learn about natural recovery after bushfires and what to expect.*

## **Opportunities / Limitations**

We are likely to see more of these environmental impacts at a larger scale and more often across Australia. Opportunities to set up governance frameworks and partnership arrangements, to create networks around trust, respect and honesty before the disaster comes is essential and has worked for us.

A limitation of the coordinated bushfire recovery efforts has been the amount of funding received in the short time and continuing to help and remind people to work together, share knowledge and understanding. When people are under pressure, they generally reform to 'just getting the job done' and the willingness to attend meetings and facilitate knowledge sharing is reduced.

## **Key messages**

- Collaborative effort takes good organisation, governance and ongoing commitment from the lead agency and all other agencies and community groups involved.
- Working together to listen and learn from each other on what our priorities are; challenges we face; and helping each other, resulted in us collectively providing better support to communities and improved responses / outcomes to environmental impacts and changes following the bushfires.
- Respectful and trusting relationships built before crisis or disaster hits will pay dividends when the going gets tough. This is with all stakeholders, including partner agencies, community groups, communities, and individuals.
- Natural environment recovery takes a long time, funding to continue recovery works needs to be thought of over a 5-10-year period, instead of 1-2 years.