

Pyromania amongst the salmon gums

By Roger Underwood

When I was a young forester many years ago, I was often labelled a “pyromaniac” by Perth’s most outspoken environmentalist. This was meant as an insult, but I wore the badge with pride because she was referring to my love of fuel reduction burning in WA forests – the key to preventing serious bushfire damage ... as I knew and she rejected.

By this definition, I remain a pyromaniac to this day, and to prove the point I will recount a story about the lovely little fuel reduction burn I recently conducted, single-handed, on my own property. The focus was a beautiful grove of salmon gums that I had planted in 1995, near the front gate and adjacent to the highway. At 31 years of age, the stand had never had any treatment, other than a light thinning of suppressed stems for firewood about 10 years ago, and the leaf, twig and bark litter on the ground was well over ankle deep. I estimated it was carrying about 15 tonnes/ha of bushfire fuel and was vulnerable to a lighted cigarette tossed into the wild oats on the road verge from a passing motorist. I decided it could do with a burn – firstly to minimise the fire hazard, and at the same time to protect the lovely trees should an uncontrolled fire go through.



Grove of salmon gums (beyond) on my property

I had first been taught how to do a fuel reduction burn (in jarrah forest) by Overseer Bill Russell when I was a student member of his gang at Nannup in 1959, so I knew the drill.

First, I waited until after the first autumn rains and the paddocks were green. Next I raked around the butts of the trees (this is not necessary in jarrah forest, but it is with salmon gums because of their thin “gum” bark), leaving one or two un-raked as these were destined for the firewood heap as thinnings, and it did not matter if the fire ring-barked them. I then slowly lit up the downwind edge of the grove, allowing the fire to gently backburn into the wind to a depth of 2-3 m. It was then a simple matter of lighting spot fires (using the rake to transport burning litter) about 4-5 m apart across the wind in strips, timing each strip ignition so that the spot fires burnt progressively into each other and self-extinguished. Eventually I lit around the upwind edge and the flanks, so that the whole area was burned out. I then walked around the perimeter and raked in any glowing coals and burning sticks ... and went back to HQ for lunch. Later I again patrolled the edge and

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completed the mop-up with a shovel. One or two stumps left from the thinning operation had caught alight, and I was happy for them to burn away safely deep inside the burnt ground.



Spot fires coalescing

It was a pleasing result: a mild burn, with flames only a few cms high, no damage, not a leaf scorched, no escapes, about 95% fuel removal. The burn was about an acre in size (0.4 ha), and the whole job was finished in about 3 hours, the hardest bit being the raking around the trees before I started. I had my tractor and firebreak scraper standing by, but they were not needed. The burn was fully accomplished with a single match, a rake and a shovel.

Apart from the outcome, it was a pleasure to be applying a controlled burning technique taught to me over 60 years ago and observing that it is still foolproof. A 'copybook' burn, in miniature.

Yes, it was fun, and yes, I am a pyromaniac – so long as this is defined as a trained person using fire to a good end and doing no harm.