

# FIRE NOTE

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## DEFINING COMMUNITY: DEBATES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSHFIRE POLICY



▲ Browns River at Kingston, Tasmania. Kingston was identified as a suitable locality for a case study as it is deemed an area at risk of bushfire and fulfilled the other criteria of population size and bushfire suppression capability. **Photo: S Chaplin**

### ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The *Effective Communication: Communities and Bushfire* project involves research undertaken by a number of staff based at RMIT University in Melbourne. The project aims to explore community networks and, through a series of 12 case studies across Australia, analyse how they may facilitate the understanding of, and response to, bushfire communication. The intention is to increase community resilience to bushfires by developing a robust and analytic understanding of cohesion and fragmentation. The project will also assist in shaping communication strategies, preparedness education, messages and delivery modes to increase bushfire preparedness. Finally, the project will generate critical knowledge and theory of effective strategies and options for communication in bushfire-prone communities as well as provide an understanding of the bases of community and its mobilisation around risk.

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### BACKGROUND

The use of the term “community” is widespread in policy and policy discourse in Australia. More specifically community is a key idea in relation to disaster resilience and management (see for example, the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission *Final Report* (2010); Victorian Government’s *Green Paper Towards a More Disaster Resilient and Safer Victoria* 2011). The increasing use of the term “community” can be seen as part of an international trend in disaster management towards formally recognising the importance of community power, resilient communities and encouraging links between communities and government institutions (Haque & Etkin 2007; United Nations 2005). In light of this wider context, notions of community are clearly relevant to discussions about bushfire preparedness, response and recovery.

However, a potential difficulty with the trend towards integrating “community” into policy discourse is that the term itself often remains vague and undefined. While concepts of community have been contested and debated in the social sciences (for an explanation see Studdert 2005) this literature remains largely unacknowledged in bushfire policy and research. This *Fire Note* offers a brief outline of sociological understandings of community and applies them to the context of bushfire preparedness in Australia, drawing on research interviews conducted in the Kingston area in Tasmania between June and August 2011 as part of the *Effective Communications: Communities and Bushfire* project.

### THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY

The concept of community has a long history and is often seen as an essential element of human existence. While the term “community” literally means an expression of commonality, the broader social meanings of the term remain contested. There has been ongoing debate for decades in the social sciences and humanities

about what exactly the term “community” denotes (for an overview see Delanty 2010) and how it should be employed. As a result there are a multitude of definitions of community available in the relevant literatures. However, there are three main ways of understanding community which encompass much of the available sociological research (Blackshaw, 2010; Taylor, 2003):

- Community as locality.
- Community as a shared sense of belonging.
- Community as a social network.

Part of the research for the *Effective Communication: Communities and Bushfire* project has been aimed at analysing the way in which these senses of community are invoked by policy makers, fire agencies and residents in bushfire prone areas.

## BRIEF OUTLINE OF APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY

**Community as locality** refers to a set of people living within a specific place. This idea is often used in regard to disaster preparedness (Cottrell, 2007). However, this does not take into account other elements of community such as a shared sense of belonging. People may live in the same space and yet not *feel* as though they constitute a community, which can have an important impact on communication. Community as locality also

does not account for links and connections to others regardless of geographical distance, or the fact that people may feel as though they are members of multiple and overlapping communities.

**Community as a shared sense of belonging** is less quantifiable than community as locality and can be seen as a kind of imagined communal feeling (Anderson, 1983).

Regardless of the objective or geographical connections between people, certain groups do report a sense of shared belonging, feeling as though they are part of a community. This concept of community or sense of belonging is also used in policy discourse, often to indicate a common way of life, shared ideals or mutual understandings. A sense of belonging can be a powerful way to mobilise people but also can be used as a divisive as well as a cohesive tool. For example, while feeling part of a community can be a positive and binding experience, a sense of community can be exclusionary – relying on some people *not* being part of the community or a *them* and an *us*. Appealing to a “sense of community” must therefore be carefully employed in policy contexts.

