

Protecting cultural heritage in bushfire prone areas.

Charlotte Walker, Marcelle Scott
& Caroline Fry

Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation
University of Melbourne

Abstract

Bushfires are an unavoidable element of the Australian environment. They result in loss of life, damage to property, livestock, and our natural and cultural heritage. In light of global climate change likely causing an increase in the frequency and the intensity of bushfires, and with reference to the January 2009 fires in Victoria this paper discusses the importance and challenges of protecting cultural heritage from the effects of bushfires. The paper describes the impacts bushfire has on cultural heritage, identifies gaps in the current heritage protection legislative, policy and planning processes, and makes recommendations for how these might be addressed. A key message of the paper is the important role that regional museums may play in engaging their communities in disaster preparedness and response.

Introduction

Fire is an integral part of our natural environment, and also part of our cultural and social frameworks (Whelan, Kanowski, Gill & Anderson 2006, p.1). On the other hand, bushfires can be extremely destructive, and the loss of life and settlements is well documented (Department of Sustainability & Environment [DSE], 2008). Further damaging effects include the “psychological impacts on individuals and communities, including anxiety, fatigue and financial stress”, negative impacts on industries, water catchments, infrastructure and plant and animal biodiversity (DSE, 2008, pp. 2-3). Less well documented is the effect on cultural heritage. While fires cannot be prevented, it is accepted that the risks they pose can be minimised through systematic evaluation, planning and management (Whelan et al., 2006, p.11; DSE, 2008; Hennessy et al., 2007). The management of bushfires is still a highly controversial issue, as

submissions to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC) attest (VBRC, 2009a); however bushfires continue to be an accepted and expected element of life in Victoria, and management strategies are systematically employed (DSE, 2008). Despite the long history in Australia of planning for bushfire, cultural heritage is only just beginning to be acknowledged within local government bushfire management frameworks (Blue Shield Australia [BSA] 2010), and there is an acknowledged need for greater co-operation and co-ordination of responses within the heritage sector.

In 2003, Australia ICOMOS noted that cultural heritage places in danger of impact from bushfires include places in urban or rural contexts such as houses, farms, rural homesteads, bridges and cultural landscapes as well as places associated with social cultural values in parks, reserves and forests such as scenic and cultural landscapes, Aboriginal places and mine structures (Australia ICOMOS, 2003). Threats to heritage also exist from disaster management actions and post-disaster recovery operations. As Spennemann (1999, p. 746) states “sites and heritage places have been demolished following natural disasters without having been given proper considerations” and later gives an example from 1993 where bulldozers used to create firebreaks destroyed several archaeological sites in the Royal National Park, New South Wales (1999, pp.746-765).

The threat posed by bushfire to cultural heritage is evidenced by the places and objects already lost. According to Parks Victoria, as of 2002, approximately 20% of the estimated 200 huts east of the Hume Highway in the Victorian alpine region have been destroyed due to fire (Parks Victoria, n.d.). More huts were destroyed or damaged in the 2003 fires, which also affected many mining sites linked to Victoria's goldmining history. Similarly, the timber rail bridge forming part of the historic Walhalla Goldfields Railway was lost in 2008 to bushfires (Cincotta, 2008). More recently, despite having a bushfire plan in place, the Marysville historical society's collection was burnt in the 2009 bushfires, resulting in the loss of “145 years of Marysville heritage” (Webb, 2009). Visitor books from Keppel's Hotel in Marysville dating back to the 1860's were lost, as

was the landmark Marylands Country House (Webb, 2009). In addition to community valued cultural heritage, there is of course widespread loss of individual cultural heritage including photographs and family heirlooms. The loss of Chris Lee's Holden collection, Kylie Butler's great-great-grandmother's china, and Bev Rice's teapot collection along with many other examples were all reported in the media, along with stories of objects that surprisingly survived (Gray, 2009a, p.6; Topsfield, 2009, p.6).

The social value of cultural heritage

While it is a given that "the protection of life and property will always be the priority in any disaster situation" (Graham & Spennemann, 2006, p. 215), the significant value that society places on cultural heritage, and the important role it can play in recovery, means that it should be considered when planning for bushfires.

Heritage places may have significance for the local community. They may have value at State, Territory or National level, and may be recognised internationally (Productivity Commission, 2006). The Allen Consulting Group undertook a survey with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the value of heritage places to Australians. The survey revealed that 93% of the community see heritage as forming part of Australia's identity. A similarly overwhelming percentage of respondents considered that it is "important to protect heritage places", and that it is important to educate Australian children about heritage (The Allen Consulting Group, 2005, p.vii).

