

The Sydney Morning Herald

NATIONAL BUSHFIRES

'Australia's first climate change refugees'

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Standing on the waterfront at Mallacoota on Friday morning, waiting with his wife and 10-year-old son to board a tender that would take them out to HMAS Choules offshore, Nick Ritar had time to ponder the utter strangeness of what was unfolding in the normally idyllic beach town just south of the NSW border.

"We are Australia's first climate refugees," he told the *Herald* by phone from the wharf, where groups of holidaymakers were being bused down from the local cinema.





Nick Ritar, wife Kirsten Bradley and their son Ashar, 10, await evacuation from Mallacoota.

"We are the first of many."

Three days earlier, on New Year's Eve, Mr Ritar had seen the many-hued shades of hell firsthand. Sheltering in the house of a friend, he and his family watched as the sky itself succumbed to the inferno roaring up out of the bush from the south-west.

What had been a smoke-tinged but otherwise near-normal dawn just after five had given way by 7am to a deepening gloom. By 8am "it was pitch black, darker than the darkest night".

The towering pyrocumulus clouds generated by the fire had obliterated the sun, leaving the group of 14 family members and friends in darkness for two hours, before blood-red light returned as flames swept up to the edges of the town. By that point, Mr Ritar recalled, "burning embers started falling and houses were starting to get lost".



The blood-red light in Mallacoota. NICK RITAR

Thousands of residents and holidaymakers huddled for safety on the beach, some taking to the water in small boats before the fire moved around the town, leaving a violent orange sky in its wake.

Further up the coast, at the fishing village of Bermagui in New South Wales, ABC broadcaster Virginia Trioli also saw the darkness descend. At 10am she told listeners: "It felt like midnight - you could not see the sunlight, it was terrifying."

All along the state's South Coast, from Bega in the far south through to Nowra,

along the normally pristine beaches and rocky coves and through the picturesque villages of the hinterland, the story has been the same.

'We're going to need a whole lot of love showered on the South Coast ... The monster is not done with us yet.'

Eurobodalla mayor Liz Innes

The darkness that turned the middle of the day into night before a blood-red haze descended. Tens of thousands of holidaymakers taking refuge in surf clubs, sports clubs, civic centres and RSL memorial halls up and down the coast. In Malua Bay, up to 1000 holidaymakers and residents spending the night on a beach, clinging to the water's edge, as homes went up in flames. In Rosedale, Mogo, Cobargo, Batemans Bay and Nelligen – houses lost, businesses and livelihoods destroyed, treasured memories obliterated. Historic villages and hamlets with their hearts torn out. And lives lost.

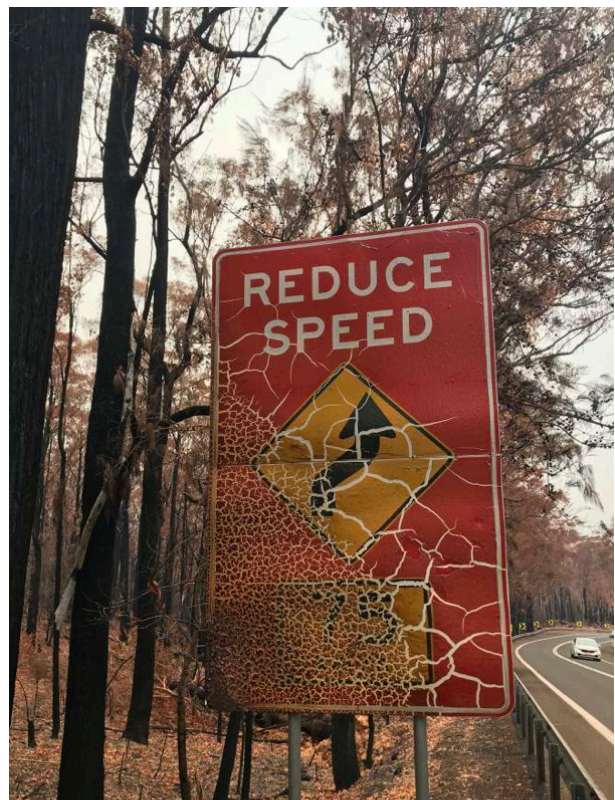
These blazes, say experienced observers, like the former NSW fire and rescue chief Greg Mullins, are unprecedented in their ferocity and scale.

The fires have been intense enough to generate madcap winds and updraughts so strong they can flip an eight tonne fire-truck on its roof, as happened on Monday near the Victorian-NSW border, killing 28-year-old Samuel McPaul as he fought the massive Green Valley blaze.

Firefighting, says Mullins, is becoming "far more dangerous despite better trucks, better equipment, better uniforms. Logic would say in this day and age we would be far better-equipped to fight fires and we would be getting on top of it, but Mother Nature is bigger than any of us, bigger than any technology, and she is pretty bloody angry."

