

FIRE NOTE

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EXPLORING THE BUSHFIRE EXPERIENCE FROM A DOMESTIC PERSPECTIVE

BUSHFIRE CRC RESEARCH

Wangary Fire

Wangary is located on the Lower Eyre Peninsula of South Australia. The largest town in the region, Port Lincoln, has a population of approximately 13,000 and is 645 kilometres west of the state's capital, Adelaide.

On this isolated coast a bushfire started on the afternoon of Monday, 10 January 2005. It broke containment lines the following morning. Nine people perished: three women, four children and two fire-fighters on a private fire unit. In particular, the death of seven women and children, six of whom were fleeing the fire in cars, motivated this research, which explores family decision-making, gender roles and bushfire.

Method

Identifying a research method which would enable the stories to be told, while remaining respectful of sensitive or traumatic information, was essential. Over a two month-period in the spring of 2006, nearly two years after the Wangary fire, 38 open-ended interviews were conducted across the fire-affected region. The perspectives of men and women at different life stages were recorded. They included people with and without young children, in farming and non-farming families, and across different socio-economic circumstances.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings that emerged from the Wangary fire narratives were structured around six themes:

- family responses and experiences
- packing the car
- role of pets and livestock in decision-making
- impacts of the bushfire
- sense of place and connectedness to the land
- spirituality.

SUMMARY

Drawing upon the life experiences of families, couples and individuals who lived through the Wangary fire (South Australia, January 2005), this case study has explored the complexities of work, parenting, relationships, changing responsibilities and roles, and sense of place. All of these factors are relevant to the review and development of bushfire management policy as it relates to community awareness and preparedness programs.

A review of the literature revealed that the way the presence of babies and young children shapes family decision-making, before or during a bushfire, has not been considered or studied in detail within the Australian research landscape.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To generate greater understanding about the bushfire experience from the domestic perspective in order to contribute to the future development of bushfire safety education programs.
- To offer valuable insights into the ways that people respond to and find resilience after bushfires.
- To encourage fire agencies to acknowledge the powerful desire felt by parents/carers to remove children from danger – a common dilemma that has been neglected for too long.
- Through evidence-based research, to scrutinise the Prepare, Stay and Defend or Leave Early policy in terms of those who are expected to enact it.





▲ The Wangary fire burnt over 77,000 hectares of agricultural and forest lands, destroyed approximately 6,300 kilometres of fencing, over 46,000 livestock (mostly sheep) and caused substantial damage to essential infrastructure. Nine people perished – three women, four children and two fire fighters.

These themes are all linked and influence each other. Gender permeates throughout and cannot be contained to a single category or theme.

Family responses and experiences

See, we've got this fire truck too but I can't drive it or start it. I don't know the first thing about it, not even the pump. (Female: early 30s).

The life cycle and composition of the family proved to be defining factors in determining the levels of certainty or uncertainty in relation to bushfire decision-making. The ambiguity of gender roles and confused expectations comes through strongly in the narratives from the parents with young children. Older men and women clearly articulated what they believe is their role in a bushfire. Heavy reliance on volunteer fire-fighters (the majority of which are men) translates to a burden on the families of volunteer fire-fighters, in particular women alone with children, during a bushfire.

ABOUT THIS FIRE NOTE

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Family dynamics and traditional gender roles can affect the resilience of women and their capacity to take on a major decision-making role. The presence of children as a major complicating factor for decision-making before and during a bushfire event is highly emotional. Female interviewees consistently articulated this dilemma: "You just focus on them being in safety. I thought I was taking them away from the danger but probably I was taking them into more danger." It is

not necessarily logical, particularly when there is no other adult present, that staying in the home as a bushfire approaches is the safest option. Juggling the tasks of actively defending the home while protecting the welfare and safety of babies and young children has not been addressed by the national policy.

Many of the insights, and only a selection can be listed here, gleaned from this theme were gender-based:

- Some women (including those who had access to fire-fighting resources) remarked on their lack of knowledge and skills in relation to defending their home from a bushfire and expressed a desire to learn
- In several families it was assumed that the man would be present if a fire were to occur in the future
- Tension and conflict can arise within a family if the parents have contrasting perceptions of risk
- The resilience of families relies on the sharing of skills and knowledge.

