



Title: 'Too close for comfort'

Description: Vegetation fire in the Saddle Hill area of Dunedin

Photographer's name: Noelle Bennett

Where and when: Saddle Hill/Chain Hills, Dunedin. October 2015.

Sustainability: The date was 07 October 2015. October thus far had been unseasonably hot - in fact it had earned the nickname of Hotober. As temperatures hit 29 degrees, the heat was exacerbated by the strong, warm winds which were blowing at between 60 and 90 kph. At a little before 2 o'clock in the afternoon, fire crews were sent to the Saddle Hill area, which is a few kilometres west of Dunedin, following reports of a bushfire. The fire was spreading rapidly, fanned by the very strong wind, and it didn't take long before the flames reached heights of 8 metres. Fire crews battled the seriously out-of-control blaze which by now had managed to jump the main state highway. It now looked as though it would engulf Chain Hills too. By this time the fire crews were trying to deal with three separate blazes. The strong winds had grounded some of the helicopters that were trying to dowse the fires, but two helicopters kept going with monsoon buckets to support five fire crews on the ground.

Rescue came with a southerly weather change and some light rain which helped to contain the fires. There was no loss of life, although one person was hospitalised with serious burns, and three fire fighters were treated for heat exhaustion and smoke inhalation. The fires swept through 150 hectares of land on both sides of State Highway 1. A total of 10 properties were damaged.

So what was the cause of the fires? Were they just a random occurrence that could be attributed to global warming? Or were they the result of sheer carelessness or even arson? Maybe they were caused by a controlled burn-off getting out of control? For some time it seemed as though the reasons were unlikely to be disclosed. A press release stated that the cause of the fire would not be made public. However, it later transpired that the probable cause was a branch from a tree falling onto power lines. The cause was almost certainly the strong winds. It seems that there is a device on power supplies whose job it is to automatically turn the power back on in the event of a power interruption (an auto-recloser). When the piece of tree fell on the line and cut the supply, the device twice tried to restore the power. These devices are supposed to be disabled when there is an extreme fire risk warning in place and one of those had been issued by the Fire Service on the previous day.

Ultimately, it seems as though there were all sorts of factors at play that led to this fire, what with the unseasonably

hot and dry weather, what one assumes was a tree growing too close to power lines, an extreme fire risk warning being apparently ignored and a device that should have been disabled in those conditions being left operational. Maybe it all goes to show our vulnerability to our warming climate and our seeming inability to take the simple steps we need to, to keep our environment safe.

Photographer's notes: On 07 October, I'd had a phone call at work from my husband, telling me that there was a bushfire burning near where we lived and that he'd been warned we may need to evacuate. He asked if I could come home. He said he didn't want to leave. It may seem like a no-brainer just to do as you're asked - after all, the request is made to try to ensure your safety. The sensible course of action was obvious. Simply to get out of there and stay out. But I could understand his reticence. By that time, he had spent over four years building his dream boat that we were going to retire to. Sure, it was insured, but no amount of insurance money was going to bring back those four years if all his hard work was wiped out by the fire. He wanted to stay there - to be there so he could try and save it. And what was more, he could find neither of our cats and didn't want to abandon them to an unknown fate. I don't think I'd have ever understood why people would experience that dilemma...until I was actually faced with it.

I did go home. Together we went down the road a little so we could keep our eyes on what the fire was doing. Many of our neighbours were also standing there, watching, willing the wind to change, hoping the dark clouds that were building would bring rain. I'd taken my camera with me and was watching and taking images of the two helicopters that had managed to remain airborne going about their risky business. Even something as relatively basic as refilling those monsoon buckets seemed so fraught with danger. And then I noticed this image, with the helicopter emptying its monsoon bucket over that skeletal stand of burnt pine trees, presumably trying to stop the fire advancing towards the buildings.

Fire has long-term ecological impacts, and most New Zealand plants are not adapted to be fire resilient. Indeed, many New Zealand plants are highly flammable. So the long-term implications of climate change and increased fire and ecological impacts it will bring are indeed a worry – but in this image and story I just want to remind us that fires are terrifying, traumatic, and highly personal threats.

Photo specs: There was no special technique used here. All I needed was an exposure time that was fast enough to ensure the helicopter didn't blur and to be able to show the flow of the water. Technical specs: The main image was taken using a Panasonic DMC-GH4 camera and a Panasonic Leica DG 100-400mm f/4-6.3 ASPH lens. Exposure details - 1/1000sec at f7.1 with an ISO of 800 and a focal length of 350mm (700mm full frame equivalent).

Digital specs: 7246 x 4703 pixels (34.08MP) @ 300dpi

Key words: fire, helicopter, monsoon bucket, fire fighting, smoke, burnt, danger, Dunedin, Chain Hills, Saddle Hill, evacuate, global warming, power supply, Noelle Bennett, Ecosystems Photography, sustainability.

Price: \$150 (incl. GST) for use of the digital image. Visit www.ecosystemsp photography/sales for details & to order, or to get a quote if you would like a high-quality print.

Donation: The price includes a \$100 donation to a sustainability organisation or project of your choice, or otherwise to *The Wildlife Hospital*, Dunedin. <https://www.wildlifehospitaldunedin.org.nz/>

We recommend that the donation goes to *The Wildlife Hospital*, Dunedin because of the amazing work they do, treating a wide variety of native species, including parrots, penguins, reptiles, and sea lions. The hospital is important to the survival of so many of our beautiful native creatures and sometimes wildlife caught in fires.

Image ref: NB#024 (please use this reference in all orders and correspondence).

Noelle Bennett
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