

Stormbird Press

Defending nature and empowering communities through the power of story



**Brilliant
and powerful
and deeply,
deeply
moving**

—Stephen Harrod,
Earth Grief

FIRE

**A Message from the Edge of
Climate Catastrophe**

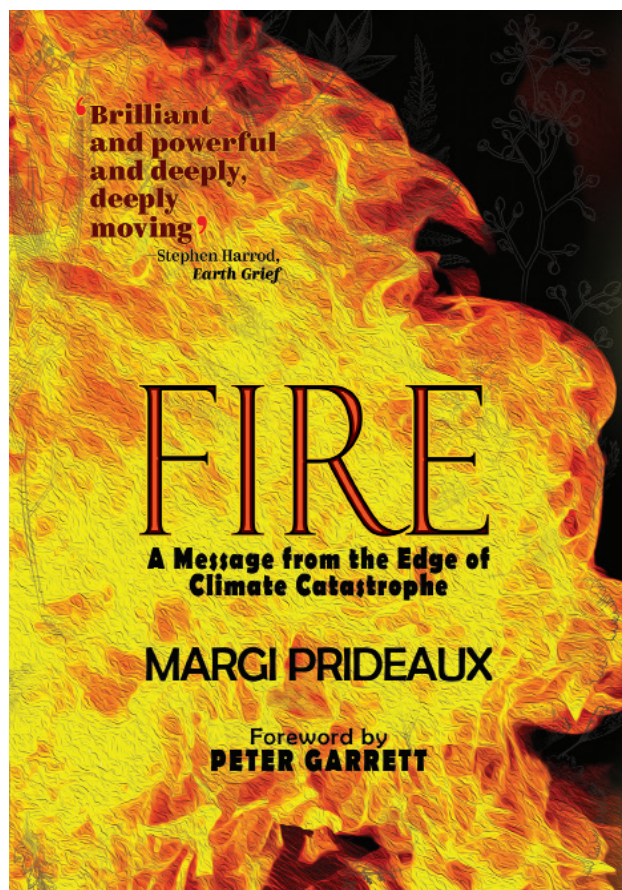
MARGI PRIDEAUX

Foreword by
PETER GARRETT

FIRE

PRIDEAUX
*A Message from the Edge
of Climate Catastrophe*





Release: October 27, 2022

Narrative nonfiction/journalism
320pp, 226 x 150mm
B&W throughout
ISBN 9781925856552 (hbk)
ISBN 9781925856569 (pbk)

Hardback A\$42.99
Softback A\$28.99

Margi Prideaux has written about wildlife, international politics, and law almost every day for the past thirty years. As an international negotiator and independent academic, with a Ph.D in wildlife policy and law, her words have been tuned to inform policy audiences in over twenty different international conservation processes.

She has five books and her shorter musings are regularly published in *Dark Mountain*, *openDemocracy*,



Live Encounters, *Wildlife Articles*, *AlterNet*, *Global Policy*, and *Ecologist*.

Having lived and lost in Australia's 2020 Black Summer fires, she now writes because she believes time has run out.

"To save what we love, we must compress our attention and focus on the communities, wildlife, and wildlands where we actually live – we must become radically local."

FIRE A Message from the Edge of Climate Catastrophe

Margi Prideaux, Ph.D

FIRE is a love letter to a small community who has a message for the world. The time for hollow words and targets and plans is over. Communities need to take back their control and consciously adapt to living in a world with more apocalyptic wildfires, killer heat domes, catastrophic rain bombs, lethal floods and mudslides, deadly droughts, and violent wind and sandstorms.

Across the world people have high expectations their governments will adapt to the changing climate. The media and politicians often shorthand this action to 'net zero' but limiting action to emissions alone fatally misses what people want. Yes, people, from all walks of life, need a resilient future secured for our children's children, but they also want their communities to be safe from disaster right now. Net zero does not provide that present-tense safety. Net zero is only about preventing things from getting exponentially worse.

In 2019 and 2020 fires ripped across Kangaroo Island's iconic landscape in the catastrophic continent-wide climate-event known as Black Summer. In that fatal season, wildfire destroyed a globally unprecedented percentage of continental forest biome. Across Australia 190,000 square kilometres were decimated, the lives of 33 people tragically lost, over 3,000 houses destroyed, and more than 100,000 farm animals and 1 billion native animals wiped out. Confronted by a hellfire that burned too hot to contain, even the oldest souls within Kangaroo Island's small community gravely whispered, 'never before.'

