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Aussie Firefighters Save World's Only Groves of Prehistoric Wollemi Pines

by Marie DeFreitas



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Fires have devastated Australian lands in the recent months. Animals, plants and people have all died in varying numbers. While most firefighters set out to save the people and the wildlife, a specializing group quietly saved a prehistoric species of tree that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world.

Local government enlisted firefighters set out to save a grove of Wollemi pine trees in a canyon within the Wollemi National Park northwest of Sydney. There are fewer than 200 of these trees left in the wild. They are said to have outlived the dinosaurs, having peaked in abundance 34 million to 65 million years ago. The trees are actually so rare that they were thought to be extinct until 1994. With the rampant fires in Australia, we were at risk of losing them forever.

Luckily, these firefighters hatched a plan.

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First, large air tankers dropped fire retardant around the trees, according to [CNN](#). Then firefighters set up an irrigation system around the trees to keep them wet. “If the fire did go through, we wanted it to be a cool burn as opposed to a hot burn to give them the best chance of survival,” Kean said.

For a few days, the smoke was so thick that it wasn't clear whether the plan had worked. “We all waited with bated breath,” Kean said.

Finally, the smoke cleared. A few trees were charred by the flames, and they lost two of them, according to *NPR*. But their efforts had paid off. “Finally,” Kean said, “we were able to get in there and



“This is a key asset, not only for the national parks, but for our entire country,” Matt Kean, New South Wales’ environment minister, said in [an interview](#) with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The trees are located in a secret spot within the national park. In order to protect the trees from visitors that could bring in disease or trample regenerating plants, the government keeps their exact location a secret.

‘Frankenstein’ material can self-heal, reproduce

These pines can grow to be about 130 feet in the wild and have a peculiar look to them. With thin and fragile bark, they are also covered on small nodules, giving a rough or ‘bubbly’ appearance.

“We’ll always have bush fires in this country. There’s no doubt about that. But there’s no doubt also that the severity of this year’s bush fires is not like anything we’ve ever seen. And that’s due to climate change,” Kean said. “There’s a huge opportunity for us to lead the way in terms of tackling climate change and help the rest of the world decarbonize. There’s no better country on the planet better placed to do that than Australia.”

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