The wet grass that burns

Dear children,





Have a look at these two pictures. What can you see that is the same in both pictures? Yes, flames! And what is the big difference between the pictures? Yes, in one picture trees are burning and in the other picture grasses are burning. In which picture do you think fire is the boss of the situation, controlling the plants; and in which picture do you think plants are the boss, controlling the fire?

The Honey Badger and I think the plants are the bosses in both pictures; because over a long time, the plants can change themselves in clever ways to control the fire. If the plants don’t want fire to burn them, they can change their leaves and stems and make them very difficult to burn by making them corky or full of water.



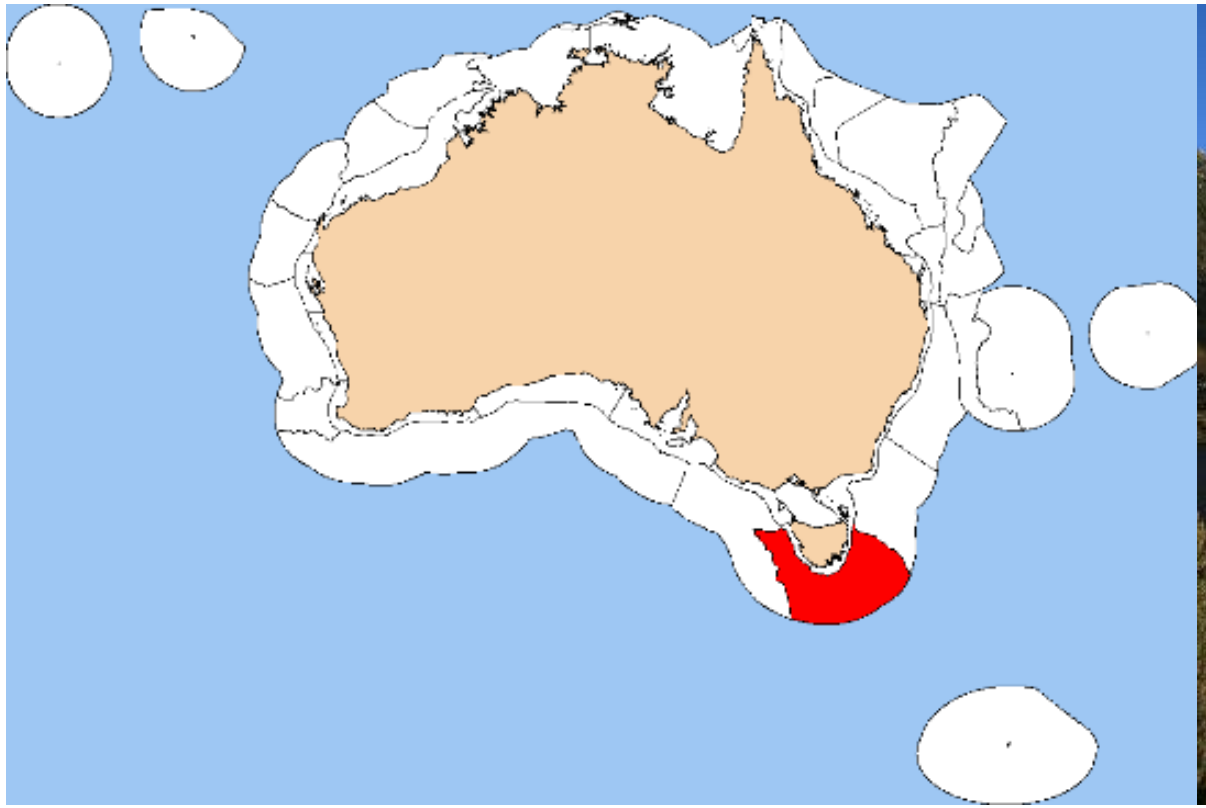
Spekboom is a good example of this. Have a look at the photo of spekboom. Can you see how fat the leaves are? This is because the leaves are full of water, which prevents the leaves from catching alight. It wouldn’t be possible to light these leaves with a match would it? So spekboom is very much the boss, stopping fire from moving from plant to plant.





And if plants want fire to help them by clearing the land and leaving ash on the ground as a type of plant food, they make their leaves very easy to burn. A good example of this is dry grass; fire leaps through dry grass as you know. Like spekboom, the grass is the boss, but unlike spekboom it wants fire.







One of the best examples of how plants are in control of fire is in a place called Tasmania, an island near the continent of Australia.

On this island there is a grass called buttongrass that burns even when it is raining, and the ground is full of puddles! Buttongrass wants fire to burn it because it lives on soils that have very little plant food in them, and it needs the fire to make ash so that it has more food in the soil to grow.





So buttongrass helps fire by making its leaves very easy to burn, even when they are wet. There is so much rain where buttongrass lives that there are crayfish living in the puddles and soil around the buttongrass. Don’t you think it’s strange that a plant that lives with crayfish burns so easily?



When you next see a fire in a nature reserve, think about whether the plant or the fire is the boss, and please send the Honey Badger and me your ideas.

All the best from the Bio-edge,

Robin