People on the south coast are telling him they have never seen the like.

"Wherever I go – and I have been out fighting fires this season in Wollombi, Spencer, Grafton, the Blue Mountains, Bargo and Batemans Bay – people who I have never met are coming up to me



and saying 'good on you mate, we see now what you are talking about'."

What he's been "talking about" is climate change. Earlier this year, Mullins was a key force behind the formation of the Emergency Leaders for Climate Action group, which brings together 29 former fire and emergency service chiefs who want to see stronger leadership on the matter.

The warming of the planet has "created conditions for fires the likes of which we have never seen before", Mullins says. That includes a 15 to 20 per cent reduction in rainfall on the South Coast in recent years, and fire seasons extending up to two months longer than they did in the the 1970s through to the '90s.

"We have lost six times more homes than we have ever lost in the worst previous fire season in New South Wales history," he says. "And it's still going."



A roadside scarred by the raging bushfires at Eurobodalla. WARWICK EDGINGTON



1:43

Aerial footage of Mallacoota on 31 December at 11pm

The aerial footage shows the extent of the devastation in Mallacoota.

Those losses stand at about 450 homes so far in this week's blazes alone, bringing to more than 1200 the number lost in the state since October.

But it will be days, if not weeks, before property losses can be fully tallied, and more is almost certainly yet to come with conditions predicted for this weekend to match those that produced the New Year's Eve infernos.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian has declared a state of emergency that will run for

another six days – the third state of emergency in New South Wales since the beginning of November.

Bega MP and state Transport Minister Andrew Constance – shattered by what he has seen in Malua Bay, where neighbours and friends lost homes while his survived – joined the Premier in urging holidaymakers to flee the region ahead of what he calls Saturday's expected "blast furnace" weather.

Nor is the danger zone confined to the South Coast. Authorities have also ordered the departure of visitors from the Kosciusko national park, the Shoalhaven and the Batlow/Wondalga area. The so-called "leave" zone now encompasses some 14,000 square kilometres from Nowra down to the Victorian border, but the blazes are no respecter of state boundaries and are already burning across state lines. In Victoria itself the entire East Gippsland region remains at extreme risk.

In small NSW towns like Mogo – where the 2016 census put the population at less than 400 – the loss of iconic businesses that had become beloved tourist magnets is a devastating blow.

They include Roman Leathergoods, which Lorena Grandaos and her husband, Gaspar Roman, had run for nearly 20 years, and the Little Tea shop, known for its quirky teapots and range of teas carefully sourced from overseas by the owner. Barely a single piece of recognisable debris was left from those shops and neighbouring businesses after the fire swept through.

The nearby Mogo zoo – which includes giraffes and zebra among its exhibits – miraculously lost not a single animal, though director Chad Staples had to stash many of the smaller species inside his house to help them weather the heat.

Fire is fickle, and in the town's side streets it was obvious that it wasn't always the sturdiest houses that survived. Some built of brick had succumbed, while others primarily made of wood had been left unscathed.

Mogo lies in the Eurobodalla shire, among the hardest hit by the fires. Its economy is heavily tourism-dependent, with a permanent population of about 33,000 that swells to more than 110,000 during the summer peak.

Local mayor Liz Innes got a frontline taste of the blazes on New Year's Eve, and then like thousands of others was stuck for more than a day offline and without power while her partner and a friend tried to cut fallen trees to clear a route out along their dirt road.

When phone coverage was finally restored, she found her first message was a reprimand from a resident, wondering why she wasn't speaking out about the fires when other mayors were hitting the airwaves.

"I'd like to tell that fellow, 'mate, I'm with you', she told the *Herald* outside the

Batemans Bay evacuation centre on Thursday. "I don't want to be sitting on a beach in Hawaii drinking a cocktail, I want to be right here with everyone else."

Innes frets about how the region will recover from the devastation. "It's going to be touch and go for a very long time," she says. "We're going to get through it, but we're going to need a whole lot of love showered on the South Coast ... The monster is not done with us yet."

At nearby Nelligen, the *Herald* caught up with cafe owner Terry 30 hours after the fire had been through. He was run off his feet, cooking up food for anyone who needed it and shuttling residents back to their houses from a safe spot beside the Clyde River.

Normally he'd have had up to 10 people working for him at the height of the summer trade, but with the power out he hadn't been able to access most of his stock because the roller doors wouldn't work.



The evacuation begins on HMAS Choules. NICK RITAR

"We're devastated financially," he said, adding that if basic services like his couldn't survive then the region's mix of tourism and aged care industries would struggle too. "We're the last in line ... but if we go, nothing will be left."

There have been amazing tales of survival. One man, who only wished to be identified as Grant, recounted trying to flee his property in a car as the fire-front approached but hit a tree as the darkness descended.

