

WE WERE SURROUNDED BY FLAMES

AS YOU
READ

How have the wildfires affected Australia's people, wildlife, and environment?



Australia has been experiencing one of its worst wildfire seasons ever since September. (Wildfires in Australia are called bushfires.) Record-breaking heat and dry weather have made it easier for fires to start and spread. The blazes have charred more than 27 million acres of land so far. That's an area about the size of Virginia.

Nearly 30 people have died. Thousands have lost their homes. On New Year's Eve, 12-year-old Dylan Lee and his family were camping in the town of Narooma when bushfires closed in on them. This is Dylan's story, in his own words.

I knew something was wrong as soon as I walked outside that morning. The sky was orange. The air was smoky. People were frantically packing up and driving away everywhere I looked. I ran inside and woke my parents. My mom said two words: "Start packing."

As we got ready to **evacuate**, the sun was blocked by a wall of heavy smoke and the power was

out. So we ran around in the dark gathering our things.

By the time we left, the sky was red and my eyes were stinging. Black, charred leaves rained from the sky. We didn't quite know where the fires were. But we knew we had to get out of there quickly. It was really scary.

Escaping the Fires

We drove to a nearby evacuation center. People flooded in all morning. It got to the point where you couldn't move. The atmosphere was tense. We were stuck there. Our house

in Sydney was too far away to get to that night.

Luckily, my dad's friend has a house not too far away. The drive there was the scariest part of the whole experience. At times, the smoke was so heavy that I couldn't see my hand if I held it in front of my face.

I saw dead wallabies lining the side of the road through the haze. Other animals just stood there, staring at the burning land that was once their home.

Home at Last

We spent two nights at my dad's friend's house. Then

WORDS TO KNOW

evacuate *verb.* to move from a dangerous area or situation

desperate *adjective.* seemingly hopeless; very stressful

ESCAPE As Dylan's family tried to get to safety, the sky turned blood red.



SHELTER For a few hours, this evacuation center was the only shelter the family had.



we woke up super early to drive home. Thousands of cars were already on the highway. The fires were so out of control. Roads would suddenly close so firefighters could battle the blazes that popped up.

We pulled over to the side of the road to wait out the traffic. We wound up being stuck in our car for more than 14 hours!

Some locals handed out

food to the people stranded on the road, even though they may have needed it themselves. My sister and I helped them give out the food. It distracted us from the danger all around us.

The roads cleared the next morning. We drove past burned trees, beaches, and villages. But we finally made it back to Sydney. I

was so happy to be home at last.

Those were definitely the craziest few days of my life. But I learned that even in **desperate** times, people can be kind. And I know just how lucky my family is to be safe. So much has been destroyed.

ANIMALS IN DANGER

As firefighters battle blazes, wildlife groups race to rescue animals. Even if animals survive the fires, many later die from starvation after their homes are destroyed.

Experts estimate that more than 1 billion animals have been

killed so far. That's three times the number of people in the U.S. On Kangaroo Island alone, more than 25,000 koalas have died.

"We need to pull together to save this Australian icon," says Kangaroo Island Wildlife Park owner Dana Mitchell.

