

Why we should care about Australia fires, Africa's floods

[DH deccanherald.com/opinion/why-we-should-care-about-australia-fires-africa-s-floods-798215.html](https://deccanherald.com/opinion/why-we-should-care-about-australia-fires-africa-s-floods-798215.html)

January 26, 2020

DH



DECCAN HERALD



Harini Nagendra,

- JAN 26 2020, 02:21 IST
- UPDATED: JAN 26 2020, 02:21 IST



Harini Nagendra

Over 18 million acres of forests have been burnt in Australia's recent wildfires, killing at least 23 people, and an estimated one billion animals. Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra were covered in smoke for weeks on end. The fires were caused by a mix of arson and lightning. But climate change was the accelerant. Australia's forests have been in the midst of a long period of drought. The wood is dry, the soil is parched, and the winds intense. A small spark can quickly lead to a fierce fire.

Controlling these fires has not been easy. One fire, in the region of East Gippsland, migrated during the night over a distance of 20 kilometers in just five hours, impelled by strong, hot and dry winds.

Some fires became super-fires, or "megablazes" as they are officially known. Multiple fires combined to form one intense conflagration. Wind speeds grew close to 100 km/hour. The blazes generated weather phenomena of their own – pyro-cumulonimbus thunderclouds that extended to 16 km above the ground, sparking new fires in far-away places.

Just when the country received some relief from the fires, after the rains, came a fresh set of disasters. Flash floods swept down with intense force. Intense gusts of winds picked up the dust and churned it in the air, creating dust storms that reached intensities

approaching hurricane-level strengths. Towns were hit by hailstorms, with stones the size of golf balls bouncing off the ground.

Then came the spiders. In some parts of Australia, especially in the moist forest regions, the climate is favourable for local spiders – giant and poisonous – to thrive, some experts say, warning residents to watch out for the spiders. It seems bizarre, almost too weird to be true.

The effects of Australia's disaster spread well beyond its geographical limits. Ash was deposited on New Zealand's glaciers, turning them brown, and accelerating their melting. The smoke from the fire made a round trip across the world, stopping off on the way in South America to pollute the air of countries like Chile and Argentina.

What does any of this have to do with east Africa? Well, Australia lies on the opposite side of the Indian ocean from East Africa. They are connected by the Indian Ocean dipole, a climate phenomenon similar to the Pacific El Nino, which influences the Indian monsoon. When Australia is hotter and drier than usual, as has happened in the past two years, East Africa has more rains than usual, due to this weather coupling. Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Somalia and South Sudan have been badly affected by floods, with over 2.8 million people displaced by landslides and flash floods. We don't read as much news about this disaster, equally horrific, perhaps because this affects poor countries, not a rich prosperous nation like Australia.

But the unfolding climate crisis in these two countries tells us something. Climate change is not in the future. It is in the here and now. We do not have eight years to fix the problem. We are living IN the problem. The world's weather systems are interconnected. The amount of damage that the Australian, Amazonian and Californian wildfires have done to the climate in 2019 is incalculable. It will only get worse. And it will impact us – yes, even us, in faraway India.

What the Australian wildfires tell us is that we know so little. We may have expected the fires – we did not anticipate the pyro-cumulonimbus that stretched 16 km into the sky, wind speeds that crossed 100 km per hour, dust storms that blanketed entire towns, hailstones the size of birds. The era of climate change is the era of unpredictability. Of unknowability. We need to double down on precaution. And act. Now.

NEXT STORY



S Natarajan,

- MAY 10 2022, 17:59 IST
- UPDATED: MAY 10 2022, 17:59 IST