

'Catastrophic' bushfire burns half of Queensland's Fraser Island and threatens ecological disaster

The fire on the world's largest sand island, also known as K'gari, has been burning for six weeks and is encroaching on areas with 1,000-year-old trees

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Fraser Island fire: massive blaze on World Heritage-listed site burns for six weeks – video

A bushfire has burned across half the World Heritage-listed K'gari/Fraser Island – the world's biggest sand island, off Australia's **Queensland** coast – with potentially catastrophic consequences for its habitats and wildlife.

The blaze, which has been alight for more than six weeks, is threatening major tourism and rainforest areas after burning much of the island's north.

On Tuesday, the fire was burning on two fronts and travelling south towards the Kingfisher bay tourism resort, where 80 staff were told to get ready to evacuate.

Queensland Fire and Emergency Services told the Guardian on Tuesday the fire was encroaching on the island's famous Valley of the Giants – home to trees more than 1,000 years old.

K'gari is renowned for its stunning 250km (155 miles) of beaches, freshwater lakes, lush rainforests and sand dunes more than 200m high.

The fire started in mid-October after an illegal campfire and has since burned across 81,000 hectares (20,000 acres).

QFES assistant commissioner Gary McCormack told the Guardian much of the firefighting effort was an “aerial assault” using planes and helicopters to drop saltwater and freshwater onto the blazing canopy.

He said there was no chance to extinguish the fire under current conditions but the focus was on steering the blaze away from tourism areas, ecologically important places and sites important to the Butchulla Aboriginal people who have lived on the island for thousands of years.



Fighting fires on a sand island was challenging, he said, because tracks were too narrow to be used as firebreaks, were only accessible to smaller 4WD firefighting vehicles, and the sandy forest floor meant water dropped from aircraft drained away quickly.

“Unfortunately the current conditions are not conducive to extinguishment,” McCormack said.

“We are working with the fire behaviour modelling to manipulate and push the fire as best as we can away from the community, from infrastructure and away from sensitive cultural and environmental sites.”

He said the fire was encroaching on the Valley of the Giants, but there was hope that trees might survive as the fire was less intense in that area.

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Dr Gabriel Conroy

He had been advised by the Queensland government's parks service, which was also helping fight the fire, that tree species in the valley could cope with some fire.

Windy conditions and temperatures above 30C (86F) were making firefighting difficult and the outlook for the next four days was not favourable, with no rain forecast.

Dr Gabriel Conroy, a conservation biologist at the University of the Sunshine Coast whose research has focused on the island, took a student group to K'Gari last week.



“A northerly wind had kicked in and it was other-worldly with ash falling down on the students,” he said. “There’s a sense of panic on the island.

“We went north and walked through areas where the fire had been. Walking through a burned landscape is quite sobering. It’s massive.”

He said 128 years of logging, which ended in 1991, had altered the island’s ecology and the presence of Europeans had suppressed the traditional burning carried out by Butchulla people. All this altered fire behaviour.

Conroy said the island has experienced fire for thousands of years, but those fires would have been less widespread and intense because of the way the Butchulla people lit smaller fires to prevent larger ones.

He said: “This is a very large and very hot fire for this island. It’s a big fire and it’s the wrong kind of fire.



Smoke from bushfires along the coast of K’gari, also known as Fraser Island, off the Queensland coast.
Photograph: Twitter / QFES

“It’s a catastrophe. Even ecosystems that are meant to burn don’t bounce back from widespread hot fires. It can be beyond their capacity to bounce back.”

He said the island’s wildlife, which includes dingoes, potoroos, wallabies and an array of birds, lived across heathlands, coastal dunes and rainforests and would be suffering.

He said the area in and around the Valley of the Giants was home to some remaining large satinay trees. The island's satinay trees were used to build the Suez canal and rebuild London's docks after the second world war.

The island was described as a "paradise" by Prince Harry in October 2018 during a visit with Meaghan, Duchess of Sussex.

Prof Patrick Moss, an expert on ancient ecology at the University of Queensland, who has studied the island, said much of the vegetation on the island was "fire adapted" meaning that given time, it could bounce back.

But he said he was concerned for the rainforest areas, where trees such as kauri pines were not well adapted to fire.



Paradise restored: K'gari native title success the start of a new story for Fraser Island

"This could have a dramatic impact on the forest and maybe kill off trees. You don't want these high intensity burns getting in there because that would have a dramatic impact on the landscape."

He said human-caused climate change, as well as logging and changes to the way fires were managed, were all likely to be playing a role in the fire.

Australia's weather is currently being influenced by a La Niña climate system driven from the Pacific Ocean, which tends to deliver cooler and wetter conditions.

"I would not expect [fires like this] in a La Niña year," Moss said.

A 2017 World Heritage report listed **changing fire regimes and climate change** among the current and future threats to the island's ecology.

Dr Christine Hosking, a conservation biologist also at UQ, said the fires were "ecologically catastrophic" for the island, particularly because they would affect the smaller animals and bugs.

"The little forest dwelling animals will struggle. It's pretty tragic for the island."