

# *Fire, Families and Decisions*

*A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Applied Science by Research*

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the life experiences of families and couples who lived through the Wangary fire (South Australia, January 2005). Examining the bushfire experience from a domestic perspective is long overdue.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with thirty-eight couples and families across the fire-affected region on the Lower Eyre Peninsula. A shortlist of fourteen were analysed in detail and they form the foundation of this thesis.

These bushfire narratives include the perspectives of farming and non-farming families and cover a wide spectrum of circumstances and demographics. Five of the fourteen families lost their homes in the Wangary fire.

Critical decision-making and the presence of children is at the heart of this case study. How the presence of babies and young children influences family decision-making, in advance of or during a bushfire, has not been considered or studied in any detail within the Australian research landscape.

Exploring the differences of experience between women with young families and older women confirms the primary weakness of the national bushfire safety ('stay or go') policy. Gender and generation were the two defining factors that informed how people responded to and recovered from the Wangary fire. The perspective of younger people, within the context of bushfire research, has been neglected in the past; this case study incorporates their views and thoughts.

It is hoped that insights gleaned from these bushfire narratives will encourage the enhancement of the national 'stay or go' policy.

## Acknowledgements

This study relied on the willingness of people affected by the Wangary fire to share their stories with me. I extend a warm thank you to the fifty-five men and women who generously gave of their time, energy and personal reflections on a life-changing event. I was humbled by their willingness to openly and honestly share their sorrows and – importantly – by their resilience.

I thank those people I encountered, who did not directly participate in this study, for their kindness and hospitality during my two months in South Australia. I felt welcomed by the residents of the Lower Eyre Peninsula and I valued this greatly. I consider myself fortunate to have lived in this remote part of Australia (albeit for a short time) – it was an enriching experience.

The Country Fire Service (CFS) – particularly Euan Ferguson and Therese Pedler – provided critical support (in the form of essential resources and assistance during my fieldwork). I thank them both for contributing to my time in the fire-affected region. Therese stepped spontaneously into a support role during my fieldwork and continued to maintain contact with me throughout the remainder of my research.

A scholarship from the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (BCRC) made this research possible. I am grateful to the BCRC for funding my case study of the Wangary fire.

I appreciate the time and patience of Helen Goodman who commenced this journey with me in 2006 – she was central to this study during the first year of my research.

Substantial thanks to my supervisors, Robyn Betts and John Handmer. John helped me progress my research proposal (drafted back in 2005) into a funded case study and his advocacy proved vital. I thank him for sharing his extensive knowledge and for seeing me through to the end. Robyn connected with my topic and has consistently provided insightful comments and encouragement.



**Figure 1:**

*Judith Griffith and her grandchildren, Star and Jack Borlase, perished in the Wangary fire.*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

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This research thesis will explore, from the results of the life experiences of families and couples who lived through the Wangary fire (South Australia, January 2005), the complexities of work, parenting, relationships, changing responsibilities and roles and sense of place. All of these factors have relevance to the review and development of bushfire management policy and related community awareness and preparedness programs.

There is value in assessing whether the management of bushfires in Australia, underpinned by policies and community education preparedness and awareness programs, reflects current social needs. Does the national ‘stay or go’ policy (the foundation of community bushfire response) address the information and decision needs of families and households where roles, decisions and responsibilities are part of an ever changing and complex social system?<sup>1</sup>

### *1.1 Lower Eyre Peninsula*<sup>2</sup>

Wangary is located on the Lower Eyre Peninsula (LEP) of South Australia. The largest town in the region, Port Lincoln, has a population of approximately 13 000 and at 645 kilometres west of Adelaide, the State’s capital city, is a remote location. The landscape is largely agricultural with two major national parks and coastal areas that support a substantial fishing and tourist population.

Port Lincoln is known as a rich fishing town, famous for its tuna fleet. Essentially, information from the 2006 census confirms that aquaculture, fishing and seafood processing are the predominant industries. The town has a higher than average number

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<sup>1</sup> This policy is often referred to as the ‘prepare, stay and defend or go early’, ‘stay and defend or leave early’ and other variations. Throughout this thesis it will be referred to as the ‘stay or go’ policy. The full policy forms Appendix I, on page 166.

<sup>2</sup> All statistics quoted were obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) website: [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au) from the ‘Local Government Area’ and the ‘Urban Centre/Locality (Port Lincoln)’ pages.

of indigenous people (5.3% compared with 1.7% for South Australia) and a slightly higher than average incidence of one-parent families (17.3% compared with 16.1% for South Australia). Though not large, Port Lincoln is the major town for nearly 300 kilometres.

Outside of Port Lincoln, the LEP is quite sparsely populated, with only a little over 4 400 people residing in the area, which includes a number of small townships. It is a rural, stable, slightly conservative environment, typical of many throughout regional Australia. The marriage rate is higher than average, the incidence of one-parent families is lower than average (and at 9.3% about half that of Port Lincoln), and the population is far less ethnically mixed than in urban Australia. The main (and almost only) industry is farming.

## ***1.2 The Wangary fire***

On this isolated coast a bushfire started on the afternoon of Monday, 10 January 2005. It broke containment lines the following morning (often referred to as Black Tuesday). The weather conditions were extreme: strong winds, high temperatures and low humidity. Due to the speed, complexity and ferocity of the fire most people had very little, if any, warning of the impending danger. The Wangary fire burnt over 77 000 hectares of agricultural and forest lands, destroyed approximately 6 300 kilometres of fencing, over 46 000 livestock (mostly sheep) and caused substantial damage to essential infrastructure (Smith, 2005, p. 10). Nine people perished: three women, four children and two fire fighters on a private unit. The scale of devastation had not been seen in South Australia since the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983. The death of the seven women and children, six of whom were fleeing the fire in cars, motivated this exploration into family decision-making, gender roles and bushfire.

## ***1.3 'Stay or Go' – the national policy***

Although the dilemma of whether to flee or fight had been previously recognised, it was when surveys were conducted after the tragic Ash Wednesday fires of 1983 that a

position became firm and, later, official. The agreed position ‘moves away from the evacuation doctrine that has prevailed among emergency services in recent decades, towards greater community self-reliance’ (Roberts, McLean and Handmer, 2004, p. 3). The important Wilson and Ferguson (1985) study assessed the merits of staying with the home or evacuating early. Based on the experiences of Mount Macedon (Victoria) residents during the Ash Wednesday bushfires it was suggested that ‘able-bodied residents who are threatened by a bushfire should remain in their houses’ and that ‘evacuation should not be undertaken lightly’ (Wilson and Ferguson, 1985, pp. 1 and 8). Through this study and others, it was established that during a bushfire fewer people perished at home than out in the open.

It is this knowledge that has informed the national policy position adopted by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC), known as the ‘stay or go’ policy.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1990s there has been a philosophical shift towards empowering communities to accept responsibility for their own safety in a bushfire event; community education programs and dissemination of information have been the major tools adopted by fire agencies to promote bushfire awareness and preparedness within the community. With the official endorsement of the ‘stay or go’ policy this shift has gathered momentum across fire agencies and related services and organisations in Australia.

A growing body of research focusing on community needs and responses prior to and during bushfire events has raised concerns about the failure of fire agencies to acknowledge the complexities behind the ‘stay or go’ policy.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst there is an abundance of rhetoric – within the fire agencies and more widely in the emergency management sector – on the value of the ‘stay or go’ policy, there is a

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<sup>3</sup> Prior to 2008 this organisation was known as the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC). It has been reported that the policy position was established, internal to AFAC, in 1996 but it was not until 2001 that it was published and disseminated as an official policy document (Roberts, McLean, Handmer, 2004, p. 3).

<sup>4</sup> The Country Fire Authority (CFA) has conducted research which revealed the gap between community understanding and the expectations of the fire agency in relation to ‘stay or go.’ This research is analysed and discussed in the literature review (Chapter 3).



lack of transparency surrounding the levels of funding allocated to the community education programs. Community education is touted as important but the funding provisions do not reflect that – only a small fraction of fire agency funding is dedicated to community education. There are, frequently, large geographic areas considered to be at significant fire risk that will, at best, have a part-time employee responsible for educating thousands of households about bushfire safety.<sup>5</sup>

For over a decade the ‘stay or go’ policy has formed the foundation of bushfire safety strategies in Australia. Fire agencies have had to widen their scope and adopt a risk management approach which requires community engagement. The existing policy stipulates that residents take responsibility for their welfare in a bushfire on the terms prescribed by the fire agencies. These organisations encourage residents to become informed and plan and prepare prior to an incident. This relies on residents making an important decision early and remaining committed to that – changing your mind during the event can be fatal. Two options are promoted by the ‘stay or go’ policy:

*Properties should be prepared so that they provide a safe refuge: sheltering from radiant heat and ember attack in a properly prepared building should be the first choice of residents when a bushfire threatens. (AFAC, 2005, p. 5)*

*People should decide well in advance of a bushfire whether they will stay with their homes to defend them or leave if a bushfire threatens...some people would be safer well away rather than attempting to remain with their homes if threatened by fire. (AFAC, 2005, pp. 6 and 7)*

## ***1.4 Aims of the research***

The primary aim of this qualitative case study is to obtain a deeper understanding of families and the role of women in bushfires; thereby enhancing our knowledge and providing another perspective from which to examine the relevance of the ‘stay or go’ policy. The family and a woman’s role within the family are crucial to the decisions that are made in advance of and during a bushfire. The family unit, in its various

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<sup>5</sup> The State of South Australia has about 1.5 million residents. Its total land area is almost one million kilometres. There are three full-time community education positions (six part-time positions) funded by the fire agency to increase community safety and bushfire preparedness. In rural and regional areas, time engaging with the community is eroded by the need to travel great distances.

forms, is an important and frequently overlooked field of bushfire research. In order to reduce, or eliminate, last-minute decisions to evacuate at the height of a bushfire, there must be recognition and understanding of how family dynamics and women's roles within the family influence behaviour during a crisis.

## Chapter 2: Approach

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*Narrative researchers use narrative in some way in their research. Narrative inquiry embraces narrative as both the method and phenomena of study. Through the attention to methods for analyzing and understanding stories lived and told, it can be connected and placed under the label of qualitative research methodology. (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007, p. 5)*

### 2.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this chapter is to locate myself as a researcher in the research process and provide details on how this study developed. I will explain why I undertook this study, how it was carried out and the challenges encountered. Identifying a research method which would enable the stories to be told, whilst remaining respectful of sensitive or traumatic information, was essential. This chapter draws on references that have either informed or influenced my approach as my case study evolved and concludes with my personal reflection of the research experience.

### 2.2 Background to the study

My research topic was not prescribed; it was generated by genuine interest and a curiosity which has sustained me throughout this process. Reinharz writes that ‘personal experience can be the very starting point of a study, the material from which the researcher develops questions, and the source for finding people to study’ (Reinharz, 1992, p. 260). My first visit to the Lower Eyre Peninsula occurred six months after the Wangary fire, in July 2005.<sup>6</sup> Prior to this field trip, I did not anticipate spending several years immersed in (and preoccupied with) Wangary fire narratives.

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<sup>6</sup> At that time I was employed as a Research Officer at RMIT University and travelled to South Australia with two senior researchers. I assisted with the planning and logistics of our one-week visit. The goal was to conduct semi-structured interviews with 17 households. There was a gap in the demographics: none of the interviewees had young children at home on the day of the bushfire. This meant that the perspective of parents – and women in particular – with babies and young children was not included.

This opportunity was the trigger for developing my research proposal. Once my research project was funded I returned to the Lower Eyre Peninsula in March 2006, to attend a two-day workshop designed for women affected by the Wangary fire; the workshop coincided with International Women's Day.<sup>7</sup> I listened to the issues they were confronting as a direct result of the Wangary fire and established a few contacts. It was important to learn how people responded and felt towards me and my proposed study.<sup>8</sup> Attending this workshop made me more aware and sensitive to my role as a researcher and my 'outsider' status.<sup>9</sup> These two short visits to South Australia allowed me to become familiar with the people and the landscape in advance of navigating my way through the labyrinth of administration and planning associated with fieldwork preparation.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.3 *Methodology – the case study*

Single case studies (in this instance Wangary fire-affected families and couples) 'will yield rich data about the wider population or social system and, as such this type of research should not be dismissed as insignificant research' (Alston and Bowles, 2003, p. 198).

'Case study research is research focused on a single case, issue, group, organisation or event. In contrast to other methods, case study research does not seek patterns of behaviour by comparative analysis of a number of subjects' (Alston and Bowles, 2003, p. 198). Gomm, Hammersley and Foster state that the term 'case study' 'implies the collection of unstructured data and qualitative analysis of those data' (Gomm, Hammersley and Foster, 2006, p. 3). Reinharz states:

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<sup>7</sup> The title of this workshop was: *Women Improving the Odds*, 6-7 March 2006.

<sup>8</sup> I had planned to conduct focus groups. The feedback I received during this workshop was that people would not feel comfortable to talk about personal and sensitive issues in front of others. As a direct result of talking to women at this workshop I concentrated on only conducting interviews.

<sup>9</sup> This 'outsider' status worked on two basic levels: the geographic (I live in suburban Victoria and was referred to on occasions during my fieldwork as a 'city slicker') and the academic (venturing out from the 'ivory tower').

<sup>10</sup> 'Conducting any piece of research creates a significant amount of administrative work' Alston and Bowles (2003, p. 67).

*The case study is a tool of feminist research that is used to document history and generate theory. It defies the social science convention of seeking generalizations by looking instead for specificity, exceptions, and completeness. Some feminist researchers have found that social science's emphasis on generalizations has obscured phenomena important to particular groups, including women. Thus case studies are essential for putting women on the map of social life. (Reinharz, 1992, p. 174)*

## 2.4 Logic of the approach

As stated in the Introduction, women's issues in disaster within the Australian research landscape have been neglected. Beginning with this observation, I used a qualitative methodology to capture the perspectives of men and women at different life stages (with and without young children, in farming and non-farming families and across different socio-economic circumstances) in the aftermath of a bushfire. Alston and Bowles write that qualitative researchers:

*...advocate a research process which is a two-way interaction between the researcher and the researched in which the parties are on a more equal level, sometimes 'co-evolving' the research structure as they go. Thus, a qualitative researcher might conduct very flexible, open interviews so that the conversation can cover topics, perspectives and meanings that are important to the people being researched. (Alston and Bowles, 2003, p.10)*

I conducted semi-structured interviews; 'a research approach whereby the researcher plans to ask questions about a given topic but allows the data-gathering conversation itself to determine how the information is obtained' (Reinharz, 1992, p. 281).<sup>11</sup> This flexible approach meant that no two interviews were identical. Reinforcing this lack of uniformity, Sarantakos states that 'qualitative interviews vary significantly in structure, length, intensity, order and type of questions, and interviewee participation' (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 255). He emphasises that 'conducting qualitative interviews is a difficult task, which meets certain important and also difficult requirements and demands' (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 256). The variation in the length of my interviews was

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<sup>11</sup> Reinharz notes that 'feminist researchers tend to interchange the terms unstructured, intensive, in-depth, and open-ended' (Reinharz, 1992, p. 281). Throughout my thesis I have referred to my primary material as 'bushfire narratives,' 'narratives' or 'interviews.'

striking: the shortest were under an hour and the longest was over three hours. The majority of interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours.<sup>12</sup>

I had prepared a list of questions (a prompt sheet) to ask my interviewees and this ended up being set aside as I soon discovered that people naturally shared their story, often (but not always) in a flowing narrative that generally mirrored the sequence of their bushfire experience (beginning with when they first became aware of the threat, how they behaved, reacted and responded, how the fire impacted on them personally, their family, the wider community and the highs and lows associated with the process of recovery).

Josselson states that ‘good narrative research is conducted inductively, modifying procedure in light of growing understanding, shifting strategies as themes develop’ (Josselson, 2007, p. 557). This looseness of research design implies an ease with which the recognition and understanding of themes emerges.

I was mindful of the value of silence during the interviews; ‘We listen people into speech’ (Josselson, 2007, p. 547). I wanted to avoid categorising the actions people took during the crisis and prioritised respecting what the interviewees had to say about their perception of their own experience. Josselson writes:

*The essence of the narrative research approach, which gives it its meaning and value, is that the researcher endeavours to obtain ‘data’ from a deeply human, genuine, empathetic, and respectful relationship to the participant about significant and meaningful aspects of the participant’s life. (Josselson, 2007, p. 539)*

Trust, between the interviewee and the interviewer, is crucial in narrative research. Reinharz writes:

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<sup>12</sup> Reinharz writes that ‘because of the interviewee-guided nature of much feminist interview research, there frequently are large variations in the duration of interviews within a single project’ (Reinharz, 1992, p. 25). There was only one interview that I felt I needed to draw to a close as it had lasted over three hours (I had left my accommodation at 7:15pm and returned at 11:20pm).

*Interviewee-guided research requires great attentiveness on the part of the interviewer during an interview and a kind of trust that the interviewee will lead the interviewer in fruitful directions. (Reinharz, 1992, p. 24)*

## 2.5 *Sampling – how did I acquire my participants?*

Four sampling techniques were used to acquire participants:

- i) Advertisements were placed in two local newsletters<sup>13</sup>
- ii) Accidental recruiting
- iii) Two local women gave me access to their social network
- iv) Snowball (or ‘rhizomatic’) sampling

Three people (two older male farmers and one young woman) telephoned me at home in response to the newsletter ads expressing their willingness to be interviewed. This, combined with the contacts obtained from my previous two visits, ensured I had secured a small number of participants in advance of commencing my fieldwork. There were many opportunities to meet people who would frequently ask why I was there and I gathered a few interviewees in this way – accidental (or opportunistic) sampling. Two women were generous with their time and helped me recruit participants. One of these women provided a rapid increase in the number of participants by telephoning her fire-affected friends and asking them to consider being interviewed for my project. Because they shared a history and trusted her judgement (of me and my project), a substantial number of interviewees were secured on my behalf. Without this assistance I would not have been able to obtain an indigenous perspective.<sup>14</sup>

The term ‘snowball’ sampling is frequently referred to by qualitative researchers and describes the practise of asking interviewees to nominate other people for the

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<sup>13</sup> These were: the final edition of the *Eyre Peninsula Bushfire Recovery Newsletter* (Issue 35, 26/5/06), and the *Lower Eyre Peninsula Bushfire Reestablishment Program* newsletter printed and circulated by Primary Industries and Resources South Australia (PIRSA). People living in the fire-affected region received the PIRSA newsletter via post and the recovery newsletter was made available from numerous locations in Port Lincoln. The advertisements consisted of a few lines and finished with: ‘I would like to talk to men and women about their experience of the Wangary fire.’

<sup>14</sup> She arranged for me to conduct an interview on an Aboriginal settlement.

project.<sup>15</sup> Stehlik (2004), one of three researchers involved in a social impact of drought study, re-named (or re-framed) snowball sampling as ‘rhizomatic’ due to the incompatibility of ‘snow’ and drought; this also applies to bushfire. Stehlik explains:

*‘Rhizomatic sampling’ is derived from the botanical ‘rhizome’ meaning ‘forming subterranean rootlike stems’ and that ‘the rhizome metaphor more accurately explains the ‘underground’ nature of narrative building; its potential within naturally occurring networks and its sense of growth and renewal (as opposed to metaphors of drought = disaster + death) within the notion of a living rhizome. (Stehlik, 2004, p. 39-40)*

In her paper on method, which assesses and reaffirms the value of seeking out potential participants in this way, Stehlik writes that it did require ‘us as researchers to make a “leap of faith” at the beginning of the project. Unlike other research designs it was not possible to “predict” everything and “control” every event, which was occasionally a little stressful!’ (Stehlik, 2004, p. 42). Stehlik advocates employing this method as it might ‘avoid the “superficial” nature of much interviewing, by allowing the process to proceed to a deeper, more shared experience as each respondent identifies a neighbour or a friend, and the collective study becomes a living, dynamic process’ (Stehlik, 2004, p. 43). This method proved to be very effective; a significant number of the women I interviewed offered me three, four or five contacts.

I did not ask all interviewees to provide me with contact details of potential participants. I was selective about who I asked and a number of people offered names voluntarily before I broached this question. In the first few weeks of my fieldwork I felt concerned that I would not be able to generate many interviews. It was not long before I realised that I would find it difficult to wind down the whole process of arranging interviews and that I would leave with many untapped sources.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> As an example, Fothergill writes: ‘The sample was generated from two sources. First, more than half of the respondents were found through a snowball technique. A work colleague in Boulder, a native of Grand Forks, provided the names of two women as my initial contacts. From these women, I got the names of two more women to interview, and thus my sample “snowballed”’ (Fothergill, 2004, p. 226).