Packing the car

I feel for her in a way because she didn't have any opportunity to get anything. (Female: late 40s).

This theme explored the tie between personal possessions and identity. The age of a person and the household's demographic seemed to determine the possessions of personal significance that were prioritised in the rush to flee the Wangary fire. As stated earlier, women were often the only adults at home. For the families who lost everything in the fire, the few household objects and sentimental items the women managed to save were all that linked the family to their past. The loss of meaningful items was not just about material loss but about emotional pain and a disconnection from the past.

Role of pets and livestock in decision-making

I just wanted to get home and get my horse and dog. I just wanted to get them out of there. (Female: mid 20s).

For the men and women interviewed, domestic pets and livestock played a pivotal role in their decision-making on the day of the Wangary fire. The primary focus of male farmers, when they are not filling fire-fighting roles, is on the welfare of their livestock. The bushfire narratives demonstrated the risks that people take for their pets and livestock at the height of a crisis. The attachment to their animals is fundamental and adds another dimension of complexity to bushfire preparedness and decision-making. The loss of livestock represented the severing of a link between the family and its farming history.

END USER STATEMENT

“Mae’s research into individual and household behaviour during a major bushfire provides valuable insight into a little known area of community safety. That is: How do householders feel, think, make decisions and react during a major bushfire emergency? The research highlights the complexities associated with implementing public safety policy at a family and individual household level. It challenges our assumptions about individual roles and behaviours. It throws the spotlight on the conflicted and, at times, counter-intuitive individual decision-making in an emergency. The research highlights the need for comprehensive and tailored community engagement and education to underpin community bushfire readiness policy.”

– Euan Ferguson AFSM
Chief Officer, SA Country Fire Service



◀ It is important to acknowledge and recognise the role that faith (whether traditional or non-traditional) plays for some people when they are threatened by bushfire. Spirituality was a key component of identity and a significant source of strength for a number of interviewees during their ongoing recovery.

The valued bloodlines, a legacy of generations, cannot be replaced.

Impacts of the bushfire

I feel the fire has totally changed communities. It’s destroyed a lot of things and made things different and that’s just the facts, I suppose. (Female: early 60s)

This was a rich and complex theme that explored how people’s lives had changed in the immediate aftermath, and in the medium and longer term. For this research ‘immediate’ was classed as within hours, days and weeks after the event; ‘medium term’ was three months to two years after; and ‘longer term’ was two years after and beyond.

Men and women experienced recovery quite differently; this was consistent with the finding that men and women had different roles and experiences during the fire event. It was common for couples not to have discussed their experience of the fire with each other prior to the interview.

Loss of normality and routine were major topics within the bushfire narratives of those whose homes were destroyed. Just as there were changes in the physical landscape, there were significant, involuntary shifts in people’s lives. Women focused on the emotional and social impacts of the fire – the major upheavals to personal relationships (“We could have left here and been divorced many times”), friendships and community functioning. Men focused on the time, energy and resources needed to replace fencing and farming infrastructure. People stopped work (either resigned or lost their job) or returned to work “too soon – for a bit of normality”.

Interviewees talked about their mental health and how they coped and responded both physically and emotionally to the Rustler’s Gully fire (October 2006) – the first local major fire event to occur after the Wangary fire. Men and women expressed concern for the mental health of their young children (those with and without direct experience of the fire) and adult children, particularly those who were either volunteer fire-fighters or on a private fire unit. The tension between volunteer fire-fighting responsibilities and family safety was discussed; the flip side of volunteer altruism is the toll that the role has on a family. A traumatic event puts strain on families and recovery is an uneven process. Personal growth and the acquisition of new friends were positives arising from the fire.

