

Restoring the landscape after Black Saturday

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Introduction

The fact that there was a fire in Victoria on the 7th February 2009 needs no introduction. Nor that a total of 255,417 hectares of land was affected and hundreds of thousands of individuals were traumatised by the event and by the loss of 173 lives. The area covered by the fires included the Goulburn Broken region, which is home to over 200,000 people. However, what does need some introduction are the circumstances that surrounded the need to write this paper.

Traumatised people needed help to deal with the effects of the fires and so did the natural environment. These people were put in touch with various government agencies to help them recover and the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority (GBCMA) began its work on the natural environment. The main issue for the GBCMA staff was how to work with the wildlife on private property or public property adjoining private land without causing further distress to landowners they might encounter.

The GBCMA in consultation with Landcare and the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) came up with a number of strategies that not only worked but brought relief to some landowners who were also concerned about the state of the wildlife. Roberts Evaluation was initially asked to develop an evaluation plan to account for the funding received from the federal government for the recovery of the natural areas. When this work was settled and projects in place, we were asked to document and evaluate the process the GBCMA and others had used to involve the community in the recovery process. We were asked in particular, to look at the effectiveness of using community organisations and networks, such as Landcare, as a model for involving a community, already in crisis, in the recovery of the natural environment from a catastrophic event. This paper looks at the process of engagement rather than the process of biophysical recovery.

Methodology

The method of what data to collect and how to measure the effectiveness of community engagement was developed with the GBCMA staff, in particular, Mark Cotter, who was the Dryland Strategy Manager at the time. The key evaluation questions he wanted asked were:

Was it organisations or individuals who were the key to your knowledge of:

- what was happening?
- what opportunities there were to get more information?
- getting involved in or contributing to the recovery program?

What skills were most useful to the recovery programs, particularly those that relied on community participation?

What role did senior managers of government have/what role do they need to play?

What is the value of investing in community networks during a crisis?

What are the differences between implementing environmental activities in and without a crisis?

What elements does a model to implement environmental recovery during a crisis need to have (people, funds, institutions) that is different to an implementation model at other times?

The data collection involved a review of relevant documents, interviews with nominated individuals and a focus group with a range of stakeholders.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with a range of community members and agency staff. These were people from:

- Fire affected communities, lay community members (6)

- Local Landcare groups (3)
- The Upper Goulburn Landcare Network (UGLN)
- The Shire of Murrindindi
- The Shire of Mitchell
- The Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority (GBCMA)
- The Department of Primary Industries (DPI)
- The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE)
- Parks Victoria.

Those who had received some form of assistance with environmental recovery works but were not directly involved in the decision making process are referred to here as lay community members. Six lay community members were interviewed and four of these were also involved with their local Landcare groups in some way.

A further four interviews were conducted with informed community members. These were members of the Upper Goulburn Landcare Network, local Landcare groups and the Community Environment Fire Recovery Coordinating Committee. Six interviews were also conducted with agency staff. This included DPI staff, Landcare project officers, and local council staff. In total, 16 individuals were interviewed.

Focus Group

A focus group was held with 11 staff members of the GBCMA, DPI, DSE, and Parks Victoria. The purpose of the focus group was to address the question regarding the differences between implementing environmental activities within and without a crisis situation.

Findings

Was it organisations or individuals who were key?

Members of the community who were involved in the study reported that the staff of the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI), the Upper Goulburn Landcare network (UGLN), local Landcare groups and the Goulburn Broken Catchment management Authority (GBCMA) were the main source of information about what needed to be done with regard to environmental recovery. Furthermore, there were key individuals within these organisations who knew what needed to be done and where or whom to ask. For example, they knew who to ask about where habitat had been destroyed or polluted and animals (including fish) needed attention. GBCMA staff stated that key individuals within the Landcare community were critical to providing information about what needed attention, the delivery of information about environmental recovery activities, developing projects and helping with the implementation of those projects.

Members of the Lions club, Rotary, the Uniting Church, Berry St¹ and non-fire affected Landcare groups were also nominated by the community as sources of both information and help – this included help beyond that to do with the environment. Both agency staff and community members mentioned the importance of knowing *when* landholders were ready to engage in environmental recovery works. It was the community members who knew who was affected and to what extent and this helped the GBCMA staff know when and where they could take action.

A meeting held between members of Landcare, DPI and the GBCMA within a week of the main Kilmore-Murrindindi fire provided a focus for activities for both the environment and the community. The role of GBCMA staff then became one of negotiator with State and Federal Government regarding funding.

