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As we watch the peninsula burn and worry about our homes and natural heritage, let us also recall that there have been major fires here roughly every decade.

Some major fires of the past include the Christmas Day fire on Devil's Peak in 1935; a big fire in Hout Bay in February 1947; a fire on the northern slopes of Table Mountain in January 1950; at Tokai in January 1960; on Devil's Peak in February 1974; and again in March 1982; a fire that started in Platteklip Gorge in December 1986; the Devil's Peak fire of February 1991; and big fires at Hout Bay and Noordhoek in January 1992; and of course the big fires of January 2000 that started at Red Hill and Silvermine.

Fires are by nature sensational news, and nowhere else in South Africa is this more so than on the Cape Peninsula, where a national park protecting fynbos which must burn every 10 to 20 years is bordered by the country's parliamentary capital city, which must not.

The fynbos has been here for millennia, and it has been burning for just as long. The changes to the natural fire regime of the peninsula first changed significantly when Khoikhoi herders began to visit seasonally to graze their livestock around 1 600 years ago, setting the vegetation on fire when they left to ensure fresh grazing for the next season. When Europeans arrived in 1652, they tried to put a stop to this burning as it threatened their houses and other structures, and to protect their crops. Van Riebeeck planted rows of sweet potatoes around his grain fields to protect them from these fires. However, the poor soil and windy conditions made it hard to grow cereal crops and many farmers turned to livestock farming. They inherited the practice of burning the veld from the Khoikhoi.

As the settlement grew, accidental fires became a feature of the dry, hot, windy summers in Cape Town. Ever since, humans have been the biggest cause of ignitions on the peninsula. This really escalated from the early 20th century as Cape Town began to develop and light industry, transport links and suburbs spread eastwards and south around Table Mountain, and suburbs spread around Lion's Head and into Camps Bay. While developments like electrification of the city and urban development could be said to reduce veld fires, the building of roads and the ownership of private motor vehicles began to open up the peninsula to development and outdoor recreation. The first case of firefighters being hampered by traffic jams was reported in the Cape Times following a fire above Clifton on January 20, 1934. By 1976, the area of constructed roads in the city recorded in 1936

had trebled, and the southern suburbs and peninsula were being rapidly developed.

Fire incidence increased steadily and the intervals between the many small fires decreased.

The introduction of plants like wattles and hakeas to stabilise driftsands on the peninsula from the mid-19th century, to allow development and the building of roads and railways, made fires more intense and difficult to control. The development of forestry on the slopes of the Table Mountain chain similarly changed the fire geography of the peninsula. While well-run state plantations were relatively well protected from fire, when they did catch fire the resulting blazes were virtually unstoppable. Most of the commercial plantations were phased out by the 1970s, with only Tokai and Cecilia forests remaining as (largely) recreational areas. An unexpected disadvantage of this was that foresters no longer maintained fire protection measures.

Things really fell apart with the disbanding of state forestry by PW Botha from 1986, and the resulting collapse of the hard-won links between research, planning and management of fire in the region. That said, public opposition on the peninsula had prevented the prescribed burning that had become policy for fynbos mountain catchments in 1970. A sustained anti-fire campaign since the 40s, vividly depicted in the fire awareness booklet Bokkie the Grysbok (1962) which still adorns posters on the peninsula today, had created powerful resistance to the use of fire on the peninsula. Even though major breakthroughs in our understanding of the importance of fire for fynbos were made in the 80s, this knowledge had limited impact outside of forestry and conservation circles.

South Africa's political revolution in the 90s resulted in a vacuum in environmental management. Although important progress was made, notably a unification of protected areas into the Table Mountain National Park, and the hiring of a helicopter to be based at Newlands, management of invasive plants and fire prevention suffered. Thus the creation of Working for Water by Guy Preston and others working with Kader Asmal presented a very welcome development. A short-term disadvantage of the focus on removing aliens was that fire was presented primarily as a threat to water supplies. When a big fire ripped through the peninsula in January 2000, torching 8 370ha of vegetation and destroying property, the major response was anti-fire.

On the peninsula itself the problem has long been (and remains) the fragmented nature of land ownership and thus management. Public perception that fires are destructive remains a hampering factor.

When I interviewed the former director of Sanbi Brian Huntley back in 2009, he remarked that the fynbos alongside Kirstenbosch was dangerously dense and overdue for a fire, but public opinion would never allow a prescribed burn. Of course, eventually, a fire would tear through of its own accord. Such fires are more difficult to control.

As Christo Marais (once a forester) explained on News 24 a few days ago, we were due for a big fire – it has been 15 years since the last big one. Ecologically, there will be little damage except in areas invaded by plants which burn more intensely than fynbos does. Of course the fire is a disaster for those whose houses and property has been burnt, and there will be a short-term impact on tourism. In 12 to 18 months, however, those black slopes will be festooned with beautiful flowers.

So let's not despair for the veld or the fynbos animals. Let's allow the competent local authorities to manage fire sensibly on our beloved peninsula. We cannot eradicate fire as we did the Cape's lions, and to do so would be to impoverish the peninsula's astonishing biodiversity. Let's all strive to retain the wildness of fire within the bounds of the TMNP and ensure we share the responsibility of living with fire equitably.

I Dr Pooley is author of *Burning Table Mountain: an environmental history of fire on the Cape Peninsula* (UCT Press, 2015).