<sup>16</sup> Only 3 people declined an interview. My journal entry states: ‘It will take a lot of time and energy to extricate myself from the Lower Eyre Peninsula. I would like to do this properly – not rush.’



## 2.6 Ethical considerations

Stehlik writes that the rhizomatic method was able to be used ‘within our strictures of confidentiality’ (Stehlik, 2004, p. 41). I found the ethical considerations to be quite slippery. This method of acquiring participants can be concerning as ‘participants know the identity of the other participants’ (Josselson, 2005, p. 554). I had to walk (on occasions) a fine line between appearing open, honest and responsive to people when they questioned me about previous interviews (what people were telling me) and respecting the privacy of my participants. I was living in close proximity to those who participated in my research and encountered interviewees in social contexts. Josselson (2005) analyses the complexities of narrative research and pays particular attention to the fragility of these relationships: ‘every aspect of the work is touched by the ethics of the research relationship’ (Josselson, 2005, p. 537). Josselson describes the implicit and explicit contract between the researcher and the participant:

*The explicit contract states the role relationships between researcher and participant (e.g., ‘This is who I am. This is the purpose of my study. You are free to participate or not. The interview will be tape recorded. You may withdraw at any time.’) and is often fairly straightforward. The development of the individual, personal, intimate relationship between researcher and participant rests on and contains an implicit contract, the terms of which are difficult to foresee or make explicit and the arena for differing assumptions, expectations, and contingencies. (Josselson, 2007, p. 539)*

It was mandatory, as a component of gaining ethics approval for this case study, to obtain a signature from each participant (prior to the interview commencing) indicating that they had given ‘consent’ to participating in my study. Josselson is highly critical of this constraint, particularly when ethics committees or review boards require that ‘consent forms talk about potential harmful effects of the interview’ (Josselson, 2007, p. 543).<sup>17</sup> She remarks on the conundrum of informed consent: ‘I don’t think we can fully inform a participant at the outset about what he or she is in fact consenting to since

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<sup>17</sup> Josselson writes that ethics committees and review boards have ‘become increasingly problematic for narrative research’ and that the ‘dominant discourse that guides these boards is rooted in health/medical research and is often at odds with the discourse of social science research’ (Josselson, 2007, p. 557). As I was enrolled in the School of Mathematical and Geospatial Sciences this resonates with my experience.

much of what will take place is unforeseeable' (Josselson, 2007, p. 540).<sup>18</sup> Josselson believes that in general 'people will only tell researchers what they want to tell, and it seems to me that there is no need to warn them that they might become upset' (Josselson, 2007, p. 543). I found that this prescribed process (of supplying a three-page 'project information statement' up front and obtaining 'consent') to be more harmful than helpful to the interview process. Josselson writes that 'the researcher must present himself/herself as part of an institutional framework to a participant often weary of the impersonality of bureaucratic forms' (Josselson, 2007, p. 544).

In order to alleviate this awkward situation, I occasionally gave myself the option of requesting a signature after the interview was completed. In many cases the participants were dismissive of the consent form and it was unusual for an interviewee to read the entire 'project information statement' which detailed the potential for harm, how their information would be stored and that they could withdraw their participation at any time. The clinical nature of these forms brought attention to the power imbalance between the researcher and interviewee and only served to undermine the connection we were establishing or had already established (prior to the interview).<sup>19</sup>

## 2.7 *In the field*

The major decision I had to make about my fieldwork was whether to interview couples together or individually (two separate interviews).<sup>20</sup> Many international studies that have focused on disasters from a gendered perspective exclude men and

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<sup>18</sup> Josselson's preference is for 'two "informed consent" forms – one at the beginning of the interview agreeing to participate, to be taped, and acknowledging that the participant has the right to withdraw at any time. The second form would be presented at the end of the interview with agreements about how the material will be managed from that point on' (Josselson, 2007, p. 544).

<sup>19</sup> Reinharz writes about 'believing and being trusted by the interviewee' and describes a number of approaches taken by different researchers. One 'had to disassociate herself from the research role to enable the 32 women...to trust her.' Another 'downplayed the academic aspect of her research in her own eyes in order to have a more egalitarian orientation to the women she was studying' (Reinharz, 1992, p. 29). Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong write that the 'informed consent form forced us to confront and contend with the explicitly differential relationships between the respondents and ourselves; it became a crude tool – a conscience – to remind us of our accountability and position (Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong, 2003, p. 178).

<sup>20</sup> The majority of disaster studies that I have encountered (some of these are analysed in the Literature Review chapter) conduct interviews with individuals only (one on one).

focus purely on the experience of women. Interviewing couples together provided me with rich exchanges (of disagreements and debates) that I otherwise would have missed. Reinharz considers this issue briefly and states ‘interviewing husbands and wives separately has the disadvantage of obscuring how interaction occurs in the couple. The views the researcher hears expressed separately may rarely be expressed when the couple is together’ (Reinharz, 1992, p. 41).

At the risk of having one person talk more than the other, I did feel that there would be more value in observing and experiencing how couples interacted together during the interview. I also reassured myself that if I came across a couple where either the man or the woman barely spoke I could always approach them later on in my fieldwork and suggest I meet with them alone to allow me to hear their point of view. How couples relate and interact with each other is crucial to family decision-making and underpins my exploration of the traditional gender roles within families.

Reinharz quotes a sociologist, Lillian Rubin, who wrote: ‘In exploring the dynamics of family life it is essential to hear “both sides of the story”. It is customary for the woman’s version to be neglected, but in redressing this imbalance I did not want to leave out of the account what the men had to say’ (Reinharz, 1992, p. 38). I had not anticipated the difficulty I would experience, while I was in the field, of obtaining the perspective of young men; they were reluctant to engage with my study. The invitation to participate in an interview was extended to all adults in every family. This highlights the broader issue of sample quality, inclusiveness and being careful about generalisations based on a biased sample.

I spent two months during the spring of 2006 living in a self-contained cottage on a fire-affected farm (photo page 22). Prior to arriving I was not aware of the extent of damage that the farm had suffered from the Wangary fire (one of two homes, in excess of a thousand sheep, outbuildings and fences were destroyed) and that my daily view, from the kitchen sink, would be a burnt landscape. Living in this location helped me appreciate the impact of the fire on the environment and the connection that the people I was interviewing had with their landscape.

I was aware that my visit coincided with the harvesting and shearing seasons and that I would have to be as flexible as possible about when and where the interviews would be conducted.<sup>21</sup> In 2006 South Australia's fire season was brought forward to 15 October. Two major bushfires occurred during my stay (the 'Big Swamp' and 'Rustler's Gully' fires). All of the participants I interviewed on or after the day of the Rustler's Gully fire (11 October 2006) referred to this fire event; commenting on where they were, how they felt, what they did and how all of that differed to their experience of the Wangary fire.<sup>22</sup> I completed four interviews throughout that day and into the evening which was somewhat surreal.<sup>23</sup>

Interviews were conducted (and recorded) with 38 families (55 individuals) across the fire-affected region: Charlton Gully, Edillilie, Greenpatch, Koppio, Louth Bay, North Shields, Poonindie, Wanilla and White Flat. Within this sample there were variations in age (20-90 years), occupation, cultural background and socio-economic status. More women than men were interviewed. Only one participant (a man) was a single parent; all the other families who had children living at home had two parents. Interviews mostly took place on the properties and in the homes of the participants, with a few nominating to meet in the town of Port Lincoln. I had access to a meeting room in town and used this space for five of the interviews.

All but two of the interviews occurred during my fieldwork between September and November 2006. In February 2007, when I returned to report back to the community, I utilised this opportunity to follow up with two interviewees. I visited one woman in her workplace to obtain her perspective in the absence of her husband. The other interview was conducted in a cafe with a woman who had, with her husband and four children,

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<sup>21</sup> Eight interviews took place in the evening – many of these finished after 10pm.

<sup>22</sup> The Rustler's Gully fire ignited about 2 kilometres north of Port Lincoln. Twenty fire-fighting vehicles and two water bomber aircraft worked to extinguish the fire.

<sup>23</sup> One man that I interviewed on the evening of 11 October played a key role in the Rustler's Gully fire: he assisted residents by helping them prepare their homes so that they could stay and defend their properties.

moved house on seven occasions since the fire had destroyed their home. We had been unsuccessful, despite many phone calls, in our attempts to meet during my fieldwork.<sup>24</sup>

Because I was living alone and meeting people all the time I was often invited to functions and events, or included in outings. I participated in two fire-fighter training sessions with a local brigade.<sup>25</sup> Without listing all of the social events I engaged in, these activities enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the community, the impact of the bushfire on the community and some of the issues that were introduced by the interviewees.

I maintained a journal during my two months of fieldwork which I used to write personal reflections on each interview, making note of the location, how I felt it had progressed and what the main focus of the participant was. This journal, which incorporated all aspects of how I spent my time in the region, constitutes a useful source of information. It has the power to transport me back to the best and worst of my fieldwork and can remind me of the smaller details that have faded with the passage of time. When I finally reached the writing stage I was not dependent on memory alone.

## ***2.8 Exploring and interpreting the narratives – the researcher's role***

When I returned to Melbourne I was completely weighed down by the quantity of material I had accumulated during my two months of fieldwork and was faced with transcribing over 60 hours of interview recordings. Hyde has written about the scale of her task:

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<sup>24</sup> Setting up interviews was time-intensive and frequently involved three or four phone calls over a number of days or weeks.

<sup>25</sup> These two sessions gave me a sense of the pressures on volunteers: how risky and dangerous their roles are, how great the responsibility and the lack of resources (particularly people). One session was in the evening and involved a presentation on radio communication in fire trucks; the other was during the day and required me to be issued with an oversized bright jumpsuit, a pair of gloves and a helmet. I was asked to start the external engine at the rear of the truck. Suddenly we were in scrub and issued with a scenario of fire and simulated a burn-over. There was only one female volunteer fire-fighter at each session. My journal entry states: 'I got a sense of the vulnerability of both the local brigade and the community they seek to protect. I'm not sure if those words are suitable but the people on the trucks play such a vital role yet they're so few and are mostly older men.'

*Fieldwork reaped extensive and rich data. I often felt overwhelmed during data collection, yet it was not until I completed the field visits that I confronted the prodigious task of creating order out of 4 000 documents and almost 100 hours of interviews. How could I manage and eventually analyse all these data without becoming lost? How could I accomplish the project when constrained by resources, time and skills?* (Hyde, 1994, p. 174)

My fieldwork glow faded rapidly as I was left alone, removed from the landscape of my study, with the task of transcribing and analysing my interview recordings.<sup>26</sup> Hyde describes this stage of the research as ‘the “unglamorous” side of qualitative methods’ and as ‘one of the most closely guarded research secrets’ (Hyde, 1994, p. 180).<sup>27</sup>

Strauss emphasises that it is not always essential to transcribe ‘every paragraph or line of each interview or taped fieldnote’ (Strauss, 1987, p. 266). Strauss writes:

*The general rule of thumb here is to transcribe only as much as is needed. But that is not necessarily an easy decision to make, nor can it be made sensibly, either, immediately – perhaps not until well into the course of the study itself.* (Strauss, 1987, p. 266)<sup>28</sup>

I came to accept that I could either analyse all of the interviews superficially or a select number meaningfully.<sup>29</sup> I nominated the latter approach which instantly provided me with renewed energy; as this was a manageable and achievable task. I selected 14 interviews that were split evenly into two groups (interviewees with children and interviewees without children). Instead of transcribing them all in full (I had earlier completed full transcriptions of a small number of interviews) I listened over and over again to each interview in order to identify emerging and shared themes. Using this method I was able to acknowledge that I had not necessarily ‘heard’ everything when

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<sup>26</sup> Avoidance featured in the form of a short-term (full-time) research position between January and September 2007 which slowed my progress. Hyde writes that she felt ‘overwhelmed and confused, which I typically respond to by disengaging’ (Hyde, 1994, p. 180). Ironically, clarity was a by-product of my eight-month break from full-time study.

<sup>27</sup> She writes: ‘The initial enthusiasm for fieldwork gave way to grinding tedium and exhaustion’ and ‘In hindsight, negative feelings were not surprising given the sheer quantity of my data and the amount of preparation’ (Hyde, 1994, p. 180).

<sup>28</sup> He qualifies this advice: ‘...should *not* be read as giving license to transcribe just a few of your first interviews or your taped fieldnotes’ (Strauss, 1987, p. 266).

<sup>29</sup> Glaser has written that ‘in general more data is always collected than analyzed in the larger research enterprise’ (Glaser, 1998, p. 9).

the interview took place. Interviewing is an art form and whilst I had studied oral history there was no such thing as a flawless interview.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the painfully slow task of transcribing, I did not need to be in front of a computer in order to immerse myself in the interviews.<sup>31</sup> This immersion process resulted in six themes that emerged consistently across the interviews. After I had confirmed them, I listened back to the interviews noting the specific passages that were relevant to these themes.<sup>32</sup> It was completely liberating not to feel compelled to produce full transcriptions.<sup>33</sup>

In her paper on analysing personal stories Fraser refers to the metaphors of sewing, knitting and travelling:

*Piecing together fragments of the fabric of conversations, researchers may be understood to sew ideas together. Similarly, we may be seen as knitters who 'spin a yarn' by weaving together the threads of different stories. Finally, we may be compared to travellers who embark on a journey and who try to use maps and compasses.* (Fraser, 2004, p. 183)

This stage of the research, interpreting the narratives, requires the researcher to turn to the 'task of making a report of what has been learned' (Josselson, 2007, p. 548). Sandelowski writes that once the 'data' is acquired the task is to strip it back 'by using data selectively to exemplify, illustrate, or illuminate the story the writer wants to tell' (Sandelowski, 1998, p. 376). It is through the writing process that the researcher discovers what they have learned (or are in the midst of learning). Sandelowski states that 'Writing is a mode of discovery that takes researchers where they should be by the time they get to the write-up: "beyond" their data' (Sandelowski, 1998, p. 376).

In her analysis of the ethical relationship between the researcher and the researched Josselson writes that 'reading about oneself written through another's viewpoint and

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<sup>30</sup> The theme of faith was a particularly subtle one (there might be a few words spoken and if I didn't pick up on it there and then it was often lost). I wish I had picked up on the importance of this theme earlier in my fieldwork. I tended to take my cue from people when it came to this theme.

<sup>31</sup> I used an MP3 player which gave me freedom of movement.

<sup>32</sup> Strauss states that 'listening as well as transcribing is essential for full and varied analysis' (Strauss, 1987, p. 267).

<sup>33</sup> The shortlist of 14 equated to just over 20 hours of interview recordings. It did not make sense to transcribe pages and pages of dialogue that I knew I would not need to refer to again during the writing process.

prose is unsettling, even more so than, but akin to, seeing a photo of oneself or hearing one's voice on tape' (Josselson, 2007, p. 551). Her concern lies in the lack of research conducted on the actual experiences of 'participants and researchers to better understand the particularities of our moral duties' (Josselson, 2007, p. 551).<sup>34</sup>

## 2.9 *Disseminating the findings*

Alston and Bowles write that 'there is no point going to all the trouble of completing a research project without also having in mind what you want to happen as a result' (Alston and Bowles, 2003, p. 298). During my fieldwork, I often wondered who would listen to or read my findings (once I had established what they were). I knew that failing to engage in the vital activity of dissemination would greatly diminish the time and generosity of my interviewees. When I asked participants who they thought would benefit from hearing their stories, the two principal suggestions were the fire agencies and residents at risk of experiencing bushfire in the future.

Josselson explores the ethical problems associated with interpretive authority and weighs up whether participants should be 'given transcripts for verification and/or final reports to comment on the interpretations' (Josselson, 2007, p. 549). She states that 'from the researcher's point of view, the report is not "about" the participants but "about" the researcher's meaning making' and that the 'researchers are interested in the research questions (and their careers)' whilst the 'participants are interested in themselves' (Josselson, 2007, p. 549).

Three months after completing my fieldwork, in February 2007, I returned to Port Lincoln as a speaker at the second workshop for women affected by the Wangary fire.<sup>35</sup> This was my first opportunity to provide preliminary feedback to the community which had participated in my study.

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<sup>34</sup> Josselson writes she has come to believe that the most ethical approach is to 'explain to the participant at the close of the interview that what I will write about his or her interview will depend on the general conclusions I make about the whole group. I tell them that what I will write will probably not feel to them as though it is fully about them since I usually highlight certain themes in the text to make whatever point about the whole topic seems to me to be important to make' (Josselson, 2007, p. 552).

<sup>35</sup> The title of this second workshop was: *Women continuing to improve the odds in disaster recovery*, 12 February 2007.



In September 2007 I attended an international fire conference in Hobart, Tasmania, and gave a presentation on my case study (this was prior to completing the analysis).<sup>36</sup> After I had completed the analysis and the first draft of my findings chapter, I gave a presentation at an international hazards conference in New Zealand, in July 2008.

Josselson encourages the researcher not to dwell on how people who have participated in the study might respond to our work:

*We have little evidence about the effects on people of what we write about them, but what we have seems to suggest that most people are not very interested in what we have to say and will be highly unlikely to read our scholarly articles and books. We researchers are preoccupied with our studies; our participants go on with their lives. Because of the time it takes to do a narrative study and publish it, those participants who do read what we write do so at a point in their lives different from the moment represented by the text we have analyzed. They may recognize some aspect of themselves in what we say but will be aware that although we have 'got' something right about them, we also got them wrong. Most people will not be very bothered by this or not for very long. (Josselson, 2007, p. 559-560)*

## **2.10 Reflecting on my research experience**

Reflecting on her five-year study, Hyde reminds us that research is 'a flawed enterprise,' 'an imperfect process' and that 'we learn much about our intended topic and ourselves from the mistakes we make' (Hyde, 1994, p. 171).

I was two months out from submitting this thesis before I made an effort to look for information on the negative impacts, or side effects, of conducting a narrative study. Prior to this I had been questioning my own self-knowledge. I had not anticipated, when I submitted my application for funding in 2005, that interviewing people rendered

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<sup>36</sup> This presentation was later published as a paper in the February 2008 edition of The Australian Journal of Emergency Management (volume 23, No.1). A small number of participants in my case study had given me their contact details and asked to be kept up to date with my progress; I posted copies of the AJEM paper to them. It was only afterwards that I read Josselson's advice: 'If we do send our work to them, we need to caution the participants that our interest in writing was about the topic for which we made use of their material but that they are unlikely to find a faithful representation of themselves since that was not our purpose' (Josselson, 2007, p. 550).

homeless by a natural disaster would be highly stressful.<sup>37</sup> In fact, during the fieldwork my focus was on arranging interviews, accumulating material that would enrich my study and simply savouring living in a rural environment. Although I did experience emotional exhaustion it was only months later, after the interviews were recorded and I had returned to suburbia, that I encountered the side effects.

I was immersing myself in the bushfire narratives – deciding which interviews to analyse in detail for this thesis and then listening to that shortlist over and over again – and failed to make the connection with this task (which I was undertaking on a full-time basis) and my own emotional stability. Each time I listened to an interview I was transported back to the converted shed and the caravan. I had to remind myself that the people whose stories I was so preoccupied with had moved on with their lives.

My initial search, within the texts that instruct students on how to conduct social research, for some reference to the welfare of the researcher proved fruitless.<sup>38</sup> Reinharz devotes a small space in her text to ‘stress from interviewing’ and quotes Thompson, a sociologist who had interviewed women with ‘eating problems:’ ‘I sometimes had to remind myself that the woman’s ability to retell a traumatic story meant she had already survived the worst of the pain’ (Reinharz, 1992, p. 35). Reinharz writes that:

*All of these stressful reactions occur [such as anxiety and depression], I believe, because feminist researchers discover there is more pain in the interviewees’ lives than they suspected. The interview process gives the researcher an intimate view of this pain and the shock of discovery may eventually force her to confront her own vulnerability.* (Reinharz, 1992, p. 36)

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<sup>37</sup> In a former life I have worked with homeless people in inner-city Melbourne.

<sup>38</sup> I have, more recently, located the work of Figley (2002) who writes on the subject of compassion fatigue in a diversity of contexts.



**Figure 2:**

This is the house, on a Wangary fire-affected farm in Greenpatch, where I lived while I conducted my fieldwork (September-November 2006).

