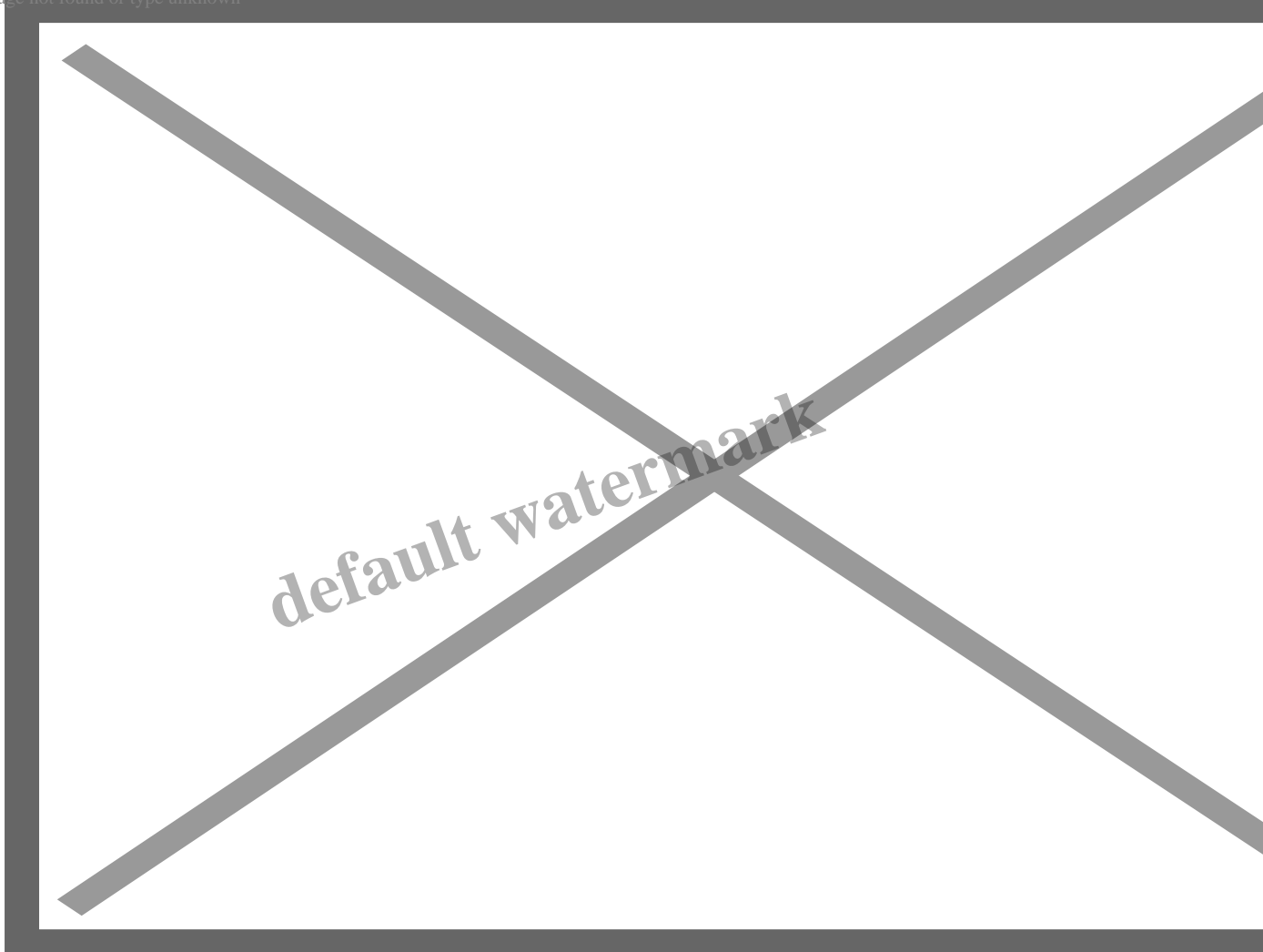


Smoke on the water, a fire in the sky

Description

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Horrific wildfires in Australia destroyed much, inspired musicians and guitar builders and offered many lessons to be learned.

This time January 2020....

*“And after every plan had failed and there was nothing more to tell
And you know that we shall meet again if your memory serves you well”*

Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger & the Trinity ‘This Wheels On Fire’ TV video promo, 1968

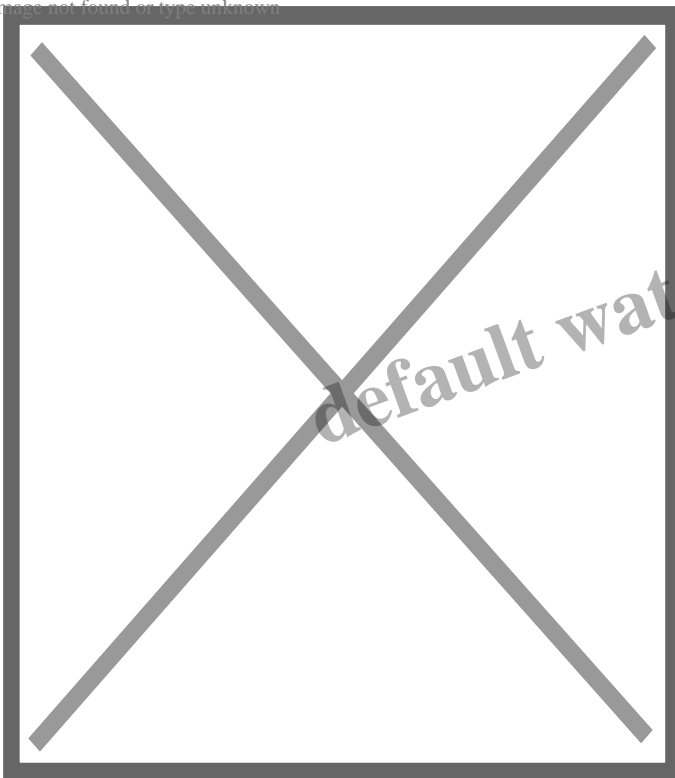
“This Wheel’s on Fire” was written by Bob Dylan & Rick Danko, performed first by the Band 1967, and subsequently covered by the Byrds and others. As with many songs from the late 60s, lyrics are

opaque and open to many interpretations – may be full of meaning or may just be words! The version here by Julie Driscoll is played to a semi-apocalyptic backdrop that seems to match events of the past year.

I started working on this project – The Nature of Music – in March 2020. At that stage the world was rapidly becoming aware of the thing that would grip the world ever tighter – the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reflecting back on the start of 2020, however, the full implications of the emerging Coronavirus had yet to become apparent. The first hints that it was a problem were already coming from China in January – but at the same time events elsewhere were already consuming news and social media bandwidth – trouble brewing between the US and Iran, rising floodwaters in Venice and, here in Australia, the worst bushfire season the country had every experienced.

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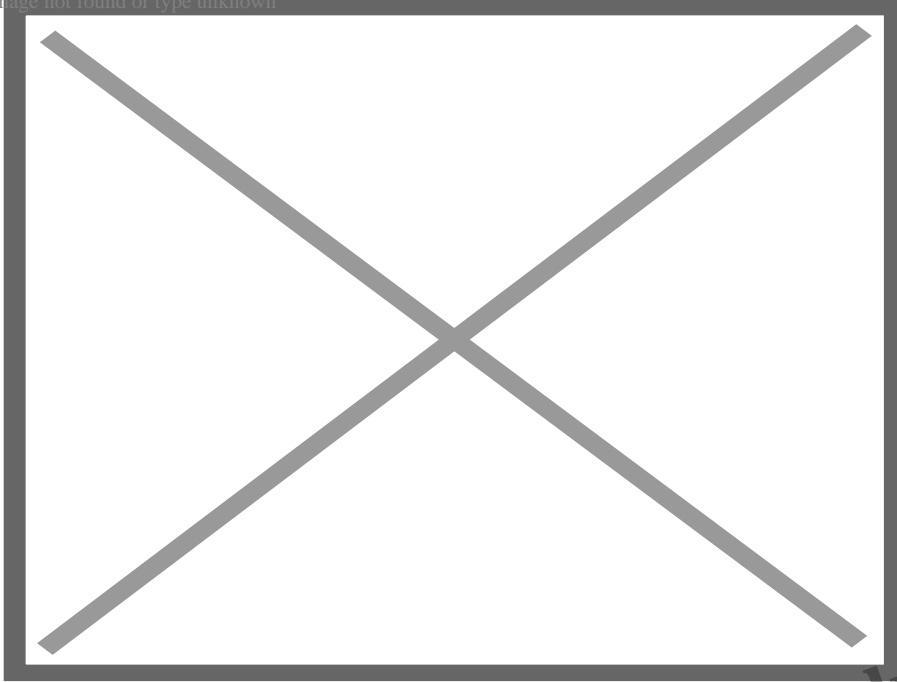


[Memes that summed up January 2020](#)

Fires in Australia

Australia has a history of periodic catastrophic wildfires – but the 2019-2020 summer fire season was longer, more widespread and more destructive than any that had occurred before. Multiple fires started, grew and continued to burn in many parts of Australia through December and January, destroying huge areas of native bushland, iconic landscapes and whole towns. Dozens lost their lives, although heroic acts by firefighters – some of whom also lost their lives – prevented the death toll rising higher. The fires created smoke clouds and haze that enveloped everything including major cities, sending air quality to hazardous levels for weeks at a time.

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A map from researchers in Western Australia shows hundreds of wildfire hotspots across the nation

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A map from researchers in Western Australia shows hundreds of wildfire hotspots across the nation as of Wednesday, Jan. 1, 2020. [Landgate's MyFireWatch](#)

It seems like pretty much everyone in Australia was affected by the bushfires in some way. Large numbers of homes and businesses went up in smoke, people had to flee their homes and/or try to get out of areas under threat. People in Malacoota, a small town on the Victorian coast, were trapped in the town [and had to take refuge at the ocean](#) as the fire bore down on the town on New Year's Eve.

The news carried images of fire, red skies, burned out houses and cars, and smoke. So much smoke.