**Community as a social network** is an understanding of community as a network of binding links between people. It can also be understood as a community defined by interest where people are connected by

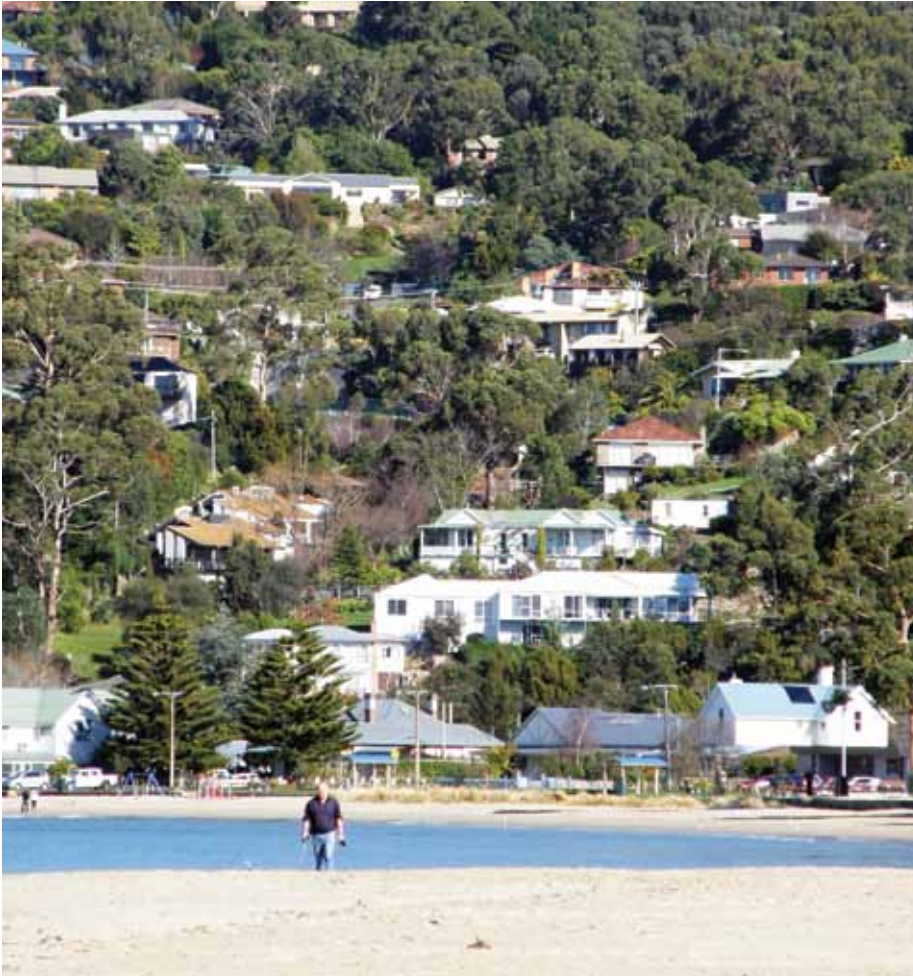
interests and associations such as religion, sexual orientation, occupation or ethnic origin. The concept of community as a social network is important with the rise of new information technologies which are seen to offer new ways for people to communicate and share knowledge and to develop new forms of communities (Clay 2008; Gruz, Wellman & Takhteyev 2011). The importance of social networks extending beyond the local geographical area has also been identified in some disaster research (Cottrell, 2007). Furthermore, community as a social network, particularly though the idea of strengthening social networks, often appeals to policy makers (Gilchrist, 2009). However, there are limitations with this approach as an individual’s social networks are likely to reflect their own socio-economic situation. So while networks may provide important emotional and even material support, they are generally incapable of dealing with structural-level problems.

