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"Deep Time and Disaster: Black Saturday and the Forgotten Past"

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In the late summer of 2009, a massive firestorm swept through more than one million acres of dense bush in the southeast corner of Australia, killing 173 people and leaving more than 7,000 homeless. In the aftermath of the disaster, commentators almost universally described the blaze as "unprecedented." This essay examines that claim in the light of contextualizing environmental histories and finds that although such firestorms are rare, they are far from unprecedented; they are in fact a necessary part of the cycle of regeneration in certain types of eucalypt forest. The idea that a never-before-witnessed event is unprecedented calls into question the shallow temporal frames through which deep time environmental phenomena are understood in Australian settler culture and offers an insight into often unnoticed ways in which contemporary society struggles with the colonial legacy. This struggle sits next to the ambition of land management authorities to adopt traditional Indigenous mosaic-patterned cool-burning techniques as part of a fire mitigation strategy, without directly addressing the colonial history inscribed on the land they are commissioned to manage. (Text from author's abstract)

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