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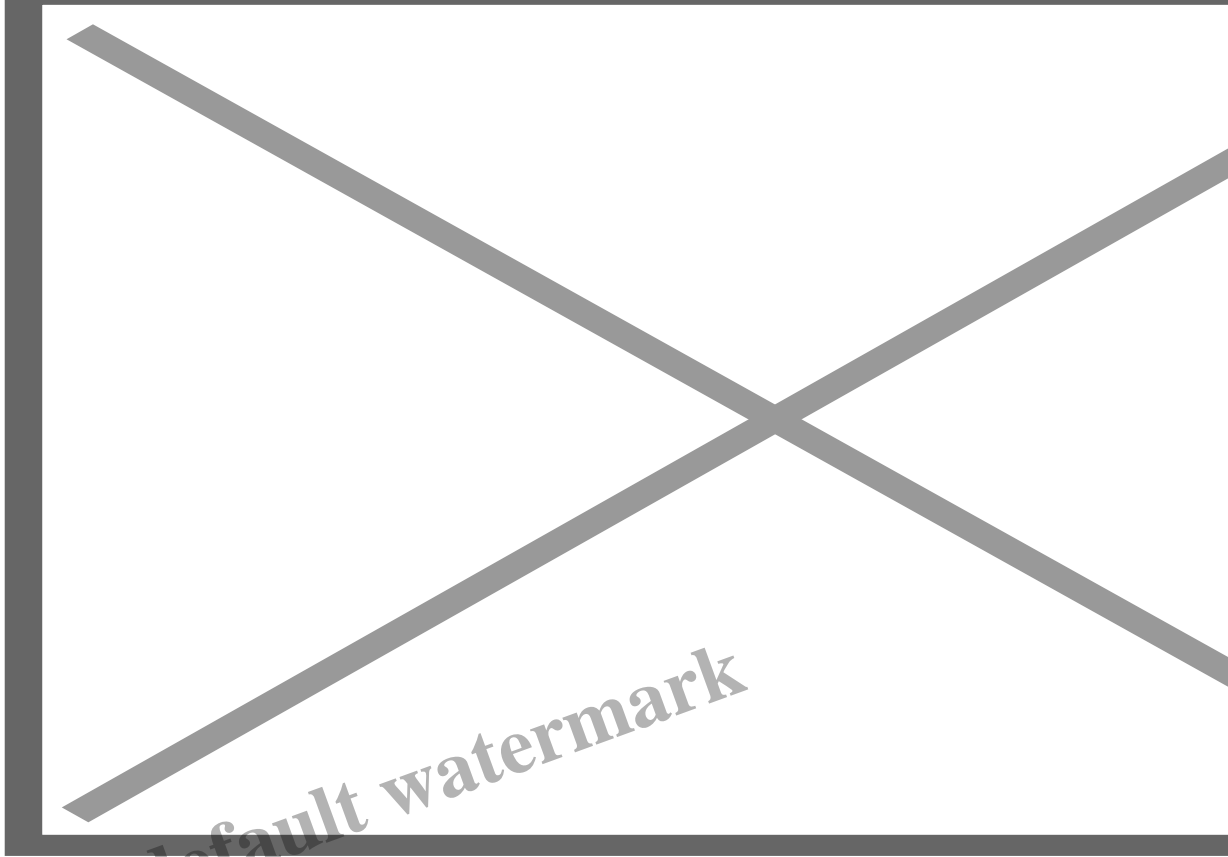
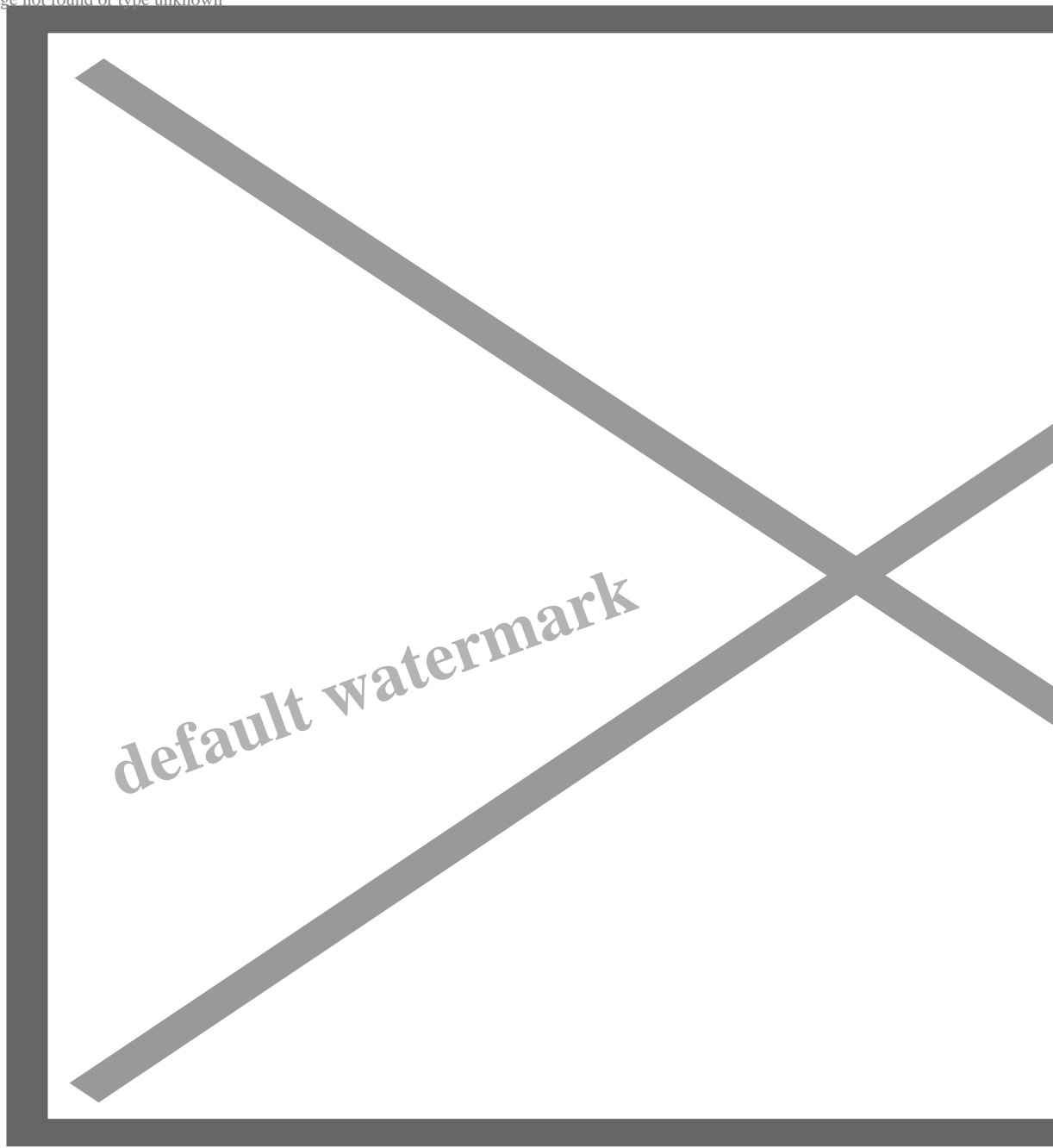


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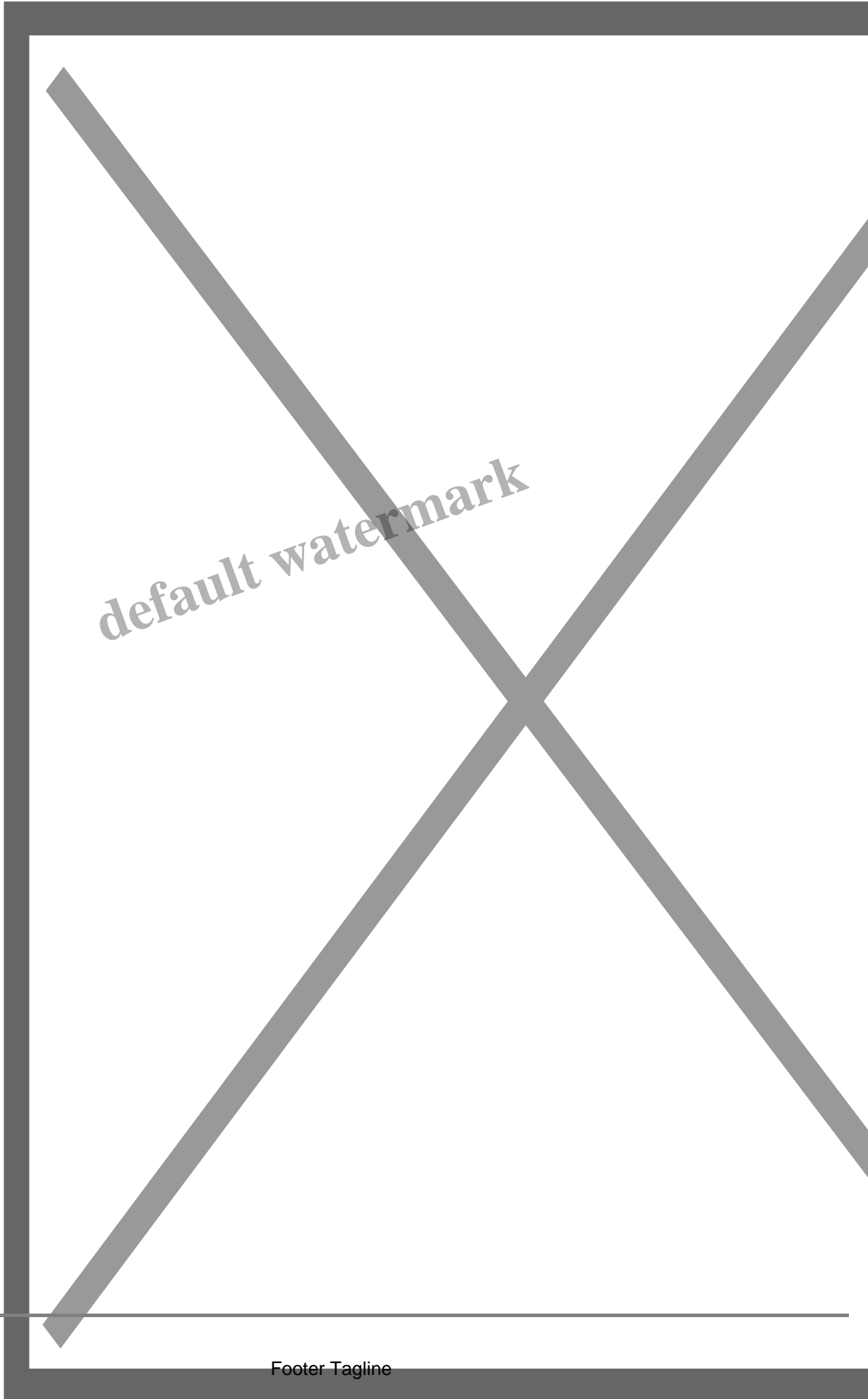
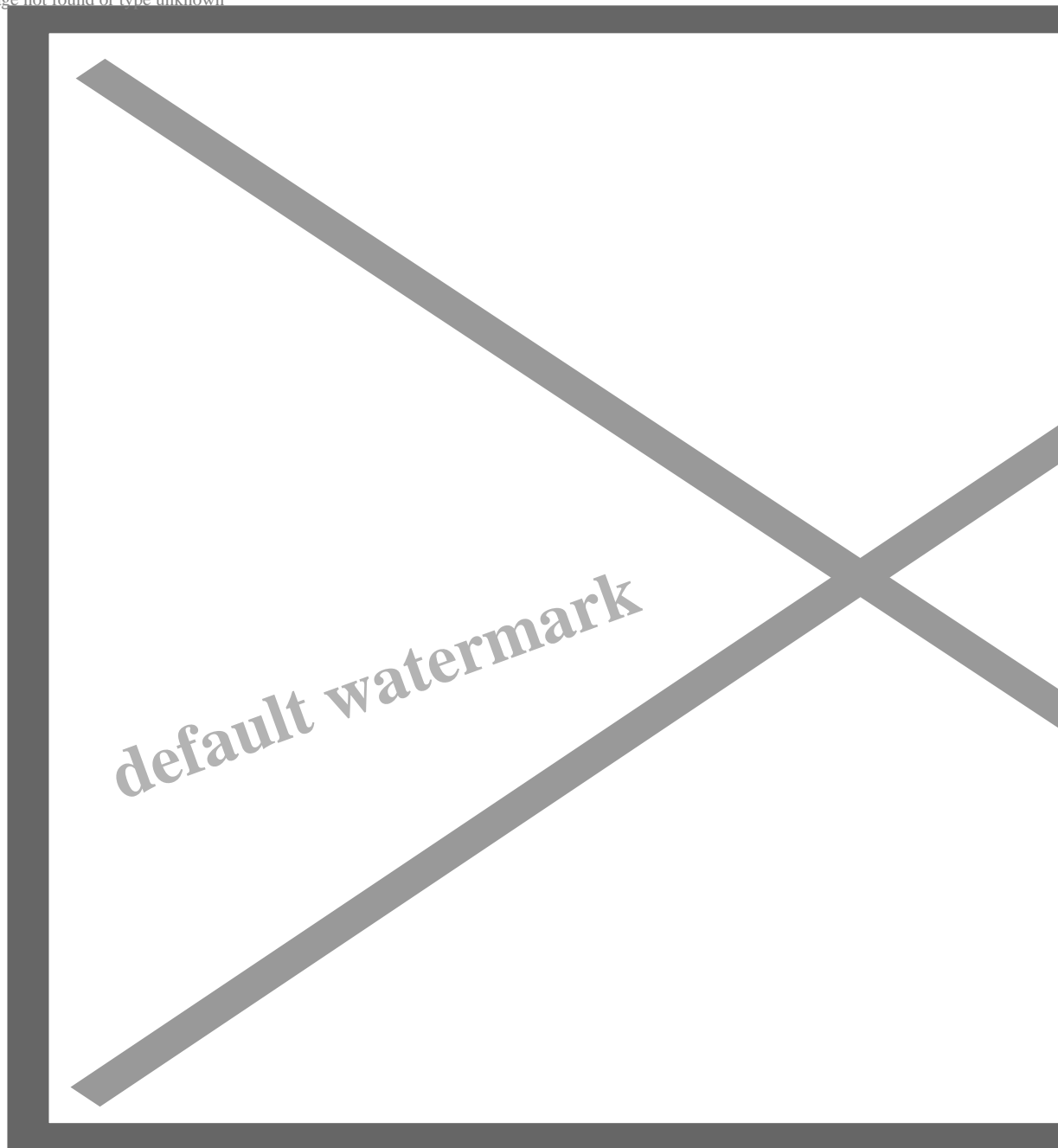


