



**Wyaliba RFS volunteer Nessie Leishman.** Photo: Annette Ruzicka/MAPgroup.

# Our **common ground**

By ACF Senior Content Producer  
Marian Reid

**As new shoots emerge from burnt bushland, a diverse range of ordinary people and community leaders are connecting, coming together and finding common ground.**

**T**he tight-knit bushland community of Wyaliba, near Glen Innes in the highlands of New South Wales, was completely devastated by one of the early megafires we saw during last summer's fire season. It was early in November when the already dry forest, its beautiful river, rich wildlife and half the homes in the community were reduced to a silent ash-grey emptiness. Two lives were lost.

But when ACF visited the community in December to collect stories about the impact of the fire, we met a strong group of women and men who were determined to speak out on climate change despite still reeling from the worst bushfire the community had ever experienced.

Wyaliba RFS Volunteer Nessie Leishman was one of these incredible voices who agreed to speak with ACF. Stepping from relative anonymity in her small community, Nessie took the reality of what was happening around her and turned it into a compelling message for

our leaders. Her video reached tens of thousands of people on social media, many of whom were not traditional ACF supporters.

She said: "Scott Morrison, you can't continue to ignore and deny the effects climate change is having on the whole of Australia. There have been lots of factors building towards these fires for a long time now. With extreme temperatures [and] a 2.5 year drought, the river has run completely dry. These are all obvious signs of climate change to me."

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**I'd been aware climate change was happening but I had never been so heavily impacted in such a short time.**

Nessie became one of many everyday Australians who have been moved to speak louder and more publicly on climate change than they'd ever imagined. Drawing on the support of her community and the nature of human connection, she saw the bushfire crisis as an important moment to be heard.

"I was experiencing these things first-hand and it would have been stupid not to try and speak up about it," she told us.

"The resilience in our community has been so incredibly strong. For a while a lot of us wondered how we were going to keep living here ... it really put a strain on people's mental health. But everyone

has come together in every new challenge we face, and it makes me incredibly blessed to live where I do. Tough times really show how strong we are."

Resilience in the face of crises is not unusual. Humans come together and problem-solve all the time when presented with challenges. But what's different this time is the scale and diversity of voices who've emerged as a result of the fires, and the need for small fire-impacted communities to demonstrate enormous resolve in the absence of government leadership.

Just as communities have been pulling together to get through the aftermath of the fires, local leaders have been stepping up to re-imagine how they can do things differently.

The Mayor of Glen Innes, Carol Sparks, who has spent much of her life in Wyaliba, was already advocating for action on climate. But the fire gave her even more reason to urge local council members to lead in the absence of a top-level shift.

"We're desperate for the government to focus on the environment because we are all watching it die before our eyes. And it is so troubling that we don't have any leadership to guide us through this time," she said.

"We have mayors in councils who are calling for a climate emergency motion in their councils. I've had mine supported. We need to sit down and work out our future. Mayors need to step up in their

Top left:  
**Glen Innis Mayor Carol Sparks.**  
Photo: Annette Ruzicka/MAPgroup.

Top right:  
**Aerial view of Wyaliba.**  
Photo: Drew Hopper.

Bottom left:  
**Bushfire regrowth on the NSW South Coast.**

Bottom right:  
**Cattle farmer Rhonda Ayliffe.**  
Photos: Annette Ruzicka/MAPgroup.

responsibility for representation of the people and work together.

“I’m so ashamed we live in a country that doesn’t value our environment. But the first revolution is changing minds. So that’s what we have to do. We have to promote that.”

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It’s now months since the Wyaliba fire and the ensuing summer megafires that stretched from the New South Wales coast, through the Alpine region and into north-east Victoria, plus Kangaroo Island. By March, heavy rains had transformed devastated landscapes into scenes both familiar and foreign.

Driving from Canberra to Batemans Bay and Cobargo recently, the contrast was striking. In many of the fire-ravaged forests, red and green shoots protruded from the black trunks like little hands waving hello. In other parts, farmland and town fringes were vibrantly green against a brown and lifeless horizon. In the remaining lush bushland that was untouched by fire, there was the confronting realisation of what had been lost.

Meanwhile, new challenges have presented themselves—at the time of writing, the Great Barrier Reef is experiencing another major bleaching event while the media is saturated by coronavirus updates leaving little room for the climate conversation. But the ‘revolution of changing minds’ on climate action and re-imagining the future remains critical.