Therefore, was it individuals or organisations who were key? Ultimately, it was individuals who were the key. The fact that they were located in organisations that had the right to intervene gave them added legitimacy but it was their knowledge of local situation and their personal operating style that made the interventions effective.

The skills that were most useful to the recovery program

The study found that the skills and qualities most useful in the recovery process, particularly with respect to agency staff, were:

- Experience and confidence to act quickly (decision making), and to manage the consequences.

¹ Berry St is the main community service organisation in Alexandra. As part of the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service, Berry St staff are assisting with individual help in housing, finding employment and the rebuilding process

- Knowing where to go to help in the community.
- Knowing community networks and how to reach landholders.
- Knowing *when* to engage with landholders was particularly important.
- Coordination of funding, donations and volunteers in a dynamic and confusing space was also an important skill.

Some staff took it upon themselves to take action such as asking landholders about what needed to be done, organising volunteers, being flexible about spending project funds so that they reacted to the needs of the landholders as well as to the needs of the environment. Many interviewees also remarked that the process of environmental recovery was greatly aided by the social connections that were formed and then strengthened by the process. For example, by providing individual assistance to landholders on their properties, agencies and groups were able to discuss environmental management issues such as protecting natural assets and enhancing biodiversity. In the implementation of the program there was a link between health services and natural resource recovery. At DPI or Landcare information sessions about environmental recovery there were also health counsellors available if people chose to speak to them. Similarly, case managers who provided physical and mental health support also provided information on who to contact with regard to the environmental recovery needs.

The role played by senior managers

The role for senior management was difficult to get right. In some cases they needed to take control and actively promote a calm and considered approach to recovery, and in other cases they need to delegate control to the local staff. For example, with regard to taking control, some community members became quite distressed about trees. Some felt that they should be cut down immediately especially those close to houses and roads and others felt trees were why they chose to live where they did. Some unlicensed tree felling took place that government did not stop for fear of causing more distress. Some in the community felt that senior government managers should have acted by communicating what the regulations were and what was needed for the recovery of the natural environment.

With regard to delegating control, it was felt that senior managers, especially at the Federal level, should have released the promised funds more quickly so that recovery could start immediately and been more confident that local government staff could be accountable. Several organisations and individuals bore the cost of initial works until they were finally subsidised.

The value of investing in community networks

Existing relationships prior to the fires were crucial for establishing trust in a time of crisis. The key point for the staff of the GBCMA was the value of funding and building social capital – prior, during and post crisis situations. In the past, the GBCMA staff continued to support Landcare networks such as with the UGLN after the funding for projects ceased. This policy helped to maintain relationships which were critical for the GBCMA staff when they needed to connect with landholders after the 2009 fires. The UGLN and Landcare were ready and able to manage and coordinate community input to and community led recovery of the environment.

The GBCMA staff found that investment in social capital (be developing their own networks and relationships with groups such as Landcare) created an informed community and established a trusting working relationship that could react quickly to crisis situations. The sheer scale and impact of the 2009 fire meant that communications were very challenging for a long time after the fires and again, local community networks and connected agency staff were called on to help.

A number of respondents noted personal and social benefits of being part of a network that helped the recovery of the physical landscape and people's properties. These activities helped with the emotional recovery and helped people to deal with the trauma and tragedy by allowing them to feel connected and part of the community.

Also of particular importance is how community consultation is managed in this process. Consultation should not be onerous on the community or repetitive, and should lead to outcomes or resolutions. It is also important to understand the level of responsibility for decision making a particular community is willing to take on. Some communities felt comfortable with what they were asked to do, others felt that the responsibility was too great for a stressed community; others again felt that they were provided lip service but were not given the power to be effective.

The differences between implementing environmental activities in and without a crisis

The question on the differences between implementing environmental activities in and without a crisis was primarily answered by the agency focus group. A prominent and divisive issue in this crisis was that of regulation and enforcement of environmental standards. It was felt that environmental regulations were suspended as a result of the politics of the situation, for example, large scale clearing of native vegetation on private property and on road verges, and that this created distress within the community and on-ground staff.

Another key difference between carrying out activities in crisis was the extreme level of loss and destruction and as a result the need to consider community readiness to engage in environmental recovery activities. The GBCMA had to rely on the good will they had built over the years with existing community networks to assist with finding out the local community members' readiness for support. Even so, it was also felt that this could have been done better. The main barrier was the lack of funding and staff resources for this task. Staff workloads were already high because of the on-ground recovery activities; engagement was added to this role, but without adequate training (for dealing with trauma), resources or time allocated. This needs to be considered as an important component of funded recovery activities in the future.