Sense of place and connectedness to the land

That’s where it’s just heart breaking. That took 40 years to get to that and I’ve run out of lifetimes. (Male farmer: late 60s)

Age, again in this theme, is a defining factor particularly in relation to the wider natural environment and the powerful articulation of hurt by the older male interviewees. All the participants in this demographic spoke about the difficulty they faced in living in the scarred environment and their sadness at knowing it would not be the same again in their lifetime. Although the younger interviewees did speak to this theme it was in a different way: with less feeling, possibly due to their children (and the survival of their children) being the primary focus and that, with time on their side, they know

they are likely to witness the revival of the landscape.

The narratives reinforced that male farmers had an inherent connection to the land, when it has been passed down to sons for generations in accordance with tradition. The older farmers’ deep bonds to the land, in conjunction with their age, influenced how and if they would recover and the extent to which they were emotionally and mentally affected by the bushfire’s impact on their farm. Not having any control over the state of the wider terrain, a number of families turned their energy and focus inwards to the domestic garden as this was something from which they could gain comfort.

Spirituality

As I drove out I was just praying for calmness and wisdom to make wise decisions. (Female: late 40s).

For some interviewees, spirituality played a key role during their decision-making at the height of the bushfire, particularly for older women who were alone and had no one else to whom they could turn. It is important to acknowledge and recognise the role that faith, whether traditional or non-traditional, plays for some people when they are threatened by bushfire. Spirituality was a key component of identity and a significant source of strength for a number of interviewees during their ongoing recovery. One woman, who was burnt out, cited her faith as crucial to her healing: “I really feel if I hadn’t had God there next to me I don’t think I would have coped. Because I, I don’t know, I just need him there.”

CONCLUSION

The south-eastern region of Australia is often cited as being one of the most bushfire-prone locations in the world and yet there is a disturbing lack of national research which focuses on bushfire from the perspective of families.

There is little recognition of the emotional attachment that people have to their homes, possessions and domestic pets or livestock and how this influences people's behaviour and responses before and during a bushfire. Critical decision-making, often influenced by the presence of children in bushfire and other emergency situations, has been central to this qualitative research. This case study provides evidence-based research that supports the need to rethink the Prepare, Stay and Defend or Leave Early policy in terms of those who are expected to enact it – including families under extreme stress.

Relevance for other hazards and locations

Being able to understand the experiences of families and women as they react to a major emergency is a fundamental part of understanding the responses of communities. There are clear links to community throughout this case study, which incorporated both the negatives and the positives of living through a bushfire. The Wangary bushfire narratives revealed the way that people function together as a neighbourhood, a town and a community. There is a clear connection between family resilience and community resilience.

While each fire event is unique, as are the experiences of those who survive it, there are findings generated from this in-depth local study that are relevant beyond the borders of South Australia and extend to natural hazards other than bushfire. It is important in any hazard or location to focus on the framework of family dynamics and family decision-making and whether or not traditional roles and local demographics influence people's behaviours and their responses to education material about risk awareness.



▲ Over two months in the spring of 2006 thirty eight open ended interviews were conducted across the fire affected region – Charlton Gully, Edillilie, Greenpatch, Koppio, Louth Bay, North Shields, Poonindie, Wanilla and White Flat.

FUTURE RESEARCH

For bushfire community education programs to be successful there must be an understanding of the dynamics and complexities of families and how they react under the pressures of a disaster, such as a bushfire event. This is an area in which more research is needed.

This case study has identified a number of gaps in the literature within bushfire research and, more broadly, in the field of disaster research. Inclusive qualitative research is time intensive and challenging. Within the recently growing field of gender and disaster research, it has been common for researchers to focus exclusively on the female experience and perspective. This is, in part, due to the historical dominance of a gender-blind approach where it is assumed that those affected by a policy or disaster event have the same needs and interests. However, exploring women's experiences in isolation from other family members replicates the narrow approach that has dominated the Australian emergency management culture.

This research has identified the need to

obtain and explore the perspectives of young men. Men who are in the role of father and husband/partner have important points of view and their influence and action (or inaction) in relation to family decision-making for hazard preparedness and response needs to be considered. The aim is not to create a women's response but to create a well-grounded response that is as relevant to women as it is to men.

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