People and nature in Australia are forever changed as a result of the summer fires.

In Cobargo, Deb Summer—a local celebrant—has been holding a space for community. The space is dedicated to connecting and grieving, but also visioning the town forward.

“I live in quite a small but very diverse community and climate change can be a very divisive topic,” she said. “Only weeks ago, everything was charred and black around us. Now it’s beautiful and green. At face value people are just getting on with things. But there’s so much trauma under it. There’s still an underlying feeling that something is wrong.”

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**The key is to bring the community in and to make sure everyone’s got a voice, regardless of how divisive that voice is.**

Despite the realisation that things won’t ever be as they were, many in the town of Cobargo and surrounding farms are seeing the need to rise above politics and work towards social cohesion to address a more uncertain future. But, as in nature, resilience comes from diversity which means better listening and more inclusive conversations.

“Climate change is a big, broad concept but there’s definitely a swing towards believing something has to

change, even if people don’t understand all the issues,” said Deb.

“If we didn’t have such a responsive community, we wouldn’t be where we are right now and moving forward. Everything’s being community activated ... and it’s an opportunity to build something sustainable, something energy efficient, fire resistant.

“Everyone needs to be heard and that needs to be a part of stepping our vision forward.”

Deb suggested we head about 6km out of Cobargo to meet Rhonda Ayliffe, a cattle farmer whose family has been in the region for generations. On her farm, Rhonda shows us just how close the fire came—she didn’t lose her property but beyond the hill that surrounds her house, thousands upon thousands of hectares of bush and wildlife was wiped out.

A self-described “ordinary Australian”, she has also been compelled to step outside her comfort zone on this issue. Her family are long-time farmers, and her father and brother are well-known local firefighters. She didn’t think she would one day be talking to an environment organisation about climate change.

“I’ve grown up with a certain narrative. I was taught in this very paddock about bushfires when I was six, holding my brother’s hand who’s younger than me. We’re a fire family. We grew up learning that fires will always be here. They will be big. They



will be nasty. And they are a natural part of being in the east of Australia. But even my own family have sort of looked at these fires and said what the hell was that?" says Rhonda. According to the Climate Media Centre, this season's fires burnt through an area more than four times the size of what's usually burnt in a year for most continents, including Australia.

"I think one of the problems with Cobargo, and also one of its great strengths, is that it has such a variety of opinions. When you've lost family members, how do you frame that?

"Some folks still can't connect the dots because it's often too painful to do that. It destroys the very fabric of who you are and everything you've been, when you're a conservative Australian and you've just been getting along with your own thing.

"Yet the fires were life-changing. They've changed everybody's life. And the one positive thing you can try to take from that is, what can I do to help other people? My thing is, I'm just an ordinary person and there are lots of other ordinary people out there, so I want them to understand that it's really important to drive for change."

Many of those who have lost their homes and businesses, or who are grieving the loss of forests, wildlife and the archetypal Australian summer are doing just that. Doctors, Traditional Owners, farmers, religious leaders,

business owners, and others are becoming leaders in some way, whether co-designing new community initiatives, holding space for grief, or leading on local policy change.

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**We're recovering but no community can suffer chaos and still be okay. We need leadership from all levels of government and corporations to match our community spirit and lead us away from where we're otherwise going.**

Jack Egan's house burnt down on the South Coast in Rosedale near Batemans Bay. He was already outspoken about our changing climate, but even he didn't imagine things would happen quite so fast.

"We've all been too complacent—me included. I thought the future would unfold in a gradual way where we'd have time to adapt ... to at least minimise the harms," he says. "Not so. We tipped over into chaos. And that terrible future is tapping us right on the shoulder, saying wake up or there's a lot more and worse of this to come."

Among us all, there is perhaps an even deeper realisation that in this human-caused catastrophe, the devastating impacts on the natural world directly affect us, our communities and our future.

Jack wants us to harness the strong community spirit shown during the bushfire crisis and use it to solve this far bigger challenge of getting out of fossil fuels and into renewables.