One of the most common arguments for the protection of cultural heritage is that it provides communities and individuals with a sense of place and identity (Spennemann, 1999; Aplin, 2002; Hall & McArthur, 1996). It is thought that people

need connections with both place and time to locate our present lives geographically and historically; heritage helps in both the temporal and spatial sense. It also helps us to locate ourselves socially, in the sense that it is one of the things that binds communities and

nations, giving a sense of group identity to both insiders and outsiders (Aplin, 2002, p.16).

Hence, cultural heritage places allow for an understanding of the past and "thus the foundations of ... [our] current existence"; natural disasters such as bushfires threaten these tangible links to the past (Spennemann, 1999, pp.746-8). In times of crisis and recovery such as during and after a bushfire these tangible familiarities, and the sense of nostalgia they impart, are needed even more (Spennemann, 1999, p.746). The desire to reconnect to heritage following a disaster has been seen following the 2009 bushfires, and in the overwhelming number of donations from the community to Marysville's historical society, including irreplaceable objects relating to Marysville's heritage (Webb, 2009). Not only does cultural heritage contribute to a sense of place, identity and belonging, it may be valued more so following a disaster, providing a sense of the familiar in a sea of change.

On the other hand, lost cultural heritage may also have long-term psychological effects for individuals and communities. In his book *Returning to nothing: the meaning of lost places*, Peter Read (1996) documents the feelings of displacement and loss that result from a lost sense of place and identity, and the desire to hold on to what has survived. This can be seen in his interview with a woman who had lost everything in the Macedon bushfires of 1983, and who remembers her anger when the fire services came to pull down her chimney: "I was so angry and I went out there like a mad woman screaming 'leave it alone!' That was all we had, just a chimney" (Read, 1996, p.107). According to Read, "her chimney, a blackened obstacle to the tractor crew, was also the site of collective family memories, a symbol of the past, a reminder of the terrifying trauma and a protector of their possessions" (1999, p.108). Records from the 2009 VBRC community consultation in Marysville note the "emotional scarring and trauma" felt by community members following the devastating bushfire, where "lives, homes, businesses, friendships, lifestyle, the township, community life and Marysville's history" was lost (2009a). Given this clear statement, and the submission to the

VBRC by Blue Shield Australia, it is surprising that no recommendations regarding cultural heritage were forthcoming in the final report and recommendations of the VBRC (2009b)⁴⁴. This sense of loss can be exacerbated when community and individual history and memory is lost. One example of this is the loss of a “precious 160 year old family heirloom, an American-made air-powered pipe organ” valued by one Kinglake resident (Gray, 2009b). He states that the loss of this organ inherited from his grandmother is his biggest loss: “I miss my house but you can build another house. But you can never get another one of those [organs]” (Gray, 2009b). According to Blue Shield Australia (2010), “Culture is both tangible and intangible and embodies the collective memories and beliefs, which underlie social systems and establish social cohesion”. It can be seen, then, that the loss of cultural heritage does not simply result in the loss of a physical object or place, but intensifies the lost sense of place and identity felt following a bushfire, which may have long term effects.

Further associated effects of lost heritage is the greater significance afforded to precious items that do survive bushfires, and the creation of a new, shared heritage, both of which may also play a role in the emotional recovery of affected communities. The increased importance afforded to saved items was witnessed at the Australian War Memorial’s conservation clinics following the 2003 Canberra bushfires. One attendee who had salvaged some precious war medals stated that:

“In receiving these fire-scarred medals back from the Memorial’s conservators, one of the veterans explained that he would wear them with extra pride. The bushfire was part of his own personal history to which these medals now bore silent witness” (Reeve, 2006).

Following the 2003 fires, the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery put together an exhibition of

⁴⁴ Recommendation 65 (VBRC 2009b, p. 3) which urges research and scholarship related to bushfires in the “physical, biological and social science” and related disciplines may provide an avenue whereby the range of issue discussed in this paper can be advanced.

stories and fire scarred objects, indicating that the shared experience of a disaster can create new cultural heritage (Reeve, 2006). Similarly, discussions following the 2009 Victorian bushfires regarding the creation of a bushfire museum indicate this would help in the healing process (Tippet, 2009). Museum Victoria (2009) recognises this, and has been collecting items from communities affected by the 2009 bushfires, including “fences, signs, Country Fire Authority pamphlets predating the fire, tourism brochures from Marysville and Kinglake, plus items from destroyed houses and bushland. The collection also includes video footage, interviews and personal accounts” (Museum Victoria, 2009). A surviving chimney from a destroyed 19th century homestead has also been installed as part of a permanent exhibition, and is expected to become “a hearth, a meeting place, that people can visit for reflection” (Museum Victoria, 2009). These examples show that objects and places that have survived a bushfire may be afforded greater significance, and may contribute to a new collective memory of the disaster event and assisting in the emotional recovery process.