The real strength of author and academic Margi Prideaux's book, *FIRE: A Message from the Edge of Climate Catastrophe*, is that it not only captures the emotional journey she and her husband experienced after losing their home and farm during that tragic season, but also chronicles a community's journey through trauma and climate grief; from disaster into stark awareness of climate chaos; from climate apathy to front-line witnesses of a global climate crisis. A journey billions more people will suffer as climate disasters escalate.

FIRE is essential reading for anyone interested not just in humanity's future but our present. 'We have experienced the beginning of the climate change curve and we cannot bequeath this hell to tomorrow.'

Foreword by noted environmentalist, former Australian Federal Minister, and Midnight Oil frontman, Peter Garrett AM.

Sales and distribution
Wakefield Press

p: +61 8 8352 4455

e: admin@wakefieldpress.com.au

w: wakefieldpress.com.au





Foreword

This book is a revelation; an ambitious, poetic, sweeping account of the Black Summer fires of 2019/2020, which raged across much of Eastern Australia, including as far as the remote Kangaroo Island located off the South Australian mainland.

We've long known that climate crises were coming our way, even if sections of national politics, in thrall to discredited conspiracy theories and beholden to the deep pockets of fossil fuel corporations, had failed to prepare the nation for the immensity of the challenge to come.

The Black Summer conflagration saw global warming arrive with a vengeance for Margi Prideaux and her Kangaroo Island neighbours. This is a gripping first person account of how a small community well experienced in fighting bush fires, faced a natural catastrophe on a ferocious scale beyond the realm of anything previously experienced, or for that matter, imagined.

'*FIRE ...*' is a genuinely deep dive work. By describing the actual events unfolding in real time, and drawing on first hand accounts from neighbours, Prideaux enjoins us to bear witness to the spectre of the climate careering out of control in your own backyard.

It is one thing to experience in the blink of an eye, homes and farms, forests and streams, native species and domestic animals, indeed anything that lay in the path of the monstrous inferno being obliterated. But how does this actually feel to those in the midst of the maelstrom? What actually happens on the ground in the days, weeks and months once the media has moved on and the public mind is diverted by more recent crises?

Here lies the importance of this book, for seldom are these questions asked, and rarely does anyone attempt to answer them in a way which brings some meaning to an event where everything humans take as normal has been rendered abnormal, and then some.

As a long time professional environmentalist and scientist the author brings a unique perspective to her portrayal of this calamity.

She writes movingly of the ensuing grief people experienced, lovingly of the living earth that was scorched in and around her, astutely of the machinations of the stuttering recovery that followed, and incisively about the role of environment organisations, local, state and federal governments, as they respond with mixed motivations and uneven results.

Along with recording and analysing this momentous scene change, by identifying the personal attributes and political strategies we—collectively—need to develop to prepare for a mega fire future, Prideaux has also sown the seeds of hope, hard as they sometimes are to discern in the midst of unparalleled chaos, and this too is a considerable achievement.

Margi has crafted a sterling primer for survival in the age of climate chaos which deserves very wide readership. This is a must-read book for the climate crisis era we are now living in. In short a magnificent effort.

—The Hon Peter Garrett AM
July 2022

Advance Praise

'*FIRE* is a sterling primer for survival in the age of climate chaos which deserves very wide readership. This is a must-read book for the climate crisis era we are now living in.'

—Peter Garrett, noted environmentalist,
former Australian Federal Minister, and
Midnight Oil frontman

'*FIRE* should be on the bookshelf of every person who is concerned about climate change or who has felt ecological grief. ... In Prideaux's stories and words you can both hear and feel the deep mourning and terrible grief that accompanies the reality of what we are facing. It comes like a hurricane, a tsunami, an avalanche – but one made of fire. ... Prideaux's story is our story; it is a single instance of what the entire human species is facing. *FIRE* is brilliant and powerful and deeply, deeply moving. It is not a book I will easily forget. And I suspect that as the years of climate collapse roll on, I will think of and turn to it many times.'

—Stephen Harrod, *Earth Grief: The Journey Into and Through Ecological Loss*

'Margi Prideaux weaves graphic human stories through the reality of our changed environment. A powerful, must-read for today and the future. A truly incredible book, written with compassion and understanding from within the fire-scar of earth.'