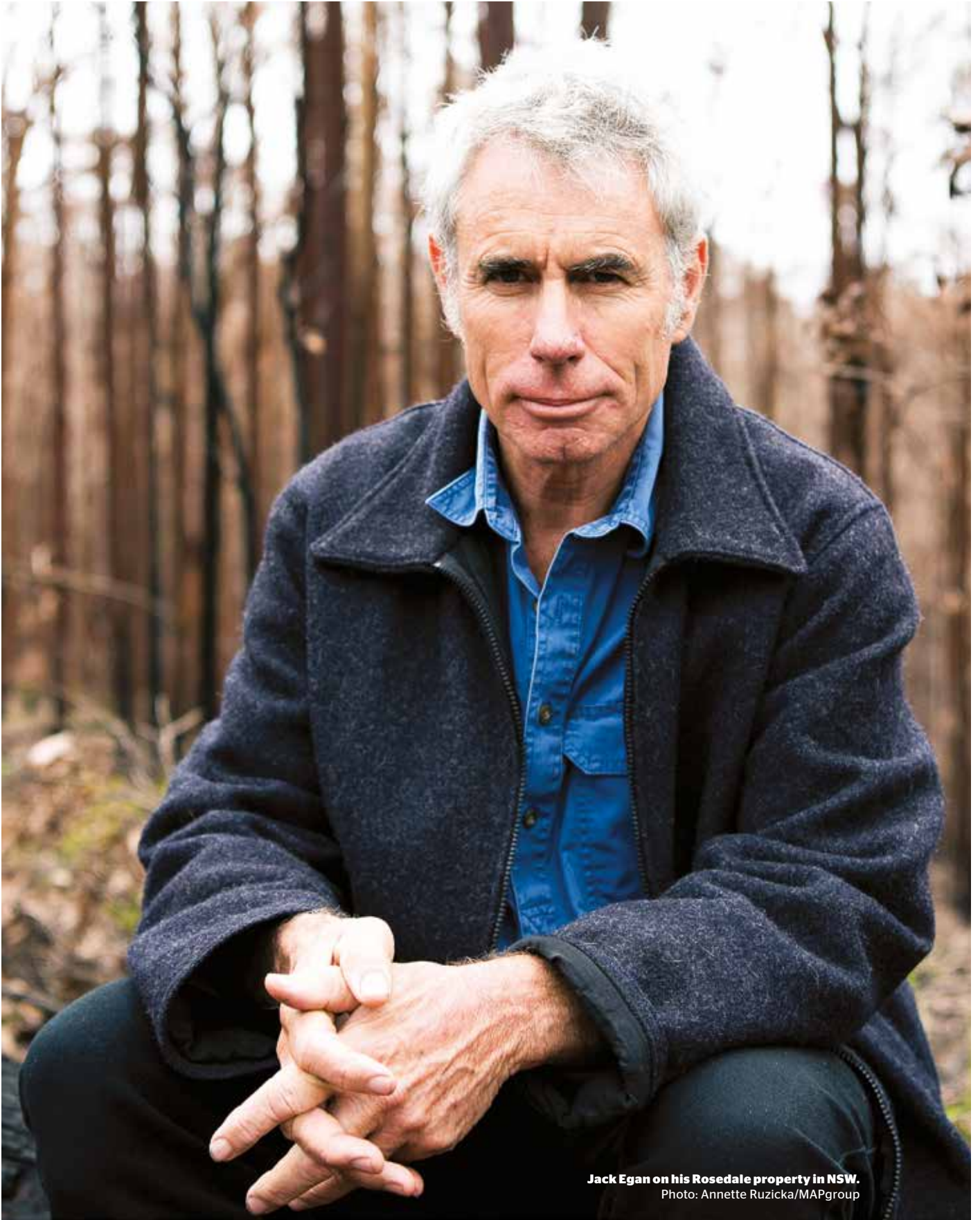
"We've seen great kindness of strangers to other strangers. It's indicative of not just the Australian spirit, but the human spirit. We need to keep that in mind as we try to get through the divisions that are in the way of effective climate action and a great future for all of us and our children," said Jack.

"I'm not trying to score points against the current government. It's just that, as a nation, we have to step up and cooperate to solve this. We need the federal government to keep us safe. To lead emissions reductions and embrace the renewables opportunities. Australia can have a wonderful future if we embrace renewables." 🌱

Watch Nessie's video and sign our open letter for action on climate change:

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[www.acf.org.au/  
open\\_letter\\_bushfires](http://www.acf.org.au/open_letter_bushfires)



**Jack Egan on his Rosedale property in NSW.**  
Photo: Annette Ruzicka/MAPgroup