

Playing with Fire? Bushfire and Everyday Life in Changing Rural Landscapes

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Project Background

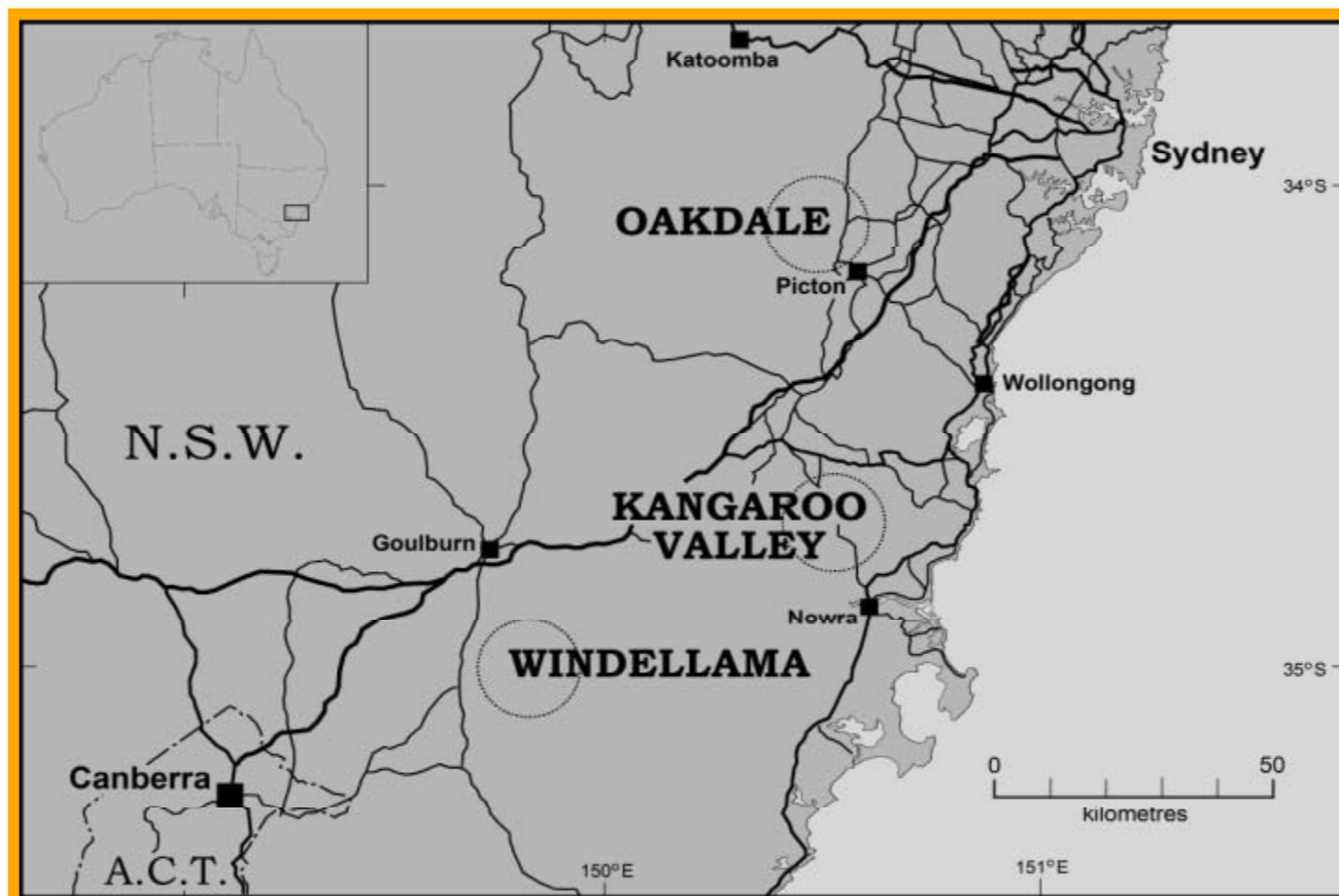
This PhD research project builds on the growing number of people living in bushfire-prone rural-urban interface areas, the increased frequency of tragic bushfires, and the predicted increase in high fire danger weather with climate change.