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Scenes from the front. Sources:

[*AAP; Dean Lewins*](#)

[*Matthew Abbott for The New York Times*](#)

[*DELWP, via Associated Press*](#)

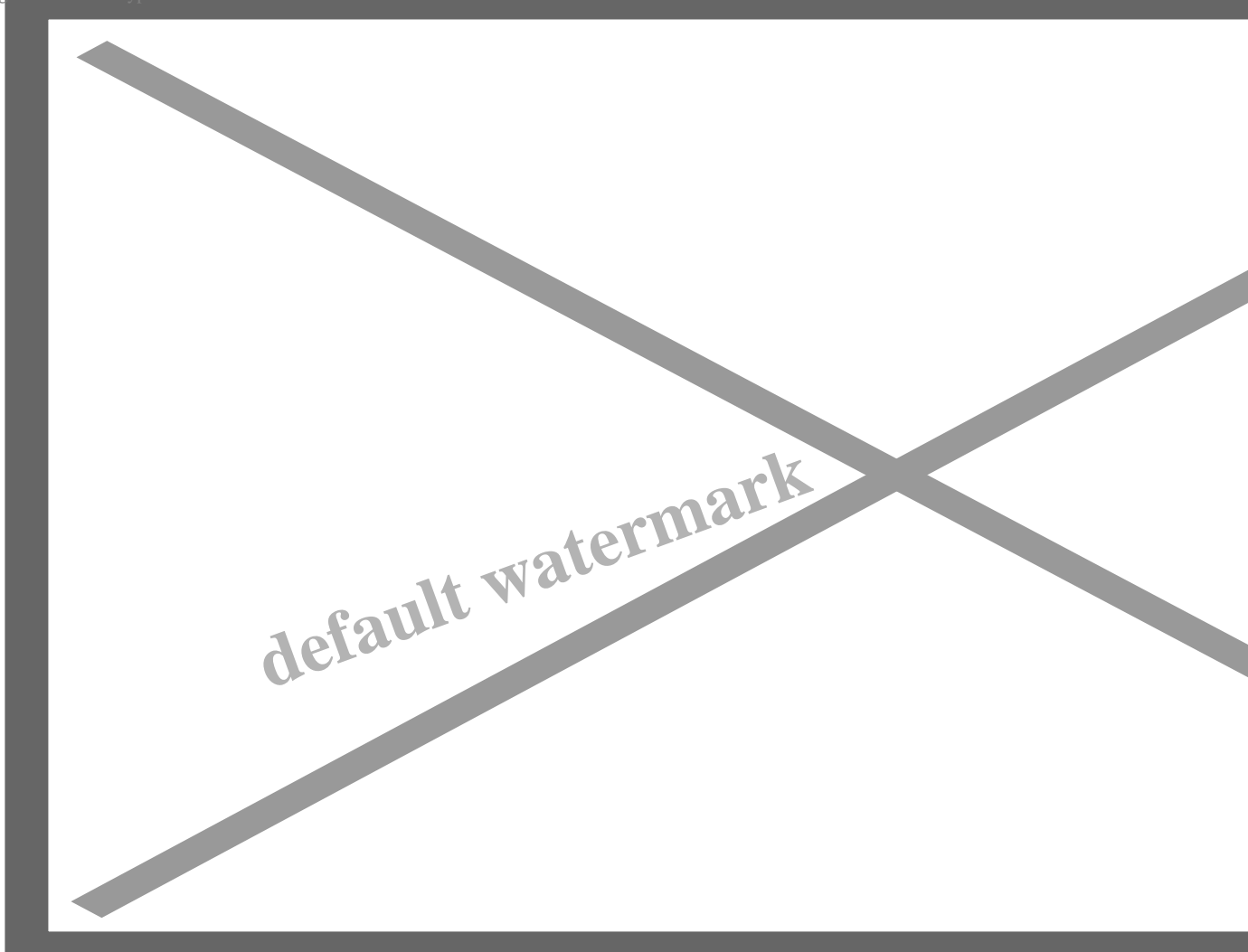
[*sippakorn yamkasikorn on Unsplash*](#)

Even for those not under immediate threat from fire had to cope with heavy smoke which made breathing difficult and was life-threatening to those with respiratory problems.

When Covid started spreading rapidly, there was a lot of debate about what appropriate responses

might be, including whether masks were helpful or not. Even among scientists, there was disagreement about whether masks helped and what sort of mask might be best. Now there is general agreement that masks are helpful – but only as one of a number of measures that need to be taken by individuals and society generally ([the swiss cheese model](#)).

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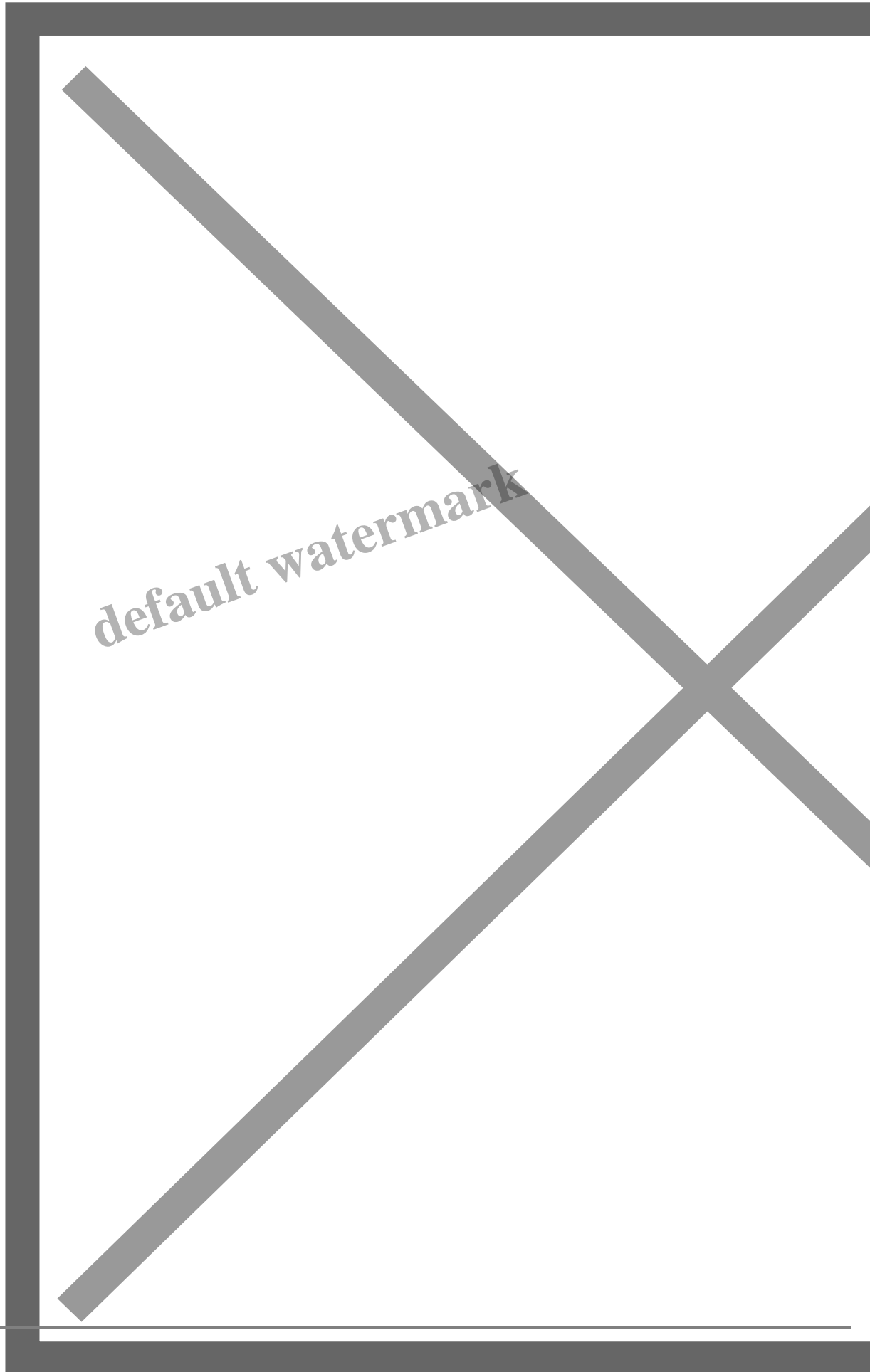


Unlike with Covid, there was no questioning of the need to wear a mask for smoke – but the supply of the necessary P2 masks dwindled rapidly and ran out in many areas. It's estimated that smoke probably [caused many more deaths](#) than the actual fires themselves.