## Chapter 3: Literature Review

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### 3.1 *Introduction*

*In the past decade sociologists have tended not to enter discussions about the meaning and impacts of natural events such as droughts, floods and fires in Australia. (Stehlik, Gray and Lawrence, 1999, p. 21)*

This literature review examines the research and theoretical assumptions, across various themes, relevant to the Wangary fire case study. It identifies the linkages and limitations of the literature to my case study findings and discussion.

This chapter introduces the broader international theme of gender and disaster and progressively narrows to the final theme that is specific to the Wangary fire. The first major theme, 'gender in disaster research,' is split into two parts: from an international perspective and then from the Australian perspective. The latter consists of research undertaken on bushfire with a focus on women's experiences. The next theme, 'allied areas,' looks at Australian studies in the wet season (flooding and cyclones) and drought. The literature review then shifts to the subject of families and decision-making, followed by an analysis of current bushfire community education programs, in the context of the national 'stay or go' policy. The final theme localises this policy with a brief assessment of three reports that were undertaken as a consequence of the Wangary fire.

### 3.2 *International research perspective of gender in disaster research*

Developing countries are more advanced with their analysis of the effects of disaster on women (Enarson and Meyreles, 2004). Researchers in developing countries cover ground that is too often overlooked by their counterparts in industrialised countries where populations have the protection of emergency management systems and generally high living standards. However, during the 1990s the study of women's

disaster experiences began to gain momentum in industrialised countries, particularly the United States.

Enarson and Morrow (1997) conducted a qualitative study with female survivors of Hurricane Andrew.<sup>39</sup> In their book chapter, ‘A Gendered perspective: the voices of women,’ they identified important key directions for future research in the field and useful lessons for policy makers. Under the heading of ‘preparation and mitigation’ Enarson and Morrow explain:

*Because women are instrumental in preparing households and kin for disaster, they are essential actors in community-based disaster planning and local mitigation initiatives. They must be fully engaged as equal and active partners in order to build democratic disaster-resilient communities.* (Enarson and Morrow, 2007, p. 138)

During their work on Hurricane Andrew, Enarson and Morrow ‘found little evidence of gender being seriously analyzed’ and with others they began to ‘call for more gendered disaster research’ (Enarson and Morrow, 1998, p. xii). Utilising the material that was generated, Enarson and Morrow (1998) edited the first collection of papers on gender and disaster: *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women’s Eyes*. One of the many contributors to this important text was Fordham, who went on to produce numerous papers on her qualitative case studies about two flood-hit locations in Scotland<sup>40</sup> (Fordham, 1998; 1999; 2008, Enarson and Fordham, 2001). In a presentation, Fordham articulated the paradox ‘where men – the risk tolerant risk-takers – are in charge of disaster preparedness and management and women – the risk avoiders – are subordinated’ (Fordham, 2000, p. 7).

In their paper, ‘Gender and Evacuation: A Closer Look at Why Women Are More Likely to Evacuate for Hurricanes’, Bateman and Edwards studied the distribution of decision-making power within American households and how men and women perceived risk (Bateman and Edwards, 2002, p. 108). They refer to earlier research

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<sup>39</sup> Hurricane Andrew hit the mainland of Florida in 1992 killing 15 people and leaving over 180 000 homeless. Further information on this natural disaster: Peacock, Morrow and Gladwin, 1997.

<sup>40</sup> The major floods studied were: Perth in 1993 and Strathclyde in 1994.

which noted that family and household composition played a major factor in decisions to evacuate:

*Consequently, many researchers have found that household composition and characteristics such as the 'presence of young children, household size, presence of elders, and whether or not the family has a pet' particularly interesting, because it is believed that family relationships and composition are crucial in receiving warning messages and for predicting evacuation behaviour. (Bateman and Edwards, 2002, p. 109)*

While Bateman and Edwards (2002) found that their study raised issues they could not address, their paper revealed the complexities that lie behind the decision to evacuate during a crisis.

Fothergill provided an overview of the literature on gender and disaster so that researchers could understand 'where we are now and where we need to go' (Fothergill, 1998, p. 12).<sup>41</sup> She concluded the review recommending that more research on women's experiences in the disaster process be conducted (Fothergill, 1998, p. 24).<sup>42</sup> Fothergill collected the stories of flood-affected women who lived in 'two adjoining towns on the Red River [North Dakota] which experienced widespread flooding, evacuation, and destruction in the spring of 1997' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 7). Her PhD, which was published in book form, *Heads Above Water: Gender, Class and Family in the Grand Forks Flood*, notes that despite the recognition that more research is needed on women and disaster, 'the knowledge base on this issue is still remarkably weak and underdeveloped' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 8).

In the introduction Fothergill states that 'my study is designed to address this knowledge gap by investigating and analysing women's experiences in a disaster and placing women's everyday lives at the centre of the analysis' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 8). Fothergill's study of flood is about '...overcoming and managing a crisis situation; it is

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<sup>41</sup> This was an updated version of an earlier paper by Fothergill that appeared in the International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters in 1996.

<sup>42</sup> 'I recommend that more research on women's experiences in the disaster process, more examinations of the links between race, class, and gender, and specifically, more research on issues of women's physical safety, including domestic abuse as well as other violence against women, in a disaster.' 'I suggest we conduct more in-depth, qualitative research in order to obtain a better understanding of women's lived experience in disasters, in the context of their specific situation'. (Fothergill, 1998, p. 24).

about family; it is about social roles and identity; it is about gender; and it is about social-class standing and the trauma of downward mobility' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 8). One of the limitations of Fothergill's study is the exclusion of men, as the perspective of husbands and fathers would have enriched this qualitative study. When qualitative researchers focus on individuals of one gender only one perspective is explored. This approach is too simplistic and conceals the complexities of families and family decision-making.

In 1999 the International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters (IJMED) published a special issue on women and disasters. A book, *Women and Disasters: From Theory to Practice* (2008), was published to mark the impending tenth anniversary of that journal publication. The seven papers, updated from IJMED, are reproduced in the book, with the addition of three new chapters. The recycling of material begins with the Forward by Scanlon who inserted text on roles in disaster response from previous years (Scanlon, 1997; 1998), and all of the contributors are well established and in senior positions. This book offered an opportunity to introduce new perspectives and work from younger researchers and scholars working in this field.

It is important to remember that these international studies on gender and disaster are culturally specific. While there are issues that are universal, the extent of their relevance to an Australian context (or transferability) is open to question. Qualitative studies are specific to an experience, including the norms and social structure and processes of a population in a space and time. Despite the commonality of language (English), there are appreciable differences in the population demographics and cultural contexts between Australia and the United States.<sup>43</sup> It is worth questioning the extent and influence of these international references for my case study conducted in remote South Australia.

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<sup>43</sup> The population of the USA is about 300 million, that of Australia about 21 million. Population differences also include extent of ethnicity, poverty, the social service and government systems.

### 3.3 *Australian research perspectives of gender in disaster research*

Australia lags behind other developed nations in the field of gender in disaster research. In her segment on ABC radio in 2005 Marilyn Childs, Director of the Fire Services Research Programme at the University of Western Sydney, made reference to Enarson's puzzlement over why Australia remains one of the few countries in the world that 'does not have a vibrant conversation about women and disasters' (Childs, 2005). Childs emphasised that 'it simply isn't possible to foster disaster resistant communities if we fail to see that women make up half the communities we live in and that they have something to offer' (Childs, 2005). Childs has conducted research into the history of women in fire-fighting in Australia and seeks to address the current under-representation of women in paid fire-fighting roles. Her research has focused on acknowledging and documenting the contribution that women have made, since 1901, to fire-fighting and identifying how to attract more women to fire-fighting careers.<sup>44</sup>

A turning point in Australia occurred (relatively early in comparison to the United States) when the Women's Policy Committee of the Queensland Bureau of Emergency Services initiated, in March 1993, a Symposium on 'Women in Emergencies and Disasters.' Three of the papers presented (by Fuller, Honeycombe and Williams) were published later that year in the 1993-1994 summer edition of *The Macedon Digest*.<sup>45</sup> Fuller's paper framed the design, purpose and outcomes of the symposium and defined three objectives: 'To consider the needs of women in disasters and emergencies; to consider case studies of disasters and emergencies from the female perspective; to commence policy development aimed at providing a better service for female clients in emergencies and disasters' (Fuller, 1994, p. 26). Although this symposium occurred

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<sup>44</sup> The Women's Fire Auxiliary (WFA) was formed during World War II. For forty years (between the end of the war to 1984) it was illegal for women to work as paid fire-fighters. Childs writes that very few women are employed as full-time fire-fighters: 'on average, less than 5 per cent and in some states less than 2 per cent'. (Childs, 2006, p. 29).

<sup>45</sup> In 1995 the journal was renamed the Australian Journal of Emergency Management (AJEM).



nearly 16 years ago the ideas and recommendations remain current due to the apparent lack of change in this area.<sup>46</sup>

The only Australian qualitative bushfire study written in the last 20 years is Cox's PhD thesis, *Treading Lightly: An Ecology of Healing* (1996). Cox interviewed 40 people, including disaster relief workers, who survived the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires in Victoria. Many of the minor themes that Cox explored (faith, packing the car, emotional attachment to the landscape, role conflict) emerged in my bushfire narratives. Cox stated that her intention was to generate understandings 'about the bushfire experience and the struggle to heal, in order to see whether insights gained could inform the healing role of nurses' (Cox, 1996, p. 19). Her major focus, described as the 'most dominant and pervasive in the fire narratives', is 'the cosmological view of humans as connected to their environment, to spaces and places' (Cox, 1996, p. 75). Cox identified a gap in the literature (and my case study aims to help fill this void):

*One emotion that is seldom located in the disaster literature, but which was clearly evident in this area, was the resentment that women felt at having to make huge decisions about what to take, when and where to go, and saving children and possessions alone. (Cox, 1996, p. 61)*

Cox stated that women in this circumstance felt that their anger was justified when their husband was out helping a friend, but not justified if they were part of the fire-fighting effort (Cox, 1996, p. 61).

Kenworthy (2007), a resident of Macedon in Victoria, began writing her memoir, *Aftermath of fire: a people's triumph...*, in 1984. Her account of the Ash Wednesday fires incorporates 'the good and the bad, the sad and the mad' (Kenworthy, 2007).<sup>47</sup> It is a comprehensive account of her personal journey and the changes she observed in the Macedon and Mount Macedon communities after the tragic fires of 1983. It is a refreshing non-academic study, a cathartic writing process for the author, which explores a number of neglected areas including the welfare of young children and

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<sup>46</sup> One example: 'There is a need to increase the number of women in all Divisions of the Bureau of Emergency Services [Queensland] at operational and management levels'. (Fuller, 1994, p. 26). This need remains current across Australian emergency agencies and organisations. Further reading on the lack of women in emergency management roles in Australia: Wraith (1997) and Robertson (1998).

<sup>47</sup> Sourced from the Introduction, which does not have a page number.

teenagers and the impacts on the families of volunteers who assisted with the recovery effort. Kenworthy writes critically of a report by Wilson and Ferguson (1985), which was influential in the formation of the ‘stay or go’ policy:

*The report doesn't seem to take into consideration the enormous stress, the dense smoke or the natural desire to take shelter. In the cold light of day, with all sorts of information to be accessed, it is easy to say what should or should not have been done by these poor people, but the note takers can never factor into their report the emotion of that time, the sheer terror, the helplessness, the panic, that surely influenced our people [the five who perished on Mount Macedon] to take the action that they DID take on that terrible night. (Kenworthy, 2007, p. 205)*

Poiner (1990) carried out a study of social relationships, with gender as a central consideration, in a country district of New South Wales in the late 1970s. She lived in the district as a participant observer, conducting surveys and interviewing one-third of the district's 170 permanent households (Poiner, 1990, p. 3). Poiner's PhD was published in book form, *The Good Old Rule: Gender and other power relationships in a rural community*. It contains a chapter entitled ‘Trial by fire,’ which briefly explores the roles of women during a bushfire that burnt through 96 000 hectares, including the district of her study, in 1979. Poiner found that ‘fire-fighting is clearly not an arena in which women participate at a visible level’ and that ‘there is no question of their going with the men or wielding any sort of fire-fighting equipment at “the front”’ (Poiner, 1990, p. 171).

Poiner noted, with irony, that although women are not considered to be physically strong enough or capable to contribute to the fire-fighting effort, they often find themselves at home alone where they undertake the task of defending the property from the approaching bushfire: ‘Thus women are excluded from participation in the forefront of a crisis in which social credit attends visibility, although their co-operation and participation is required at a less prestigious level’ (Poiner, 1990, p. 172). This scenario, of women taking on ‘male’ roles or duties alone in the domestic environment at the height of a bushfire, is not explored at any length (the welfare of children is not mentioned) but it is acknowledged and this is important.

### 3.4 *Allied areas*

Within the Australian disaster research environment there is a small number of studies, on drought and the wet season (flooding and cyclones), that focus on the experiences of women or families and their perspective.

Cottrell and Berry (2002) conducted a research project, *Women and the Wet Season in Northern Australia*, using qualitative methods that explored the resilience of women in the context of wet-weather natural hazards in northern Australia. Their approach was informed by the recognition that ‘presenting information to communities without identifying their needs is ineffectual’ (Cottrell and Berry, 2002, p. 8). By focusing on the strategies that women do have for preparing for the wet season in Northern Australia, Cottrell and Berry were able to ‘capture benefits that might be applied more widely in the region’ (Cottrell and Berry, 2002, p. 49). Their outcomes included: ‘Women’s needs and capacities differ depending on the type of community in which they live, their income, and their capacity for independent action’ and they recommended that information campaigns need to ‘go beyond the generic and be tailored to suit different communities and different sub-sections of communities’ (Cottrell and Berry, 2002, p. 51).

*Women and the Wet Season in Northern Australia* is directly relevant to this bushfire case study, as the authors acknowledged the value of tapping into the experiences and knowledge of those who have lived through a crisis or disaster. Their recommendation, to go beyond the generic and to draw on actual experiences, applies to the national ‘stay or go’ policy and could potentially enhance and improve it by making it more relevant.

Finlay’s (1998) chapter on her study of women’s flood experiences in rural Australia was published in the *Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women’s Eyes*. Using a qualitative method, Finlay conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 women of various ages and social location, to explore women’s capacities during a flood and their interpretations of the disaster. Finlay states that her flood study, undertaken in coastal Queensland (in a town that features in *Women and the Wet*),

demonstrates that ‘women contributed valuable helping work in flood time’ and offers an ‘alternate image of women in disaster’ (Finlay, p. 148). By exploring the capacities of women and the ‘meanings that women give to “disaster”’, Finlay focused on the ‘concept of self-reliance, involving women’s freedom to act rather than passively to await rescue’ (Finlay, 1998, p. 144).

These two wet-weather hazard studies are useful but, similar to Fothergill (2004), the male perspective is excluded. Men who are in the role of father and husband have an important point of view and their influence and action (or inaction) in relation to family decision-making for hazard preparedness and response needs to be considered. The aim is not to create a women’s response but to create a well-grounded response that is as relevant to women as it is to men.

Stehlik, Gray and Lawrence, the chief investigators from universities in Queensland and New South Wales (NSW), undertook a two-year comparative study of the 1990s drought. Producers across 56 farms in the western district of New South Wales and Central Queensland were interviewed about their experiences while in drought (Stehlik et al, 1999). Their study developed a ‘social construction of drought’ and the report, *Drought in the 1990s: Australian Farm Families’ Experiences*, documented 14 main findings (Stehlik et al, 1999, p. xi). The first two – ‘Families are the first line of defence against the hardship of drought’ and ‘Men and women experience drought differently’ – resonate with the experience of the Lower Eyre Peninsula residents affected by the Wangary fire (Stehlik et al, 1999, p. xi).

The 2002-03 drought was the focus of a study conducted by Alston and Kent (2004) for New South Wales Agriculture. Their research aimed to fill ‘the current gaps in knowledge’ by identifying the social impacts of drought on ‘farm families, small business and rural communities and the effects of policies on these impacts’ (Alston and Kent, 2004, p. 4). The State of New South Wales, including Sydney, was 100 percent drought declared by February 2003 which coincided with their research. Sixty-two farm family members across three small rural towns were interviewed as well as key informants. Their study findings, in *Social Impacts of Drought: a report to NSW Agriculture* built on the earlier drought study (Stehlik et al, 1999), particularly with

regard to gender: ‘From the data presented here it is clear that the experience of men and women in farm families in relation to drought differs’ (Alston and Kent, 2004, p. 107).

These two important drought studies resulted in a number of narratives that were utilised by the investigators beyond the official reports. The female experience of drought was the focus of two papers; one from each of the studies. Alston, in her paper “‘I’d just like to walk out of here’: Australian Women’s Experience of Drought’, writes that women have been ‘largely invisible and, in the language of drought, women’s individual voices and stories have been absent’ (Aston, 2006, p. 155). Alston stated that she had taken up the challenge of ensuring the voices of women were heard and her research indicated that there are ‘multiple realities that make up the drought story and that women’s experiences must be part of the acknowledged and public discourse’ (Alston, 2006, p. 169).

### ***3.5 Families and decision-making***

Connell stated that the family is often seen as ‘the simplest of institutions’ when in fact it is ‘one of the most complex products’ of society (Connell, 1987, p. 121). He wrote:

*There is nothing simple about it. The interior of the family is a scene of multilayered relationships folded over on each other like geological strata. In no other institution are relationships so extended in time, so intensive in contact, so dense in their interweaving of economics, emotion, power and resistance. (Connell, 1987, p. 121)*

In her study of the strain of rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Andrew, Morrow (1997, p. 141) described families as the ‘most intimate social group’. Gladwin and Peacock, in their investigation into warning and evacuation patterns in advance of Hurricane Andrew, found that ‘Households with young children can be assumed to be more likely to have the mother as a major decision-maker, thus increasing the likelihood of evacuation’ (Gladwin and Peacock, 1997, p. 66). In her ‘cursory’ examination of emergency related public awareness materials in Canada, Enarson identified that there is ‘much room for improvement’:

*Families and households are diverse, yet the ‘family’ is addressed generically with little or no reflection of cultural difference or economic constraints. The family is also typically addressed as a single unit with little or no recognition of how conflict or competing interests on the basis of gender and/or age may prevent or hinder preparedness or effective response and recovery. The ‘family’ is also generally presented as middle-aged and middle-class with the capacity and resources to purchase and store emergency supplies, arrange for private child care or transportation, cell phones, computers, and perhaps a cottage for the family in case of evacuation. Website content and illustrations rarely reflect the living conditions of girls and women most at risk and tend to reinforce gender stereotypes. (Enarson, 2008, p. 37)*

This observation, consistent with the earlier quote from Connell, where emergency agencies treat families as uniform (ignoring the diversity of socio-economics, language, education and abilities) is mirrored in Australia where there is no research available on how family dynamics inform decisions or about their response to and recovery from bushfire.

Many of the families affected by the Wangary fire derived their livelihood from the land. Whatmore states that ‘women are primarily involved in farming through specific forms of familial gender relations, most significantly through marriage, as wives, but also as the daughters and mothers of men “farmers”’ (Whatmore, 1991, p. 5). Alston wrote that the practice of passing the farm from father to son (patrilineal inheritance) ‘has made male ownership and control of land and the resources of agriculture the norm, giving male landholders enhanced prestige and influence in small communities’ (Alston, 2004, p. 142). Alston’s study of farming women revealed that ‘women have little power and control within the family production unit and share power within the family’ (Alston, 1995, p. 67).

### ***3.6 Current community education approaches to bushfire***

In the introduction to this thesis an historical overview and definition of the ‘stay or go’ policy was provided. This section of the literature review expands on that information.

The national ‘stay or go’ policy has required fire agencies to encourage residents to take greater responsibility for their own safety by preparing and planning for bushfire. The ‘creation and maintenance of a space within which a building can be defended against bushfire embers and radiant heat’ is identified as the most important aspect of preparation’ (AFAC, 2005, p. 5). Prior to this significant policy shift, emergency service providers did not believe they needed to include or understand the human dimension of emergency management, as their focus was purely on incident response and suppression. Australian emergency services seemed to remain isolated from the research that had been conducted by social scientists, over many decades and across numerous countries, in the disaster and emergency related fields.

After a number of serious fires in which lives had been lost, an attempt to bridge this knowledge gap was made in 1999 by the Community Safety Directorate within the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA). Several studies were funded to investigate household preparedness and responses to bushfire. The need for research was clear: ‘At present emergency services have little understanding of the nature of household preparedness and how to describe, measure and monitor it’ (Reinholdt, Rhodes and Scillo, 1999a, p. 1).