The key point here is that on-going engagement and support for community networks in non-crisis situations allows for better communication, engagement and support after a crisis. Funding was difficult to negotiate. There was confusion over what would be funded, and by whom. This led to delays in communicating the types of works to be funded and how they would be delivered, resulting in confusion between agencies and the community. It also meant that some critical on-ground works, e.g. dam water supply protection and stock containment fencing, were slow to begin.

Consideration of the timeframe for recovery and community support is important in managing future crises. It was felt by the community that a program of support that suited the timeframe of the community would have benefited recovery and ensured that most people were able to be a part of the program. The timeframe differed for each community and depended not just on the devastation caused by the fire but on community readiness to act. This feedback needs to be communicated to funders and included in program planning where possible.

The model

A key element of the model used to implement recovery activities was the use of community networks, such as local and regional Landcare networks, to connect with individuals, assess needs, coordinate activities and deliver on ground works.

Soon after the fires, members of the Upper Goulburn Landcare Network, Department of Primary Industries and the Goulburn Broken CMA met to discuss how to assess the needs and how to best approach fire recovery activities. A short questionnaire was developed for landholders to indicate what recovery work they would need done. This formed the basis of assistance required and was used for applying for funds and the subsequent recovery activities.

The GBCMA played a key role in providing funding and support to the Landcare networks both before and after the fires.

The investment in the community and social networks was seen as critical for both achieving environmental recovery and also as an end in itself in terms of connecting with the community and helping individuals. Human and environmental recovery were intricately linked. Some individuals reported that ongoing help or follow-up offers of assistance gave them hope and the sense that they were not alone, especially when they were dealing with the trauma of the fires and the efforts to rebuild and restore their lives and livelihoods. The value of networks such as Landcare is that they are concerned with all land in their area and not just that of their members and so all landholders have the same access to help.

Literature review

We were asked to collect data from the various stakeholders who were involved in working with the GBCMA recovery program to see if DPI and GBCMA staff had done something extraordinary. It was felt that the recovery program had gone very well and that the GBCMA and agency staff felt that they were able to make a difference. It was a small study, so to justify the findings for this paper, we also looked at the literature of what others had done in similar circumstances.

With regard to the first question about whether it was individuals or organisations that were the key, we did not find much in the literature other than that some individuals work very well in a crisis (Bonanno 2004) or that they can be taught to be resilient (APA 2008; Flynn 2008). The

role of organisations to legitimise contact with victims of trauma was not raised, although their role to provide information, training and to know where to go for information was stated (Flynn 2008; Hickson; Dass-Brailsford 2008; Commonwealth 2010; Commonwealth 2011). Flynn (2008) went so far as to say that government had a responsibility to prepare communities for traumatic events by making them self sufficient and their members resilient. He said that governments can do this by warning of dangers (such as the possible hijacking of aeroplanes of which they apparently were aware) and telling citizens what they can do about these dangers. Dass-Brailsford (2008) talks about the need to connect trauma victims with their communities and networks immediately after the event. She described her experience of helping a young, non English speaking man connect to other individuals who could speak his language and to whom he could tell his story. This example was similar to what fire victims also said about connecting with each other. A study by Webber and Jones (2011) into the 2003 Canberra fires also found that community networks were important for the recovery process. It could also be that for some traumatised individuals, looking after the wildlife on their properties gave them a job to do, a distraction and a purpose which was seen by the American Psychological Association (2008) as important.

The value of the literature review for this paper was that the GBCMA staff can feel that it was appropriate to proceed cautiously with regard to the community. While the study by Bonanno (2004) shows that less than 30% of trauma victims are severely affected, there is still a need to proceed carefully because the effects are unpredictable and that trauma affected individuals may resist all help (DeWolfe 2000). That they built networks in advance of a crisis would be envied by many who wrote articles.

Conclusion

Landcare, DPI and GBCMA staff worked on instinct when they developed and implemented their environmental recovery program immediately after the 2009 Victorian bush fires. They were cautious about approaching affected communities directly and relied on local organisations and networks to make first contact. They supported individuals within their own organisation who had the skills and qualities to find out what needed to be done and how to implement a proper process. Their investment in the community and their networks were critical to the recovery work which was helpful for the environmental and the landholders. Some of the findings of the study are supported by the literature. Others such as the actions taken by senior management need further research to uncover what were the issues and how senior management can best react in a crisis.

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