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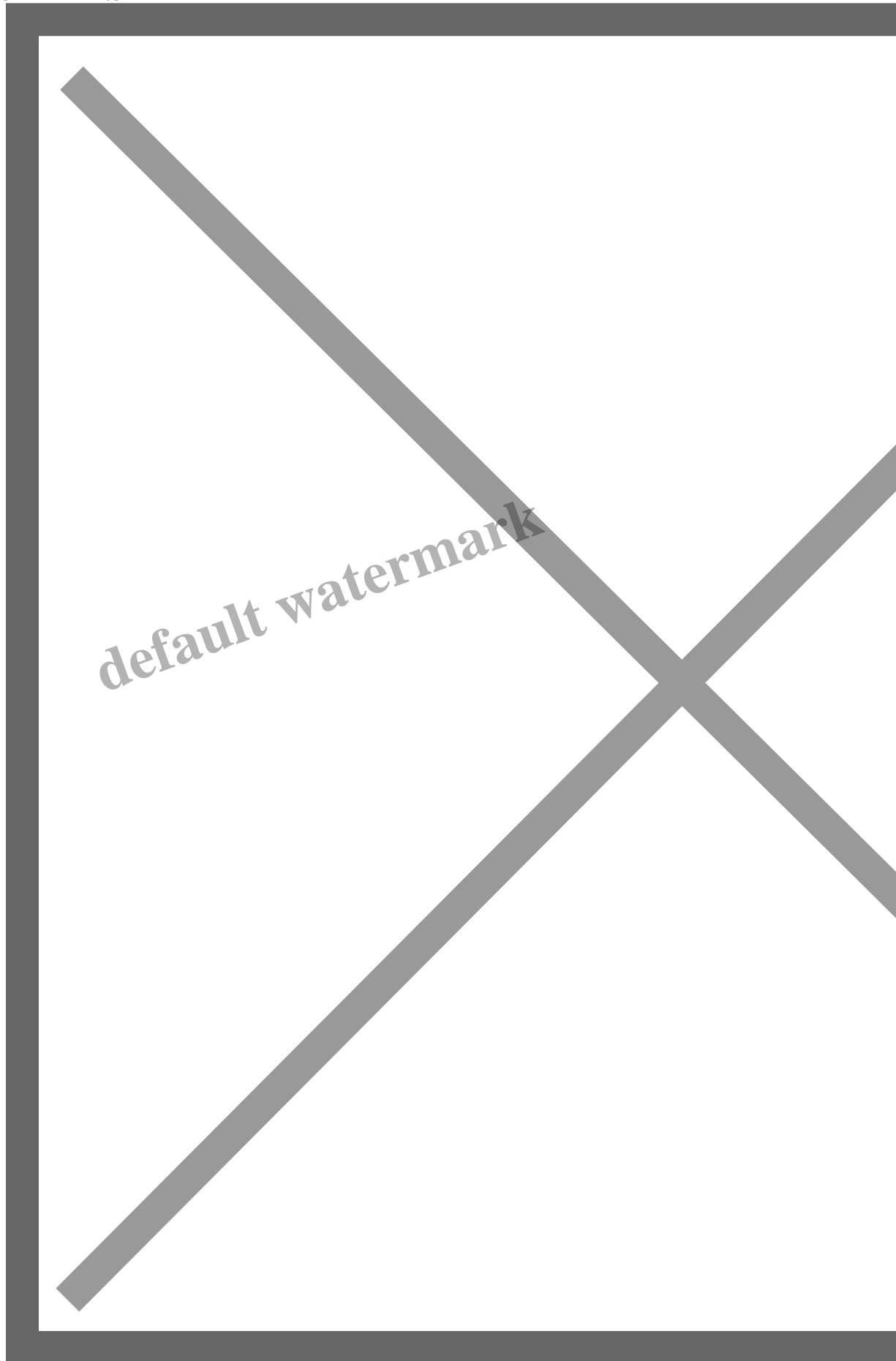
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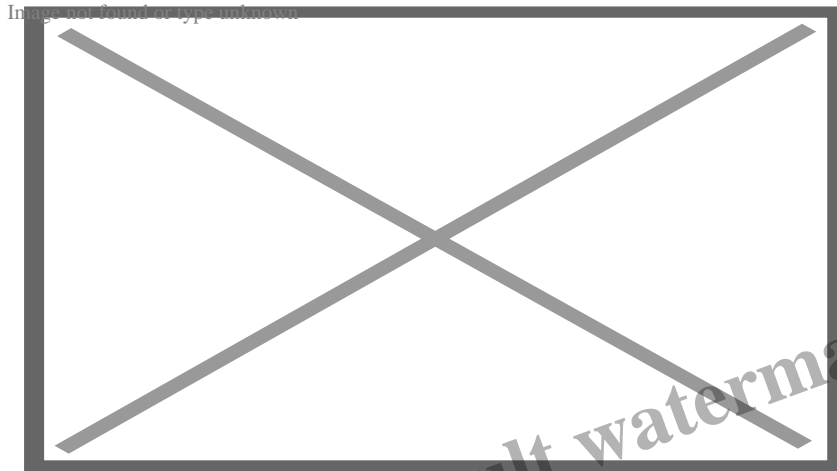
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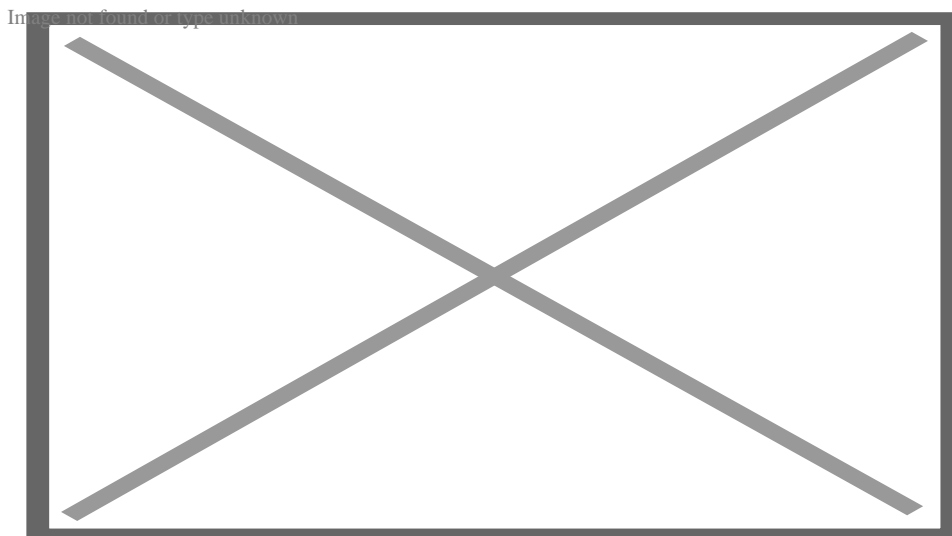
My daughter, Katie, was on her partner's family property near Tumut, NSW during the height of the bushfires. A major fire was burning not too far away and smoke blanketed everything, rendering air quality hazardous. Photos courtesy Katie Hobbs

Previous bushfire emergencies had mostly been restricted to particular areas and had occurred over a matter of days – devastating, but finite. The 2019-2020 fires occurred all over and just kept going. Even places less badly affected, like Western Australia, where I live, had its share of fire problems – for instance, nearly half of the Stirling Ranges National Park, one of the state's premier parks, was [burned in early January](#).



More than 40,000 hectares of land was burnt in the Stirling Ranges. (Photo: [ABC](#), Ryan Pollock)

The relentlessness of the fires took a heavy toll on not just those directly affected but also on everyone involved in the effort to control the fires, keep people safe and subsequently to deal with the aftermath of the fires. The scale of devastation was almost incomprehensible and the numbers of homes lost and businesses ruined was huge. The toll on both human communities and native ecosystems and wildlife was immense.



[Millions of animals were killed or injured in the fires.](#) Photo:

AAP Image/David Mariuz/via Reuters

Smoke on the Water, by Deep Purple, 1972. Most people probably don't listen too closely to the lyrics, but they tell the story of an actual fire that the band experienced. The chorus is memorable though, and the song has one of the most recognisable rock riffs ever.

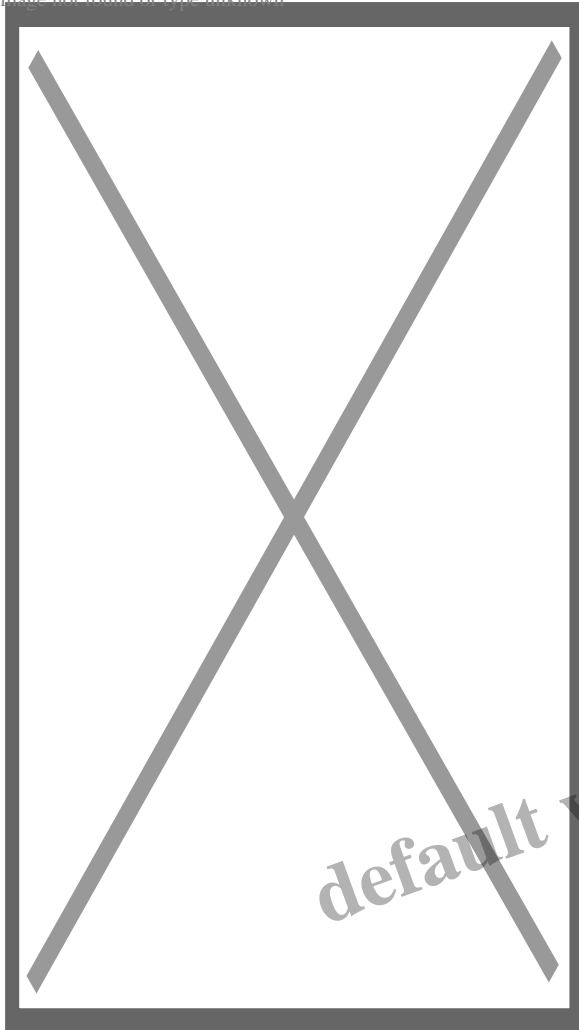
Help!

The fires exposed shortcomings in funding and support for local firefighting efforts – almost all run on a voluntary basis by local bushfire brigades. They also exposed some of our leading politicians as being more interested in photo opportunities than in the plight of the communities they represent. On the other hand, they also highlighted the true leadership and humanity of those leading the planning and deployment of firefighting resources. And grass-roots community action with ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

More broadly, the nation as a whole came together in support of the firefighters and the people and places affected by the fires. Huge sums of money were raised for aid efforts. As part of this, musicians across the country held benefit concerts – here in Western Australia, a group of local musicians quickly organised Fire Aid, a concert in Fremantle, which sold out so quickly that they put a second concert on. The two concerts [raised \\$650,000 for bushfire relief efforts](#).

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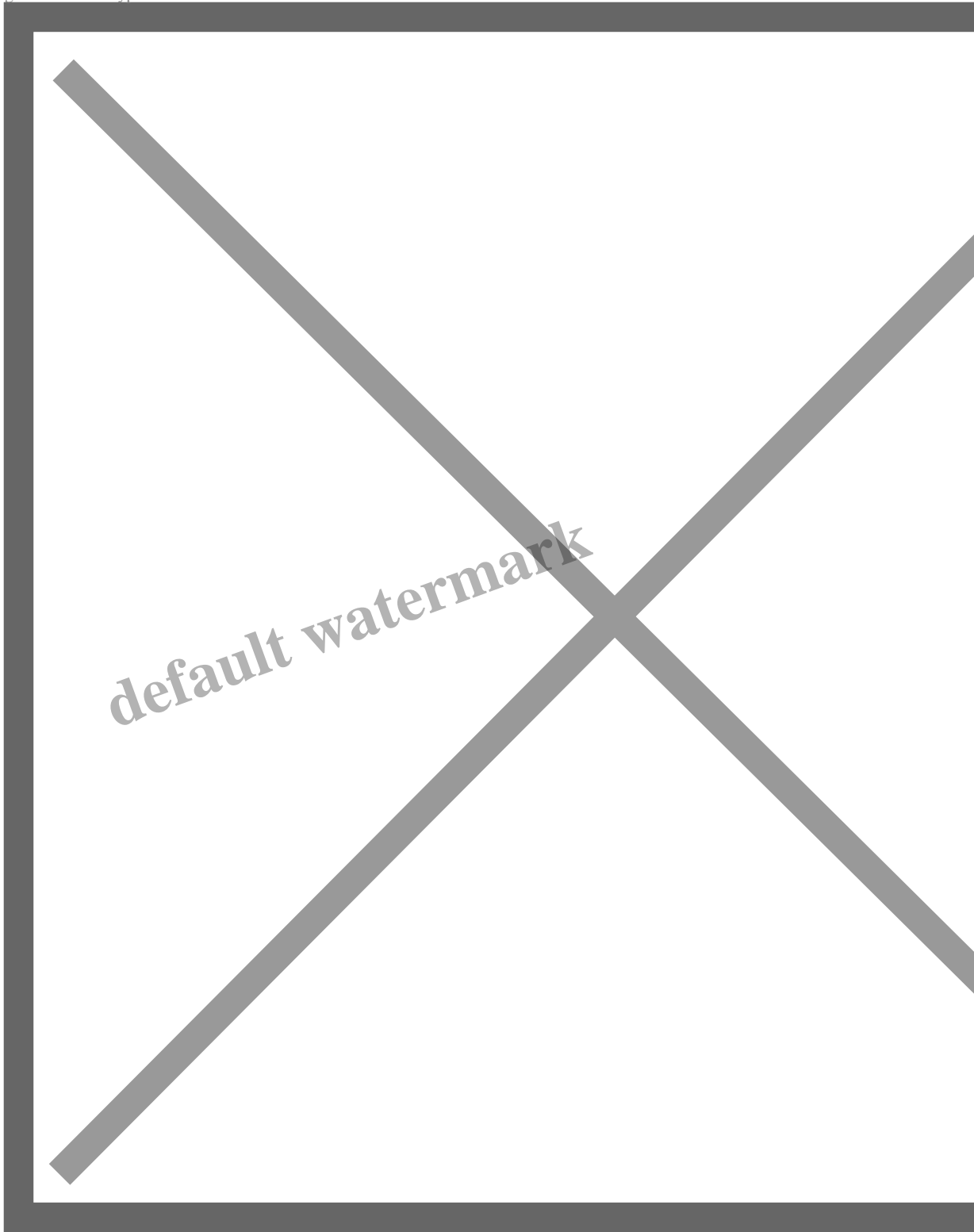
Distributing aid has not necessarily always been smooth, and the government has been criticised for the slowness of its efforts. [The Bushfire Recovery Agency](#) was formed in the wake of the fires to coordinate efforts. But the process is slow and complex, with affected communities still waiting for, or [going through complex application processes](#), for assistance.

