

COMMUNITY-LED RECOVERY IN THE CONTEXT OF EMERGENCIES AND DISASTER: A CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN THE 2013 FORCETT TASMANIA BUSHFIRE



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Disaster resilient communities and their resourcefulness to approach and respond in natural hazard events, play a key role in the disaster recovery process. It is critical that the organisational and cultural characteristics of people living and coping in a bushfire disaster is gathered at a ground level to enable practices that recognise and support local community resilience.



THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In a disaster there are significant community needs that will require external support. Historically, with the command and control style of disaster management, the knowledge, skill and resources for managing and responding to natural hazards and disasters has rested with the authorities. In Australia, over the past few decades there has been a considerable effort to incorporate communities affected by disaster into emergency management policy. This is good in practice but there is a powerful narrative to suggest the need for a more flexible approach, allowing those affected by disaster to participate in a way that is meaningful and respectful of their experience. The lack of clear understanding of a community-led approach to disaster recovery, may hinder the ability to recognise community resilience and support community in their process of moving beyond the disaster.

THE CONTEXT

The 4th of January 2013 was one of the most significant fire days in Tasmania since 1967, with fires burning in the Lake Repulse, Bicheno and Forcett areas. It was the Forcett bushfire that caused the most damage, burning across 20165 hectares, with 193 dwellings destroyed and a further 186 other buildings destroyed or damaged.

The bushfire starting at Forcett, followed the path of Arthur Highway in the direction of the Tasman Peninsula. The fire significantly impacted on the small communities of Copping, Boomer Bay, Connellys Marsh, Dunalley and Murdunna.

The roads into the fire affected zone were closed for a number of days, effectively causing a 'gap' in time between the emergency and official recovery response into the disaster area. As first responders, local residents demonstrated their ability to self organize and draw upon social capacity to respond to their evolving needs in the bushfire disaster. In Dunalley a recovery centre emerged through community initiative. A marquee resourced locally and placed in a familiar location, provided a place to meet, and access food and information.

The magnitude of the disaster threatened life and left a trail of destruction, but it did not destroy the community social structure and its processes. Residents didn't sit around waiting for someone to help them, they began helping themselves utilising their local knowledge, skills and resources in ways that were natural to them.

Over time, a gradual increase and then deluge of external help impacted on local residents' involvement in, and ownership of, recovery processes. The external response brought structures, systems, processes, functions and activities that often conflicted with local responses. Many local residents felt excluded from decision making and many of the community-led initiatives ceased.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study will involve semi-structured, in depth interviews with participants who were involved in the Forcett bushfire disaster. A Constructivist grounded theory method of data collection and analysis will be adopted to identify categories of experience and meaning. This approach supports both objective and subjective reality, to produce a systematic representation of the participants experience and understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

The student researcher's experience and literature has been used to stimulate theoretical sensitivity and generate hypothesis. The following questions will be used as a guide in the initial theoretical sampling.

1. What is a community-led approach to disaster recovery?
2. What community-led approaches were utilised in the Forcett bushfire disaster to facilitate recovery?
3. How do the different understandings of a community-led approach influence the recovery process?

Data collection will commence in August 2015.



This research is a part of the BNHCRC project: Out of Uniform: building community resilience through non-traditional emergency volunteering.

Background Photo: Mark Heather



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