



FINDINGS

Easily achievable **fire-fitness** strategies normalise preparedness to become a **routine** part of daily life, narrowing the **awareness-action gap**.

Advancing public health in the context of natural hazards: normalising preparedness within a framework of adapted Protection Motivation Theory.

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This project proposes public health policy and processes to assist people to negotiate natural hazards in an increasingly hostile, climate change induced environment. This is achieved by normalising preparedness – to make “fire-fitness” routine and everyday. With data gathered from a diverse regional community in South Australia this predominantly qualitative research adapted Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) and used Thematic Analysis (TA) to identify strategies which favour beneficial outcomes for individuals, communities and their immediate social microclimates. Locally bespoke and societal-wide applications are recommended to help narrow the awareness-action gap, promote public safety and well-being and identify topics requiring further research.

Introduction

The *awareness-preparedness gap* – i.e. the mismatch between people's *awareness* and *readiness* to manage a hazard threat and treat risk - is widely acknowledged as persistently too large. While the magnitude of the gap remains, human morbidity and mortality in bushfire (and other) natural hazards will not be significantly reduced; people will continue to make poor decisions, thereby perpetuating the cycle of negative outcomes and ramifications emergency responders routinely encounter. Previous studies have contributed to addressing this problem, but none have identified the need to establish a preceding culture of normalised preparedness, which this author has named “fire-fitness” (trademark pending).

Methods

Data collection took place in a bushfire at-risk regional area in South Australia from June to August 2015. Two demographically diverse groups - animal owners and Emergency responders participated in eight focus groups (n=72) and 32 individual interviews. A pilot survey (n=37) of livestock and cropland primary producers completed the data collection phase.

Results and Discussion

Findings were grouped into six main categories of strategies and proactive, potentially life-saving public health and safety policies with each aiming to make preparedness as routine as buying the groceries or fuelling a car.

Proposed categories are:

- ❖ A new type of workplace leave: Catastrophic Day/Extreme Fire Weather Leave
- ❖ Financial incentives
- ❖ Effective use of the social microclimate - synchronous, synergistic delivery of information
- ❖ Acknowledging and rewarding best practice fire-fitness
- ❖ Adaptive rewards – that an action is gainful - and dynamic risk assessment
- ❖ Cropland fires: use of firebreaks, crop types and crop placement and planting around assets

Each of these strategies contributes to cultivating a culture of preparedness over the short, medium and long terms. Importantly, a fire-fitness program for any given group must be locally relevant and bespoke.

Future use of this research

The recommendations from this research are readily achievable and need only some visionary advocacy to instigate and trial. None require regulatory or legislative action to implement. These strategies are *not* intended to replace preparedness campaigns. Rather, they are designed to change the preparedness environment by establishing a preceding culture of fire-fitness as a routine social norm – to develop a prescient suite of lifestyle adaptations to confront and manage the ‘new reality’ of extreme weather events.

It is important to note that while these strategies are able to be adopted and implemented quickly, they will optimally promote and achieve *medium to longer term* changes in the public's level of improved fire-fitness, and in the perception among the wider population of the need to adapt to a worsening natural hazard environment.

The complete project can be accessed at: <https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws%3A49051>

Figures



Figure 1: Research rationale – broad summary of key elements. The word “human” is used wholistically. Adverse environmental and animal impacts which inevitably affect humans are assumed inclusions.



Figure 2: A new type of workplace leave, financial incentives and synchronicity in the social microclimate are some fire-fitness strategies to normalise preparedness.

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