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## INTRODUCTION

### Grassfires in Australia

Fire is one of the most important elements in the Australian landscape. Many Australian plants have evolved with fire as a necessary part of their life cycles. It is estimated that, on average, an area of more than 2.5 million hectares is burnt each year by wildfires – and much larger areas in extreme years. The figures are somewhat uncertain, however, partly because it is difficult to distinguish between wildfires and agricultural/cultural burning-off in the tropics. In 1992, for example, 7.4 million ha was burnt in the Northern Territory – 5.5% of the total land area – but the fraction that was burnt by wildfires is unknown.

Most wildfires in Australia are called bushfires because they occur in rural areas or ‘the bush’. It is more accurate, however, to describe a wildfire by using the dominant fuel type involved, e.g. forest fire, scrub fire or grassfire.

Grass is the most common fuel type in Australia. Nearly 75% of the country is grassland of one species or another, with half of that area used for sheep or cattle grazing. Grasslands range in type from the vast open Mitchell grass plains of northern Australia to the buttongrass moors of western Tasmania. They may be open treeless plains or areas that have been cleared for agriculture or grazing, and include improved pastures and crop lands of southern Australia. Grasses are also the dominant fuel in woodlands and open forests with a history of regular burning.