Bushfire preparedness and response

Despite the broad acknowledgement of the importance of community and individual heritage, there is little in the way of specifically targeted strategies for the protection and salvage of cultural heritage sites and objects, at a formal government or related agency level. It is noteworthy that immediately after the bushfires, some heritage and conservation agencies were cautioned against reactive and premature delivery of conservation assistance and advice into impacted communities. Meanwhile, TV, print and radio media were reporting individual’s joy at finding surviving family treasures (see for example Topsfield 2009).

The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission articulated significant shortcomings and need for review of various government agencies approach to the coordination and delivery of bushfire services (VBRC 2009b). Blue Shield Australia (BSA 2010) presented a well considered submission to the Commission, and the authors of this paper support the recommendations that BSA be better enabled to play a leadership role in disaster

preparedness and response training and information dissemination. There is a need and an opportunity for the museum sector to play a more prominent role in awareness raising within Commonwealth, State and Local government and emergency management agencies of the social importance of cultural heritage. Likewise there is a need to establish formal guidelines for greater involvement of the heritage sector in planning for future broad-scale emergencies and disasters. At a national level, it has been suggested that this may take the form of a 'Heritage Disaster Task Force' of experienced conservation and museum professionals to review strengths, and weaknesses in current disaster preparedness and response, and to formulate appropriate training programs. Following discussion at the Museums Australia 2010 conference and noting that there may be areas of overlap with the role of BSA, this paper recommends that the Museums Australia National Council and BSA National Committee collaborate to develop options for a joint advisory and response network.

The regional museum sector is well versed in disaster preparedness and response strategies for cultural material. In moving from policy to practice, this paper argues that the regional museums sector is ideally positioned, both in terms of skill set and locally relevant knowledge, to play a leadership role in their community's disaster preparedness and response strategies. Many members of local museums will also be involved, either directly or indirectly, with the CFA Community Fireguard program, or other similar groups in their district. By combining their core museum-practice skills sets (i.e. significance assessment, documentation, risk assessment, and disaster preparedness) with knowledge of community networks, museum personnel could engage and empower local government and non-government agencies and individuals in disaster preparedness and response strategies for heritage collections and personal memorabilia. There are several obvious advantages to this strategy. Perhaps most important is that of 'capacity building', based on local knowledge and expertise. It has been shown that engaging those directly affected by the threat, of bushfires, in the planning and recovery phases, can contribute to their psychological as well as material recovery. It is a

further recommendation, that Museums Australia National Council and membership consider and develop a coordinated approach to community disaster preparedness, based on the existing MA national networks and State branches model.

At the heart of these recommendations is a call for increased investment (time, people, money) in cultural heritage disaster preparedness coordination and training.

Conclusion

Bushfires are unavoidable in the Australian environment. They will continue to affect communities, local economies, infrastructure and biodiversity. They will remain a threat to the hundreds of thousands of cultural heritage sites and associated objects listed on various registers in Victoria, as well as those not listed, but highly valued by communities and individuals.

Human life always takes precedence in any disaster situation, however the significant value given to cultural heritage, and the important role it can play in recovery, means that it needs to be considered when planning for bushfires. Cultural heritage is central to identity and to community and individual's feeling a 'sense of place'. It may also contribute socially, spiritually and economically to a community's recovery following bushfire. On the other hand, the loss of cultural heritage may have long-term psychological effects. Hence, even in disaster situations, the protection of cultural heritage objects and places warrants a place in all planning and response processes.

The key recommendations of this paper are that Museums Australia advocate for and identify strategies to support the necessary investment in resources in:

- the development of a nationally coordinated cultural heritage disaster preparedness and response task force;
- the development of a nationally coordinated regional network of museums to play community leadership roles in cultural heritage disaster preparedness and response.

These measures seek to address the current weaknesses in awareness and policy regarding the

protection of cultural heritage from bushfires. In doing so, they have the potential to make a meaningful contribution to a community's recovery from a major bushfire.

This paper has been independently peer-reviewed.

References

Aplin, G. (2002). *Heritage: Identification, Conservation, and Management*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Australia ICOMOS (2003). *Draft Guidelines for Cultural Heritage Places Damaged by the 2003 Bushfires in South East Australia*.