—Becky Westbrook, *Evie and the Bushfire*

'[This] thought-provoking work is an expression of despair, anger and bewilderment that the devastation across part of Australia by the Black Summer bushfires – to an extent not seen before – came after many warnings that fires would be hotter, fiercer and longer. The nation was woefully ill-prepared to deal with them and their aftermath. Margi, a senior academic in species conservation, and her husband lost everything on their beloved Kangaroo Island. Now, she says, the only way forward is not with more failed government policies, but through resolve and action at the grass-roots community level.'

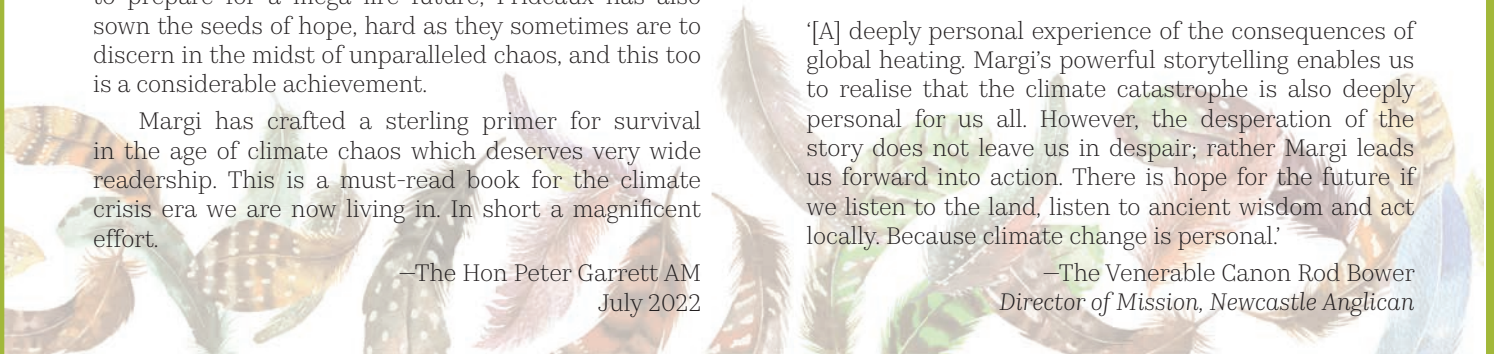
—Alan Atkinson, *Three Weeks in Bali*

'Margi Prideaux is no newcomer to articulating the dire predicament we face due to the extraordinary complacency—and complicity—of our political leaders who dance around the edges of much needed change. Her wisdom gleaned from personal experience and her willingness to dive deep and untangle the wicked problems we now face provide us with more than hope.'

—Petrea King, *CEO Quest for Life Foundation*

'[A] deeply personal experience of the consequences of global heating. Margi's powerful storytelling enables us to realise that the climate catastrophe is also deeply personal for us all. However, the desperation of the story does not leave us in despair; rather Margi leads us forward into action. There is hope for the future if we listen to the land, listen to ancient wisdom and act locally. Because climate change is personal.'

—The Venerable Canon Rod Bower
Director of Mission, Newcastle Anglican





Author bio

Margi Prideaux has lived and breathed conservation policy and law (Australian national and international) almost every day for more than thirty-five years. As an international negotiator and independent academic, with an Ph.D. in international wildlife policy and law, her words have been tuned to inform policy audiences in over twenty different international conservation processes. She has served on the five separate government delegations to international conservation negotiations, and as a technical advisor to both the Convention on Migration Species and the development of the Pacific Islands Regional Agreement.

She is a skilled researcher and writer, having published five books as well as dozens of online articles and academic papers. She previously published as an Adjunct scholar to the University of South Australia and now publishes as a member of the Planet Politics Institute.

Margi is a professional member of number of IUCN specialist academic groups including the IUCN WCPA Transboundary Conservation Specialist Group and the Joint IUCN SSC/WCPA Marine Mammal Taskforce. She currently serves as the Chair of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) Scientific Council Aquatic Wild Meat Working Group and as the appointed Focal Point for the implementation of IUCN Resolution 113: Restoring a peaceful and quiet ocean (addressing ocean noise pollution).





Q&A with Margi Prideaux

1. There are many books on climate change in circulation now. What makes *FIRE* unique of different?

'*FIRE* is a chronicle of one community's journey through a catastrophic wildfire and the pain of the subsequent recovery, where the implicit contract with government revealed itself hollow. It is perspective born of lived experience.'