## COMMUNITY AND POLICY

References to community are also found in policy. In the Australian context, there has been a recent focus on community resilience, strengthening community and a shared responsibility between the community and the State. For example, in the Victorian Bushfire Safety Policy Framework (FSC, 2010), there are more than 90 references to “community”,

## HOW DO RESIDENTS IN BUSHFIRE-PRONE AREAS INVOKE NOTIONS OF COMMUNITY?

COMMUNITY AND LOCALITY	COMMUNITY AND A SENSE OF SHARED VALUES / BELONGING	COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS
“...the make-up of the community down there is quite different ... The brigade wasn't quite so switched on with community engagement ... (Participant 2).	“... biodiversity, if you want to call it that, is one of the things that makes [this] a particularly amazing place. It's highly valued both by - professionally, from a scientific point of view, but also from a community values perspective. It's always brought up as something that people value here.” (Participant 2).	“I have quite strong connections to certain aspects of the community. By default, I get asked a bit about bushfire as well, through that ... for instance ... members of a Landcare group might come to me to say, we're concerned about a development because of the clearance involved. We've been doing some weed work by it, or we've been monitoring habitat or something like that.” (Participant 2).
“A couple of times a year they invite everybody in the street to get together and talk, and often the talk is about bushfire preparation or things about where you live.” (Participant 1).	“There's a bit of a sense of pride in the area. I can't say what's happening in the new housing areas that have gone in, it might take them a few years.” (Participant 8).	“... the fire brigade is very much more insular. It's connected only to the members that are directly connected with it.” (Participant 2).
“... we actually do know all our neighbours. Half of them are retired and they look after the house – watch the house for us when we're away and things like that, so in that way yes. The school's got - is quite a community generating area for local people.” (Participant 4).	“[the sense of community is not] the same extent as you get with perhaps when we first here, because it was like a little village ... The other thing is when we go for a walk around the place, you can see there's no real interaction between the people ... They don't perhaps even know each other.” (Participants 6 & 7).	“... through the local school parent associations, they do get together and they do work together for the benefit of the schools and the sporting groups ... and [the other] community groups that do exist. So I think in times of need, they would club together as best they can and do whatever they can.” (Participant 8).



alternately termed “the community”, “a community” and “communities”. It is unclear, however, what “the community” means in this instance. Is it a community of all Victorians, all Victorians in bushfire-prone areas, or a community of fire and emergency services practitioners?

The above example, which highlight the frequent but often ill-defined use of the term “community”, support the contention of Marsh and Buckle that until various understandings of community are better understood, articulated and incorporated into emergency and bushfire management, attempts to implement safety measures will remain largely ineffective (Marsh & Buckle, 2001).

However, given that developing an agreed definition of community is so problematic, it is perhaps difficult to see how the concerns raised by Marsh and Buckle (2001) can be resolved. A possible way to account for community, as an inherently contestable idea, was outlined in a recent pamphlet *Resilient Nation* (Edwards 2009). Writing within UK and European contexts, Edwards characterises wide ranging changes to consumption and service (for example, food, transport networks & utilities) delivery together with increasing interconnectedness in a global ecosystem as contributing to what he calls “our brittle

society”. A consequence of this according to Edwards is an increased vulnerability to any disruption (from for example, extreme weather events) to these arrangements. In order to respond more effectively to such disruptions, Edwards argues that we need to consider the idea of developing community resilience and the role of government in that process. Edwards notes that reaching a shared agreement about what community and community resilience mean is very difficult. It is perhaps more helpful to view them as a framework within which skills and capabilities can be developed that will enable people to become more resilient.

#### **CASE STUDY: KINGSTON, TASMANIA**

Kingston, Tasmania, was identified as a suitable locality for this research study. This area is deemed an area at risk of bushfire by the Tasmania Fire Service and fulfilled the other case study criteria of population size and bushfire suppression capability. Kingston is 15 kilometres south of Hobart and situated amongst heavily timbered hills and is part of the Greater Hobart area. It has undergone rapid urban growth and change due to the ready availability of land and housing. Consequently Kingston is the major commercial and residential community in one of the fastest growing municipalities in Tasmania. A large percentage of the

◀ Kingston Beach at Kingston, Tasmania. Interviews for the case study were conducted between June and August this year, with participants including local business owners, retirees, local and state government employees and members of several local community organisations.