One report, *A framework for understanding and monitoring levels of preparedness for wildfire*, focused on how residents in bushfire-prone areas understand the fire risk and what residents considered to be effective preparedness. While the number and profile of residents who participated in the three focus groups was not clarified,<sup>48</sup> demographic factors were considered to be one of a substantial list of influencing behavioural factors: ‘Age and family structure, for example, are two variables that can strongly influence perceptions of risk’ (Reinholdt et al, 1999a, p. 19). Primary material gleaned from participants revealed that the option of staying, which is strongly endorsed by fire agencies, was considered irrational by many people: ‘...it seems to defy common sense and experience’ (Reinholdt et al, 1999a, p. 27).

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<sup>48</sup> Where the person lives is the only identifying feature; occasionally the content of their words provides further information (such as their gender).

A few of the focus group participants touched on a major theme in my case study but this fell outside the scope of the agencies' research. When asked to describe their priorities in the form of actions taken to deal with the risk of fire, one man is quoted as saying '....we have a tank and a pump which we regularly run, but I want to make sure my wife can actually handle it...you have to learn how to handle the equipment' (Reinholdt et al, 1999a, p. 30). By exploring the barriers to undertaking planning and preparation directly with residents living in high fire-risk areas, the authors concluded that the 'emergency services' understanding of preparedness is considerably different from that of the broader community' (Reinholdt et al, 1999a, p. 57).

This disconnect is reaffirmed in another of the CFA reports from that period, *Stay or Go: understanding community responses to emergencies*. The research team observed bushfires that threatened or impacted on communities and how people responded. In-depth interviews were then conducted to capture the experiences of residents. They confirmed that 'the strategies people adopted [could not] be simply categorised in terms of "staying" or "going"' (Reinholdt, Rhodes and Scillo, 1999b, p. 33). Although it is difficult to group complex behaviour, the authors identified eight major responses.<sup>49</sup>

Whilst the authors observed both women and men 'staying' they did notice that 'men were more inclined to stay' and that 'women generally assisted in preparing the property but left, often with children, as the fire approached or was about to impact' (Reinholdt et al, 1999b, p. 32). Their consideration of social and cultural influences is of value to my case study:

*Traditional gender roles also influence behaviour during events. Fighting fires is more often carried out by men who commonly assume the role of the 'protector' or instructor. Women have traditionally been more dependent on receiving instructions and act in roles which place them as primary carers for children. (Reinholdt et al, 1999b, p. 38)*

The CFA reports are critical of the prescriptive and authoritarian approach to community education and they note that the simple act of providing information to

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<sup>49</sup> The eight responses: leave early, stay away, unsuccessful attempt to return, return to rescue, leave immediately, wait and see, do as much as possible and stay.



people does not necessarily ensure that learning has occurred (Reinholdt et al, 1999b, p.10).

These findings have been reinforced by more recent studies that focus on bushfire preparedness and risk perception (Odgers and Rhodes, 2002 and Paton, Burgelt and Prior, 2008). The former study consisted of a questionnaire which was distributed to 1219 households who experienced the NSW bushfires over the summer of 2001-02. The authors noted that many aspects of the 'stay or go' position 'are at odds with how many people are likely to respond to risk' (Odgers and Rhodes, 2002, p. 36). Gender roles and decision-making is briefly referred to in their explanation of a higher proportion of men stating that they intended to stay and defend (Odgers and Rhodes, 2002, p. 26).

Paton et al (2008) explored the differences in levels of household preparedness, and their findings have reinforced the CFA's earlier results: '...living in high bushfire risk areas, or just receiving information about risk and how it might be managed is not sufficient to motivate people to prepare' (Paton et al, 2008, p. 47). The CFA research reports and Paton et al (2008) have recommended that the emergency services develop new ways to manage people who act outside the two prescribed options (stay or go). Considering that their research was published nine years apart it appears that the message is yet to be heard by the emergency services. There is a paradox here (in the failure to engage with internally produced research) and the statement made in one of the CFA reports might prove to be timeless:

*Agencies which ignore how the community is likely to respond, and try to direct people to adopt a specified response will remain frustrated by the communities' failure to conform. Those which try to understand what people do and why, will have the information necessary to develop new ways of promoting community preparedness and managing incidents which take account of the likely responses of the community. (Reinholdt et al, 1999b, p. 46)*

### 3.7 *The Wangary fire*

Rhodes completed a quantitative study of 288 households for the South Australian coroner which examined ‘the factors that influence how people prepare and respond to bushfires’ and aimed to identify ‘ways that community capacity can be enhanced’ (Rhodes, 2005, p. 3). Referring to numerous recent inquiries into major fires, Rhodes reinforced that ‘public safety in large part depends on people changing the way they understand and respond to the bushfire hazard’ (Rhodes, 2005, p. 5).

This report’s usefulness to considering gender roles and decision-making is limited somewhat by the imbalance of males to female respondents in the research sample (Rhodes, 2005, p. 30). A response from one person per household was obtained: ‘This strategy was adopted to enable people to decide for themselves who would be most suitable to respond’ (Rhodes, 2005, p. 22). It is likely that traditional gender roles influenced the low participation rate of women.<sup>50</sup>

Gender is touched on twice in the analysis of the results; in relation to intended protective action and differences in the reasons for taking particular action.<sup>51</sup> Rhodes noted that in rural areas a significant number of people will be involved in the fire-fighting effort which can increase ‘the risk to a person’s own assets and may place greater demands on those who have stayed at home and attempt to protect assets with limited assistance’ (Rhodes, 2005, p. 13). This observation is gender-neutral; the increased likelihood of women being alone when the fire impacts on property is overlooked or not referred to. The impact of the fire is touched on briefly: ‘A number of

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Obtaining responses from only one person per household also limited the information on the actions of others in the household or those who were present at the time’ (Rhodes, 2005, p. 30). Rhodes states that ‘the option to self select possibly introduced a bias in the responses. There is an imbalance of males to female respondents’ (Rhodes, 2005, p. 30). A statistical breakdown of the gender imbalance is not provided.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Women are less likely to intend to stay and defend than men, instead women are more likely to wait and see what happens and leave if they feel threatened or to choose to leave early in comparison with men’ (Rhodes, 2005, p. 41). ‘Men tended to cite property protection as the main reason with personal safety as the second most common reason whereas the reasons underpinning women’s actions were the reverse’ (Rhodes, 2005, p. 54).

people described the effects of the fire as life changing, both in terms of the experience and what they had lost' (Rhodes, 2005, p. 63).

Smith (2005) conducted a review which was undertaken to make recommendations about how the Wangary fire was managed. His consideration of the 'stay or go' policy is narrow. Smith focuses on the individual when he writes about the role of the 'stay or go' policy. He acknowledges that 'a majority of citizens appear from discussion not to have the knowledge and confidence to confidently apply this approach in practice' (Smith, 2005, p. 75).<sup>52</sup> Smith writes:

*The rapid progression of the Wangary Bushfire across the LEP generated high levels of anxiety in citizens. Some citizens were attempting to move away from the progressing bushfire, while others were attempting to return to their properties in order to check on security of relatives, friends, pets, stock and physical infrastructure. (Smith, 2005, p. 83)*

The clinical nature of this report is reminiscent of the criticism, which was detailed earlier in this chapter, that Kenworthy made about the 1985 study by Wilson and Ferguson. The brief discussion which Smith provided about the national policy is concluded with one recommendation: 'The CFS [Country Fire Service], through SEMC [State Emergency Management Committee], continue to support the "Stay and Defend or Leave Early" policy and work with all emergency agencies to ensure consistent application' (Smith, 2005, p. 75).

These two reports (by Rhodes, 2005 and Smith, 2005) are examples of research where sampling and subsequent analysis was conducted in a way that marginalised the role and decisions of women. The quantitative study by Rhodes (2005) ignored the dynamic and systemic influence of families and households. Interviewing one member of a household and making assumptions about the household or family based on that one perspective is simplistic. The key learning from these studies is that future work which analyses bushfire and other emergencies, in the context of preparedness and recovery, needs to take an inclusive approach to research and methodology and to ensure that the views of women and other marginalised groups are considered.

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<sup>52</sup> It is unclear how many fire affected people (not associated with any organisation or service) were consulted during the collection of information for this review.

The South Australian Government produced a report on the recovery operation entitled ‘Collaboration is the key: lessons from the South Australia Government’s Recovery Operation Lower Eyre Peninsula bushfire January 2005’. Sue Vardon, the Chair of the State Recovery Committee, wrote that the recovery operation was ‘judged successful by the measure that matters most’ (SA Govt, 2005).<sup>53</sup> This statement about local people (recipients of the recovery effort) is diminished a few pages later: ‘...it was not the brief to seek direct community input to the document’ (SA Govt, 2005, p. 2). The voice of the community is absent from this report, which made suggestions on how to enhance planning for recovery from future hazards. Considering the long and tragic history of bushfires in Australia, the lack of meaningful reference to previous recovery efforts is disturbing. The 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires were not mentioned.<sup>54</sup> This report has given the impression that each bushfire event provides unprecedented challenges to communities: ‘In many ways, the Lower Eyre Peninsula bushfire recovery effort provides a template for future recovery operations’ (SA Govt, 2005).<sup>55</sup>

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This literature has informed and shaped my case study. The research and studies analysed in this chapter have been important as they have confirmed the themes that have come out of my findings. The value of recording the voices and stories of women and couples within an Australian context is vital as this enables the bias of studies (Rhodes, 2005; Smith, 2005) which marginalise women to be identified as limited and not inclusive.

This review reinforces significant themes across a range of hazards (flood and cyclones, bushfire and drought), therefore strengthening the theoretical grounds of these themes. This chapter has identified the challenge for future research in emergency management to be more inclusive, to utilise literature and knowledge from other fields

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<sup>53</sup> This quotation is sourced from Vardon’s letter, addressed ‘To the Premier,’ at the beginning of the report which does not have a page number.

<sup>54</sup> In South Australia, the Ash Wednesday bushfires claimed 28 lives, injured more than 1500 people and destroyed or damaged over 300 homes. Further information on the impacts of Ash Wednesday on the residents of South Australia: Clayer, Bookless-Pratz and McFarlane (1985).

<sup>55</sup> Sourced from Vardon’s letter, ‘To the Premier,’ this does not have a page number.

of work – namely family therapy – and enables more appropriate theoretical principles to be introduced.

It is only relatively recently, during the 1990s, that the invisibility of women has been challenged and addressed in the disaster research landscape of industrialised countries. Within the recently growing field of gender and disaster research, it has been common for researchers to focus exclusively on the female experience and perspective (Finlay, 1998; Fothergill, 2004). This is, in part, due to the historical dominance of a gender-blind approach where it is assumed that those affected by a policy or disaster event have the same needs and interests. Exploring women's experiences, in isolation from other family members, perpetuates the simplistic approach that has dominated the Australian emergency management culture.

It is important that future studies incorporate the perspectives of men and women – family-focused research is a neglected area of study within the Australian emergency management environment. The two Australian drought studies (Stehlik et al, 1999; Alston and Kent, 2004) demonstrated that engaging with drought-affected men and women is an effective and inclusive approach to research. The researchers were able to capture the voices of men and women and emphasised the importance of the female perspective which is often lost or excluded. Both studies identified families as the first line of defence against drought and this is also true of bushfire. Bushfire and drought are an integral part of the Australian landscape – it has been possible to transfer drought studies to studies of bushfire. The themes have been similar and findings raise core principles about family decision-making and behaviour.

For bushfire community education programs to be successful there must be an understanding of the complexities of families and women's roles within the family. These two important studies revealed that men and women experience drought differently; this finding applies equally to bushfire and is reinforced by the survivors of the Wangary fire.

The wet weather study by Cottrell and Berry (2002) emphasised that policy applied generally, without recognising the capacities and needs of particular communities, has limited impact. Despite the absence of the male perspective in this wet weather study,

their key recommendation – to go beyond the generic – is particularly relevant to the implementation of the national bushfire ‘stay or go’ policy.

## Chapter 4: Findings – Before and during the Wangary Fire

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*A primary way that individuals make sense of experience is by casting it in narrative form. This is especially true of difficult life transitions and trauma: As Isak Dinesen said, 'All sorrows can be borne if we can put them into a story'. (Riessman, 1993, p. 4)*

### 4.1 Introduction

The purpose of these two chapters is to present the voices, within my own framework, of the interviewees and to reinforce my primary research goal to gain a deeper understanding of families and specifically the decision-making role of women in bushfires. In order to arrive at this understanding it was essential to interview families who had babies and young children present on the day of the Wangary fire. This theme, the influence of the presence of children on decision-making in a bushfire event, was a priority.<sup>56</sup>

I refer to traditional gender roles, as a key variable, throughout my study. This encapsulates the societal factors that influence similarities and differences between men and women.<sup>57</sup> In particular the Wangary fire has highlighted women's roles and the conflicts affecting those roles when decisions needed to be made.

The exploratory nature of this project is reflected by the number of themes that consistently emerged from the interviews, without any direct questioning or probing, throughout the bushfire narratives.

After a brief description of the 14 interviews, the bushfire narratives will be

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<sup>56</sup> Sandelowski states that 'there is no one style for reporting the findings from qualitative research' and that 'qualitative researchers must choose not only what "story" they will tell, but also how they will tell it' (Sandelowski, 1998, p. 376). I pursued this theme and allowed the others to emerge from the narratives.

<sup>57</sup> Enarson's definition of gender has guided me: 'Refers to the array of socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. Gender is relational-gender roles and characteristics do not exist in isolation, but are defined in relation to one another and through the relationships between women and men, girls and boys' (Enarson, 2008, p. 65).

structured around six themes:

- family responses and experiences
- packing the car
- the role of pets and livestock in decision-making
- impacts of the bushfire
- sense of place and connectedness to the land
- spirituality.

All of the narratives covered two clear time frames: the day or days of the fire (Monday and/or Tuesday depending on the residential location) and the aftermath. Separate chapters are dedicated to each of these time frames.

These themes are all linked together and influence each other; it is inevitable that there will be instances where they intersect. Of the six themes, it is the first one which explains both cognitive and emotional responses to bushfire and provides the greatest detail about how families respond to and make decisions together about a life-threatening event. This theme, ‘family response and experiences,’ offers insight into the intricacies of family dynamics and decision-making.

I have found that gender permeates throughout the themes that emerged from the narratives and, as an outcome of this, a separate theme dedicated to gender would be superfluous. Gender cannot be contained to a single category or theme; therefore it is infused through the chapter, allowing a more thorough exploration.

## **4.2 *Who are the interviewees?***

These 14 interviews (20 people in total) each have variable circumstances and demographics. The majority of them had ‘close calls’ on the day of the Wangary fire. Half of the 14 families had young babies or children present on the day of the fire and the other half did not.



Within the former group of seven interviews, four geographic locations are represented: Charlton Gully, Greenpatch, Poonindie and North Shields. Two are farming families and the remaining five work for an employer or run their own business either in town or from home. All seven families consist of two parents with the number of children (at the time of the interview) ranging from one (one family) to four (two families). Four of the women work, either full- or part-time, outside the home while the remaining three are full-time workers (unpaid) at home. The properties range in size from one-acre blocks on the main highway (two of the seven) to 54 000-acre farms. Eight people – one couple and six women without their husbands – were interviewed. The absence of men in these interviews is addressed through the course of this chapter. Two of these seven families lost their homes in the Wangary fire and one family's home was substantially damaged.

The second group of seven interviews are those with adult children or without children. Two of the families had adult children living at home when the bushfire occurred. The geographic areas represented in this group include: Charlton Gully, Greenpatch, Wanilla and White Flat. Of this group of seven, four are farming families. Two women were not working at the time of the interview as a direct result of the Wangary fire. One woman had retired from her position, one had ceased paid work decades earlier to raise her children (all now adults) and the remainder worked either full- or part-time. Their ages ranged from a woman in her twenties to couples in their fifties and sixties. Twelve people participated in the interviews. Two women were interviewed without their husbands, one couple was interviewed separately and the remaining four couples were interviewed together. Three of these seven families lost their homes in the Wangary fire and one family's home was damaged considerably.

In selecting these 14 interviews an effort was made to capture the variations in age, socio-economic status and occupation.<sup>58</sup> It was important to acquire and include perspectives from farming and non-farming families; therefore there are six of the latter and eight of the former. It should be noted that the lack of cultural diversity in the 14

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<sup>58</sup> Of the 38 interviews conducted for this project, only one was with a single-parent family. All of the 20 participants who feature in the 14 interviews being explored in this thesis are married. This is reflective of the region's low rate of single-parent families.

households being explored more deeply in this chapter is reflective of the ethnically homogenous population in this remote region of Australia.

*I wanted my husband's decision. I regret what I did.*

### **4.3 Family responses and experiences**

What emerged quite strongly through these 14 narratives was the bushfire being predominantly an individual experience. This occurred purely through circumstances leading up to the event, or the actual timing of the bushfire threat itself (the Wangary fire occurred during the school holidays). What people are doing at a specific time can reflect how they come to learn of, or recognise, that the crisis exists and that a response is necessary. In several instances it was the relationship between the couple – or, if the children were present – the family, which informed their individual or joint response to the crisis. This theme is grounded in the history of interpersonal relationships and the dynamics of families in combination with their understanding of bushfires and bushfire safety. Within one family there can be similar (shared) or varied (individual) perceptions of the same situation or threat. Throughout their reflections on the day of the Wangary fire all the interviewees referred to other people (whether they were physically present or not), who were the primary influences in their lives and, as a consequence of that influence, in their emotional and cognitive responses to a crisis.

The different roles, values and experiences that men and women have in a bushfire can contribute to whether a shared or individual experience occurs. Tension and conflict can occur if, within a family, the parents have contrasting perceptions of risk. They are less likely to be united in their response to the crisis if they have vastly different views and definitions of ‘crisis.’ Each person in this study had their own bushfire narrative; none, even within the same domestic environment, are identical but there are common threads that can be identified. A number of the bushfire narratives failed to fit neatly into either category (shared or individual) and this reflects the complexity of risk perception, and bushfire safety and decision-making. A key characteristic of a bushfire is its impact as a frantic and intense event (even for those people who have plenty of

warning, when a fire has burned for weeks). Previous experiences of responding to and dealing with a crisis scenario (not necessarily a bushfire or natural hazard) usually contribute to how people react; if there is a history or experience to draw on it will provide some level of influence.

Each of the narratives about the Wangary fire reflects the sensitive and personal context of family life – family dynamics and the relationships are at the core of this case study. During the interview process it was vital to retain a non-judgemental approach, as care is required when listening to people describe their decisions and actions when they were threatened by bushfire. Within this context I have tried to assemble the interviews according to the characteristics which have determined either the shared or individual experience of the Wangary fire, including their previous experiences about the way they deal with and make decisions in a crisis.

#### **4.3.1 Older interviewees**

Six of the seven interviews in the second group were couples with adult children. Three of the four farming families in this group featured men who were born and grew up on the land where they currently live and earn their livelihood. A number of these farming men and women expressed firm ideas and clearly described their role in a bushfire. Two of those men, with strong links to the land and fire-fighting experience, stated that their role is to go out and fight the fire while their wife stays at home and shelters inside the house.