'*FIRE* carries forward a shared community voice, rarely heard or sought, making the narrative unique in the current climate change literature.'

2. *FIRE* claims climate chaos is unravelling faster than expected. What evidence do you have for this?

'Climate change writes the evidence of chaos in the scars on landscapes that have burned deeper and fiercer, flooded higher and more often, been thrashed harder, or smelted by brutal temperatures.'

'The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report documents, with clarity and care, the unexpected speed and scale of change. Anyone who takes the time to look can see it with brutal clarity.'

3. There are many layers of government policies about disaster management and governments have made many well-designed decisions to avert the worst impacts, yet you suggest they are all unprepared. Is it more truthful to suggest that natural disasters have always happened and that some places are just unlucky?

'Earth's climate system has always visited storms, and floods, and fires upon us. The frequency of these events has ebbed and flowed within long cycles. But, the speed and frequency of current change has broken those cycles and is climbing fast.'

'Governments receive this information from the IPCC, and they make responsive commitments on paper. Where they fail is in implementation of their commitments, or adjustments when things are clearly getting worse. Fixated on climate change as a distant threat, there is scant attention to actual adaptation.'

4. You assert that communities have to carve their own path to protect themselves. How realistic is this?

'As they say, necessity is the mother of invention. Carving our own path is as realistic as communities want it to be. We face a bleak and difficult future and because we've all waited so dangerously long before responding to the existential crisis, there is not really enough time left for major nation-level adaptation projects to be put in place.'

'I am advocating we all do what we can with the time we have. Working at the community level is where empowered people can move forward. The sooner communities assert themselves and take their futures into their own hands, the better chance they have of surviving.'

5. What do you say to those who call your message 'doomist'?

'The accusations I am being 'doomist' stem from parts of the scientific community who are concerned that all brutal messages rob people of hope. While wise in the world of climate science, these people often lack firsthand experience of international politics. They have spent

their careers measuring the loss of the polar ice cap or unravelling the temperature record of the past thousand years. Whereas my career has been inside the international government negotiation space. I know that beautiful words and signed pledges are cheap. I see far too much symbolism and wiggle room in the net zero commitments to believe politics, as it currently stands, will turn the ship around. My accusers have missed my fundamental point. I am not giving up, nor urging others to do so. Mine is an immediate and urgent message, imploring people to take assertive local action to protect what they love, because waiting for politics to rise to the occasion is hopelessness defined.'

6. Does the narrative of *FIRE* apply to other regions beyond the Australian landscape? Does your message have relevance to Europe or elsewhere?

'My community's message is a simple one that applies to everyone and everywhere. My community has said three things: control your own destiny, embrace your land wisdom, and learn to trust each other.'

'We must all control our own destiny. Passively waiting for stretched and ill-prepared government agencies to save you is a fool's errand. Audit what threatens you most. It might be fire, or flood, or food security. Whatever that threat is, develop and implement a community-level plan to avert its worst impact. Adaptation is a more manageable idea when seen at the community-level.'

'We are entering a period of change and we need to think differently; to embrace our land connection and wisdom. There is knowledge, skill, and inventiveness in every community. Tap into it. Empower it. Follow it.'

'We need to trust each other; alone we are condemned. Walk away from the temptation to divide into tribes. Find commonality. Division is dangerous and serves a different master. Recognise you need each other.'

What will differ from culture to culture, region to region, community to community is the interpretation of this core message.

7. It's been nearly three years since the Black Summer wildfire that prompted you to write. Has the message of your book changed over this period, or did you have a clear idea soon after the fire about what you wanted to say?

'The book I've finished with a very different one to what I set out to write. My first instinct was to bear witness to the event. It was catastrophic and life changing. I felt it needed telling. Then I started speaking with people across my community and I learned I had a different writer's obligation—to carry forward their voices and that of my surrounding environment.'

'The events—apocalyptic wildfires, killer heat domes, catastrophic rain bombs, lethal floods and mudslides, deadly droughts, and violent sandstorms—captivate the media's attention, but interest soon wanes. The world rarely hears about the longer, harder battle through recovery. People don't know about the collapse of communities. They don't hear of entire ecosystems that never recover or the grave affects to human health. We need to understand these battles because they influence the stability of our society, our economies, our food security, our survival.'



