

Camp Fire

There's no doubt that being able to produce fire at will was early man's greatest discovery. Fire gave heat, light and energy – important building blocks of society.

Hominids were no strangers to natural fires, caused by volcanic eruption, lightning strikes and spontaneous combustion. It's most likely that such fire sources were seen as god-sends and campfires spawned by natural events were kept burning for as long as possible. Many early humans carried fire with them as they travelled.

Most experts on the topic feel that the first cultivated fire began as an accident – probably when a flint axe missed its mark and struck a hard rock, giving off a spark in the process.

Thankfully, today, we don't have to hurl an axe around a campsite to provoke the odd flame – a match will do the trick. However, that initial burst of flame can quickly turn to a spiral of smoky disappointment if it's misapplied.



To Burn or Not to Burn

The first consideration before building a campfire these days is the legality of the situation. If there's a fire ban in place or fires are prohibited by campsite regulations, a campfire is out of the question.

The next consideration is the appropriateness of the situation. If it's thirty degrees in the water bag and you're not planning to cook, what do you want a fire for? Why light a fire in conditions that would have you reaching for the air conditioner controls at home?



Then you need to consider the safety aspects of lighting a fire. If there's a strong wind, sparks could be carried into nearby bushland.

How about the surrounding environment? If there's plenty of dead wood lying around you may actually be doing some bushfire fuel reduction if you burn some of it in a campfire.

Under no circumstances is it justifiable to cut live branches or fell trees. Apart from the wanton stupidity, green wood makes lousy fuel.

Deserts are a special case. Wood is scarce and what's lying around is critical for soil nutrient, erosion control and as housing for small creatures. If you're off the beaten track there may be adequate wood to allow a small fire, but on the main bush routes, such as the Simpson tracks, there's insufficient wood to burn.

In some locations, such as National Parks, it's forbidden to collect wood. In some of these wood is provided – usually sawmill off-cuts – or you have to carry in your own.

Have a Fallback



It's not wise these days to assume that you can have a campfire at every stop. A fuel stove is an essential alternative and it's wise to carry a small single-burner fuel stove as a reserve.

We also carry a bag of heat beads; well, not actually a bag, because we found out the hard way that the paper bags tear and the beads turn into soot that permeates everything. Our heat beads are stowed in a sturdy box.

“You can't get the wood, you know”

Spike Milligan wasn't talking about Aussie camp fires when he made this prophetic announcement, but it fits the current situation. The ideal campfire wood is old and dry and, preferably, as hard as the hobs of hell. Desert stuff is by far the best and, if previous bush travellers had used it somewhat more judiciously, there'd be more of it around.

Whenever you're collecting firewood, be on the lookout for snakes and make plenty of noise as you walk about.

Wear strong gloves – most of our first aid repairs are for splinters and punctures caused by sharp pieces of wood. Look closely if you're driving through grass looking for wood, because tyres don't like wooden spikes either.

Old, fallen branches are the best source of campfire wood, because they graduate in size from kindling to long-burning logs. Forget trying to cut dead hardwood with an axe – a cross-cut bush saw is a quicker and safer tool for the job.

Where wood is supplied you need to select the driest bits you can, in graduated sizes. If there's no kindling you'll have to split some of the larger pieces, using a heavy bush knife or a tomahawk – before you get into the jungle juice.

White Fella Fire

Our aboriginal mates are highly amused by the size of the average 4x4 trip campfire, calling the blazing pyre a “white fella fire”. We've all sat around them, haven't we, with faces burnished red, boots smoking, beers protected from the searing radiation...and our backs and ears frozen by the night wind.

Our bush-savvy, indigenous brethren light much smaller fires that don't give the squatters such a contrast between heat and cold.

The Construction Phase



With sufficient wood gathered you need to clear the intended fireplace area of any combustible material that could allow the fire to spread. Where there are designated fireplaces or previous fire sites, use them: don't create another fire-blasted ring.

Use your shovel to dig a shallow trench in which to build the fire. The piled up earth acts as a wind break, stops sparks flying away so easily and can be used to bury the fire when you break camp.

If you intend to cook with coals, an oblong trench is better than a round one, because you can sit the camp oven at one end, on top of some coals, and keep creating fresh coals at the other end.

Then it's time to ball up some paper loosely, or make a pile of dead leaves, fine twigs and grass, and arrange the kindling tepee-like over the top of it. Fire starters are a great help in slightly damp conditions.

Once the kindling is burning, place the next size wood pieces on the fire and keep building it up until you've put on enough of the larger pieces to give you decent sized coals for cooking. Don't stack the wood on so that the fire is blazing two metres high – half to one metre flames are more than enough to produce coals.

At no stage should a campfire be left unattended and there should be a long-handled shovel and a fire extinguisher at hand, but not so close as to become part of the fire.

If you're planning to cook over coals, or use a camp oven you'll need to have the fire alight at least one hour beforehand.

If the wood doesn't look like it's going to come up with good quality coals you can drop in a few handfuls of heat beads: they mightn't be 'bushy' but they work!

When you break camp and 'bury' the fire, make sure that it's obviously a fire site that can be recognised as such by incoming campers. People often get burnt feet, from accidentally stepping onto buried coals.