The wife of one of those farmers spoke at length about the roles of men and women in a bushfire and differentiated between farming and non-farming families:

*I think the whole thing with the fire was that the farmers have a really good practical knowledge and because you're on the farm a lot of it is survival, because you're working with the natural elements and so the men have learnt with experience with fire what to do.*

*I think the same with the women. The women have lived on the land and so you also take on and develop the skills and the thinking skills of the men. It's quite a harsh environment so you have to learn survival. [My husband] always*

*just told me that if ever there's a fire that you get in a area of the house that's got a cement or tiled floor, a wet area, get a blanket and wet it and cover yourself and never to get in the car and go away. It depends on what perhaps your men have told you and what your instincts tell you on the day as to what you do.*

*Your common sense tells you and you work that out with your man what you need to do. If you're alone in the house, which I was, you then have to assess the situation but I always kept in mind what [my husband] said.*

Her husband, who was outside forming a fire break on a tractor when the fire front came through, said that his wife 'wanted to leave the house and head off and I said "No, this ain't gonna burn. Even if it does, it's going to burn quite a long time after the fire has passed."' She recalled:

*[He] came in at some stage and said 'fill up all the buckets of water' and he's told me that that is also to give you something to do to keep your mind occupied and actually doing something rather than doing nothing and panicking.*

This couple had talked together, over the years, about the threat of fire and what they would do when a bushfire occurred. She recalled what she observed at her first bushfire:

*A lot of women are very good on farms and you know I remember when I first came to live at Wanilla and there was a fire in the neighbouring property and I went over there and I saw this woman and she had a ute, she had a fire-fighter and she was starting the motor. I was amazed. I was amazed at this woman being able to do that. So a lot of women, particularly in the generation before me, um, but not that much older than me – say fifteen years older – um, they worked along side their man on the farm and so they developed a lot of skills. They were as good as the men. A lot of the girls now work. And so we don't work as much, some of us don't work as much alongside our men but you just talk about things that happen on the farm and what would happen if. You talk about what you would do if a fire came. Never leave the house. I just remember that. You just know what you should do.*

This female interviewee went on to explain that women have very different roles in a bushfire:

*By being in the house or away, whereas men have been in the thick of the fire women have as well but not to the same extent. Am I making sense? We've had a bit of a different fire experience because of our gender roles. Normally the woman won't go out and fight, she'll stay home and protect her house and her children. Um, that protective role comes in, um, from nurturing and so we're coming from a bit of a different angle than the men.*

*Women had different roles during the fire, those who stayed, those who fled to another town then they had the worry of their men and on the radio it said two people from Wanilla had been burnt well everyone thought it was their men. Um, so yeah, women face different problems on the day.*

Another woman, who married into a farming family (established in 1926), reflected on a bushfire she experienced 30 years previously:

*In January '75 there was a fire, um, above the Todd Reservoir there and we'd been in Lincoln and were on our way home and we saw the flames. We had [our son] at the time, he was nine months old and [my husband] just stepped on it and he thought it was our place going up, you see. We got home and he changed his clothes and went off to the fire truck and he said 'just stay inside and keep the doors and windows closed'. And there I was with this baby and, um, oh well it was January '75 and we had been married in the April of '73 so I didn't know a lot about anything at that stage. I could see the flames from the front windows looking through the leadlight there I could see them. Oh I was a bit frightened that time.*

*I stayed inside and did as I was told. It didn't come near us, I don't think it burnt any of our property but it did burn some neighbours.*

On the day of the Wangary fire she was able to grab a few things before fleeing alone in her car to the nearest town. Her husband was outside attempting to protect his livestock. He also left alone in his car some time after his wife had fled.

While these two couples had discussed and experienced bushfires in the past, their roles and experiences were individual and, in the main, defined by gender – the traditional roles of men and women, what is spoken and not spoken and the differences in the experience of the emotion.

A couple of similar age had, over time, also established clearly-defined roles regarding their response to a bushfire threat. The key difference was that they had not

discussed these separate roles until they were posed questions during the interview. The husband has been an active volunteer fire-fighter for several decades and was out on a fire truck during the Wangary fire, while his wife returned home only to flee shortly afterwards. When I asked what their response would be for a future bushfire threat they responded:

Husband: *For me I wouldn't be here anyway, so I wouldn't have to evacuate. I'd be fighting the fire approaching.*

Wife: *It would be me and that would depend on whether I'm at home or whether I'm not and I guess it would be put down to the day I would have to make that decision as to even if I come home, is the power on? Can I prepare anything? Or would I just collect my valuables and run? It would be a decision that I would make on the day.*

The husband gave the impression that his role is very separate from that of the domestic environment in which he lives. He had not given much consideration at all to his wife being at home during a bushfire, nor acknowledged that when his fire-fighting skills are taken away from the home her safety may be compromised. The tension that some fire-fighters grapple with – of when to defend their home and when to defend the public and private assets of others – is evident from a number of the bushfire narratives. This issue of skills residing with one member of a family and the absence of those skills on the day of the Wangary fire is explored later in this chapter.

I asked the wife of this volunteer fire-fighter what she would do if it was too late to leave safely:

Wife: *I'd stay within the house like they recommend until such time as...*

Husband (interjecting): *I would suggest you go to the big shed, the shed won't burn, the house will.*

Wife: *You're quite right but in the event that the main front has gone through I'd drive out to the nearest paddock. I wouldn't have a problem on the day...I've had to do things for myself. I'm reasonably confident in my own ability to either do things or make decisions. I don't think that would bother me at all.*

The three farming couples that have featured up to this point all had individual experiences of the Wangary fire, with the women acting alone isolated from their husbands.

Two couples (non-farming) from this group of seven were together on the day of the Wangary fire; with one couple fleeing in their car and the other couple trapped in their home. The latter lived on 120 acres and both worked in Port Lincoln. It was fortunate that they were both in the house, as the husband stated he experienced a strong desire to flee to their dam. His wife persuaded him to stay inside.

*I would have done a runner...it would have been the wrong thing to do. [My wife] didn't want me to go outside.*

Their experience demonstrated how the dynamics of a relationship (the traditions, habits, familiarity and trust) can inform crucial decisions. The wife was able to convince her husband to stay within the home.

The couple who left together in their car with one of their adult children on the day of the Wangary fire had a shared experience. They fled their twenty acre hobby farm and drove to the nearest town for shelter.

*Wife: He [their son] was very insistent that we just go. I was dilly-dallying, doing the dishes. They were sort of saying it was a stage such and such and it was clearly behind the time wasn't it the radio?*

*Husband: Basically they were saying stay or go, stay in your house or whatever. Anyway, we had always decided that we would go, much as we love the house and the things in it. I think that we got out probably with about 10 minutes to spare. I suspect we wouldn't have gone quite as early if it hadn't have been for my son's experience the afternoon before [on a fire truck].*

#### 4.3.2 Younger interviewees <sup>59</sup>

In the first group (families with young children), the women expressed less certainty about their bushfire experience. Two of the women from this group had, to varying

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<sup>59</sup> All of the ages stated in the text refer to when the fire occurred (in January 2005).

degrees, a shared experience of the Wangary fire. The remaining five women had either an individual experience with elements of a shared experience, or exclusively an individual experience.

Only two of the women had their husbands present on the day of the bushfire. One of these women, after assisting her husband with preparation for the fire front, fled the fire with their two children. Due to the lack of visibility, she drove through a junction and into a tree. It seems that in this family, what started as a shared experience about the bushfire and the subsequent decisions ended as an individual experience for the husband and wife primarily due to gender roles and values within this family. What dominated in these families was the woman's role as mother or child carer. The husband instructed his wife to leave, thinking that this was the safest option and that she would be removing their children from danger. 'Next time,' he said, 'I definitely wouldn't have got [my wife] and the kids to leave...we copped a bit of flak over it.' 'You base your decisions on the information that you've got.' The wife's primary role in this family was to protect the two children. She said: 'You just focus on them being in safety, I thought I was taking them away from the danger but probably I was taking them into danger more'.

This paradox emerged through most of the interviews in this group when the conversation turned to future fire events. A number of women articulated a desire to remove their children but recognised the danger and risk associated with this action.

The other woman who was at home with her husband had clear and firm ideas about what the family should do. She took the lead in the decision-making for the family of four. Her husband, a shift worker, had been asleep when his wife realised they were in danger. However, their experience of the bushfire was shared; they worked as a team and assisted each other with their strengths and weaknesses (he suffered from asthma so his wife had a major role outdoors defending their home). This couple relied on each other in equal measure:

*I looked out the window and I could see fire across the road. The kids were just screaming and I said 'Look, we just have to go outside and do what we can to combat the fire.' Your heart went out to them thinking 'Do I just sit here with*



*them and look after them or just let [my husband] who is asthmatic go out alone?' I said [to their children] 'We'll come back and check on you all of the time.' We were working as a team basically. I said 'I'm going up there with a hose, you go and check the kids.'*

The only other shared experience of the Wangary fire occurred with a farming couple who were not physically together at the time of the fire. The woman, who was at home with their four children on the day of the bushfire, was able to tap into the knowledge of her husband through frequent and detailed telephone calls from him. Her husband's absence did not prevent him from playing a vital role in her actions and decision-making on the day. He had a wealth of bushfire experience to draw on and reference was made to his father who fought the fires in 1951. Using his mobile telephone the husband and father was able to ensure that he played a crucial role in the family decision-making:

*I was under strict instruction by [my husband] to stay at home and not to panic. He said, 'Repeat after me, I'm not to panic.' He would test me, 'What did I just say?...Do you understand that?...Repeat after me.'*

While he was not able to assist physically, his advice enabled her to think clearly on the day of the bushfire. She had total faith in his advice and said that 'He's told me for years if ever there's a fire we'll stay. That's what [my husband] has always said, "If you're gonna go you have to go early, like really early, and if you're going to stay you have to be prepared".' While there are elements of an individual experience in this scenario (not being in the presence of each other), they effectively worked together which, remarkably, resulted in a shared experience.

Two other women from this group of interviewees, one who had married into a farming family and the other who lived on a small block of land, had a similar experience in the lead-up to the Wangary fire.

On the Monday one woman phoned her husband who was watching cricket on television at a friend's place. She could see smoke and was concerned so she telephoned him on multiple occasions throughout the afternoon. None of the men took her seriously:

*They were laughing and joking, 'Oh don't worry about it,' '...it's your wife again.' They knew where it was, which was a long way away. He said 'Don't worry about it, if anything worry about it tomorrow' 'cos he knew it was going to be shocking weather the next day. The smoke died right down and I thought 'That fire's under control.'*

She said she 'didn't want to sound like a silly woman' but could not resist making the telephone calls. Her husband was on a fire truck on the Tuesday morning which she found reassuring, as 'I knew if there was an issue or a problem he'd ring me'.

As a family both the husband and wife had access to fire-fighting resources but, due to an apparent gender division of duties within the family, she was unable to use these resources on the day of the Wangary fire:

*See, we've got the fire truck too but I can't drive it or start it. I don't know the first thing about it, not even the pump.*

I asked if that was something she wants to learn:

*Yeah, but I don't feel capable. So that's actually a huge issue for women. For me, I'm not capable of driving that truck. So it's here. I didn't know how to start it let alone drive it up to the house.*

This issue, of not being able to utilise fire-fighting equipment at home, was not peculiar to this particular family. The experienced fire-fighters in several families, who were out fighting the Wangary fire, had not shared their skills and knowledge with the women who were left alone at home on the day. Other women remarked on their lack of knowledge and skills in relation to defending their home from a bushfire. In a number of cases it was assumed that the man would be present if a fire was to occur.

The other woman was at home on the Tuesday, 'doing my daily thing, I had all the kids home because it was school holidays and had the baby in bed'. As the morning went on and it was getting darker her concern was escalating and she rang her husband (a volunteer fire-fighter who was at work in Port Lincoln) numerous times: 'I kept ringing him saying "Have you heard anything? The kids are wondering what's going on and I'm starting to feel anxious myself." He said "It's fine, it's miles away, it's not close, just try and stay calm because you're probably upsetting the kids more."' I reckon

I rang about four times. Even then he was saying “It’s a long way away. If you like I’ll come home in my lunch hour.”

This experience of having her concerns not shared by her partner magnified the individual bushfire experience which they both had. The women felt as if they were over-reacting and their fears and concerns were disregarded. Both women remarked that the ‘she’ll be right’ attitude of their husbands has, in the aftermath of the Wangary fire, persisted. One woman tried on numerous occasions to persuade her husband to teach her how to operate the fire truck on their property. By failing to do this he has maintained the individualised bushfire experience in their family. His wife said that her husband is adamant that he will be present at the next bushfire. He will not accept that there is a chance she might be home alone again when a bushfire threatens in the future. As he is the only family member with fire-fighting experience and he does not believe it is necessary to share some of those basic skills with his wife, it is unlikely that they will have a shared experience of bushfire.

Two other women who were home alone with children that day experienced disbelief. Woven through the narrative of one of these women is her refusal to accept the dire situation she was facing:

*I knew something wasn’t right. I knew there’d been that fire the day before and that the smoke had something to do with that. It’s just a process, I think, of giving my brain enough time to accept the information.*

Her husband was far away, at work, so her experience of the fire was an individual one, although she drew on her two teenagers who were present for some decision-making input.

The other woman, in similar circumstances, expressed frustration throughout the interview with the individual experience that caused her to have to decide what to do, in isolation from her husband. She felt she had no time to think, it was ‘just sheer bloody panic’ and, had the family been together on the day of the fire, she feels that they probably would have stayed. The fire took a heavy toll on this family and she said on

numerous occasions 'I just wish I could have that day all over again...I would've sort of done it so differently...would've felt better with yourself.'

The wife of a farmer in this group talked about the sacrifices that volunteer fire-fighters make. Her husband did not participate in the interview and his experience was captured in her words:

*He saw those two guys [perished fire fighters] on the road and had to cover them up and then...he had to double back and try to get through and came through past all our neighbours that houses had burnt to the ground and a few cars that were burnt out on the side of the road. Not knowing if I had panicked and left and got caught on the road. Not knowing if I'd stayed here and the house had burned. It's just such a traumatic thing to go through. So I think when he drove up to the house and saw the house was still standing and I went out the front door I think just the release for him because he had such a huge day.*

The flip side of volunteer altruism is the toll that volunteering has on a family. A mother of four interviewed for this project raised this issue immediately when we met. They had lost their home and the 'kids were freaking out'. Her husband is a volunteer fire-fighter and her narrative commenced with the following words:

*After it happened [my husband] fought all Tuesday afternoon and all of Tuesday night right through to Wednesday afternoon so that was more traumatic than him not being there when it was happening.*

She returned to this theme on a number of occasions.

*Dealing with everything without him...There was...God you know, I wish... I said after, 'I really needed you there; I wished you hadn't fought the fire on that night.' He said 'I was so numb; I think I went into a state of shock. For me that was just the way I...' He said 'Looking back now he can see it probably wasn't the best thing for me.'*

As stated earlier, the decision-making and presence of children was behind my desire to gather bushfire narratives and initiated the entire project. Listening to the reflections of families who had responsibility for babies and children during the

Wangary fire was my primary goal. I wanted to hear from those interviewees about how they coped with managing the welfare of babies and children during a bushfire.

Six of the seven interviews were with women alone, while one was with a couple: a total of eight perspectives. This was in contrast to the number of couples that feature in the second group (of people with adult children or without children). The male perspective (with that one exception), was accessed through the women's stories and perspectives. Their husbands were in various situations on the day of the Wangary fire; at work, interstate, fighting the fire at a relative's property, fighting the fire on a brigade truck or at home.

Exploring the event through the women's words reinforced that the bushfire was predominantly an individual experience. This separation, between these wives and husbands during the bushfire, seemed to remain unresolved. There was, in several of the interviewed families, a strong connection between the presence of children and women having an individual experience of the bushfire; as with all factors, there are exceptions and this is reflected in two of the narratives that feature in this theme.

The six women and one couple in this group represented a diversity of circumstances: four of the women fled the fire with their babies/children in vehicles, two of the women stayed in the home with their babies/children (one was actively defending) and one woman sent her children into town while she stayed to defend the home. Only one of these women had her husband present throughout the entire event.

The discussion will commence with the women who fled their properties and the circumstances of the women who stayed will follow. The women's perception of risk, their role as primary carer and the separation of domestic roles within the families were key topics in most of the interviews. After reflecting on their Wangary fire experience, the interviewees talked about what they would or would not do differently during future bushfires. A number of the women remained uncertain about the bushfire safety decisions if another bushfire threatened; in some families there was a link between the women's uncertainty and the limited shared conversations that they had with their husbands on this issue.

I acknowledge that this theme was not exclusive to a particular age group (parents who have young children), as it is not uncommon for grandparents to be in a ‘carer’ role for their grandchildren. This topic concludes with the consideration of opinions expressed by interviewees from the second group on bushfire and the presence of children.

### 4.3.3 *Women who left*

A mother of five was at home with her two teenagers (aged 13 and 14) on the Tuesday morning. Her husband was at work approximately 80 kilometres away. She had been aware of the fire the previous day and confirmed its location with a neighbour. On the Tuesday morning she went for her walk, ‘which shows how dedicated I was because the wind had sprung up and it was just sort of hazy and hot and horrible’. She stayed indoors in the cool with the curtains closed. Late in the morning, feeling like a swim, she walked down to the dam and saw ‘this huge big smoke back over the trees, billowing and pretty close’.

The three of them got in the car and drove to a neighbour’s hill: ‘...we could see smoke all the way around and pretty close so it looked fairly ominous but not wanting to believe it, I s’pose, we headed towards Wanilla to another neighbour’s place.’ She described the wind as ‘like when a child does a drawing of wind on paper it’s sort of straight lines and that’s what the wind looked like because you could see it because of the smoke and embers and stuff’. A woman ‘who whizzed past in her car’ pulled over to inform them that the fire had jumped the road at Wanilla, that homes were burning there and they should head to North Shields.

This bushfire narrative is peppered with the word ‘disbelief.’ It was not until she drove to another neighbour and witnessed them ‘in fire-fighting mode filling gutters and stuff’ that she turned to her kids and said ‘Do we stay or do we go?’ She said her kids were ‘old enough to do as they’re told and put in’. Deciding to ‘go,’ they returned to their home briefly to collect a few personal possessions and then fled in their car to Port Lincoln.

*By the time we went up there and then out there and back there and back here and packed a few things which took only a couple of minutes, I s'pose. I was driving fast but, yeah.*

This woman referred to a bushfire that came within three kilometres of their property, a few years before the Wangary fire. On that occasion her husband was present, 'which probably made a difference and it was nowhere near like the other one'. Bushfire is 'something that's always been pretty real for us'.

*I'd always thought that if a fire came I'd be safe if I had a blanket and I went down and I was in the dam with a wet blanket over my head. I may have been or I may not have been I don't really know.*

This family's financial situation meant that they did not have the resources necessary for fighting a fire: 'Although we were really aware of fire we always lived on a low income; we'd had, you know, five kids, we'd been doing up our house and buying our place. Because we worked for ourselves we'd been on a low income for quite a while and we'd always thought we've got to get a fire-fighting unit, we've got to get a fire-fighting unit, we've got to get a fire-fighting unit.' That morning while she was walking she remembers:

*Thinking 'We have got to get a fire fighting unit, we've got to have one by next summer.' Well it was too late wasn't it, I needed one that day and had I had one that day I probably would have stayed, although I might not have been able to do anything and I don't know how I would have coped seeing my house burn down.*

They had an electric pump, so as soon as the power went that day there was no access to water. The summer after the Wangary fire, this family purchased a fire-fighting unit and a petrol pump. She said they could not 'afford big sprinkler systems'. With these resources and knowing what she knows now, she feels she would 'probably stay next time'.

A mother of three children (aged 7, 12 and 14) repeated the phrase 'made the wrong decision that day' throughout her interview. Her brother-in-law had phoned on the morning of the Wangary fire asking for fire-fighting assistance. The interviewee's

husband 'just jumped in the car and took the two boys and they took off'. This left her and their seven-year-old daughter at home. They would have been 'only just down the road a little way when the phone rang'. It was her husband giving her instructions: 'Go up to the shed, get all the fire hoses out, get the pump ready because if the wind changes it will come straight through our place'. As she set off to do this she remembered thinking 'What the hell is going on?' as all of a sudden it all 'went black like midnight'.

She described a physical sensation: 'Then I could feel, well, adrenalin? Panic? I don't know what it was, you could just feel it run through your body like you've never been in a situation like that before ever.'

While she was outside a neighbour said, 'Get the hell out, it's here'. She 'wanted my husband's decision' but was unable to reach him on the telephone so 'we got in the car and I made that wrong decision that day'. She drove to North Shields, 'it was sheer bloody panic'. Had the family been together on the day of the fire she feels that they probably would have stayed. This interview is infused with regret and anger: 'I guess we sort of, I know I had [my daughter] that day, I don't know if it was safety, I didn't feel...I don't know, it was just too confusing. The men have a bit more of a level-headed thing.' Gender roles feature quite prominently in this interview. This woman wanted and needed her husband's decision: 'I wish I could have got hold of him, I probably would have gone under what he said. He's heard me say "I should never have gone". He's never said anything to me.'

Her narrative is infused with guilt and regret. She said that 'the boys had got back in time to save the house' but their losses were devastating: 'We lost the shearing shed and all the sheep and the implements shed and the hangar shed and the workshop shed, just couldn't believe what had happened.' 'We didn't have to lose so much.' She linked the extent of their losses with her decision to leave. They have an old fire truck which she had used once before when her husband was absent: 'If we'd stayed at the house I could've saved a lot of things. Should never have gone.' 'I do regret it.' Their water is gravity-fed, which would have posed a major barrier had she stayed.

