

The arsonist's mind: part 4 – the rational firesetter

Previous issues of this bulletin have looked at the role of psychopathology and psychiatric disability in arson. Only a fairly small proportion of arson offenders are ever caught and even fewer become research subjects. People who light fires under the influence of psychopathology, particularly if they become serial offenders and light multiple fires in a discernible pattern, may be more likely to get caught and attract the interest of researchers than those who light fires for more rational reasons. Further research is needed to try and get a closer understanding of the distribution of deliberately lit fires across the different motive categories. At least in some areas, however, the majority of deliberate bushfires will be lit for reasons that are rational, even purposeful, and not necessarily malicious.

The bushfire arson typology in bulletin no. 7 identified, as a category, bushfires that are lit for a specific purpose or gain. In this category, firesetting behaviour is not typically influenced by psychopathology. Reasons for such deliberate firesetting might be altruistic, pragmatic or material:

- The lighting of fires for altruistic purposes might stem from a belief that the firesetter is doing the right thing. An example is where landholders burn bushland adjoining their property to reduce fuel build-up which they feel poses a threat to their own and neighbouring properties.
- A pragmatic purpose might be, for example, where a landholder generates grazing fodder for his or her stock by allowing a legally permitted fire to burn from their property into adjoining land. The landholder may illegally start a fire for this specific purpose.
- Deliberate firesetting may also have a material purpose. Such fires might generate a financial gain to the firesetter. For example, there is anecdotal evidence of bushfires being lit on protected public land to stimulate the growth of wildflowers, which are then harvested for sale.

Such practices may be done without any malicious intent, and the legitimate use of fire for land management is appropriate – and even necessary – in the right circumstances. However, the illegitimate or illegal use of fire carries potential threats to the environment, other properties, and the safety and resources of responding fire crews. These fires may be poorly planned and implemented, creating control problems for managers of adjoining Crown land.

These types of fires may also be lit with malicious intent. The destructive force of a bushfire can be used as a tool of anger. This anger may be displaced onto the bush from a target unrelated to the bush, such as an employer. Alternatively, there may be a link between the target and the bush, such as where the firesetter is seeking to protest against a land management or conservation agency over its policies or practices. The target may be the local community, with the arsonist responding to a perceived injustice by using fire to harm the community. When fire is used out of anger, whether the underlying influences on the behaviour are rational or not may largely be a matter of judgment. What seems rational to the arsonist, may not seem so rational to those who have to deal with the fire and its consequences.

For more information:

Crowe F 1999. The arsonist's mind. In *FIRE! The Australian experience*. Proceedings from the National Academies Forum 30 September–1 October. <http://www.atse.org.au/uploads/FireCrowe.pdf>

Rider AO 1980. The firesetter: a psychological profile. *FBI law enforcement bulletin* 49(6): 6–13