



Rural resilience and bushfires in East Gippsland

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RURAL RESILIENCE AND BUSHFIRES

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

What, then, constitutes bushfire resilience? Why are some communities and people therein less resilient than others? What are the links between human welfare and capacity and the ability to effectively prepare for, respond to and recover from bushfires?

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



THE RESEARCH

The research is a case study of a small, rural community in East Gippsland's High Country that was severely affected by the 2003 Victorian bushfires. The level of damage and loss caused by the fires was extremely high, given the small size of the population. Losses included: eight houses; a recreation pavilion; a service station; more than 20 hay and wool sheds; thousands of sheep and cattle; hundreds of kilometres of fence; and pasture. The fires also had a range of longer-term impacts on people's finances and livelihoods, health, social lives and local environments. Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to investigate:

- Factors that contribute to and detract from community bushfire resilience;
- Ways to identify groups and individuals who lack resilience;
- Barriers to effective bushfire preparation, response and recovery;
- Ways to identify and utilise valuable 'local knowledge'; and
- Strategic planning, policy and practical measures for increasing bushfire resilience in rural communities.

SOME FINDINGS

Demographic change: the changing size and age structure of populations is reducing many rural communities' capacities to cope with bushfires.

Economic diversity: communities with a mix of economic activities and opportunities tend to be more resilient to bushfires.

Livelihood security: the degree of access to and control over public and private resources is an important indicator of bushfire resilience.

Social networks: active involvement in informal networks (e.g., for emergency warnings, preparedness activities, etc.) greatly increases bushfire resilience. Social networks can, however, be highly exclusive.

Local participation: the utilisation of 'local knowledge' and the participation of local people in fire, emergency and land management is a vital component of community bushfire resilience.



THE PROJECT WILL DEVELOP A TOOL THAT WILL ENABLE FIRE, EMERGENCY AND LAND MANAGEMENT AGENCIES TO IDENTIFY GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE LEAST RESILIENT WHEN THREATENED BY BUSHFIRES. THE TOOL WILL AID THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION AND TARGETING OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR IMPROVED BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE AND RECOVERY.