Others have commented on her decision to get in the car: 'And some say, I was really putting my daughter and myself in more danger leaving. We could have bloody



had a prang. I think I put ourselves more at danger.’ ‘I did make the wrong decision.’ ‘If my [husband] had said to me, perhaps it was natural instinct to run but because it was so horrific and so out of the ordinary I guess.’

Frequently her sentences are punctuated with sighs and some of them are started and remain unfinished. Surviving the fire and seeing that her house survived, she wanted to get ‘the message out to stay’ to women who, like her, will face the decision alone: ‘I don’t know whether they can get that message out to stay, even to wives...you know, something for farmers’ wives...well, if your husband’s not there this is what... you know and people that have been through it could say their stories.’ ‘I definitely would say “Just stay” because, God, you sort of lose so much and we didn’t have to lose so much.’

She said about the men in the district and her husband in particular, that they tend not to talk about it and ‘I still think it does eat ‘em away...that’s because they don’t talk, really talk about it, it doesn’t come out’. ‘Some aren’t too bad, I guess some, have you found some?’

The experience of one woman on 11 January 2005 began with her husband and two children (the youngest was 4 years old) together at home. A neighbour phoned late in the morning to alert them to the approaching bushfire. They had recently moved into the property knowing ‘there was potential for fire out here’ and had ‘already had a fire pump organised and had cleared a lot of the low-lying scrub around the house.’ Initially they worked as a team: blocking up the gutters, changing into protective clothing, driving the car down close to the house and packing it, filling up the bath and buckets, starting the fire-fighter unit and nailing wet towels over the wooden window frames that would be in the line of fire. The husband said the power went out and when the paddock caught on fire ‘[my wife] and kids were pretty much ready to go, we never really discussed it but they jumped in the car and they left’.

His wife described what occurred from her perspective:

*I’m a real memorabilia person so I had all the kid’s stuff in boxes, you know, from their first dummy to their school stuff and everything and put it all in the*

*car and 'cos the fire came through so quick by the time I filled up the bath with water, filled up the buckets and helped [my husband] wet the house down and plugged up the gutters and all that sort of gear and then we left so we crashed. We hit something and I thought 'This is it, I'm going to die in the car with my kids' kind of thing, 'cos everything was hanging over the car on fire and I thought 'What if we're bogged I can't get out of the car because it's too hot.' I backed back and as I went down I saw my parents coming along. We drove up and as we were coming up I could see the sky was blue and I went into shock then. There was grown men just crying, not knowing if their family was OK on the other side.*

The husband, alone at the property, was under siege: 'The heat was never a massive concern for me but it was the smoke.' His father-in-law and two brothers-in-law arrived not long after his wife and kids had left.

This was their first experience of bushfire and the husband said 'If I could do it again I'd do it different, I definitely wouldn't have got [my wife] and kids to leave. That was probably only the really stupid thing, well, not a stupid decision, we copped a bit of flak over it and [my wife's] parents weren't very happy about it.'

*Wife: A few people said to me too, 'You were so stupid getting in your car, that's how those other people died', but at the time...*

*Husband (interjecting): You base your decisions on the information that you've got.*

*Wife: People that have been through fires are way more understanding.*

She felt that at the time that she was driving the kids away from danger: 'especially when you've got children you just focus on safety.' Later in the interview she referred to women wanting to leave in a bushfire 'especially if they've got kids. I'd say your motherly instinct is to get them away from danger.'

*You sort of wonder, I know it's a mean thing to say now, but you wonder the people that went in their cars, like me, and other people that lost their lives were women. You sort of wonder 'if they had a man there.'*

Since the fire they have installed a sprinkler system on their house and one of the sheds. The wife said she has laminated a step-by-step instruction sheet and attached it to the pump in case '[my husband] is not here and I go into panic'.

I asked how she would feel if she was home alone with their children next time a bushfire occurs. She does not feel confident and said 'That would be my biggest fear, I 'spose, would be if something happened and he was away.' 'I realise I'm not good in a panic situation...I needed instructions.' 'Men are just a bit stronger, I think.'

Another woman who fled the fire in her car felt she had little choice. She was at home with her three children and baby (aged 10, 7, 3 and less than 1), feeling uneasy on the Tuesday morning. She made four telephone calls to her husband who was at work. 'At around 11-ish it was getting really dark' and her husband offered to return home during his lunch break to reassure her that it was nothing to worry about and that the fire was 'miles away'. He did drive home and shortly after he had left to return to work, his wife experienced an 'overwhelming feeling of "I'm not happy being here on my own"'. She was 'still not really aware that there was a fire at my backdoor. We were engulfed by the fire, just as I got into the car...I think I crashed the car into a tree stump and all the kids by that stage were hysterical'. 'All I thought was just "get to the beach and we'll be OK".'

Reflecting on her actions that day she said, 'I had no choice. I had to. I've got to keep my kids safe.' 'It was so dark, it was like midnight. That's why I might have left, I couldn't 'phone anyone.'

*I would have been worse being stuck in the house and having the front go over the house and be in there with five children and not knowing what to do. Because I had no idea we've never discussed a fire plan. We're on mains but there was no water anyway, was there?*

After making it to the beach, 'the sounds were incredible, hearing gas bottles exploding, the smell of stuff on fire, I couldn't open the window to let air in because there was no fresh air', she decided to drive to Port Lincoln to shelter at her mother-in-law's. This individual experience, of having sole decision-making responsibility, was exacerbated by her husband going out on a fire truck that afternoon through to the

following day: ‘That was worse for me. All I kept thinking was, he’s going to lose his life. Because I’d already heard that people had been killed. That, for me, at the initial time, was worse than losing the house.’ She said to her husband, ‘I really needed you there; I wished you hadn’t fought the fire on that night’.

For the next bushfire, ‘the reality is, the kids are likely to be there’. If she had ‘plenty of warning’ her preference would be to ‘take them somewhere else whether or not I would just stay gone...’ ‘I guess I probably haven’t thought much about if I was home alone again and [my husband] wasn’t there or if I was having to fight something like that on my own with the kids how I would...’

When I asked if they, as a couple, have discussed this potential scenario she said: ‘We do. He’s much more the opposite of me; he’s much more “It will never happen again”’.

#### **4.3.4 Women who stayed**

Two of the women who were at home without their husband on the day of the Wangary fire were able to make contact with them and receive crucial advice via the telephone. Both of these women had married into farming families.

The first woman was at home with her six-month-old baby while her husband was on a fire truck at the fire front. The smoke ‘just got bigger and bigger and bigger’ and she became ‘gradually more and more panicked, scared and worried’. She telephoned her husband who reassured her that it ‘wasn’t going to come this way’. Despite hearing this she started to pack the car. The telephone was ‘constantly ringing’, with people warning her and checking in with her, which magnified her fear. She telephoned her sister to ‘have a chat with her about it’. Her sister urged her to leave immediately but she still expected ‘to be warned’. It went from ‘Better be ready, this is all scary to bang (clap) it was coming before I knew it’.

*Basically, I remember going outside and there was just smoke everywhere and I just knew. My head told me ‘You can’t get in the car and go anywhere because you know that would just be sealing your fate with [her daughter]. But my*

*heart was like, 'You've got to go, you've got to get out of here, the fire's coming, you've got to go, you don't want to be here', so that was very strange.*

She described the desire to leave as powerful:

*It's very hard to fight the emotions. Literally, it was like a physical pull to get in the car and drive away because the fire is coming. So I can totally understand why that happens, why people do that. It's just an instinct.*

She spoke to her husband over the phone, who had confirmed 'We're in trouble', and asked him a number of times 'Do I stay or do I go?' Each time he instructed her to stay. Fortunately, three people (two were relatives) managed to drive out to her home and assist with defending the property. She was convinced the house would burn and believes that without their assistance it is likely she and her daughter would not have survived.

*That's what happened that day. All the men went over there thinking they were just going to keep a lid on this and then it exploded and they all got caught there and they couldn't come back and defend their families, homes, farms.*

The next morning, 'I remember looking out the window just as the sun was coming up and you could see this new landscape, like it wasn't what you normally see, and I felt really empowered.' 'I should have felt quite sad but I felt really strong.'

She talked at length about gender roles and difficulties that mothers face:

*If [help had not arrived] I just would have been in the house here not able to stop the house from burning even though the resources are here [referring to the fire truck she cannot operate].*

She was frustrated by that feeling of powerlessness and has not been successful in convincing her husband to teach her how to operate the fire truck:

*I've been broaching the subject lately of the fact that if I'm here with [their daughter]. It's an issue. I very much vocalise that to him and I very much feel like he's still got one eye on the telly...I feel he doesn't pay enough attention to that.*

It is a different situation now as her daughter is no longer a baby and ‘she could be very traumatised’. She has told her husband that she ‘feels really capable’ but ‘I’ve got [our daughter] so I’m not in a position to do it and we talked about different things’. ‘If I had enough warning I’d probably take [their daughter] into town’ and return to defend the home. ‘If there’s not enough warning I’d have to do it on my own with [their daughter.]’ Their plan is that her husband will be home during the next bushfire: ‘That’s what I’m hoping’. ‘But then he’d be out there trying to shift his sheep so all these factors come in.’

One family, amongst this group of seven, anticipated on the Monday that the bushfire would flare up the next day. The wife and mother was at home with their four children (aged 5, 7, 16 and 19) when her husband phoned on the Monday evening from interstate, asking her what the weather would be like the following day. When she read out that ‘northerlies were forecast’ he said to her ‘You’re up shit creek’. She had ‘a restless night that night’, woke up Tuesday morning and it ‘was flat calm and within half an hour the north wind had picked up’. Her oldest son went off to work and their daughter took the two younger boys into town. Her husband was unable to get home due to the closure of the local airport. He ‘phoned every twenty minutes’ throughout the day. His advice was comprehensive and practical:

*He just reminded me not to panic, not to panic as the fire gets close; that’s when I’ll get frightened and not to get in the car and stay in the house and wait until the fire has gone over and then get outside.*

She hosed down the outside of the garage, soaked some towels and filled the bath, sink, spa and wheelie bins with water. She was under strict instruction to stay home and not to panic: ‘I knew that what I had to do, I just knew what [my husband] said was true.’ She has a great deal of respect for her husband and completely trusted his advice: ‘I know that he’s so knowledgeable, I didn’t even question him.’

This family had a fire truck and she was unable to operate it. ‘I don’t know how to use it myself actually.’ Fortunately, a neighbour arrived to provide assistance and he was able to utilise this vital resource. This meant she was not alone when the fire front passed through their farm and she had additional help with the mopping up afterwards.

‘If [our neighbour] had not have been here I would not have been able to...well, [my husband] would have given me instructions over the phone, I would imagine.’ I asked about what would have happened had their children all been present with her: ‘I would have been so worried about them.’ Being alone allowed her to have complete control of the situation: ‘I didn’t want to be responsible for anyone else or to worry about anyone else.’ She contemplated asking her older son to stay home and help her but thought ‘I don’t need to have him here to worry about him.’ ‘He wouldn’t listen.’

If there is a bushfire in the future, despite handling the Wangary fire, she is unsure what she would do if she got caught at home with the children: ‘Would there be more trauma at the beach or at home? So, um, I don’t know, I can’t answer that. If [my husband] was here I wouldn’t have a problem. If [my husband] was away, yeah...I couldn’t leave a six-year-old inside with his eight-year-old brother. I couldn’t leave two kids inside and me be outside, yeah, they’d be running out looking for me.’ After debating out aloud to herself the potential variations in levels of trauma, she said: ‘I would stay with the kids and just hope like hell [my husband] was here.’

The last woman, who was also at home, had her husband present for the entire ordeal. She had been aware of a bushfire on the Monday and started getting worried on the Tuesday morning when she could smell smoke. By late morning the ‘smoke was getting thicker’ and they had the house all closed up. She went outside, it was ‘all windy and horrible’, but there was no visible fire. They had no power at the time and she thought ‘Surely we’re in danger.’ ‘The police will come and evacuate us. Should I be packing the car? Should I be waking my husband?’ Her husband, a shift worker, was asleep. ‘One minute it was really black and the next minute the sun would break through and then it would be eerie again.’

When she looked out the window she could see flames. The power came back on and the smoke detectors were screeching. They had water ‘but no pressure to do anything with it’ so they used a hessian bag and a spade. Their two children, aged 10 months and three years, ‘were just crying, they were just screaming’. There were ‘explosions going off left, right and centre and the kids were just freaking out’ and ‘we were racing in and out all the time checking in on them’. For a ‘good half an hour they

just sat there bawling their eyes out'. 'We just felt like we were alone in the whole world by ourselves fighting this fire. It was pretty scary.' 'We didn't have time to panic.' When she saw the flames she recalls thinking 'We'll just stay put now, it's here and that's it, we'll have to stay put.'

Because her husband suffered from asthma this woman was doing the majority of the defending outdoors. She would send him in 'to check on the kids'. 'We were working as a team.' While her children have been traumatised she believes that putting them in the car would have been more distressing. Friends of hers 'left their run too late' and that 'would traumatise them more'. 'A vehicle to me is a bucket of plastic; it's just a time bomb. I would never have jumped in the car.' 'As much as it was scary, just stay put.' She recalled thinking 'It's too late to run now'.

This couple had never discussed what they would do if a bushfire was to occur. After experiencing this fire they sat down as a family and decided, 'You are better off staying home, even if your house does catch on fire.'

'I was constantly thinking, "I'll stick a blanket in the bath and soak it and use it to cover the kids"' as a last resort. She would have liked to have had them out. This would have required an early warning. 'That panic, that's the thing that triggers people.' 'I think we're better off staying put.' 'Once I'd seen those flames there's no way I would have jumped in the car. That was the last thing on my mind, to jump in the car and flee.'

They have acquired a pump and generator.

#### ***4.3.5 Grandparents caring for grandchildren***

A few of the interviewees, who are parents of adult children, mentioned that having responsibility for young children can complicate decision-making in a crisis. One woman said, 'If I had children with me I'm sure it would have been a totally different story. I only had myself to worry about at that time'. One older couple, when they considered future threats of bushfire, expressed concern for the welfare of their grandchildren. This farming family has three households and four generations to consider; the presence of elderly parents can be another (often overlooked)



complicating factor. During the interview this husband and wife engaged in a lively discussion, from two contrasting points of view, about the safest action to take. They disagreed on what should be done – demonstrating that when young children (and/or the elderly) are present the decision-making is more complex and that it is not always the parents who are faced with this dilemma but grandparents too:

Wife: *What do you think?*

Husband: *Stay there.*

Wife: *But you do think they should have that experience?*

Husband: *Well, it's not the experience... it's the safety.*

Wife: *No, but if they went to Lincoln...*

Husband (interjecting): *No, no, no, no, no, you don't do that.*

Wife: *But, no listen... We're talking now, what we're going to do next fire.*

Husband: *Unless you can leave way before the smoke gets here, which is an hour or two hours and most of the time you haven't got that warning you're far better off here. There's no way I would do it.*

Wife: *No listen, [their daughter-in-law] and I have discussed it. On a really nasty day I would go early in the morning....no listen.*

Husband: *No I don't agree with you...I'm sorry I just don't agree with you.*

Wife (interjecting): *But, no listen...*

Husband (interjecting): *You're far better off here.*

Wife: *We're doing the exception; it's her [one of their grand-daughters who had a medical condition]. We're not doing any ordinary little family we're doing our family.*

#### 4.4 *Packing the car*

For those families who lost their homes in the Wangary fire, what they managed to retain from their previous life – a link to their own history – was of great importance to them. This activity, of packing the car, seems to be predominantly a female task. Two male interviewees, neither from farming families, made reference to this activity with only one of them being actively engaged with it. Those who did pack their car did not always leave their home – some people automatically took the precaution of packing, preparing in case they decided to leave.

Five of the seven families in group one, with young children, packed their cars and four of them left their properties. Four of the seven families in the group consisting of people without children packed their cars and they all left their properties. Two women from this group were in a safe location when they first learned about the threat of bushfire on the Tuesday (both were at work at the time) and returned to their properties in order to pack their cars and flee. One of the women who drove from work out to her home used the time to make a mental list of what she would retrieve and leave with:

*I got home here and I don't know what made me do it and I still to this day don't know but everything was clear as a bell what I was doing; it wasn't frantic, it was quite methodical. I went upstairs and grabbed our big chest of photos, grabbed our two filing cabinet drawers which had all our insurance policies and our financials. Put that in the car. Grabbed the hard drive of the computer and put that in the car. I was in my work clothes so I put my horse clothes on. We didn't have any power at that stage so I couldn't do anything else. I also grabbed all the photos off the wall.*

Another woman, with her two teenagers (aged 13 and 14), had very little time to think about what to pack. She said they ‘came home and let the kangaroos and our chooks out and grabbed the photos, the computer and the dogs and jumped in the car and took off’. When I asked her how she knew what she would grab she said:

*I've always just thought, 'What do you take?' You take the photos and the computer. You know when you start thinking about what else should we take I just thought if we start we won't know when to stop and we could end up*

*being trapped. I grabbed a fire extinguisher and a fire blanket and that's about it.*

Her two kids grabbed a few things: a leather jacket and a new guitar. This woman expressed sadness at her older daughter, who was living at home at the time, not having that chance: 'I feel for her in a way because she didn't have any opportunity to get anything. Everything that she had other than her work clothes and her car was out here and was burnt.'

A woman from the second group mentioned that at some point, late in the morning on the Tuesday, she decided to 'pack a case – I put a lot of photo albums in a case and I just grabbed at things. A wedding photo that was on a china cabinet and various things. I just threw them all in.' Her adult son was on a fire truck and later in the interview we discussed the sacrifice of fire-fighters: 'He lost all his 21<sup>st</sup> things because his mother didn't think to go and grab them.'

A farmer's wife associated the packing of the car with the female role in bushfire. Although she did not pack a car (she stayed at home during the fire), she believes that 'that's your first thing too, if you're going to go and you have got time to go, that's OK. So you get together your photo albums, your sentimental things that you want. So you're kind of clear enough to think that. Some clothes, valuables, put them in your car and you go.'

Several of the mothers of young children spoke about packing the memorabilia associated with their children. Two women (one who ended up staying and one whose home was destroyed) said they felt silly or foolish when they packed things to take. The woman who lost everything said:

*Early on the Tuesday morning I had for some reason got the green shopping bags and put the four kids' baby albums and wedding photos in the bag. I actually felt really foolish. No idea why I did it.*

The woman who stayed said that she utilised the time she had while her baby was sleeping to pack her car boot:

*Even though I'd been told that it wasn't coming my way it was still such a scary thing. It was such a shockingly hot, dry windy day. I just made a decision to pack my car. I just thought right, I want all my things in the car so that if something happens and it doesn't matter, I can unpack it tomorrow and no one will ever know. I just like to be prepared. So I started going around from room to room being very practical about it.*

#### **4.4.1 *Since the Wangary fire***

One of the young mothers mentioned during her interview that since experiencing the Wangary fire whenever hot, windy conditions occur she packs all her 'precious stuff' and takes it with her 'just in case'. She has questioned this behaviour and asked a friend if she is overreacting: 'Am I insane?' She said her husband is unaffected by the Wangary fire and believes 'it will never happen again'. He has said, regarding her need to pack the car: 'You'll probably have more chance of having a car accident and your car catching on fire and losing your photos' than if she left them in the house on a high-risk bushfire day. She says her husband is a lot calmer since the fire than she is: 'A hot windy day doesn't bother him whereas it really bothers me.' She said she'll probably 'get over it one day' and no longer feel the need to pack her choice belongings on hot, windy days but for now it is a reassuring routine.

*We had seven big old rams. Round barrels. Big old gentlemen. They'd plod. Could hardly move. It was sad. Two that survived. All burnt. Had come back to the shearing shed. He was just standing there.*

#### **4.5 *The role of pets and livestock in decision-making***

One of the numerous variables that played a major role in decision-making for many of the families interviewed was the welfare of livestock and domestic pets. Men from farming families were either outside fighting the fire (on a brigade truck or private unit), or rounding up their livestock in advance of the fire front arriving. A number of men were caught out by the arrival of the fire front, performing the task of attempting to relocate livestock to safer ground.

Farming and non-farming families displayed a deep connection with their pets and livestock. For some people, the welfare of their pets and livestock was at the forefront of their minds. Farmers, in particular, who rely on their livestock for income, took great risks to influence the rate of survival.