A scorched guitar

At the height of the fire crisis in January, [Joshua Hamill](#), a young guitar maker in Tasmania (which was also experiencing severe bushfires), put one of his guitars up for sale with the aim of donating 15% of the sale price to the NSW Rural Fire Service. The guitar was what Josh described as a TeleMaster – a sort of hybrid between a Fender [Jazzmaster](#) and Telecaster, something Fender themselves [had tried](#) a while ago.

The interesting thing about this guitar, though, was that it was one of Josh’s “Scorched Series”. For these guitars, Josh made a series of scorch patterns by hand on the body and neck, rendering each guitar unique. A guitar touched by fire seemed like the ideal medium through which to offer support for the firefighting effort. And perhaps a symbol of how music – and life – carries on in spite of everything.

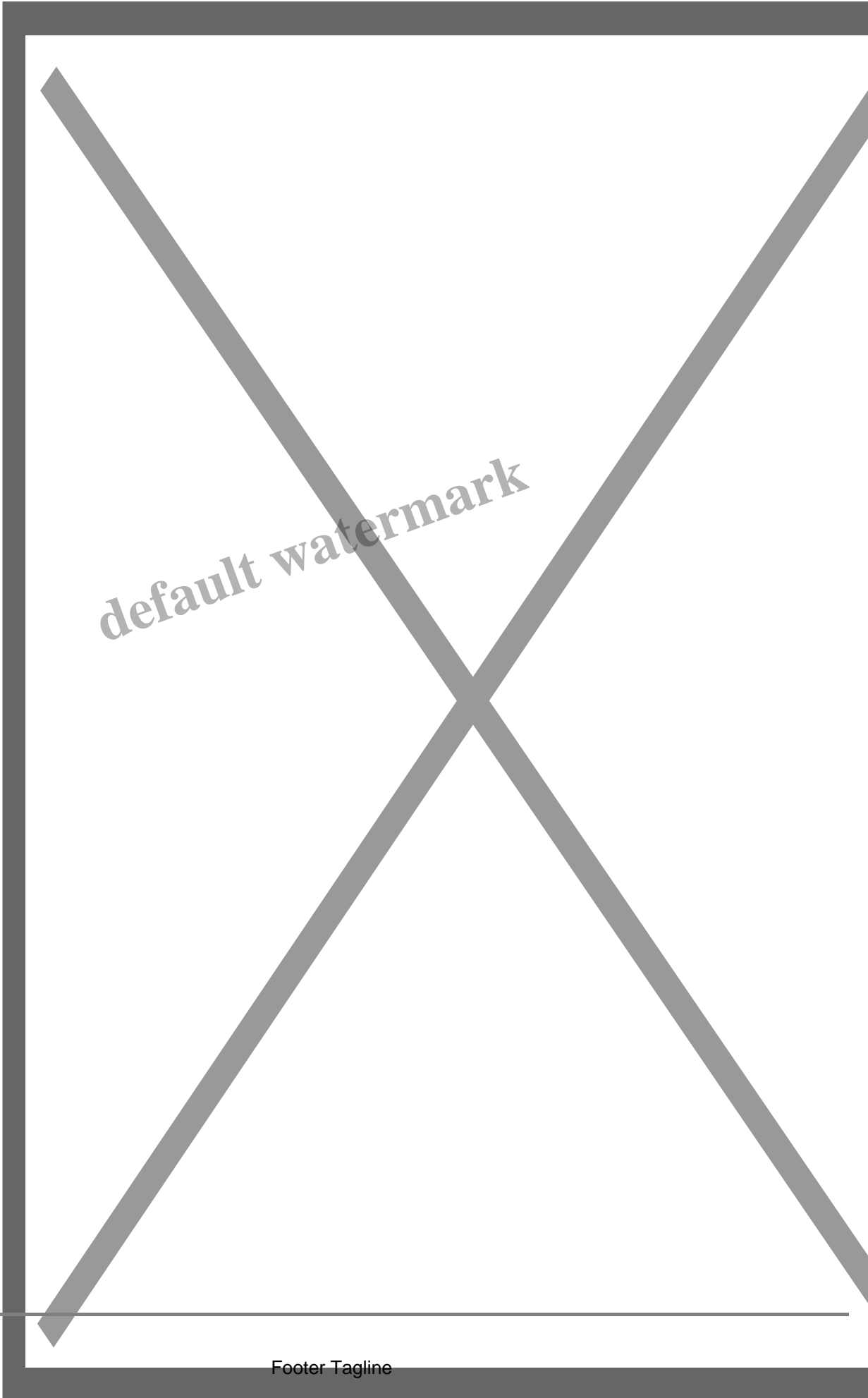
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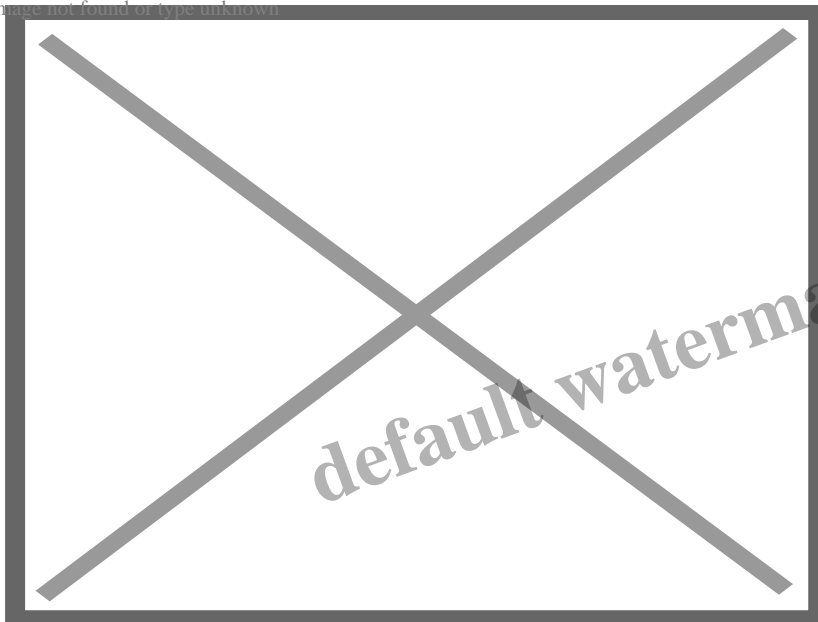
JH Guitars Bushfire Appeal JazzMaster Telecaster

The guitar body is made from Mountain Ash ([Eucalyptus regnans](#)) which grows in Victoria and Tasmania. This is recognised as being amongst the tallest trees in the world, with [some individuals reaching over 100m tall](#).

Mountain Ash

Mountain Ash forests are magical places and home to not just the amazing trees but unique forest wildlife, [some species](#) of which spend almost their entire lives in the tree canopies.

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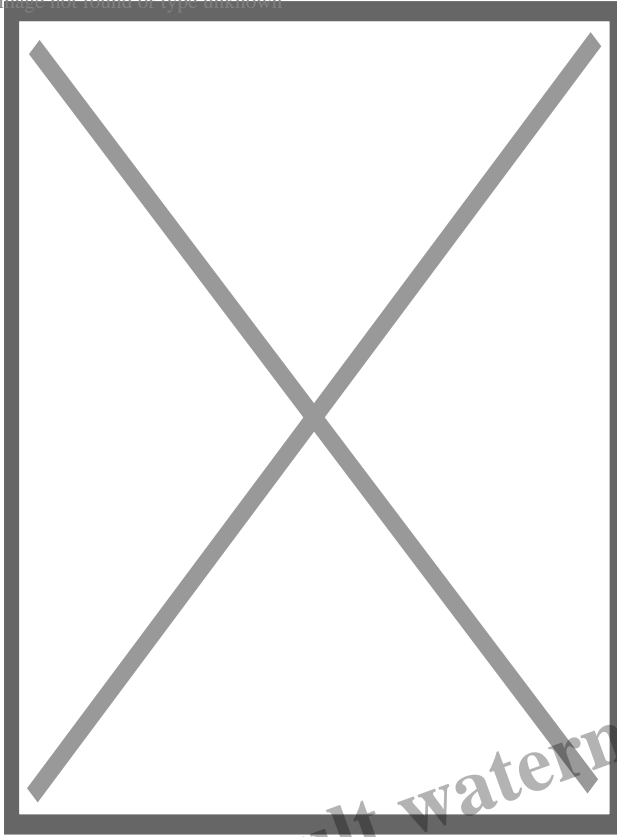


Old growth Mountain Ash forest

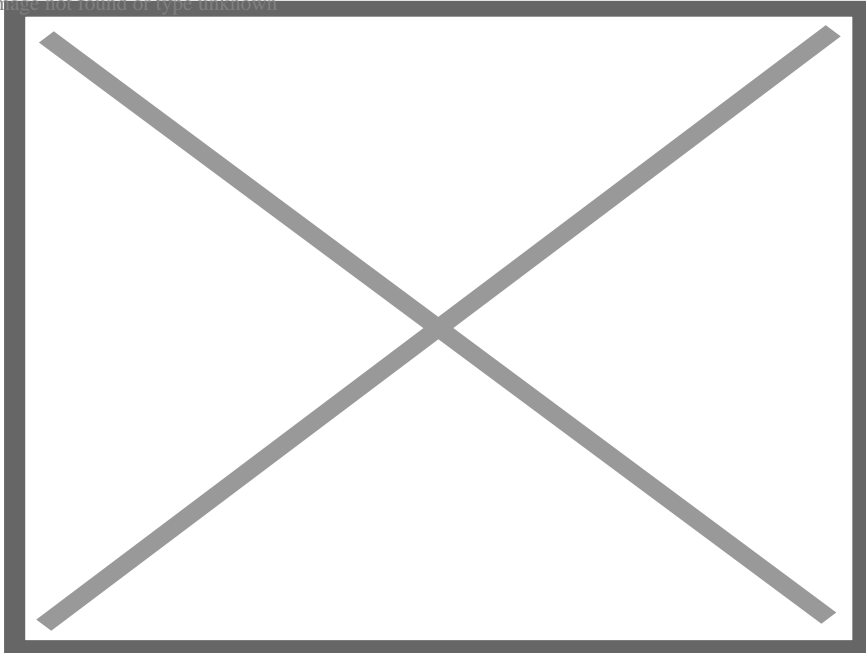
These forests, like many others containing large trees, have been subjected to heavy and ongoing logging. If the timber being extracted from the forests was all being used for high-value products such as Josh's guitar, there might be some modicum of sense in continued logging, albeit at a much-reduced level than in the past. However, most of the trees felled are turned, not into fine wood products, but into woodchips that are exported to countries such as Japan.

