DIVERSE VALUES, SHARED VISION?
CHANGING HUMAN / FIRE / LAND RELATIONSHIPS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Overview

In New South Wales, Australia, humans, fire and land are entangled in a meshwork of dynamic relationships. Recent years have brought rapid changes in atmospheric CO_2 concentrations and in the structural and floristic composition of vegetation in New South Wales. Demographics in the rural environment are changing and the diversity of peoples is increasing. These changes, set against a background of devastation caused by wildfire to fixed assets and the growing population, are driving shifts, fractures and re-combinations in human/fire/land relationships (HFLs). Government agencies, NGOs and academics are now seeking to influence the direction of development of HFLs in the wider community. Understanding these developments includes unearthing the relationship of particular programs with the needs and orientations of different landholders. Programs are not solely defined by the initiators but come into being in combination with landholder perceptions, experiences and contexts.

Research Questions

This thesis describes contemporary human / fire / land relationships and asks:
- What types of HFLs are found amongst landholders, agencies and NGOs?
- How are these unsettled HFLs fracturing and recombining in changing rural environments?
- Where and how do different HFLs coincide, co-exist or collide?
- What forms of HFLs are promoted by NGOs and agencies, and how?
- Can HFLs be deliberately shifted from one form to another and how can this be facilitated?
- How do more-than-human elements such as plants, animals, topography, weather and fire events feed into and back from HFLs?

Two approaches to training landholders to use fire: Hotspots (above) and K2C (below)

Preliminary Reflections

Many landholders, particularly recent rural amenity in-migrants, feel a personal need for education about the scientific and legislative aspects of using fire as a management practice. These people are largely unfamiliar with fire and with living in an area which has been designated fire-prone. They may have limited time to manage, or conceptualise their relationship with, land and fire. Additionally, the vegetation on their properties may present particular challenges to fire management. These landholders welcome clear guidelines on how to proceed and may be well suited to programs such as Hotspots, which offers a mixture of formal presentations, classroom learning activities, observations in the field and well-resourced information packs. This program also offers intensive support from the NSW Rural Fire Service.

Other landholders have, or want to develop, a more holistic, "hands-on" relationship with land and fire. These people are experiential learners who prefer to "learn by doing". These landholders may be suited to the practical, flexible approach offered by the Kosciuszko to Coast (K2C) Project, which enables participants to be actively involved in several burns and learn about fire within the wider context of traditional land management practices.

Still other landholders are well informed by science and local environmental knowledge and passionately committed to supporting a healthy environment. Rather than perceiving a personal need for education on this topic, they welcome opportunities to deliberate on fire and how it might be used. These landholders may be directed towards discussion forums, such as those commissioned by the Independent Hazard Reduction Audit Panel, local council consultations or representatives on Bush Fire Management Committees. However, the opportunities for genuine deliberation are more limited and there may be room here for projects that welcome controversy and indeterminacy, and work with communities to define problems as well as to solve them.