

Australia: First Step in the War Against Climate Change?

For the first time ever, humanity watched as a huge wildfire threatened a whole continent. With all its technology, Australia proved unable to control it. Only rain appeared capable of putting an end to this infernal episode.

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In Australia, since August 2019, around 100 000km² of forest have gone up into flames, representing about 5% of the total forest area of the country. As a result, close to 1 billion tons CO₂ were released to the atmosphere.

Australians are used to forest and bush fires during the dry season (from November to March). Usually, their intensity is limited thanks to preventive brush clearing fires during the wet season. This strategy did not work in 2019 because of the risks associated with an unusually dry and hot wet season.

Here, climatologists see an effect of global warming.

Wild fire control with water bombers

Once a big wildfire has started, it is very difficult to control it even with water bombers. The most efficient method is to flood a fire as soon as possible after its discovery. This implies a very efficient fire detection system.

For financial reasons, most Australian water bombers are leased from the USA and Canada.

In 2019, Australia rented 7 helicopters and 9 large water bombers, at a cost of 40 million US dollars. However, only half as many were delivered in time because the fire season in the northern hemisphere extended longer than expected.

A considerable cost

The Australian government is planning to allocate an emergency fund of 1.4 billion US dollars as compensation for the victims of the disaster. John Quiggin of CNN Business evaluates the total cost of the fires to 70 billion US dollars.

A cost-effective investment

What would have happened if all of the water bombers had been available? The Australian firefighters evaluate the equipment that was missing to control the big wildfires of New South Wales and Victoria at 15 million dollars per year. With that investment both the cost of the disaster and the amount of CO₂ emissions could probably have been cut by half.

A world scale problem

Before these wildfires in Australia, the largest so far, other large hardly controllable wildfires were observed in the past few years: in Siberia in summer 2019 with 300 000 km² burned; in the Amazon forest; in California; in Canada; in Greece; in Portugal. And the Mediterranean countries are at risk along with a large part of the African continent.

Need for a world scale program to monitor and control bush and forest wildfires.

The increasing frequency of large forest wildfires is a particularly bothersome consequence of global warming: the massive CO₂ emissions they entail reinforce the conditions that cause them. The only way to stop this self sustaining process is to suppress it as soon as possible.

First, the regions that are particularly at risk, i.e. regions that combine warming and drought, should be identified. These should be carefully and permanently monitored, with satellites, drones, and earth based observations.

Any fire start should be immediately suppressed using the most efficient means such as water bombers.

A global network of water bombers ready to take action (i.e., already carrying their water load) should be set up in such a way that any fire start can be flooded within a short time after detection, say one hour.

The number of water bombers needed can be estimated at a few thousand representing an annual budget of a few billion dollars. The UN and, within it, the UNEP, could have the responsibility for this fire killer fleet. One may dream that it might be financed via a tax on coal extraction.

Thanks to its overseas territories, France could host several tactical groups for aerial firefighting.

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