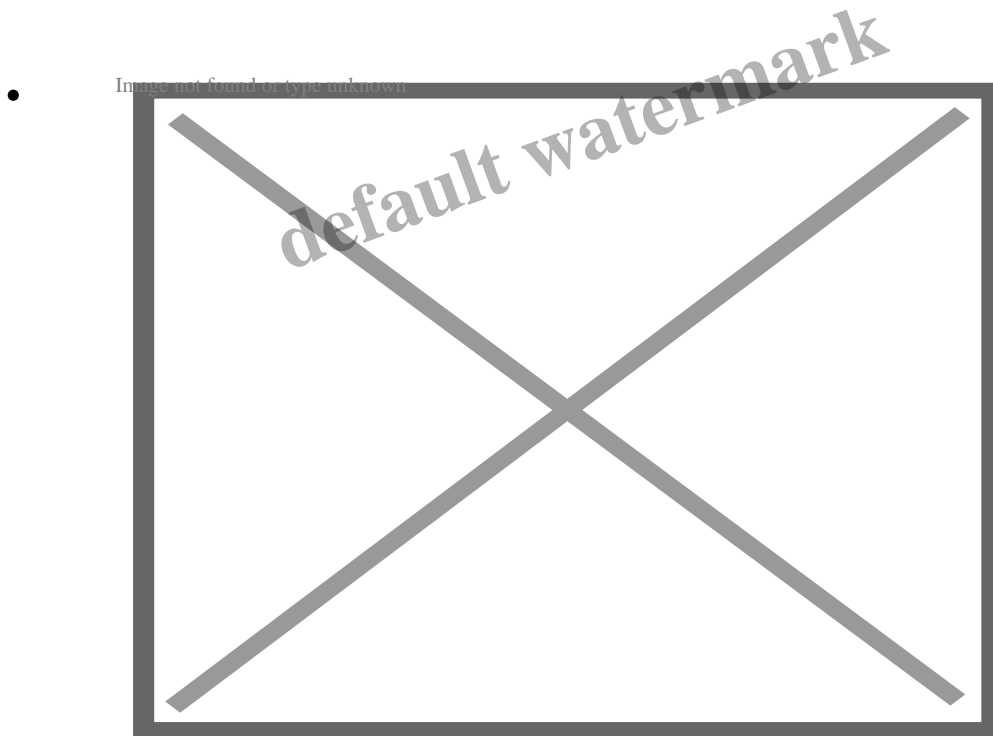
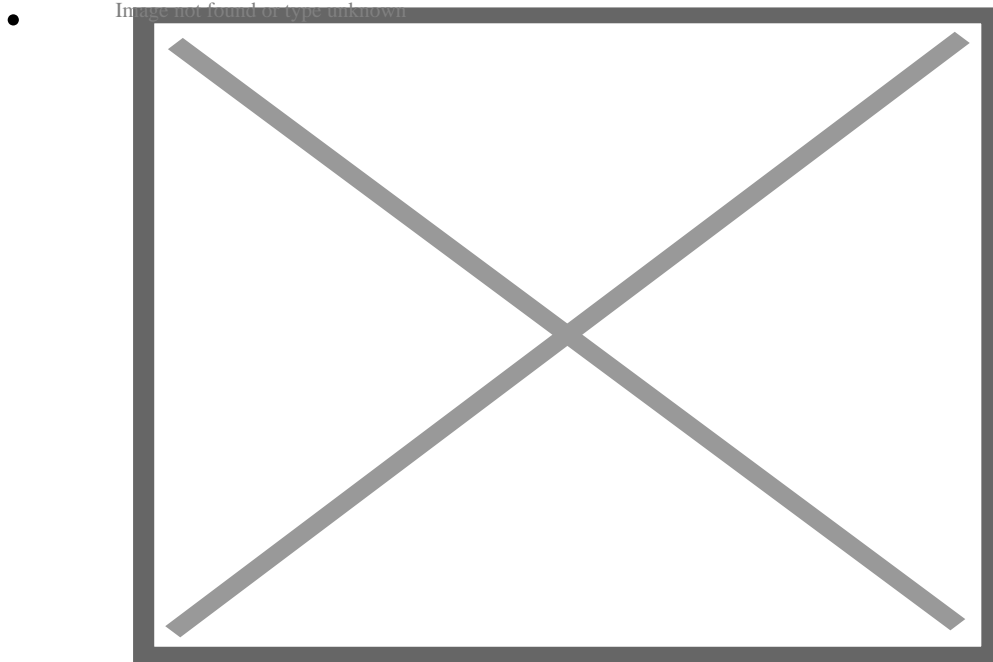
The remaining old growth Mountain Ash forests represent a small percentage of the original extent, and regrowth forests have quite different structures that do not contain the large old trees previously present.

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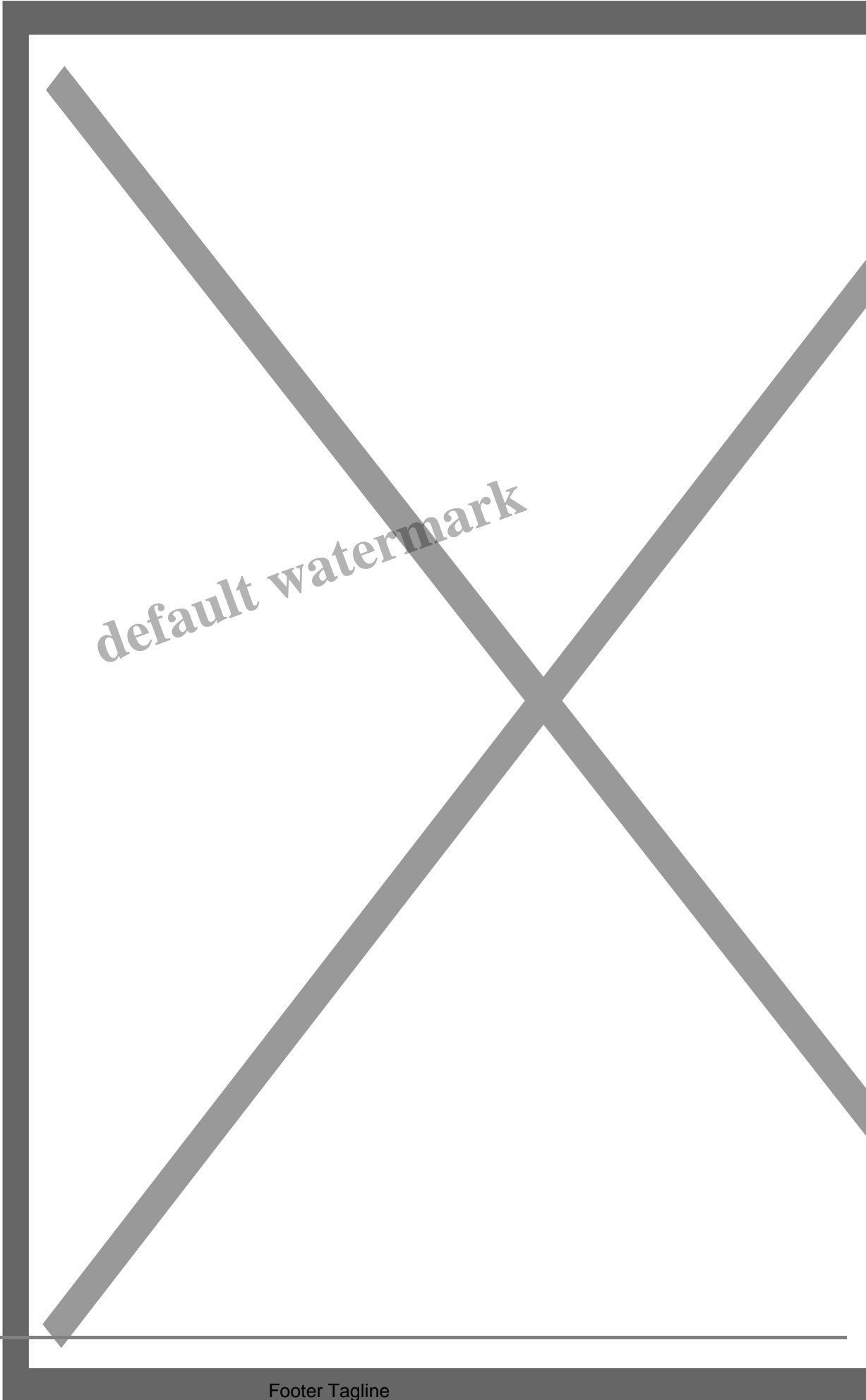
Old growth trees can survive fire, whereas regrowth rarely does. Salvage logging adds the further degradation of the forest landscape.

My friend and colleague David Lindenmayer has studied these forests for decades, both before and after the [Black Saturday bushfires](#) in February 2009 that were less widespread but claimed many more lives than the more recent fires. David and his colleagues have written numerous books and articles about the forests, their wildlife and their recovery from the bushfires.