Excerpts from FIRE

(Chapter two)

The first of Kangaroo Island's Black Summer fires, called Duncan and Menzies respectively, were started by dry lightning on December 20, 2019. Like most of our neighbours and friends, Geoff joined the fire crews on the Duncan fire ground that first day. Many more fires ignited in the days that followed. Duncan started in the bushland on a neighbouring farm, a short 8 kilometres from our home. It gathered momentum when it reached the commercial pine and blue gum plantations and onward into private and government-protected wilderness areas. Meanwhile, Menzies raged its own warpath further east. By day's end every fire truck on the island was in attendance at one or the other fire.

On the second day the fire station called for urgent backup from the mainland. From that day onwards, my voluntary role was to man the radios or support fire station logistics, occasionally taking a break to join Geoff in our private firefighting unit. As with so many others, around-the-clock shifts snatched away our normal lives, day and night without pause, as we fought alongside community leaders, farmers, townsfolk, and volunteers from across the country. The battle raged for another two weeks. Seasonal celebrations were cancelled as we wrestled the conflagration threatening our homes, our farms, and the wildlife we share this land with. Finally, on January 1, those fires were held behind containment lines. Duncan was stopped 50 metres from our farmhouse door.

Yet, we were collectively robbed of any relief. Another fire—by then named Ravine—had ignited and was already out of control. Lightning struck on December 30 in the island's jewel—Flinders Chase National Park—to the southwest of our farm. This third major fire for the island's season rapidly built into an inferno that reached the island's north and south coasts at the same time. Firefighters and earth movers risked their lives to build fire breaks to halt the front but three days later, on January 3, the real ordeal broke through these containments, formed two pyro-cumulonimbus (pyro-cume) clouds that sent a fast-moving firestorm north and eastward. This previously rare phenomenon incinerated farms, animals, and infrastructure, lighting decades-old plantations like candles, and overrunning vast ecosystems and their wildlife.

Ravine—so hot, so uncontrollable—literally devoured the landscape at lethal speed. Fire trucks shielded under halos of water witnessed lethal lightning inside Ravine's pyro-cume cloud. A weather station positioned centrally between the island's north and south coasts registered temperatures of 428°C with 140 kilometre winds before it stopped transmitting—at this point the fire was still some kilometres away. Aluminium that melts at 660°C pooled across shed floors. Firefighters took refuge where they could, or fled from its front where temperatures reached 900°C. Darkness eclipsed the daylight hours before the sun had set. Animals—sheep, cattle, kangaroos, wallabies, koalas—ran in panicked mobs and perished together in tortured heaps. Even the big, fast-flying birds succumbed to the fire, sometimes in mid-flight. Stunned and confused, wildlife had nowhere to hide.

Ravine destroyed our farm, our home, our dreams.

Ravine destroyed the farms, homes, and dreams of friends and neighbours, too.

Ravine stole lives: Two. A father and his son—brave firefighters—unaware of the threat bearing down upon them. Violent deaths that ignored the natural order of life, caught painfully short. A shocking loss that vibrated across the entire community.

By January 4 Ravine reverted to a devouring crawl, burning eastward for yet another two harrowing weeks, taking more homes, farms, and wildlife. When finally contained, but still active, it had burnt more than 211,500 hectares of agricultural land, plantations, and woodlands of our small island—nearly three times the area of New York. Eighty-nine homes were reduced to ash and nearly 300 farm buildings destroyed, many with tools and equipment collected over farming generations. Nearly sixty-thousand farm animals and 830 bee hives were destroyed, and 15,000 hectares of mature plantations were razed. Farming, forestry, tourism, and the myriad of other business across the island were all hit, hard. A township was evacuated and elsewhere people fled to the safety of jetties and sports ovals at the easternmost point of the island. The whole island community was upended numerous times over the months the wildfire raged. So many old trees perished.

Across Australia the figures were similarly grim. The Black Summer fires decimated 190,000 kilometers², destroyed over 3,000 houses, killed 33 people, more 100,000 farm animals, and three billion native animals across Australia. Black Summer burnt a globally unprecedented percentage of the continental forest biome, and the largest forest fires recent recorded history anywhere in the world. They raged across the continent for seven months. Smoke plumes and fire storms reached 30 kilometres in height, injecting aerosols into the stratosphere and circumnavigating the globe.

Our strong community shattered like exploding glass under thermal shock. With little more than an overnight bag, our phones, and laptops, Geoff and I stood with ash on our faces and smoke in our hair in an unknown world. Never has Kangaroo Island been so dry, and the relative humidity so low, so early in the season. This fire, and the devastation it caused, directly results from a changing climate.

