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OPINION 6 of 6

KEVIN RUDD

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Burn-off debate relit as fire season hits

STUART RINTOUL The Australian October 20, 2012 12:00AM



Historian Bill Gammage, author of *The Biggest Estate on Earth - How Aborigines made Australia*, on Canberra's Black Mountain yesterday. Picture: Kym Smith Source: *The Australian*

"FOR countless generations, people have stared into safe fire. The dancing flames mesmerise, the warm glow is a friend. Not so that other fire, heralded by haze, smoke, red lines in the scrub. That fire is implacable, alive. It roars, races, leaps, kills, devours."

So writes historian Bill Gammage in *The Biggest Estate on Earth - How Aborigines made Australia*, which has now won the \$100,000 Victorian Prize for Literature as well as the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Australian history and the Queensland literary award for history.

An amalgam of history, philosophy and ecology, *The Biggest Estate on Earth* describes how Aborigines not only lived with the land, but shaped it with constant burning to ensure continuity, balance, abundance and predictability. It is a message - and a challenge to the idea of "pristine wilderness" - not all environmentalists want to hear.

Putting the final touches to a speech for the Australian Environment Foundation, Gammage, an adjunct professor at the Australian National University, says the landscape needs to be burned back to a better natural balance - one that does not lend itself to regular catastrophic bushfires.

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"This is a very tough proposition," he said. "It is heading in exactly the opposite direction of what a lot of environmentalists would like. But I think it is necessary to go back to that balance."

At the foundation, executive director Max Rheese agrees. He says Aborigines would never have allowed national park "wilderness" areas to grow into such profusion and would have regarded it as "dirty bush", and intensely threatening.

Mr Rheese says after the Black Saturday fires in Victoria, the foundation advocated a trebling of prescribed burning from 120,000ha a year to 390,000ha a year, but received grudging to no support from

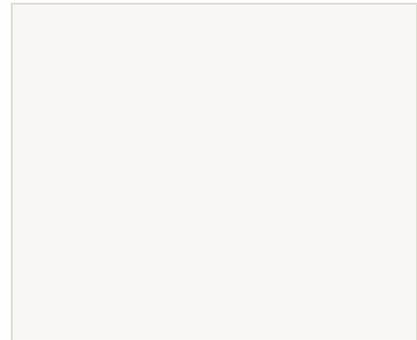
other environment groups.

The Baillieu government has doubled the burn area since 2009 and is progressively raising it to 390,000ha a year.

Mr Rheese says Gammage's book is a stark challenge to environmental groups that have clung to the idea of 1788 Australia as a "pristine wilderness untouched by man", when Gammage's book showed comprehensively that it was a managed landscape.

On the eve of another fire season, insurers have warned the risk of bushfires around Australia this summer is much higher than in recent years. Insurance Council of Australia chief executive Rob Whelan said wet weather over the past two years and forecast higher-than-average temperatures had created "optimal conditions" for bushfires.

The NSW central coast, Queensland's Darling Downs and Atherton Tablelands and Western Australia had already experienced significant fires. South Australia's Country Fire Service this



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week imposed total fire bans in parts of the state.

In Victoria, Country Fire Authority chief officer Euan Ferguson said fire agencies were preparing for a "more normal" fire season after years of drought, but warned that even in a normal season the state was prone to significant fires.

In the ACT, Rural Fire Service chief officer Andrew Stark said there was low potential of fire in the high ranges of the Brindabellas, but "phenomenal" grass growth posed risks.

In Darwin, Joe Morrison, chief executive of the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance, said it was hoped savanna burning would become an income earner for Aboriginal people through the Carbon Farming Methodology.

He said The Biggest Estate on Earth was not only welcome recognition of how Aborigines "made Australia", but a warning for people living in volatile fire-prone areas.

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