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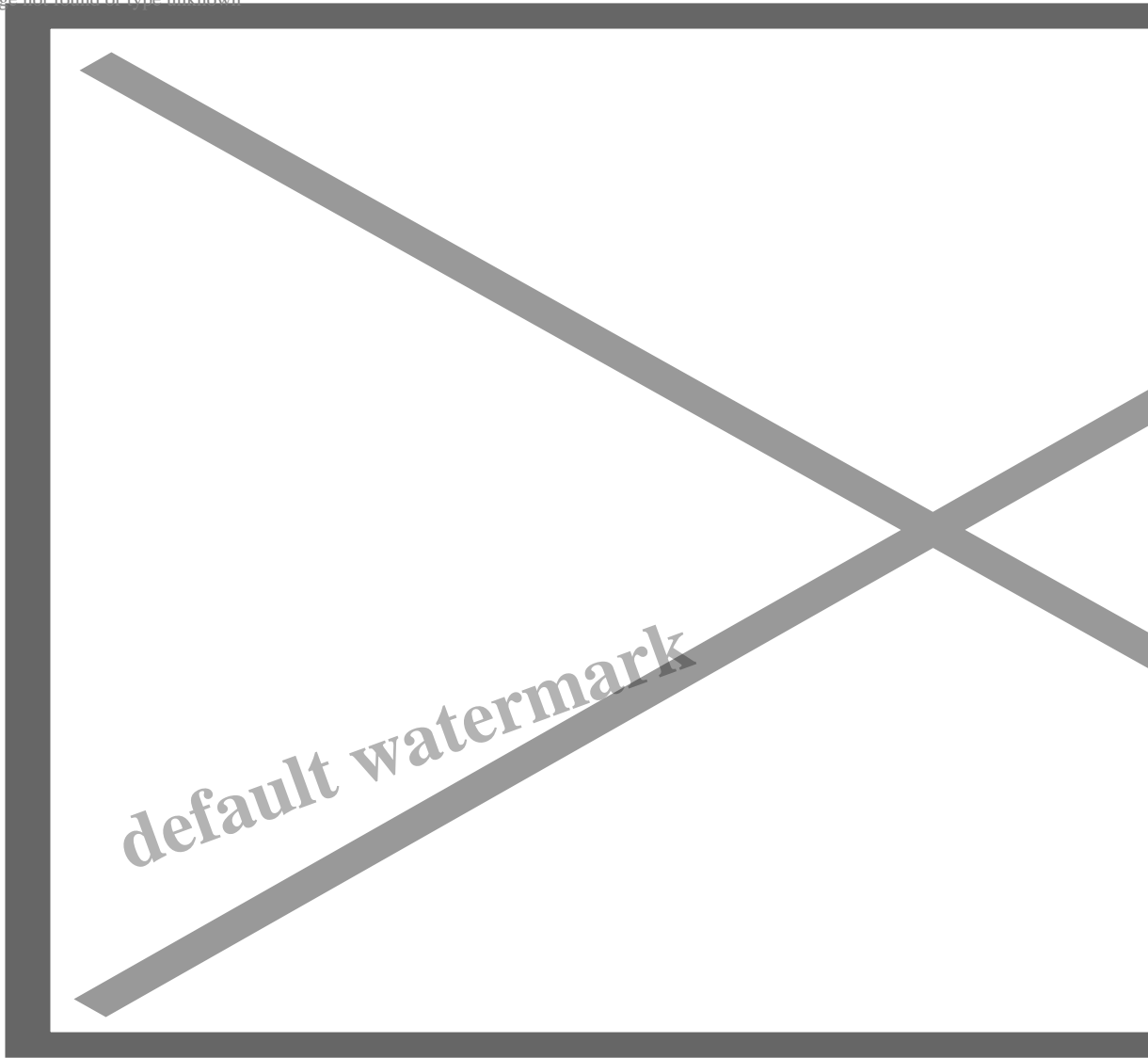
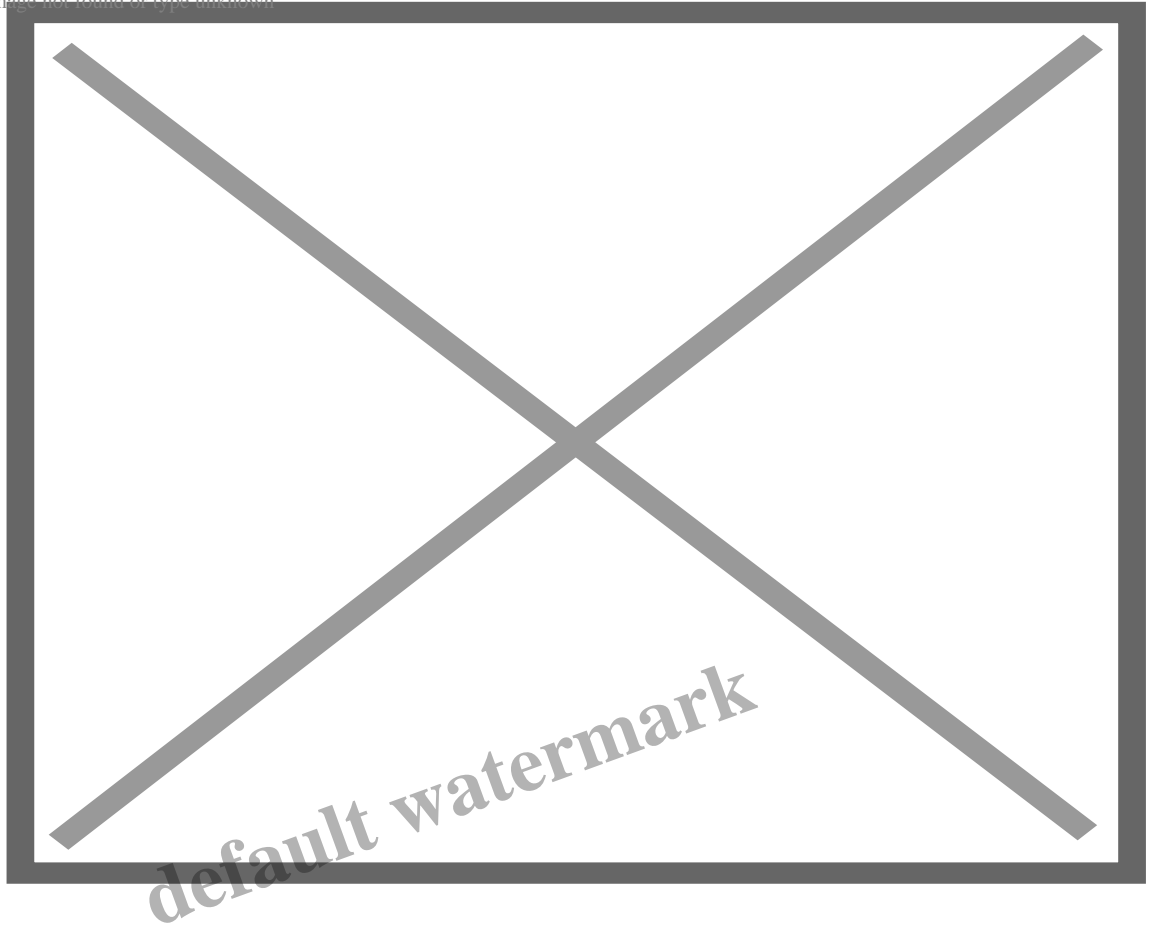


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David Lindenmayer and colleagues have amassed a huge amount of knowledge of the mountain ash forests. A couple of the resulting books: [Forest Phoenix](#), [Mountain Ash](#)

An important finding is that the changed, more homogenous, structure of logged forests also makes them more fire prone and more likely to allow fires to spread. Hence there is a perverse interplay between logging and wildfires, as described in [a recent article](#) by David Lindenmayer and colleagues. And this is further exacerbated by the practice of “salvage logging” burnt areas.

One of the article’s authors, [James Watson](#) has dual roles at the University of Queensland and the Wildlife Conservation Society. His comment is: “Australia is going to have more fires. Even if we stop logging tomorrow, the problem is that they’ve been logging the wazoo at these places for 100 years, and therefore there’s going to be more fire. Guess what? We can’t change the past. We can only change the future and our management.”

Can we change the future?

This story is about Australia, but it’s really also about many other places in the world. Wildfires are increasing in frequency and severity in places like western North America, the Mediterranean and the Arctic. There have even been wildfires recently in my native [Scotland](#). Australia is perhaps one of the bellweathers, but what we do here is relevant worldwide.

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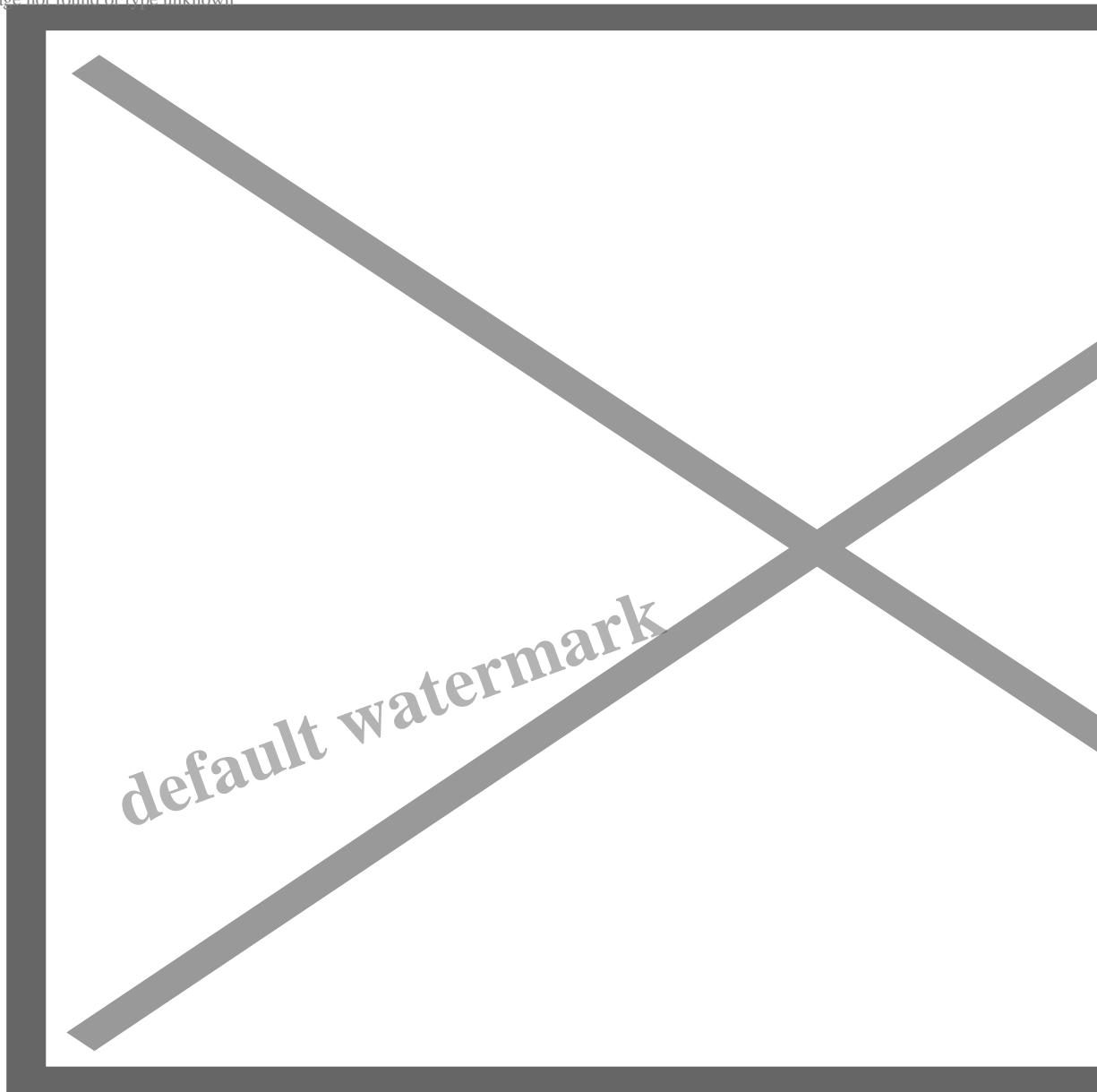
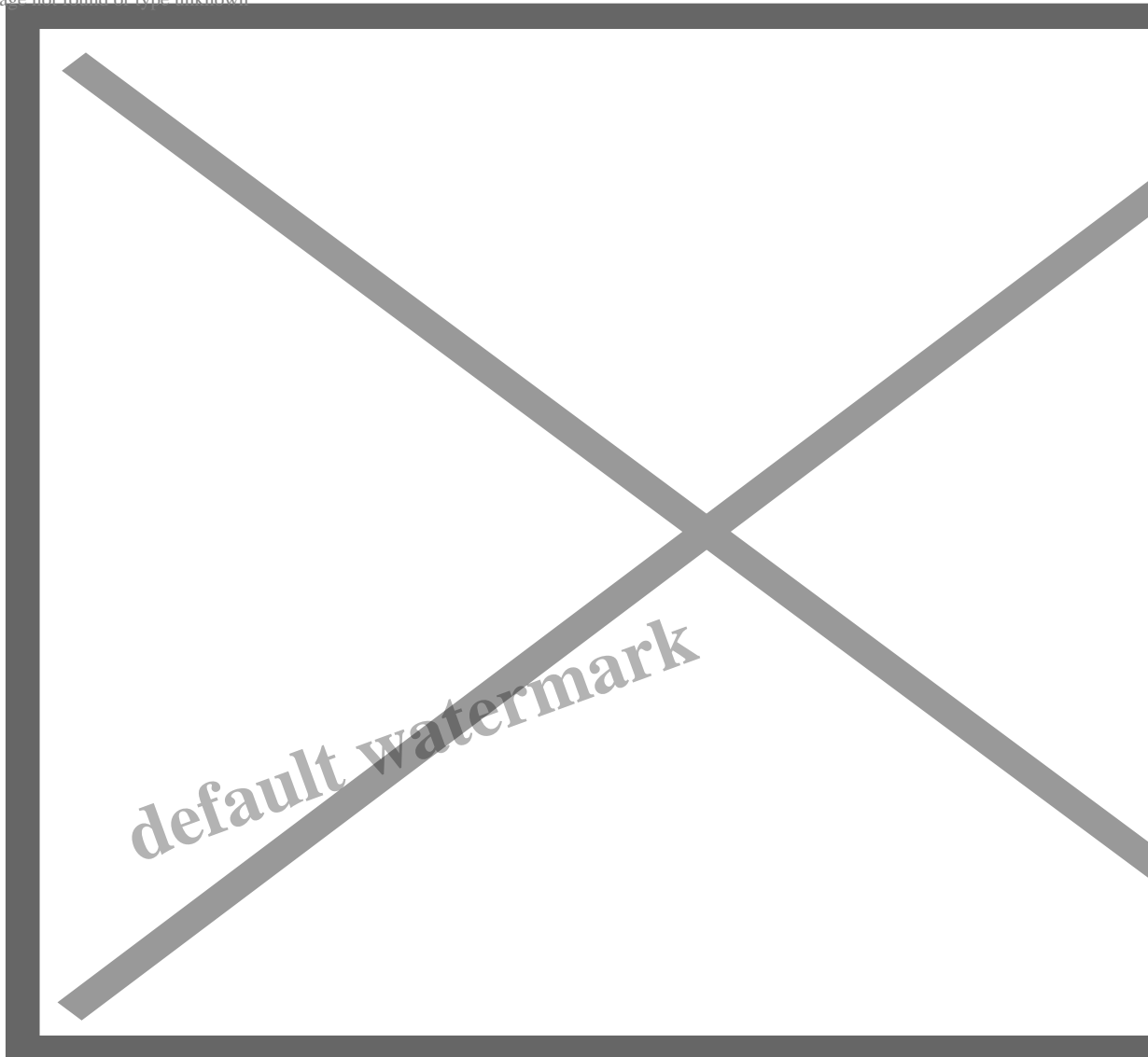


