

The Social Construction of Fire and Fuel at the Interface

A Landscape Sociology Proposal to the Bushfire CRC



A/Prof Ruth Beilin
Melbourne School of Land & Environment
University of Melbourne

Outline

- What is the 'social construction of landscape'?
- What are the project questions?
- What kinds of research methodologies can be useful?
- How does this research contribute to practical change and project outcomes?

What is the social construction of landscape?

- People perceive, experience, and engage with nature at the scale of landscapes.
- People assign meaning to landscape through the process of living in it.
- This impacts how they make sense of ecological phenomenon, including natural disaster.
- Social constructs reflect the discussion in cafes, in media and science about: what the forest should look like; how it should be managed; what to do about maintaining areas that abut the forest...and so on.

Meanings in landscape

"Tall trees, king parrots and eastern rosellas...it seemed like the ideal natural place to build a simple wood framed house which fitted into the landscape..." (Resident, CF Olinda)



The place is 'home' in the bush. The expectation is that the bush is 'natural' and that the management required will be in line to maintain this image of place over time. In short, to freeze time. Static local home management practices reinforce expectations of what is the 'right look' of the bush.

The Australian landscape is changing

- It is a fire-prone history.
- There is urbanization (and sub-urbanization).
- Social & cultural diversity are increasing in these areas.
- The social construction of climate change is contributing to a sense of uncertainty...drought, dying trees, dry soils, changes in rainfall distribution...
- Globalization, technology, agricultural restructuring, environmentalism, and more...
- All of these factors influence how we understand the place we live.



Impacts on environmental & risk perception

- Meanings, attachment, and values assigned to landscape can:
 - lead to conflicts over fire management practices (Gill 1994)
 - impact 'expert' attitudes to burning (Griffith 2002)
 - affect preparedness for floods (Mishra et al. 2009)
 - shape ideas about how natural resources should be managed (Brandenburg & Carroll 1995)



Project Questions

1. How do social constructions of landscape impact people's perceptions of bushfire risk?
2. How does it shape their land management?
3. What does this mean for fire and land management?
4. Can stakeholders re-imagine their places through better understanding how the discussion of fire and forests is currently constructed?

Research Methodology

- critical realist and social constructivist perspectives
- action research and place theory associated with qualitative methods
 - participatory observation
 - photo elicitation
 - in-depth interviews
 - focus groups
 - open-answer surveys

Contributions & Outcomes

- Making transparent the underpinning associations and experiences that impinge on responses to forest management, fuel and fire at the interface.
- 'Re-imagining place' to link the social and ecological realities of the interface.

- Seeking partners and collaborators
- Post doctoral and PhD research potential

• Contact: rbeilin@unimelb.edu.au