Blue Shield Australia. (2010) *Submission to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission*. Retrieved 14/05/09 from 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Web site:
http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Submissions/SubmissionDocuments/SUBM-002-058-0109_R.pdf

Cincotta, L. (2008, November 13). Open for business. *The Age*. Retrieved 25/04/09 from The Age Web site:
<http://www.theage.com.au/travel/open-for-business-20081113-5zwwg.html>

Department of Sustainability and Environment (2008). *Living with Fire: Victoria's Bushfire Strategy*. Retrieved 13/05/2009 from Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment Web site:
<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/nrenfoe.nsf/LinkView/41DBDCBD209E6B32CA25751C000FAB2F44688EB30B57BF124A2567CB000DB2EF#Strategy>

Graham, K. & Spennemann, D. (2006). Disaster Management and Cultural Heritage: An investigation of knowledge and perceptions of New South Wales Rural Fire Service Brigade Captains. *The Australian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies, 1*, 215-237.

Gray, D. (2009a, February 17). 'A Holden haven now turned to ash'. *The Age*, p.6.

Gray, D. (2009b, April 28). 'Old bath tub keeps the home fires burning'. *The Age*. Retrieved 25/04/09 from The Age Web site:
<http://www.theage.com.au/national/old-bath-tub-keeps-the-home-fires-burning-20090427-akoa.html>

Hall, C.M. & McArthur, S. (1996). Managing Community Values: Identity-Place Relations. In C.M. Hall & S. McArthur (Eds.), *Heritage Management in Australia and New Zealand*, 2nd Ed. (pp. 180-184). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Hennessy, K., Fitzharris, B., Bates, B.C., Harvey, N., Howden, S.M., Hughes, L., Salinger, J. & Warrick, R. (2007). *Australia and New Zealand*. In M.L. Parry, O.F. Canziani, J.P. Palutikof, P.J. van der Linden & C.E. Hanson, (Eds.) 'Climate change 2007: impacts, adaptation and vulnerability': contribution of Working Group II to the fourth assessment report of the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (pp. 507-540). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Museum Victoria (2009). *Kinglake chimney in forest gallery*. Retrieved 15/05/09 from Museum Victoria Web site:
<http://museumvictoria.com.au/about/mv-news/2009/kinglake-chimney-in-forest-gallery/>

Parks Victoria (N.D.) *Cultural Heritage of Natural Areas- Treasures that will not grow back*. Retrieved 26/03/09 from Parks Victoria Web site:
http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/resources/14_0981.pdf

Productivity Commission. (2006). *Conservation of Australia's Historic Heritage Places: Productivity Commission Inquiry Overview*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Read, P. (1996). *Returning to nothing: the meaning of lost places*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Reeve, B. (2006). 'Communities in need: Bushfire disaster response by Canberra's cultural

institutions: First steps'. In Proceedings from *Museums Australia Conference*, Brisbane.

Spennemann, D. (1999). Cultural heritage conservation during emergency management: luxury or necessity? *The International Journal of Public Administration*, 22, 5, 745-804.

The Allen Consulting Group. (2005). *Valuing the Priceless: The Value of Heritage Protection in Australia, Research Report 2*. Sydney: Heritage Chairs and Officials of Australia and New Zealand.

Tippet, G. (2009, April 12). 'Bushfire museum would help stricken communities'. *The Age*. Retrieved 13/05/09 from The Age Web site: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/bushfire-museum-would-help-stricken-communities-20090411-a3gz.html>

Topsfield, J. (2009, February 13). 'Ashes yield family treasures'. *The Age*, p.6.

Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2009a). 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission: Marysville community consultation – 6 & 7 April 2009: Summary of discussion. <http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/getdoc/03fa6001-e7ca-4350-acc2-42a70a8a7136/Summary-of-Marysville-Comm-Consultation-67-April-2>

Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2009b). Final Report and Recommendations <http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Assets/VBRC-Final-Report-Recommendations.pdf>

Webb, C. (2009, August 7). 'Marysville's past is pouring back in'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved 25/05/09 from the Sydney Morning Herald Web site: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/marysvilles-past-is-pouring-back-in-20090806-ebk2.html>

Whelan, R. Kanowski, K., Gill, M. & Anderson, A. (2006). *Living in a land of fire*. Canberra: Federal Government Department of Environment and Heritage.

About the Authors

Charlotte Walker is a conservator at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin. She has a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Cultural Materials Conservation from the University of Melbourne and specialises in objects and textile conservation. Research for the Museums Australia National Conference paper was undertaken in 2009 as part of Charlotte's minor thesis for her Masters degree which investigated the challenges posed by bushfire and climate change for the protection of cultural heritage.

Marcelle Scott is a conservator with over twenty years experience in the museum sector, working in State institutions and with community museums. She is currently a lecturer and course coordinator for the University of Melbourne Masters degree in Cultural Materials Conservation.

Caroline Fry is a paintings conservator at the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, The University of Melbourne where she is responsible for the conservation of paintings from public collections and private collections. In addition, Caroline lectures and instructs students enrolled in the Masters Degree in Cultural Material Conservation.