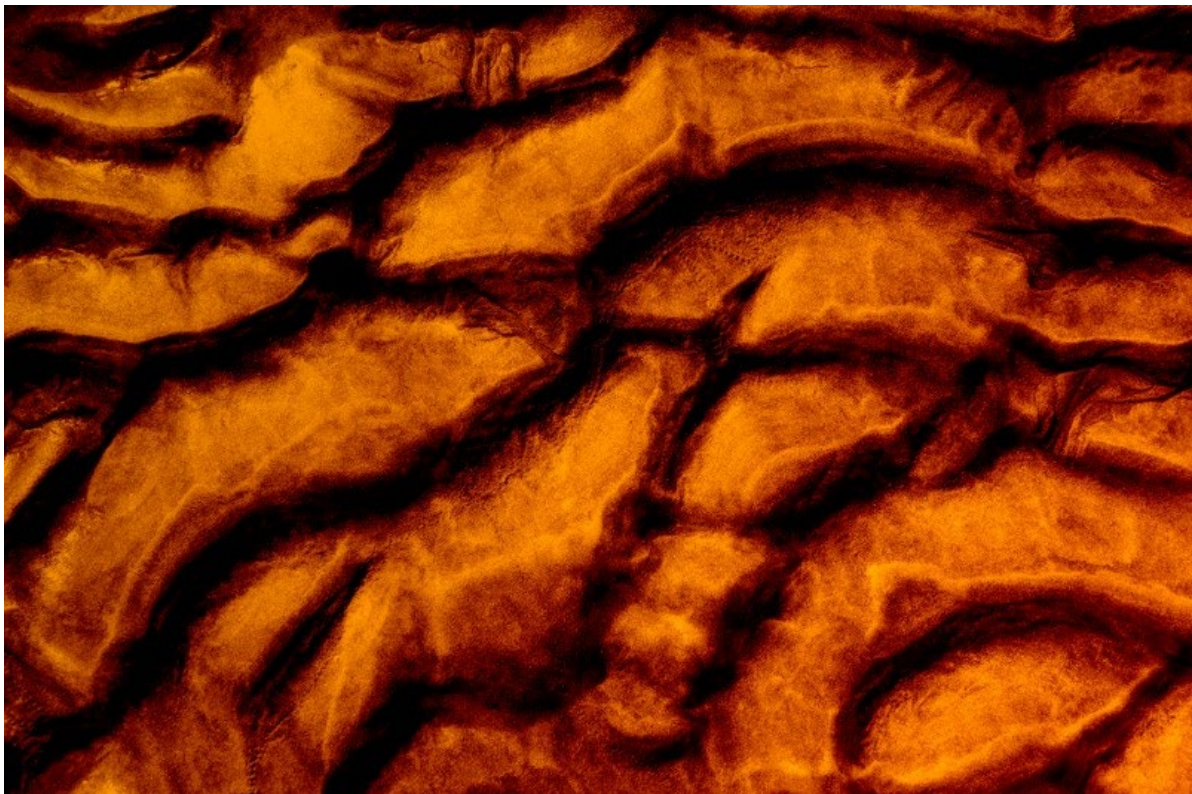


Bushfire divisions etched in sand

Over the New Year I was holidaying at Gerroa on the Southern New South Wales coast. Though safe the town was relatively close to the fires. It was an edgy time: in a season dominated by fires and the suffering they brought to people and to nature, it seemed a little self-indulgent to be relaxing by the sea.



The Gerroa beach, part of a national park, runs broad and curving as far as the eye can see. Each morning the sun rose red as a tomato and disappeared behind the acrid smoke for the rest of the day. Each rising tide dumped on the shore black clumps of charred twigs, leaves, ashes and the remains of native flora and fauna. Each receding tide drew the black ash back into the sea only to throw it back again with the change of tide.

Later, as the sea withdrew, each wave left behind a curling black line. The lines crossed one another. As a result, at low tide the long white beach became a map in which territories were separated from one another.

That image reflected the reality of the fires and the changing ways in which they were perceived. They were always more than localised events. They affected relationships that spread far beyond the fire.

These included changes to things that we take for granted: the light of the sun, transparency of the air, colour of beaches and the arrival of birds driven outside their normal habitat. The fires also affected social relationships. Communications in the form both of movement of people and goods and of electronic contact with families, medical centres and fire authorities, were disrupted. So was the commercial activity so important to the livelihood of coastal towns along the coast.

At the same time, however, the fires deepened people's relationships to one another and to the natural world. People distant from the fires came to see their destructive violence, the heroism of those fighting the fires, the human reality of being stripped of home and family history. The ABC News channel became a gateway to empathy with people in their grief and courage.

The fires also elicited a generous response as distant farmers brought feed to farms and a host of appeals began for donations to support people in their recovery. The fires also brought home to Australians the wider connections between the fires, high temperature and drought in which fire flourished, and the necessity to address climate change seriously and to deal with its effects.

"All this requires a reflective and universal view in a political world that thinks in terms of small actions to defend small defended territories."

That was the first phase. As the initial shock was handled, this breadth of vision and unity in responding to the fires became fragmented. The boundary lines separating divergent interests and priorities were marked on the sand. The world was divided into those regarded as virtuous and vicious, as unimportant and of central importance.

As a result things that were part of a whole were separated and presented as competitive. Their importance relative to one another was neglected. Responsibility for the fires was variously assigned to climate change, drought, arson, and the neglect of preventative burning of forests as if these were disconnected and unrelated. The responses advocated to the fires became also correspondingly narrow.

Territories were also marked out by special interests seeking support in the response to the fires: the forestry industry, workers, the insurance industry, small businesses, for example. Some territories were notably neglected: the plants and animals killed and species potentially eradicated as a result of fire, for example.

All these things are important, but when they are seen in isolation and as competitive and not as part of a map whose complex hierarchy of relationships needs to be recognised, they will not address the factors that lead to fires. The recurrence of fires can be guaranteed. Preventative burning may help reduce the effects of future fires but it must be consistent with nurturing the diversity of flora and fauna.

And, like all other partial steps, it will be affected by the effects of climate change and must be set within a comprehensive plan to address and minimise them. The location of houses, the allocation of water, protection of river systems, the support given to particular forms of farming, must all be reviewed in the light of the effects of climate change.

All this requires a reflective and universal view in a political world that thinks in terms of small actions to defend small defended territories. The Prime Minister's emphasis on resilience and adaptation is not encouraging in that light. Both qualities are important, particularly in caring for people during a time of change. But as a response to the world revealed in the fires, they represent business as usual when the ineffectuality of that business has been exposed.

By Andrew Hamilton from Eureka Street