Two women, whose husbands were not interviewed, talked about the importance of bloodlines in their sheep and how the fire destroyed generations of hard work. One of these women was at home with her baby while her husband was on a fire truck at the fire front. She said that when her husband found out – either through the radio on the truck or another volunteer – that the fire had travelled to Greenpatch he was ‘dumb struck’. ‘Because it just turned so quickly,’ he was ‘just incredulous, he was in denial about it because that’s when he knew it was going to his place’.

The fire decimated this man’s livestock. His wife recalled:

*We had about 3 000, or just over and we had maybe 300 left and the real tragedy of that that really killed something inside of him was that like I said, his family, generations, have built that. They were very much into bloodlines. His grandfather, his great-grandfather. [My husband’s] father died so he is no longer here and that was his legacy and [my husband] had been doing that for over ten years building it up.*

*I remember before Christmas. I remember he actually said to me that day, ‘This is good, I’ve just about got my flock exactly how I want them.’ Three weeks later they were all gone. That was another huge thing that he had to deal with after the fire. Nothing in comparison to losing your children. Nothing. Pretty hard to deal with, something you’ll never get back.*

One farmer who was out herding sheep when the fire front passed through suffered substantial losses:

*We lost twelve hundred wethers and ewes. One mob of wethers up there. There were seven hundred of them just dead. Just bang.*

*There were one hundred and twenty-odd fat lambs up there and they all got burnt to hell. We had to shoot them. Their feet were burnt, their teeth were burnt.*

The first thing one male farmer did, as soon as we were seated to commence the interview, was to slap down an A4-sized photo of a bird in its nest on the kitchen table:

*That upset me, I lost him. He was on my front veranda when the fire went through. There was three eggs and I think they'd just hatched. The fire, because of the intensity, I've never seen him since, him and his mate, I've never seen him since. I used to get him and tickle him underneath the chin, hell he used to hate that. Built a nest about a metre from my back door. It's a fly catcher, about the same size as a wren.*

One female interviewee, who had married into a farming family, described their losses:

*Lost our shearing shed and three-quarters of our stock. We could hear sheep in the paddocks just screaming. We lost about six hundred sheep. The fire burnt their ears, their noses, their eyes were burnt. Some of them were still alive.*

A young woman who risked driving from work in town to her home was motivated purely by the welfare of her horse and dog:

*I just wanted to get home and get my horse and dog. I just wanted to get home and get them out of here. They were my priority.*

If she has to face another bushfire in the future her decision to stay or leave will depend on the amount of warning and her animals:

*Depending on what kind of fire it is and the degree of danger I will possibly leave with the animals. I guess if we didn't have the animals and stuff here we'd stay, but if I can get out early with them I will. Last time it came through so quickly.*

Another woman who is not from a farming family was torn about fleeing the home at the height of the fire:

*When we left here when we did get out my biggest worry was about my pets. They were still inside and I was saying 'What about the cats and dogs that are inside?' Can't take them all because we had too many. I didn't know whether to leave the door open so they can run out if the house burnt or leave it shut so the fire didn't get in. Everyone [on the telephone] was just saying 'Just leave*

*them'. We all left empty-handed. We weren't thinking in that frame of mind. I didn't think we would get out.*

Their geese, sheep, cows, horses and alpacas survived but the exotic parrots, peacocks, chooks and rabbits all perished.

## Chapter 5: Findings – Recovering from the Wangary fire

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*All disasters affect people, all cause disruption and stress, all generate uncertainty. Without these outcomes an event is not a disaster. (Buckle, Brown and Dickinson, 1998, p. 35)*

### 5.1 *Impacts of the fire*

Once the interviewees had told their story of the day (and where a couple was interviewed together there were usually two separate stories), it was natural for the conversation to shift to the aftermath. Most interviewees spoke at length about the days, weeks and months after the Wangary fire and to what degree their lives had changed. The impacts raised by the interviewees were, unsurprisingly, mainly negative. In amongst all the bleakness and difficult repercussions, however, there were a few positive outcomes.

A substantial amount of time was spent listening to the impacts that the fire has had on couples and families; I have had to be selective with the issues that are incorporated here. The sequence of the following text begins with the immediate impacts, moves on to the impacts that occurred in the weeks and months afterwards and then, finally, to those that remained unresolved nearly two years after the event. A number of interviewees told me that they felt the effects were only just becoming apparent and that for many people there would be no true relief. This theme is concluded on a brighter note with a brief summary of the positive impacts that people identified.

#### 5.1.1 *Immediate impacts*

For those whose home was destroyed the immediate impact of the fire was not having a bed to sleep in that night. Five of the 14 families were in this situation. They all obtained temporary accommodation either through family, friends, work contacts or donated housing via the wider community. One woman told of the odd circumstance she found herself in on the evening of 11 January 2005:



*It was half-past nine at night and there I am in the car on my own and all this fire around smouldering. It was very eerie and not knowing where I was going to sleep that night, no idea you know, but it was a very strange feeling and then in the back of my mind was 'our house has been burnt.'*

Humour surfaced in a number of the bushfire narratives, particularly around what people were wearing when they fled the fire. The woman quoted above remarked, with laughter, on her fashion sense:

*I only had a sun frock and work boots on, I looked a real dolly. It was only a 1988 model, I looked quite interesting. So we had no clothes other than what we'd worn. It was a strange night. You couldn't sort of get your mind around it, you didn't know what you were going to see, you didn't know how you felt.*

At the end of one interview with a couple who had lost their home, they recalled 'wandering around K-Mart the day after in borrowed clothes, yeah, we were looking for underwear'. The husband, through laughter, said 'In fact, I reckon these are the clothes I was wearing? I think they were...these are the clothes I had on that day [the Wednesday].'

Another woman, laughing, recalled how she had issued instructions to her two teenagers but did not follow her own advice:

*'Just grab some jeans and a long shirt or a jumper and make sure you've got your boots on' and, um, in the process I grabbed my jeans, forgot my boots, grabbed a flannelette shirt of [her husband's] and didn't put them on. I just didn't think. I just grabbed them and chucked them in the car so if we'd been trapped in a fire I would have been cactus because I still had my bikinis on. It was gorgeous I can tell ya.*

The three of them had been swimming in the dam on their property when they first saw smoke on the Tuesday morning.

For this family and a number of others, the immediate impacts of the fire persisted. Their home was on 16 acres of land and they had a building business. They lost their home and, similar to some of the farming families, their livelihood:

*It hasn't stopped since that day really. It's been really constant. One kid left home after the fire, 'cos she couldn't handle it anymore. And the other two had a borrowed caravan each for their bedroom. We had a tent for a long time till it blew down too many times and we moved the bed into the shed one day. That's where we've stayed for our bedroom.*

This woman clearly articulated her frustration with how her quality of life has deteriorated as a direct result of the fire: 'We went from being self-sufficient and owning our own home to not having anything.' She questioned whether their house would ever be finished and thought about what she would most like to do when the day finally arrives:

*Once we've got this house finished I don't ever want to have to make a decision ever again. I don't want to buy a new thing ever again, you know, I've just had a gutful of having to make decisions and think things through. I just keep saying 'When the house ever gets finished and I ever get to sit in my lounge room I just want to spend a whole year sitting in my lounge room looking out my window.' I guess we will get there. One day.*

Over the two years following the Wangary fire, a family of six had moved house on seven occasions. Straight after the fire they rented in Port Lincoln and 'the kids really didn't adjust well to that after being out of town and living in town it just didn't suit us.' They rented elsewhere, returned back to town briefly and then out to a friend's farmhouse and from there to Adelaide with family and finally, to a rental property in Rustler's Gully. As a result of all the relocations their children had to change schools.

Three days prior to the interview taking place, this family had moved back to their block of razed land, into the shed. During the interview the wife and mother described the disruption and lack of routine as being incredibly frustrating. Their final move will be from the shed into the new home that is yet to be built. This woman said she is 'feeling much better back on the land' and that 'finally we can start really getting some routine back into our lives...it was so good just knowing we're not moving again.' Having only spent three days back on their land she said she is feeling 'so much better'.

### 5.1.2 *Impacts that have emerged over time*

The loss of normality and routine was a major topic within the bushfire narratives of those whose homes were destroyed. Just as there were changes in the physical landscape there were major, involuntary, shifts in people's lives. One man in his sixties, who lost everything and who had lived his whole life on the family farm in a house that was built by his ancestors in the 1800s, moved into town. People reduced their hours of work, took time off or resigned so that they could focus on re-establishing their lives. The following section explores a number of issues that were raised in discussions around the medium to long-term impacts the bushfire has had at a personal, community and domestic level.

#### 5.1.2.1 **Community, friendships and relationships**

Three women, two from the first group and one from the second group, spoke about how the fire has impacted on their friendships. The older woman, in her sixties, said her friendships have not been the same:

*It's affected my friendships as a woman, um, in that our whole community of Wanilla has been destroyed. We've got close friends. The fire has moved, um, two out of the four of them to Lincoln 'cos their house was burnt. It's affected friendships. I guess I've allowed it to affect some of my friendships. There's just no community anymore, we've lost that whole community spirit.*

*Our community has been broken up and I guess that's sad. Even though you think there would be more caring and awareness of people after the fire, everybody seems to have their own little crisis to deal with. I have found that probably my friendships have not been the same in terms of the closeness and regularity of seeing my friends.*

*I feel the fire has totally changed communities. It's destroyed a lot of things and made things different and that's just the facts, I suppose. That's how it is. They're busy reconstructing all their fences, they're doing things on the farm if you still have a farm left. You're scarred and those scars, I think you can still heal but there's still a terrible lot of grief that we feel. There's a whole lot of grief inside you that things will never be the same, men and women.*

She spoke in detail about how gender (and friendships) can inform the recovery process:

*I see that difference in men and women. Because we're women we have a nurturing instinct and therefore I believe that women will talk about things. They've developed that ability. Men bottle it up. Generally speaking many men won't sit and talk about the emotions and the scars, they probably don't really know because men compartmentalise everything, their work, their bowls, their children, their house, their farm, their wife, their sexuality, their whatever – it's all compartmentalised. Because many men can't express their emotions because that's just the way traditionally Australian men are.*

A woman who has children living at home and who lost everything said she felt that some of her friendships had been affected by the fire in a way she had not anticipated:

*It's been funny we've had really good support from people we didn't know very well or people that weren't close friends or whatever and then from some areas where you'd think you'd get support like immediate family and close friends it's not necessarily forthcoming.*

This was echoed by another young woman who had lost everything in the fire:

*Even some family members weren't there for us and had said things which we couldn't understand and still can't. For a while after for us that was more traumatic than dealing with the fact that we'd lost everything. The reactions, the lack of reactions, lack of compassion, lack of lots of stuff really was probably harder to deal with.*

I asked her if she had met other people that she didn't know prior to the fire:

*Yeah, I have yup. Yeah, I've made friends with people who I hadn't met before so that's been great. I mean I also have friends who I don't have anything to do with anymore since the fire. So it's been a real...it's been quite life changing in a lot of aspects of our life like friendships – old friendships, new friendships. Lots of different levels of change. Work changes. My husband didn't actually work for quite a while after.*

On a more intimate note, one woman who spoke at length about the guilt and anger she carries with her as a result of the bushfire said she and her husband 'still haven't talked about it'. She said the fire 'still eats at her' and believes that her husband is 'still

angry inside'. While she has not talked to her husband she feels that 'he probably would never blame me but he probably thinks I should have stayed – not that he would ever make me feel bad like that'. The entire family's workload continues to be substantial nearly two years after the fire and this has caused significant strain on their marriage:

*We could have left here and been divorced many times but you still just, you get that bit of hate 'cos people in town like they just don't sort of realise, 'Oh it looks so beautiful out there, it's green'...You just keep going on, you're not going to bitch and moan and groan because it's there. You have to deal with it, don't you?*

Her tone, words, pauses and sighs seemed infused with bitterness, regret, anger and frustration.

### **5.1.2.2 Mental health of interviewees**

Numerous people from both groups talked about the impact the Wangary fire has had on their mental health. Those that had either felt they would perish or believed a loved one had perished were particularly affected, psychologically, by the bushfire. The fire at Rustler's Gully (October 2006), the most significant fire to occur since the Wangary fire, was frequently discussed by the interviewees with particular reference to their sensory responses.

One male interviewee talked about his fragile mental health and said he had been prescribed medication, because he was not coping. He spoke openly about his struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): 'I'm still on bloody anti-depressants and that...enough to drive you to the point of bloody no return.' During the Wangary fire he, with his wife and adult niece, had been trapped in their home when it caught fire. They sheltered in the bathroom, 'sounded like a jumbo jet, the whole house was roaring and shaking, I'll never forget it,' and believed they would die. Their home was extensively damaged but, due to looters and their surviving animals, they were compelled to move back prematurely and lived in substandard conditions for the following eight months. Being exposed for so long to the ruins of their home had a negative affect on their

progress with recovery: ‘the smoke smell just drove you around the bend, just a stench that wouldn’t go.’

This couple discussed together how they felt and responded to the Rustler’s Gully fire, the most recent fire event. He was at home that day and was up at the shed when he was told by a family member ‘There’s a fire’. He had an intense physical response: ‘I walked out of the shed and just looked up [saw the smoke] and went to shit. I was very close to vomiting.’ Despite this reaction he went with a neighbour to assist in the fire-fighting effort:

*I had to go, I had to go. I had to go back and see a fire. I was helping other people. We had that many people help us. I had to go and help someone else and just get back to where a fire was because yeah, it wasn’t very nice I can tell you. Our mate over the road who got totally burnt out [in the Wangary fire] I was talking to him the other night down the pub there and he said he was crying all the way into Lincoln to go to the fire, yeah, because they got totalled. He said ‘I just cried and cried and cried all the way in.’ But he had to go. He had to go. Just to see a fire again and to go and help someone. It’s a bloody shocking feeling.*

Directly after the Wangary fire one young female interviewee took four days off work. Her home had been destroyed and she needed to purchase essential items, obtain temporary accommodation and ‘just absorb the whole situation’. She and her husband left their home in separate cars and at different times during the Wangary fire. They had agreed to meet at the jetty in North Shields. The woman, who had left before her husband, waded into the sea and sheltered under the jetty:

*Well, I was just freaked out because I just saw the fire coming over the hill and I thought [her husband’s] in that.’ I thought he was gone and when I actually ran out into the water I was having trouble breathing and I actually thought that this was it, I was dead, the house was gonna be burnt and husband’s probably gone already and I just thought that was going to be it. I had trouble dealing with that.*

She was keen to return to work as soon as possible: ‘I loved my job and sitting at my desk, everything on my desk was my own and that was the only normal thing in my life at that stage so I really enjoyed going back to work.’ When she opened her payslip a

month later, those four days had been deducted from her annual leave. She was upset about this and confronted her boss:

*'Why didn't you discuss it with me?' I said, 'You know I could have gone to the Doctor and got a certificate to say I was unfit for work for those four days.' He said, 'Well, you weren't sick, so it can't be sick leave.' I said, 'What about compassionate leave?' considering what had happened. And he said 'For it to be compassionate leave someone has to die.' I sort of went 'Well, a part of me has died, in terms of my house is such a big part of my identity', and he said 'Sorry, we can't do that either, the only leave you are effectively able to take is annual leave.' Of course I had already had annual leave so that had put me into negative annual leave. Looking back now it was silly, I should have just gone 'That's crap', but I didn't say anything and I just stewed on it and I was really, really, really deeply upset because my boss had been a really good mate and I enjoyed working with him and I guess the rot set in then and that kicked off my whole anxiety thing and I ended up resigning because I was just unhappy at work.*

She is aware of others, also survivors of the fire, who experienced a similar situation: 'A lot of that went around town. There were quite a few people that either resigned from their job or lost their job after the fire, so I'm not an isolated case.'

When she resigned from her job, four months after the fire, a friend suggested counselling. 'It wasn't until the twelve-month anniversary that I hit the wall with my anxiety; I couldn't leave the house, I couldn't drive out here, I couldn't go anywhere, I felt like I was going to die if I just stepped out the door. I felt really insecure.' The anniversary prompted her to seek help: 'All these emotions came up and smacked me in the face.' At the time of the interview she and her husband had only been back living in their semi-rebuilt property for 12 weeks. The Rustler's Gully fire occurred shortly after they returned to live at their property which 'didn't stress me out at all, didn't faze me at all'.

One woman, still sleeping in a shed at the time of the interview, said that she returned to work after the fire for one day a week:

*Just for a bit of normality, I s'pose, but half-way through the year I thought 'I can't handle this, can't handle you know, it just seems so low priority with all the other things we had to do.' So this year I wasn't going to work at all and*

*just concentrate on getting the house done but last term I got offered one day a week and this next term I've got three days a week, so I really don't know how I'm gonna cope. Because there's so much that needs to be done here and I'm a hands-on person as well. But in reality it's only nine weeks, it's only twenty-seven days of work, in all it's not that much; it's just that it will add to the pressure.*

It has been difficult for this family to rebuild with such a major reduction in their household income due to the husband taking on the job of building their new home.

A female, with adult children, said that she returned to work after the fire and 'was able to block stuff out' in a job that she loved. At the time of the interview, nearly two years after the fire, she was no longer working and now has 'all this time to think about everything'. She talked about the differences between men and women moving through the recovery process as a direct outcome of men and women facing 'different problems on the day'.

*I think it will be more men needing mental health help than women 'cos women have each other and bounce off each other.*

*I just know that probably with the men, um, those whose whole properties were burnt, houses were burnt now are in real financial trouble. And so those men, I believe...the results of the fire are going to tip them over the edge because a lot of them just can't get back. So financial problems then lead to the mental problems and there probably will be suicides, um, because men again don't talk about it; women talk about it. You might get depressed as a woman but you talk about and I think you go and seek help. And there's a lot of women that have been through that I know are on anti-depressants and I am as well.*

She emphasised that the fire, for many, was not an isolated problem:

*It's hard sometimes to differentiate because people have had the problems anyway and then the fire has exacerbated those problems. But I think a lot of the male problems are still coming, I don't think we're aware of a lot of that that's gonna happen because those who lost, as I said before, those who lost everything are very depressed and the problems of how they cope are probably going to come out some years down the line.*



*I just know through friends of ours that a lot of them [men] have not admitted that they are sort of suffering trauma. It's still inside.*

Her prognosis for the mental health of many men (and women) in her community is bleak due to the crisis in mental health services:

*You ring [the local psychologist] and he says 'Sorry, I can't see you for three months.' What do you do? That's a huge thing over here. Mental health, probably all over Australia, is lacking and mental health particularly in country areas is really, really lacking. And so you cannot get the help when you need it.*

She talked about the difficulty farmers have experienced in the reconstruction phase:

*...they've had to get another house, they've had to get another shearing shed, implements and they will never recover and the banks now will foreclose on some of those people...and that's a whole family, like one, two three generations that's been on that farm and it's gone as a result of the fire.*

*There will be monetary and emotional scars that will never, never heal probably in some people. Particularly with the men, it mainly affected farmers and male farmers are so stubborn and rigid in their thinking. It may give those people, some people like that a broader sense of their purpose in life, their being here. A different perspective.*

*With a farmer, self and farm both intermingle and become the same thing so that their farm is who they are. My husband is absolutely a prime example, because your farm is your life it becomes who you are and you don't often venture beyond that. Particularly with the older generation, whereas now some farmers develop...but because you live and your life is your farm you become quite insular in many ways and a lot of farmers are like that. Their farm is destroyed and so their life is destroyed, for males in particular. Females develop more interests through playgroups, schools; through your children you have more interests. It will be interesting five, ten years' time how it's affected.*

A younger mother from the first group, who has four children, was interviewed over two years after the fire. She said that the fire has caused her to be on the alert, particularly during certain weather conditions:

*It's more sensory for me, even coming in to town today like the clouds were a bit dark and I'm not sure if there's a fire in another area and if I smell smoke and like for me it's still all of that sort of stuff that's really real for me. I'm fine talking about it but it's the visual cues...it's definitely that for me that I'm still working through. I'm certainly much more aware of the weather and the winds and whereas prior to the fire if it was a hot wind day it was a hot windy day, it was no big deal. Whereas now if the forecast is hot and windy I straight away think of fire.*

One of the seven people that I interviewed on the day of the Rustler's Gully fire said: 'Mornings like this morning makes you nervous...yeah, it's almost exactly the same type of day.'

