

Coping with fire in East Gippsland: Rural resilience and the 2003 Victorian bushfires

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1. BUSHFIRES AND RURAL RESILIENCE

Resilience is a measure of human welfare and capacity; it is a quality of human systems that enables people - as groups and individuals - to cope with and respond positively to change. It is a condition that shifts over time and space and, in effect, determines the impact that a particular hazard will have. Viewed in this way, disasters occur only when people who lack resilience are confronted with hazards.

What, then, constitutes bushfire resilience? What are the links between human welfare and capacity, and the ability to adequately prepare for, respond to and recover from bushfires?

This research will develop an understanding of the factors that make rural communities resilient to fire. By doing so, it aims to increase community self-sufficiency for fire safety.

2. THE RESEARCH

Through case studies of rural communities affected by the 2003 fires in East Gippsland, the research is investigating:

- What constitutes 'bushfire resilience';

- Why some people are more 'at risk' from bushfires than others;

- How access to resources and participation (or lack thereof) in social networks affect levels of resilience; and

- Different actions and strategies that people adopted to cope with and respond 'positively' to the 2003 Victorian bushfires (with particular reference to the 'stay-or-go' policy).



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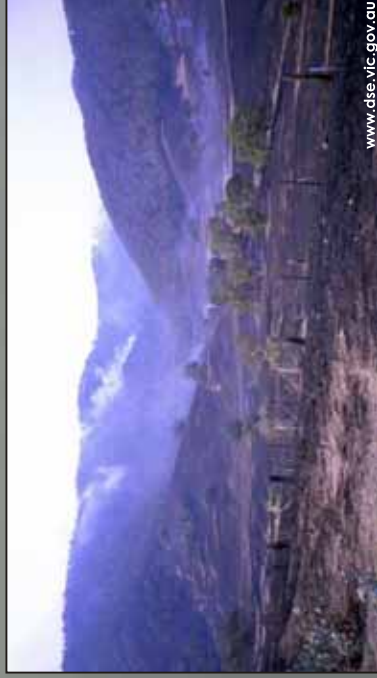
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'We were grateful for the amount of people we had helping. This was the primary reason, we feel, that the house survived'

'I still don't know why we were treated in such a way - we were active members of the community who were more than willing to help others in their time of need, and yet we were faced with months of slander and neglect'



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'You don't know how many good friends you've got until something like the fire happens. People who don't even know me helped me out'

'It has taken time to recover. People here are strong. The community has pulled together and we have survived'

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The case studies are incorporating qualitative and quantitative research methods:

- Literature review** (COMPLETE)

- Document analysis** (UNDERWAY)

- Preliminary interviews** (COMPLETE) and **focus groups** (UNDERWAY) with local people and agency personnel

- Semi-structured, in-depth interviews** with local people and agency personnel (To begin July 2005)

- Post-fieldwork statistical survey** to establish whether the identified factors of community resilience can be generalised beyond the cases.

4. OUTCOMES

The research will:

- Develop an understanding of what makes communities resilient to bushfires;

- Provide a method for assessing community resilience to bushfires;

- Inform the development of policies that increase bushfire resilience;

- Assist decision-makers identify and allocate resources to those who are least resilient when threatened by bushfires;

- Contribute to the evaluation of the 'stay-or-go' policy;

- Reduce the social, economic and environmental costs of bushfires by increasing community self-sufficiency for fire safety.

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