

Local knowledge and fire management – overrated or invaluable tool ?

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What is local knowledge ?

A term often used & yet both complex and controversial.

Local knowledge is defined here as information - both first hand & passed on - based on tradition, personal observation & experience of a particular geographic location & how it functions as a community. It can present as a mixture of observations, thoughts & reasoning or perhaps be more a sense of country – who lives where; their age, circumstances & health; where access tracks through the bush are; what sort of condition they are in; how to communicate with certain residents; where important property boundaries are; fire & weather history & behaviour – what to expect. All of this, & more, makes up local knowledge & it is held by residents found throughout the district .



Why is it important ?

If local communities are not allowed to be involved in their own future, a deep cynicism can develop amongst residents. In times of emergency this can present as a lack of confidence in fire managers and agencies which can develop into anxiety & uncertainty. Often a complete lack of trust follows which can cause further, long term alienation & disquiet. Such emotions actively undermine the strength & resilience found within that community – the ‘ballast’ necessary to deal with emergencies. Communities must be involved & engaged.



Potential pitfalls...

Many & varied – local knowledge may not be accurate, it may be based on hearsay or observations of country long gone; it may lack altruism; it may be subjective & laced with emotion rather than factual; it may be intensely local & narrow & so have little application elsewhere & present problems when incorporated into the broader firefighting effort; it is very resource intensive, particularly in the early stages of fire planning; it may be hard to locate within a community & even more so to get from individuals; it can further divide a community – those with this knowledge & those who don't have it, for example newcomers & it is open to misinterpretation by those seeking it. Just because this knowledge is local does not mean it is necessarily correct – it must be checked as with any information.

How can it be applied to future fire management ?

Fire management can be viewed in stages – the early, preventative work, the more active planning for fire & the operational response phase when dealing directly with a bushfire. Local knowledge can play a crucial role in both the early & planning phases if fire managers are able to tap into, listen & record the information. This can then go on to link into & be complementary to the accepted science of bushfires. Locals can assist with mapping to ensure accuracy; older brigade members can brief firefighters from elsewhere; locals on trucks help with access & locals providing details about their specific community. Rural communities carry the burden of bushfire & yet fire managers often proceed in the absence of key local knowledge within these communities. This is changing with agencies seeking out & listening – for rural communities to fully understand & be ready for bushfire, & for those communities to function effectively during and after a fire, they must be informed & involved.