He leapt into a dam to survive, remaining submerged for the next hour as the bush blazed around him. Miraculously, a sprinkler system helped preserve his small home, but the fire spared nothing of his absent neighbour's house except a handful of pages from a recipe book, which he later found fluttering in the driveway.

On New Year's Day, passing through Narooma on the way to fire-ravaged Cobargo, a *Herald* reporter spotted more than 20 people queued up outside the local Telstra phone box, trying to get through to families the old-fashioned way.



3:35

Victoria Bushfires: Mallacoota locals forced to seek refuge

Residents in the Victorian town of Mallacoota were forced to seek shelter on the beach when the fires ripped through the town.

As with so many of the coastal communities, power was out, communications down, service stations were out of fuel and food supplies were dwindling.

Coming into the Bega Valley township of Cobargo, the *Herald* team confronted scenes of utter carnage in the fields and on the roads.

Charred tree skeletons stood in paddocks that had been reduced to blackened dirt, dotted with the corpses of horses and cattle lying stiff with legs in the air, or entrails spilling out from distended bellies.

It was not far from here, at Wandella, that father and son farmers Robert and Patrick Salway lost their lives trying to defend their property, among the eight who have perished in the fires in New South Wales this week.

Damaged and weakened trees pose an ever-present hazard for those making their way through the ruined landscape to check on property, possessions and stock and also threaten the roads.

Long lines of cars snaked out of Batemans Bay as roads gradually reopened on Thursday, and holidaymakers heeded the call to abandon the region before the weekend.

But the exodus, too, ran into problems. Sections of the Princes Highway were subject to on and off closures over several hours, adding to the frustration and fatigue of motorists trapped in lengthening tailbacks.

The Longo family were among those who covered only 40 kilometres in six hours after they headed north from Batemans Bay. Forced to a halt near Ulladulla, they took refuge in the local RSL until midnight, when it closed its doors. They, along with scores of others, spent the next few hours napping uneasily by the roadside before the highway reopened about 4am.

Political leaders have been put to the test during the crisis, and some have been found wanting. Berejiklian has come through with her standing enhanced. She has been a reassuring voice and constant presence before the cameras and on the ground.

State Emergency Services Minister David Elliott has likely inflicted terminal political damage on himself by heading overseas as the crisis was set to intensify. On Friday he was said to be returning, though the *Herald* had made repeated attempts to contact him without success.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has not fared well, being heckled in Cobargo when he visited survivors there and putting in a testy performance at a media conference on Thursday.

Pressed on whether he should have showed stronger leadership earlier, Morrison still appeared eager to keep state authorities at the forefront of the emergency response, though Canberra has now markedly increased the tempo of defence force relief operations and the Prime Minister will convene a meeting of the cabinet's national security committee on Monday.

Morrison continues to insist that Australia will "meet and beat" its emissions reduction targets, but Mullins says they are too low anyway, and that Australia's credibility has been shattered by Angus Taylor's performance at the recent climate summit in Madrid where he failed to mention that the continent was burning.





Scott Morrison and Darren Chester arrive in Bairnsdale on Friday . The PM had earlier been heckled in the NSW town of Mogo MELISSA CUNNINGHAM

Mullins wants the government to urgently request at least 20 purpose-built water-scooping aircraft from Canada, saying they have faster turnaround than Australia's heavier tankers and can quickly suck up water from lakes, dams and rivers. It would be a practical measure, he says, to "get us through this catastrophe, which is growing ... they can't put these fires out but they can give us a tactical edge, and save homes."

Mullins says his dearest wish is that "our Prime Minister will read some of the scientific papers on climate change and bushfires, start to listen to experts rather than the coal industry. It becomes a huge moral question. Are we prepared to subject future generations to even worse? I am not, and my colleagues are not."

At Mallacoota, the winding 25-kilometre route back to the highway could take several weeks to reopen because of the need to clear tree hazards.

For now, the only way out remains by sea. Nick Ritar, his wife, Kirsten Bradley, and son, Ashar, were expecting to be on the high seas by afternoon on Friday, the last time the *Herald* made contact. Ahead of them lay a 20-hour voyage to Westernport, bunkered down in the bowels of the ship, before they can begin their journey home to Tasmania. The family have become part of the largest evacuation in the country's history.

Ritar was conflicted about leaving. "We all feel a bit guilty, knowing we could be of help in an emergency if it develops this weekend but also aware that the more people who remain, the more the load on emergency services and supplies."

What will linger in his mind's eye for a long time is the last walk he took along the beach.

Strewn along its 10-kilometre length were the bodies of birds – lorrikeets, king parrots, owls, rosellas, eastern honeyeaters, magpies and others. He thinks there were probably thousands. "Every two steps, I saw another one," he said. "The impact on native wildlife is unfathomable."



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