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Smoke in [Sydney](#) in December 2019 and in [San Francisco](#) in September 2020.
Photos: ABC and Reuters

How and what do we need to change? During and after the 2019-2020 bushfires, there was ongoing debate about what caused them and why they were so extensive and destructive. And, of course, people wanted someone to blame. Some commentators blamed arsonists, although evidence clearly showed that only a very small percentage of the fires were accidentally lit. Some blamed the greens who'd been arguing for more sensible prescribed fire management that supposedly had allowed excess forest fuel to build up. The whole question of [prescribed burning](#) to reduce fuel loads is contentious in many parts of Australia, partially because existing policies rely on achieving certain amounts each year, without also considering where might be best to focus the activities. There is no doubt that well designed fuel reduction programs can save lives and property, but setting fire to large areas in remote places is probably not helpful.

A clear culprit in the eyes of many is [Australia's changing climate](#). Reduced rainfalls and increased

temperatures lead to drier landscapes and longer potential fire seasons. Wildfires are possible for longer and, conversely, the safe times in which prescribed management fires can be conducted are reduced. Scientists and firefighters alike pointed to this as a major factor leading to the 2019-2020 season. However, if you have a government that does not buy into climate change as being a reality, then political leaders are apt to downplay the role that it plays.

However, it's not just climate change – it's all the other changes that have been going on at the same time as the climate has been shifting. As already mentioned, continued logging has changed forest structures, making drying landscapes even more fire prone. And more people now live in fire risk areas, often in settlements that are poorly designed to deal with the fire risk.

Like Covid-19, a swiss cheese model could be applied to how we deal with fires in the future. Individuals can do their bit by ensuring that their properties are [designed and maintained](#) to reduce ignition sources. Landowners, local authorities and government agencies can work towards more effective landscape management that takes what's working from current strategies and modifies it in the light of new understanding, and in the light of changing climatic conditions.

Much can be also be learned to listening more to the traditional owners of the land and [how they once managed fire](#). Governments can develop policy that implements recommendations from all the various reports following not just this most recent fire season but also every other wildfire disaster. And they can ensure that the recommended actions are adequately funded and resourced. And that also means [recognising and acting on the impacts of climate change](#).

Maybe, as David Lindenmayer suggests, [we need better politicians](#) for this to happen. Certainly, our current Covid crisis has separated the wheat from the chaff in terms of political leadership. But Covid has also taken attention away from all the other things that matter, including the ongoing fallout from last year's bushfires and the factors that led to them.

Repeating James Watson's comment: "We can't change the past. We can only change the future and our management." That goes for all aspects of the fire issue, including how we tackle climate change. It also goes for the current pandemic: we can't change the past but we can learn from it. Let's start getting better at learning and changing towards a better future.

Hope?

David Lindenmayer's book "[Forest Phoenix](#)" illustrated the capacity of the forest ecosystem to recover following fire. This capacity has been sorely tested by the 2019-2020 bushfires because of their severity and extent. There is certainly the possibility that some systems and species will not be able to recover unaided, and may never return to their former selves.

Nevertheless, there are hopeful signs. Inspiring stories are emerging of heroic efforts to save precious ecosystems during the fire, and of surprising recovery by plants and animals.

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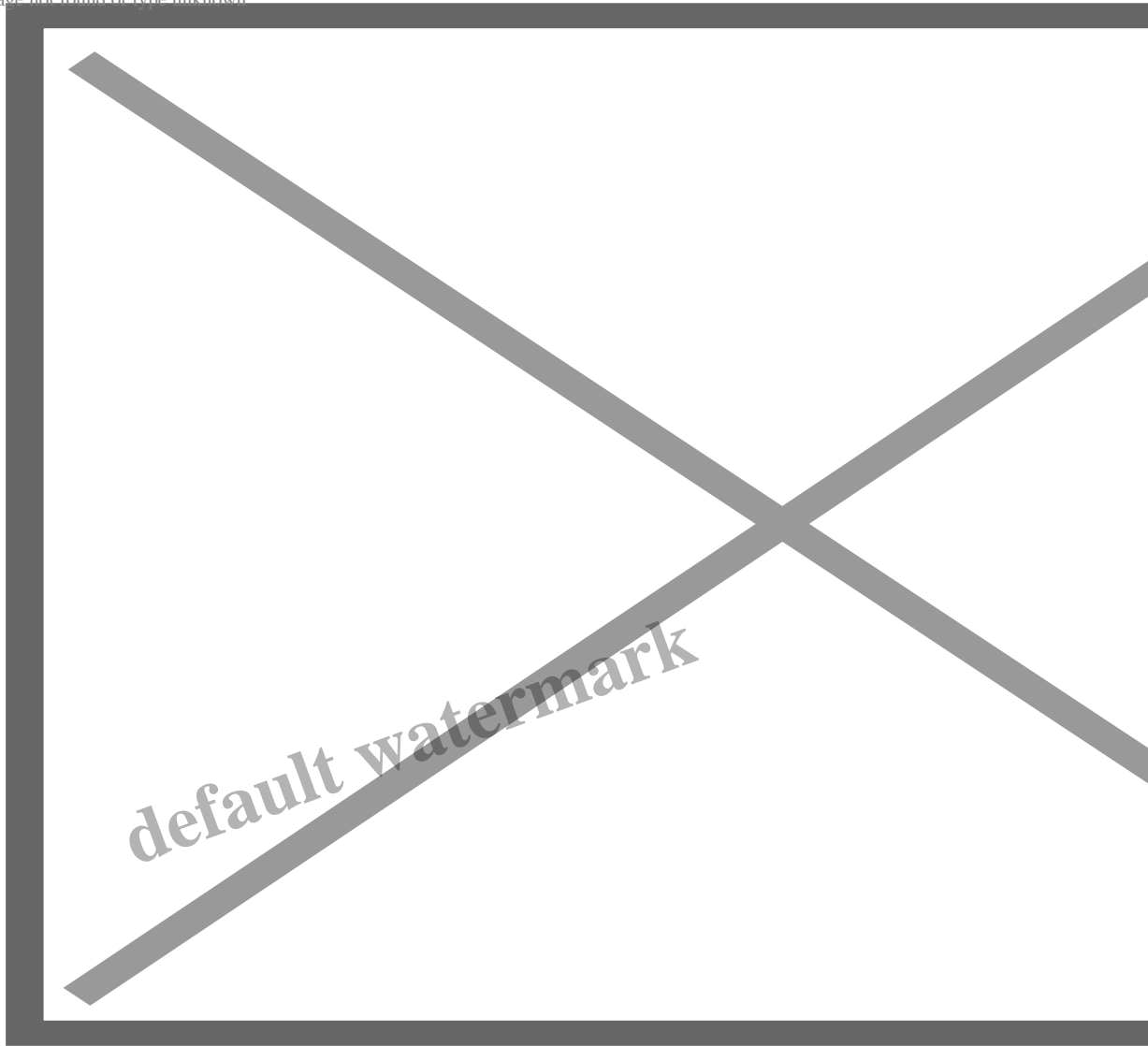
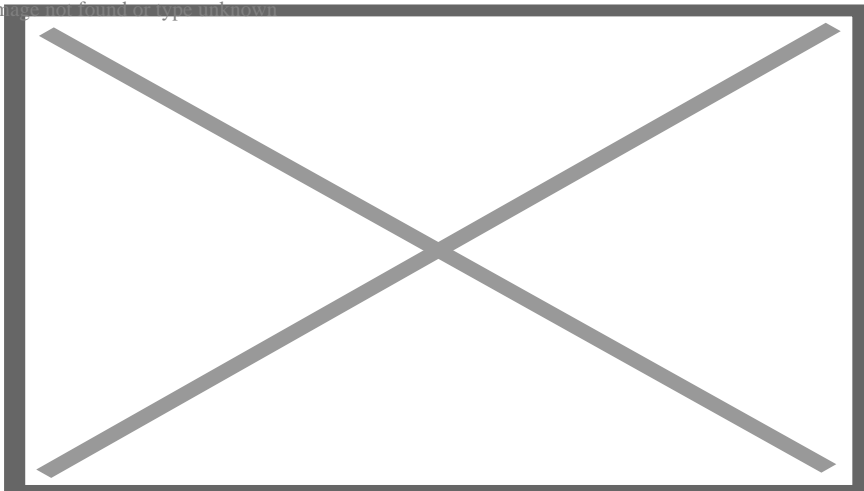


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[Christmas bells](#) bloom in abundance and [Lyrebirds](#) survived and bred after the fires.
Photos: Emma Siossian and Paul McIver

Nature's ability to bounce back is now intimately related to how human society interacts with it, and part of changing towards a better future is learning to live in ways that allow us to continue to share the planet with the amazing plants and animals around us.

Time to finish off with a guy playing guitar. Bob Dylan wrote "The Times They Are a-Changin'" nearly 60 years ago at another point in history where things were looking pretty bleak. Seems just as relevant today.

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