Research Aims

- To examine how amenity migration is influencing awareness, preparedness and attitudes to bushfire.
- To identify the significant factors that influence if, how and to what extent landowners prepare.

Research Methods

- Postal surveys
- Interactive field-based interviews, including photo-eliciting and property walk/drive-throughs
- Participant observation with local bushfire brigades, LandCare group, and NGO workshops



Quotes conveying themes from interviews

"I am more worried due to the lack of controlled burn off from farmers. The 'Greenies' have seen to that."
 "I should clear more around the house but I regret destroying natural bush."
 "Certainly in terms of volunteering to do things, it's really difficult when you work full-time and for me it's the hours, there's no way! I can't even go to a CWA meeting. You know, they're just not designed for commuting working mummies..."
 "The bigger fear is that he's out somewhere. There is no mobile range here. Once I phoned up to say there is a lot of smoke and I can smell burning, where's it from? And I was obviously by myself, I think I had one of the kids with me. Like, you've got to be able to talk to somebody. Like, what do I do? I can't even turn on the pumps. I have to have him telling me what to do!"



End-user Statement

"Due to the differing dimensions and diversity within communities it can be difficult to understand the needs and requirements pertaining to bushfire preparation. More so to have a benchmark of where a community, group, or individual is positioned before and after the delivery of fire preparative messages as currently it is relatively unknown and not well understood. The Bushfire CRC, and in particular Christine Eriksen's work, is valuable as it identifies community attitudes and perceptions and assists the RFS in tailoring our engagement activities and program development. This research will allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of current practice and revisit strategies and methods to deliver our message."
 David Bartlett, Community Safety Officer
 NSW Rural Fire Service, Wollondilly District

Summary of Research Results

- Awareness of local bushfire threats within the very diverse set of landholders generally appears to be good. These awareness levels, however, do not correlate with many of the landholders' actual level of bushfire preparedness.
- The diversity of people now inhabiting bushfire-prone locations hold widely varying experiences, beliefs, attitudes and values relating to bushfire, which influence the way they understand and interpret risk messages – doing so within the constraints of their individual contexts.
- Landholders were found to actively incorporate information and interpret it in relation to the values, attitudes and beliefs they have already established.
- The formation of local environmental knowledge of bushfire is consequently dependent on the type of learning styles individuals employ and the deconstruction of other frames of conceptualisation and understanding.
- This points to a need for local, context specific and interactive bushfire risk communication initiatives to address local barriers and motivations for action.

Summary of Research Results

- Landholders bring their own agency to bushfire in the relationships between everyday procedures, dilemmas, and tradeoffs between social, cultural, environmental and economic issues. Consequently, regardless of landholders' awareness levels, attitudes towards bushfire and natural resource management influence if, how, and to what extent landowners prepare for bushfires.
- Three dilemmas of everyday life in particular were found to underpin these attitudes: costs (in monetary and time values), gender roles, and priorities.
- Bushfire is an important agent for maintaining traditional gender roles and power relations within changing rural landscapes. Landholders were found to uphold conventional views of bushfire management as "men's business" despite the changing social circumstances associated with amenity-led in-migration.
- Key gender differences exist within residents' bushfire risk awareness, bushfire knowledge, the perceived need for bushfire preparedness measures, the willingness to perform certain tasks, and the belief in personal capacity to act.

Research Publications

- Eriksen, C. (2010) *Playing with Fire? Bushfire and Everyday Life in Changing Rural Landscapes*, PhD Thesis (submitted for examination on 30 June 2010)
- Eriksen, C. & Gill, N. (In Press) *Bushfire and Everyday Life: Examining the Awareness-Action 'Gap' in Changing Rural Landscapes*, **Geoforum**
- Eriksen, C., Gill, N. & Head, L. (In Press) *The Gendered Dimensions of Bushfire in Changing Rural Landscapes in Australia*, **Journal of Rural Studies**
- Eriksen, C. & Prior, T. (Accepted) *The Art of Learning: Wildfire, Amenity Migration and Local Environmental Knowledge*, **International Journal of Wildland Fire**
- Eriksen, C. (Forthcoming) *Playing with Fire? Bushfire and Everyday life in Changing Rural Landscapes*, **Bushfire CRC Fire Note**, www.bushfirecrc.com