

“This country is sick,
it is *dying*.”



Indigenous fire-man
Victor Steffensen
comes to the mountain

Geoff Burrowes reports on the Nunniong weekend in December 2016.

December 14, 2016 was a great day for those who know and love the high country. A Tagalaka man whose home country is in far north Queensland had just arrived at the top of Mt Nunniong. Spread out before him was one of the great alpine vistas, stretching from the Snowy River in the east to the Bogong Plains in the west and reaching out over the Cobberas all the way to Kosciusko. It doesn't get much better than that and this was his first experience on top of Victoria's iconic high country.

Victor Steffensen was immediately and visibly overwhelmed by the immensity of what he saw. Unable to speak, shaking with emotion, he almost fell to the ground. It took him minutes to regain enough composure to express his

feelings: “This country is sick, it is dying. Everything is wrong. How have you allowed this to happen?”

Victor hadn't been conned by the majesty of the view, he was reacting to the wasteland of burned-out trees as far as the eye could see, the grass-less scorched earth. He was hearing the silence of billions of dead animals, feeling the absence of insects, reptiles, birds, mammals of any kind. “Upside-down country”, he called it: the bare grey roots pointing skyward, the canopy lifeless on the ground. He had never seen such devastated country anywhere in Australia and had never heard from his own old people of country ever being in such a pitiful state. A late lunch had been prepared but Victor



demurred, “We cannot fill our bellies and be happy in this place where there is so much sadness. This is a disgrace. We have to go.”

So much for our “pristine national parks”.

What makes this so important is that Victor Steffensen is Australia’s leading indigenous burning expert and advocate. He runs bush knowledge and cultural fire workshops in Queensland that are attended by people, white fellas included, from all over Australia. He is consulted by Government agencies, land managers and fire services all over Australia. He is a regular in the media when land management is under discussion. Victor Steffensen is a treasure trove

of bush knowledge, with 25 years of non-stop hands-on learning experience in assessing the health of country and healing it when it is sick. He is also one of the most genuine, inclusive and charismatic people you could ever hope to meet. The Australian bush has no greater friend than Victor.

Another thing that made this meeting on the mountain important was that there were around 30 other people there, including over a dozen DWELP fire management people and a similar number of MCAV members. The day had been organized by Chris Commins who had been struck by the similarities in Victor’s approach to looking after the land and the approach of the mountain cattlemen. None of us had any idea how Victor would react or what he would say.

At Moscow Villa, Bill Ah Chow’s beautifully built hut near Bentley Plain, Victor introduced himself and recounted his “university” days. As a 17 year-old two “old fellas” took him out into the bush. At first they didn’t teach him anything, they simply went about their business and watched to see if he



could make any sense out of what they were doing, see if he could make out the link between something done earlier in the day and another thing done many hours later. He must have, because they ended up mentoring him for a decade and a half. This was where Victor started to acquire his “traditional bush knowledge”; information passed down through centuries to

Victor inspecting the growth at Nunniong (top) and some of the group who seized the opportunity to hear Victor firsthand, with the Cobberas in the background.

Jarod Pinder photographer

those old fellas, then to him, and refined and added to over his ensuing years of experience.

Victor regards bush knowledge as indispensable for anyone responsible for looking after country. Without it any attempt to heal country can only result in failure and the country declining further. Even healthy country requires active intervention to keep it healthy. Bush knowledge cannot be passed on or acquired through books. It can, however, be taught through direct and prolonged experience of the bush. Even science, as it has been applied to understanding the bush, is of little use to healing country. Victor sees current scientific practice as too narrow in scope, too complicated by its own self-imposed proscriptions, too blind to the big picture.



What is the big picture? In Victor's opinion, it's all about balance. Trees and grass must be brought into balance and then actively maintained in balance. Grassy clearings have to be protected from encroaching forest. The forest floor must be kept clean of encroaching scrub and "native weeds" (a term Victor employs to describe an invasive native plant in the wrong place; black wattle and grevillea are two such examples). These "native weeds" do have a place where they belong, but it is not in the eucalypt forests. In Victor's words: "these fellas have got to be sent back to their own home". Their presence in forests inhibits grass growth and contributes to the intensity of wild fire, almost guaranteeing that a fire, no matter how mild initially, will find its way up the ladder of fuel to



the forest canopy. This, Victor says, is clearly a disaster. For him, the forest canopy is sacred and must be protected at all costs. It provides boundless habitat, flowers, fruits and seeds, and shelter for everything alive below.

Country in balance provides habitat, food and refuge for all the animals. Everything has a place, but every species doesn't have to be in the same place. Victor thinks it's insane to put the welfare of one plant or one animal ahead of the health of the wider landscape.

For Victor the key to managing country is the proper application of traditional fire. This is true all over Australia. Victor says that the more he travels around the country, the more he is struck by the broad similarity of the bush environments, the recurring need to balance trees and grass. Get that right and the rest follows.

Some of the group after inspecting the trial plot for the Hairy Anchor *Discaria pubescens* plant in Commins holding paddock, where they found healthier specimens outside the fence; those in the plot struggling with two years growth of snow grass, that when it burns, will destroy the plant.

Jarod Pinder photographer.

Simon Turner, Victor Steffensen and Brett Ellis at Nunniong. Brett who is the Risk Emergency and Community Safety Officer at Yarra Ranges Council was involved in arranging the weekend.

Jarod Pinder photographer.



He believes that the current approach to burning the bush is all wrong. It's almost as bad as doing nothing and just waiting for the inevitable wildfire to come along and destroy everything.

Effective burning cannot be done according to a schedule. It can only be done when conditions are right so that animals and "good" plants are not endangered. That requires Johnny-on-the-spot to make the decision to burn, not Johnny-in-the-office hundreds of miles away. Victor's fires spread out in circles. They are cool burns, tricking along the ground "like water". This ensures that even the tiniest of animals have time to seek refuge under the ground or up in the trees. Victor hates black roiling smoke. His fires are characterized by wispy white smoke. Every fire has a precise aim. He has a clear picture of what the result should look like and what its effect should be. They are purpose-driven, not process-driven. Most important, his fires are followed up as frequently as required so that they achieve and then maintain the desired outcome. For him, "burn it once, then forget it" is just showing off. It is a waste of time.

Although Victor is quite clear that current land management strategies are wrong-footed and have created a terrible mess, he is not vindictive nor is he interested in the blame

game. He's interested in fixing the problem. It's because they lack bush knowledge that environmentalists and government agencies are steering the bush in the wrong direction. He accepts that they mean well. But that's not good enough any more. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. The high country, like so much of the Australian bush, is well down that road to hell. The evidence is everywhere. There has to be a change.

In Victor's view, "the agencies must take a step back, bring others with bush knowledge forward to do the work, then take a step forward themselves (through the right door this time), follow up to the others in front" and become part of the broad force working to heal very sick country.

For the mountain cattlemen present that day, this was manna for heaven. At last someone else was talking sense about the high country, putting bush knowledge and culture ahead of politics.

Victor Steffensen, Vic Jurkis, Wurundjeri elder David Wandin, Chris Commins, Charlie Lovick and kneeling in the front, Geoff Burrowes.

Jarod Pinder photographer.