While farmers bent their broken spirits to the task of shooting their burned animals, servicemen in fatigues cleared the roadsides and fields of carcasses that hung contorted in wire fencing or in crushes consumed by flames. When people met in the street, or over farm fences, they searched each other's faces for signs of an emotional burden weighing too heavily on each other's soul. Everyone was then, and remains now, desperate to not lose anyone else.

In time the dark, smoke-filled skies returned to blue. Our island collectively struggled to make sense of this event, as a community, and as individuals. For months, a profound silence cloaked our landscape. It was weeks before I heard the first bird call out across the ashen hills on our farm, or the sound of insects from the charred, blackened trees along our creek line. Children climbed aboard school buses that carried them through a charred and fragmented land. Many of us lived in tents or shipping containers while we pieced life together again.

Eventually, the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, otherwise known as the Bushfire Royal Commission, met, collected evidence, deliberated, and



released its findings. Its mandate was to ‘gather evidence about coordination, preparedness for, response to and recovery from [bushfire] disasters and improving resilience and adapting to changing climatic conditions’. To give the Australian Government the means to sidestep accusation about its woeful response to the fires, the Commission was also to ‘consider the legal framework for Commonwealth involvement in responding to national emergencies’. At its core, this Commission looked at the same evidence presented to dozens of previous commissions. As a broken community, even as the Commission began its deliberations, we were sceptical that anything would change.

Now, with the reports released, a brand-new Federal agency formed, and more devastating disasters unfolding in the west and the east of the country, our community is punch-drunk and still struggling to rebuild. We are in new and uncharted territory. It is not terrible luck. It is not even wilful poor planning. The fire’s ferocity took us by surprise because we did not accept how quickly and to what extent a warming Earth would disturb weather, people, and animals. We believed climate-related events would strike somewhere else, sometime else, someone else. We were content to manage life as we always had in the past and we allowed government to distract us from their wilful inaction. We trusted the system would protect us and what we loved. Our ignorance affected not only human lives, livelihoods, and homes but set in motion a backdrop of biological annihilation. So many old trees, gone.

Now we are all uncomfortably and consciously living in the changing climate curve without leadership or a plan.

(Chapter sixteen)

If we allow that we are community, like many across the world, who faces grave changing climate impacts but without autonomy to adapt to these impacts, we must also accept we need to carve a brave new path—to identify our own long-term community interests and build our own solutions. We need a vision.

Words are simple. Actions are tough, especially when they mean we must rewrite the pattern of our lives. Yet, there are simple truths we have to face. No central authority can see the whole picture, and when disaster strikes it is felt at the local level, not in the state or federal capital of any country. As disasters unfold across the world, communities are discovering that all governments want to do is put a band-aid on the problem. The recovery ‘aid’ is short term, and embarrassingly small compared to how much we all pay in taxes over our lifetimes. As the immediate danger fades, there is little or no systemic thinking about what needs to radically change to protect people and nature the next time.

Also, we all have to understand that decision makers within different government departments do not control all the choices required to alleviate pressures on the layered problems we face. Often these internal government choices pull against each other. More often than not the international commitments a country makes are simply not carried out in the way that they appear on paper.

For decades this is the system we’ve accepted and for decades it’s been liveable. Injustice in the world has

haunted the recesses of our minds, but in the mainstream, privileged, wealthy western world our lives have been safe and had the appearance of security. The developed world now faces a future that looks and feels very much like the future we’ve willingly contributed to but ignored in indigenous communities especially, but at scale across the developing world, too. Our hubris has come home to roost.

Now we face a future with more apocalyptic wildfires, killer heat domes, catastrophic rain bombs, lethal floods and mudslides, deadly droughts, and violent wind and sandstorms that exceed our capacity to fight these forces the way we have in the past. Each of our communities is unable to direct science to help us, because decisions about mitigating big catastrophic events rest in places of political power, not where we live. This sad truth is not just for my community. It’s a truth across the world. I cannot imagine anywhere where this is not the case.

To change our status quo, we need to be prepared to step outside the system. To chase clarity about the reality of our situation and then take the necessary steps to protect our future.

... Each of the community tragedies unfolding across the world over the past few fateful years are small brush strokes of detailed canvas where, once viewed as a whole picture, reveal the extent to which we have no control over our own futures.