Photo: S Chaplin

population commute to Hobart for work and many households live in bushland/urban interface areas.

Research interviews were conducted in the Kingston area between June and August 2011. Using a combination of direct contact with community groups and snowball technique, 24 participants were recruited along with one focus group. The participants comprised local business owners, retirees, local and state government employees and members of several local community organisations.

In the Kingston case study, residents and members of local agencies invoked community in many different ways, even within the same interview. The most common use of community, however, was in terms of locality. Many participants referred to their local, geographical area, for example, a particular municipality (participant 2) or an individual street (participant 1). Other participants understood community as a sense of neighbourliness (e.g. participant 4) and determined the strength of a sense of community by how well people knew their neighbours, that is, those who were geographically closest to them.

Many of the interviewees mentioned community as a sense of belonging or shared values. Participant 2, for example, mentioned “community values” in reference to a shared respect for biodiversity and participant 8 spoke of a shared “sense of pride”. It should also be noted that both these participants related this sense of belonging as existing within particular geographical spaces, as “here”, “this place” or “in the area”. While in these first two accounts the geographic boundaries of community fitted closely with the participants’ understandings of a shared sense of community, a tension between geography and belonging was reported by others. Participants 6 and 7, for example, felt that a sense of shared existence or interaction was more difficult to maintain because of recent housing development and demographic changes. They felt that as a result of expansion, “there’s no real interaction between the people” that live in the local area. While there was some semblance of “the community” as a place it no longer *felt* like “a community”.

Some participants also referred to their own or others’ involvement in a range of groups

that could be categorised as social networks. At times, interviewees spoke of a sense of community as being linked to these groups. Participant 8, for instance, suggested that the community was not always a cohesive body, but would “club together” around certain interest groups or issues. Some even spoke of how their involvement in particular groups facilitated the sharing of information about bushfire preparedness (for example, Participant 2).

However, for the most part, participants did not explicitly link concepts of community to these interest groups and forms of social networking. The seeming disconnect between understandings of social networks and understandings of community are important for two reasons. Firstly, although “community” was not often used in relation to these connections, most interviewees recognised their relevance. Participant 2, for example, referred to a fire brigade that was insular because it seemed “disconnected” from broader networks within the local area and that this had a negative impact in terms of communication for bushfire preparedness.

## END USER STATEMENT

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re a policy maker in government, a strategic communications specialist in a fire agency, a bushfire education facilitator or a local brigade captain – if you don’t have a clear understanding of the community you’re dealing with the message isn’t going to get through. One of the outcomes of the *Effective Communication: Communities and Bushfire* project will be to draw some clear lines around what ‘community’ means in the bushfire context and that will be enormously useful for everyone who plays in this space.”

– John Schauble, Manager Policy and Planning, Fire Services Commissioner, Victoria

Secondly, given the interest by some policy makers in social networks, it may be more useful to speak specifically of social networks rather than view these as a community, particularly given that residents do not always identify their social networks as part of their community.

## CONCLUSION & FURTHER WORK

While the concept of community is contested, and its meanings are varied, it is likely to remain a fixture in policy discourse for some time to come. It has been suggested here that there are three categories which will help to sort and clarify meanings of community:

community as locality, community as a shared sense of belonging and community as a social network. In addition, these three themes can be seen to emerge in discussions with residents in bushfire-prone areas. If communication about bushfire preparedness is to be effective, then the ways in which residents perceive and understand community must also be taken into account. While research has already been undertaken in Victoria as well as Tasmania, further research will be conducted in similar localities in Western Australia and New South Wales in 2011, leading to a comparative analysis of community across the four States.

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