

A ‘responsibility to place’ – firefighter deployment, local knowledge and risk

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This research considers how ideas about ‘local knowing’ and the meaning of place, matters for firefighters during a bushfire. In 2012, we interviewed 68 Australian bushfire firefighters from selected agencies and volunteer brigades in contrasting localities: : the north-east coast of Tasmania, the urban-rural interface of Canberra ,and the farmlands of the Wimmera/Mallee region in Victoria. We find local knowledge can assist firefighters to navigate tracks and understand fire behaviour in familiar landscapes, while at the same time they are aware of the likely impacts on local community and valued assets. This sets up a ‘responsibility to place’, where local firefighters bring an understanding of surrounds; but distractions can emerge because of their attachment and local knowledge of people and place. The fire further afield presents many unknowns and potential hazards for deployed firefighters because they do not have local knowledge, although this disconnect can assist in their more cautiously negotiating unfamiliar surrounds and awaiting orders. We find that while ‘local knowing’ can advantage firefighters, it may well compound issues of risk because of their ‘responsibility to place’.

Balancing a ‘responsibility to place’ and the hazards of firefighting



‘Local knowing’ can jeopardise or enhance firework. Our research shows local knowledge can interfere with firefighting in ways not always recognised or anticipated by the individual or fire agencies. Including ‘place matters’ in training and for example, a checklist during deployment that accounts for ‘place’, could overcome likely competing responsibilities and predicaments in decision making and risk-taking found in this study. To fight fire safely, skilfully and objectively, whether at home or abroad is to strike a balance between responsibility to place and negotiating the hazards at the place of fire. This is one of our findings associated with the social and ecological aspects of fire and place.