Another woman described how the impact of the fire on her family continues to be felt almost two years down the track:

*It would have been thirteen months after the fire and I was getting angry up there because I was still pulling down burnt bits and I was thinking, you know, it's just those stages that you all go through. 'People think we're bloody doing all right,' and I'm slamming it on the ground and it's still all black. So it's still fairly...yeah, it's still fairly raw, really.*

She talked about the day of the Rustler's Gully fire:

*I'd got up that morning and it's 8 o'clock and it's school holidays and I got all teary that morning, this is how raw it still sort of is, I guess, and how much it hurts I suppose. But I sort of think 'Bloody school holidays.'*

Her husband and three children were outside working on the re-fencing:

*...and this is 8 o'clock in the morning like school holidays and they just worked all through the school holidays. I sort of got all teary then you know, yeah, even driving in then it's still sad but people don't probably realise, everyone's the same; they'd all be doing it, everyone'd be still working away trying to do the fencing and yeah. But it's funny, I sort of felt a little bit, not edgy.*

She said she was a bit panicky for someone she knew that lived in Rustler's Gully.

This heightened awareness of weather conditions, in conjunction with the occurrence of major fire events during Spring 2006 when I was interviewing, triggered a

strong reaction from a number of interviewees. One woman summarised how the recent fires (Rustler's Gully and Big Swamp) affected survivors of the Wangary fire:

*Another interesting thing is now when you smell smoke it straight away brings it back. And that, all the smoke, that starts to bring people to relive the situation, kids would probably be quite terrified of that. Yeah, it brings it all back. Some people have been able to cope with that, some people have not dealt with that, um, some people have been able to move on from that and some people are still there with the fire.*

One topic raised by a number of people was the 'not knowing'. Those who were stuck at road blocks unable to get home – or relatives residing in unaffected areas who were aware of deaths but unsure of the details – talked about feeling helpless. I asked one woman in the second group, after she told me her horrific story (where she drove through a fire front to get to safety) whether she 'felt fearful' when she was driving in the car alone:

*I don't know that I was panicking. I obviously wasn't panicking because I wasn't going extremely fast...I knew that was stupid anyway, going ultra-fast in those sorts of circumstances.*

*I guess I did remain...it's almost as if you're out of your body sort of thing. When I was getting down towards Shields and I could see it spotting everywhere it was like total disbelief. It was quite an odd feeling so I don't know that I was panicking...I think I was worse when I was actually in Lincoln in the afternoon hearing reports and particularly when I heard about three that perished which were the two children and Nat's Mum. Um, that was probably one of the darkest hours. They said that two had perished and that was the fire fighters out here. But when they said 'three perished'...before it was confirmed, yeah, I did that hot and cold all over and had a really bad feeling, um, and probably that was one of the darkest hours and waiting for [my husband] to get in was another bad one.*

### **5.1.2.3 Mental health of children**

A number of the interviews featured discussion of the bushfire's impact on the mental health of young children.

The woman who sent her four children into town hours before the fire front arrived stressed that removing them from the actual fire well in advance did not necessarily eliminate the risk of trauma. Her five-year-old son has been particularly affected by the fire:

*He wouldn't go to school after that, I had to take him into the class room and try and, you know, just disappear or sit with him for half an hour and I'd get up to leave and he'd start to cry. When we had really bad dust storms they would load all the kids up from here and take them to Lincoln and, no, he would panic; there was no way he would get on that school bus and go to Lincoln. He was troubled for a good six, eight months afterwards, especially to leave me. I would say 'What's wrong?' He would say 'Mummy, I get really frightened when you leave.'*

*And bear in mind too these little kids [Zoe Russell-Kay and Graham Russell] that were burnt, they went to school with my boys. It was always on the TV. The fire happened on the Tuesday and we actually went away the first weekend. It was on the news every second and there was so much happening on the farm, you know, with dead sheep we could see that the two younger kids were really stressed out. We couldn't go away for very long or very far because there was just so much work to do here. We actually took them up to Whyalla for two days and sat in a motel room and swam in the swimming pool...just to get them away for those couple of days was really good for them. You know, they'd look outside and everything was just black. Couldn't get away from it. Everything was black.*

One couple from the second group work in the education sector. While acknowledging the needs of the students at the primary school in Poonindie, they expressed concern that children attending schools beyond the fire-affected region were overlooked in the aftermath of the bushfire.

*Wife: There were times when we definitely needed more counselling available.*

*Husband: They put quite a team together for counselling adults um and the Government and the Education Department promised a lot but when issues actually arose from the kids and you went to seek support there actually wasn't any. That took quite some time to lobby.*

*Wife: I think they probably learnt from that too. I think the counselling side of it was really important, I believe they had teams rostered on from Adelaide so*

*that people would change every couple of weeks which isn't useful when people need to follow up.*

They witnessed children who had no direct experience of the bushfire displaying signs of not coping:

*Husband: Your initial response is to look at fire victims, um, but one example was one kid who wasn't in the fire at all wouldn't go and stay at a friend's place for a sleepover birthday party because their place was surrounded by trees and it was hot so wouldn't leave home.*

Many kids were affected, regardless of where they lived and which school they attended:

*Husband: We had one lad helping his Dad, um, on the back of a ute and looked across and thought he could see a dead kangaroo. In actual fact it was one of the fire-fighters and [he] realised what it was and his Dad put him in the ute and they took off. He's still dealing with that and he's coping well.*

*Some of the victims took it and thought 'Oh well, that was a bit rough', whereas some other kids were victims but not having been through it.*

A mother from the first group, who was at home with her daughter on the day of the bushfire, discussed the impact the event has had on her family and particularly the mental health of her younger son. He (aged 12) and his older brother (aged 14) sheltered alone in their Uncle's shed while a fire front passed through the property. She was not aware of any details of their ordeal until quite a while after the event:

*[Her husband] hasn't really spoken to me about the day they all went over [to her brother-in-law's]. It took eight months before my eldest told me what had happened and, um, to this day [her husband] hasn't told me because I think he feels a bit...He was racing around with his brother...and this fire was there. [Her husband] would not have known where the boys were. They just thought they were going to die because they couldn't breathe. They thought the shed was going to fall in.*

*From what I can gather he [younger son] just went into shock. And even now he's not really...I think he's...anyway. Still not, not too bad but still doesn't...I ended up taking him [15 months after the fire] to someone and she said he was in shock. She looked at him and said 'What has happened to you?'*

She believes her younger son suffered a mental breakdown and is still healing.

Another mother, who was at home with her husband and two toddlers on the day of the fire, explained how her children were immediately affected:

*It traumatises the kids. It has traumatised the kids for quite a while. I had lots of trouble that night settling the kids. I was up seven, eight times. You just basically didn't get any sleep because you're up and down all night to kids. All they wanted was just cuddles, to be reassured.*

*They were real clingy. You couldn't step out the back door. Every time I'd go out the back door, 'Where you going Mummy, where you going Mummy?' And that was probably three, four months I had that. I could not go out the back door without them. Just wanted to know where you were. For the first couple of weeks I didn't want to leave the house.*

*They played and everything about play was bushfires. Everything they could see in their eyes, burnt vehicles, they played about it for, um, must have been two, three months. And when Victoria had their fires last year, my daughter kept saying 'Bushfire Mum, bushfire' and I said 'No bushfire, sweetheart, no bushfire.' And that night smoke wafted over here from the Grampians fires [January 2006]. She was only ten months old at the time of the fire and that night I had to go to her five times before I even went to bed. She was just upset completely because she could smell smoke and was obviously worried that fire was coming again. She was only ten months old so as little as they are, they say they forget but they don't forget. It makes a big impact. Even now they'll still...they'll now and again come out with the talk. It's with them forever.*

A mother of four, (aged 10, 7, 3 and less than 1), said that her two older children 'listen to the weather on the news and really tune into it'. After the Rustler's Gully fire her daughter did not want to go to school: 'I want to stay with you today.' She tries to reassure her that 'You're much safer at school'.

*'Telling them that they're safe. Yes, we're going to have other fires, it doesn't mean it's going to burn your house down every time there is a fire. My son, who's now twelve, said 'That's what they said last time and our house burnt down.' So I have to say that that was an exceptional circumstance.*

This family has had to make an important decision around whether the husband/father's role as a volunteer fire-fighter is sustainable. They have had to weigh up the psychological cost of having a volunteer fire-fighter in the family unit:

*Since the [Wangary] fire he's fought a few fires, he's still an active member of the CFS but I think the last fire he went out to fight caused so much trauma for us because he was out all night and the little ones were up and down all night and just knowing that he was out fighting a fire and then coming back with the smell on his uniform. We decided for our family at the time it would be best for a little while if he's still a member but he won't go out and fight fires for a little while. He...I think it...whether it was also his healing going out and fighting them now, but he's OK to fight them, like it doesn't cause him too much distress but for the rest of the family...*

*I know the last one he went out and fought – it might have been the Rustler's Gully fire – our [four year old] really reverted, she started stuttering and it was the day he was fighting the fire and she was clinging to me and we went and spoke to the counsellor we'd been seeing and she said it was most definitely linked to that, so that was when we decided.*

The woman feels that it is better for the family, for now, to not have her husband involved in fighting fires. He is still active and part of the brigade but just not in a position where he is paged to go out and fight a fire.

#### **5.1.2.4 Adult children – the trauma of fire-fighting and living elsewhere**

Three of the interviews featured parents of adult children who had been involved in the fire-fighting effort (either in brigades or on private fire units) on either 10 or 11 January.

Having no idea where the fire had been or the extent of the damage it had caused, one couple decided to go for a drive to see what had happened on the Tuesday evening.

*Viewing the landscape directly after the fire was quite an unreal feeling. Driving home we came across the two bodies that were burnt but there was a tarpaulin over them but we knew that [our son] had come out and saw the charred bodies and that's what kind of upset him terribly, I don't think he ever sort of got over that. There were two bodies there and I said to [my husband] 'I can't bear to look at this, this is shocking.' So you felt just sick.*

Their son had assisted with the fire-fighting effort and spent time afterwards helping with the re-fencing. By November, 10 months after the event, he'd 'had a nervous breakdown' and 'didn't want to be here anymore'.

Another woman interviewed (who as a consequence of the fire moved with her husband off the family farm into town) talked about what her adult son endured on the fire truck that Tuesday:

*He's told me some of it, they on the truck were asked to hose these two burning bodies which was [the two fire-fighters who perished] and so the police asked them and these bodies were burning and they didn't know who they were, had no idea and the next day they were told who they were and he knew them both. And that was awful, I mean the fact of having to do that in the first place and then finding out and imagine their faces when they were alive and well and, ah, my son had worked with [one of them] for a year. So, he often says 'I just want to get on with life, it's gone now' but it's not it's there and it will always be there.*

Since the fire, her son has been working to reconstruct the family farm and has taken on the bulk of the farming responsibility. He had only moved back out to the farm five weeks prior to the interview taking place. I asked, now that his role on the farm has changed, whether she thinks he would stay to defend the farm or go out on the truck if there was a fire in the future.

*Oh, I'm sure he would now, I'm sure. But the problem is, if there was a fire he'd have to be on the truck...it'd be his duty to go to wherever the major part was and whether he could get back home again...well, see...some of the farmers were able to save their homes because they'd been on at night. They'd been on the Monday night crew from midnight to six...on the other hand, some of them were in bed and a few of them would have burnt had someone not woken them up. One chap...he would've but the guy who'd been on the truck was awake and up and about and he went and checked and said 'get out.'*

Two adult sons of a couple interviewed were active in assisting the fire-fighting effort. On the Monday afternoon when they could see smoke, their eldest son said he would wander over to the CFS shed and see what was going on. When he did, 'they told him to hop on, with his shorts and thongs and no experience whatsoever so he headed



off'. He telephoned in a few hours later to say 'It's not good, you better pack and get ready to go'. When the wind changed direction the threat was gone.

His parents described what their son experienced that day on the CFS truck:

Husband: *Here he was on the back of the CFS truck when someone yelled an order from the truck and they turned their hoses on and just drove straight through the flames and uh, that was a bit scary for him. Whether by then he was in overalls instead of his shorts I don't know.*

Wife: *We haven't liked to ask probably in case they didn't [provide him with protective clothing].*

Their younger son, who was rousing on a nearby farm on the Tuesday, was telephoned by his mother. Her intention was to ask him to return to help them prepare for the bushfire. It was then that she found out that 'he'd gone off with someone to help fight the fire'. 'This is when my panic set in.' 'That worried me a lot because I knew he'd had no experience of fires and hadn't had any training or anything like that.' Her husband, and their father, recalled:

*It was at Edilillie that we heard that they'd found two bodies down there where our son had gone and of course, I mean, there was no reason why it wouldn't have been our son. That was a bit traumatic and [my wife] has had PTSD, um, after that for a while.*

*As it turned out [our younger son] he was on the back of a ute of somebody who he'd never met before trying to put out this grass fire when the ute stalled and I still really don't know, so he'd thought he'd better come home. Once they'd saved a house he thought he'd better come home and came in here [to home] and there wasn't one. It had gone by then.*

A topic was raised by one woman, a mother of five children ranging in age from teenagers to young adults, regarding the implications of the fire for her older children who had, for a number of years, lived away from home:

*They weren't living here, but that's the other thing that I think got forgotten along the way with all of the donations of money and help and stuff like that there was although our two children weren't living at home they still lost stuff. They had stuff here and they lost their inheritance basically as well, so it was*

*pretty tough for them as well. Initially it was tough for them just knowing; well, it's tough for everyone, I suppose, but knowing that we lost everything.*

Despite not having a current presence on the Lower Eyre Peninsula these adult children grew up on this land, in a home that no longer exists. They would have their own story of the bushfire, which they did not witness or experience, and how it has impacted on them at an emotional level.

*Everything we thought would not come back we got rid of...it's pretty hard looking at dead trees.*

## **5.2 *Sense of place and connectedness to the land***

This theme, focused on people's relationship with the landscape and their sense of connection to the natural environment, was powerfully articulated. It resonated through many of the bushfire narratives and I noticed, when playing back the interviews, that it was the older participants who spoke at considerable length on this theme. Interestingly, in a number of interviews with farming families it was this theme (along with the loss of livestock) that was the most emotional topic of conversation for the men. These interviewees expressed their reaction to living in a burnt landscape with clarity and emotion. Their age was a major factor in the responses. Many acknowledged that they would not be around to witness the rejuvenation of their surroundings. They spoke as if the environmental clock had been wound back and their sadness was palpable.

A few of the younger interviewees voiced their sorrow for the older generation, with special mention of those who had lost all that they had worked for over their lifetimes. These younger interviewees are well aware that time is on their side; they will witness the rejuvenation of the landscape. Not having any control over the condition of the wider terrain, a number of families turned their energy and focus inwards to the domestic garden as this was something from which they could gain comfort.

One particular interviewee, a mother with teenage and adult children, who had lost everything in the fire emphasised the importance of re-establishing a garden:

*That was sort of my first thing, really, because I thought ‘Well, the fire has taken everything away but the soil is still here’, so as soon as I could I started working in the garden and planting vegies. My thinking being too...well, whatever I grow I don’t have to buy. And yeah that’s sort of my comfort zone and anytime when they were building sheds and things and I’d be wanting to help but I’d just be in the road so I’d go and work in the garden.*

This woman was keen to point out to me how striking the landscape was prior to the fire: ‘It was really beautiful. You can see where all the dead branches are and that was all green and beautiful. Really old trees.’

Numerous interviewees mentioned the old, big trees that were burnt in the fire. A couple with young children had not lived long at their property before the fire occurred and noted that they had never really had a chance to ‘enjoy a Winter with it so beautiful and lush and green’.

*Wife: It was creepy that night. We had really big trees. We went down there, didn’t we, as a family and put our arms around the trees, these massively big trees. The first night was just awful out here, wasn’t it? All night we just heard creaking and then crash...*

*Husband: We lost hundreds of trees that first night.*

A male interviewee expressed grief for the loss of the large old trees on their property:

*The big trees and that, they were I think twenty to twenty-five years old maybe, something like that, yeah I won’t see them anyways. Not to what they were, not up to bloody thirty-footers.*

His wife said she still feels like they are ‘living in a fish bowl’. Prior to the fire their home was secluded from the road. With the loss of the trees and their natural windbreak they are still feeling exposed.

Three families who lost their homes talked about the challenge of planting a garden after the fire. They were conscious of minimising the flammability in their new gardens. This was a common concern articulated by the families who were burnt out by the fire –

how to strike a balance between fire prevention and still enjoy the landscape they reside in and love. The woman, quoted above with her veggie garden, described this tension:

*Really, in building the house where we have and not knocking down any trees close to the house they probably are really too close but...it's a bit hard to know what to do...I'm not the sort of person that can live in an open paddock. I mean, right close around the house I'm really conscious of what I'm planting in my gardens to try and make sure it's fire-resistant but I think there's gotta be a happy medium somewhere. I need to have garden around me.*

The young woman without children, who lives on a 10-acre block, was in the rebuilding stage at the time of the interview. Their previous garden had woodchips and although the new garden was not yet created she had given thought to alternatives: 'With this house there's no wooden deck; as you can see, everything is all cement, um, when we do have gardens they'll be rock, pebble gardens.'

A couple who live on 20 acres and lost their home in the fire spoke about the impact the event has had on their environment:

Husband: *Oh, we had a beautiful garden, beautiful native garden.*

Wife: *And the birds and the lizards and rocks.*

Husband: *Oh yeah, that's what we miss most of all, having the wrens literally just outside your window, pecking at your window.*

Wife: *So now I've gone for saltbush and succulents and native stuff. But it's all a bit dry at the moment. I've really researched what plants you could have what wouldn't burn as much. I mean I know they all burn but...*

Husband: *We've planted orange trees out the back as a fire retardant.*

Their conversation then turned to deciding to draw the line at installing fencing.

Wife: *We've got more plants in to act as a bit of a fire break; we haven't gone down the fence route because we don't want to be fenced in.*

Husband: *Corrugated iron, yeah, or Colorbond. Yeah, I mean this is why we're here, to feel as though we've got some elbow room. To then go and give us a Colorbond fence we might as well be in the suburbs somewhere.*

This woman explained that people have “understood my want of not having flammable plants and things others have said ‘It will never happen again, don’t worry’. I felt a little bit foolish at times, my gut feeling is so strong to do everything possible that that’s overridden other people’s opinions, I suppose.”

Earlier in the interview, when they described their old house and garden and how unprepared they were, they laughed at the futility of it all:

Husband: *We had a timber clad, timber framed house at the time up on stilts um timber verandas.*

Wife: *Timber decking.*

Husband: *Timber decking with mulched gardens up to the decking in places.*

Wife: *Eucalypts hanging over the roof, yeah, couldn’t have been worse.*

It was on the Tuesday that they discovered their one outdoor hose did not reach all the way around the house. The husband and one son were chopping down trees and using a bucket to wet down their house with water.

Wife: *I was saying, yep, I will change the garden.*

During three of the interviews with older couples, I was shown photos that were meaningful to them. These images were of their home, garden and landscape before the fire. Two particular couples were very proud of their garden prior to the fire and one couple’s garden had been open to the public as part of the National Open Garden Scheme. This woman gardener described her garden as ‘my passion’. She said ‘it was pretty hard to live here and look out at the black everyday’. I was shown some post-fire photos: ‘See the burnt, that’s what you call black, nothing. No, not going to come alive, burnt beyond recognition.’ Living with ‘everything black’ was difficult and one of their first tasks as a couple was to restore the lawn:

*I had to water the lawns so we started watering the lawns and we had beautiful green lawns again and [my husband] actually mowed them on Australia Day, so that was like not even two weeks after the fires after it was totally black.*

During the interview she showed me photos of her pink roses before the fire: ‘As the days went by everything went brown and crispy and dropped all their leaves but my friends cut them all back and fed them all and they came back and they all lived, every one of them’.

It was confronting looking at dead trees and plants:

*After twelve months the bottle brushes in the driveway there, they shot after a year, um, so some things are worth holding on to but yeah, we’ve just got rid of the last only in the last few months, the last dead stuff around because we just don’t want to look at it anymore.*

Another couple, in their sixties, found it painful to look out the window at the landscape after the fire. Pointing to a photo album the husband said ‘You shouldn’t really look at the fire without having a look at this...this will break your heart, have a look at some of these garden ones here’. As we turned the pages, looking at photos of their garden the year before the bushfire, he said:

*What do you think of that for a garden? That’s what it used to be like. It’s nice that we’ve got the photographs cos’ you’ve got memories. It’s not hurting quite so much now but the first six months after the fire you sort of knew what was there and all of a sudden it was just a desert. Forty years of hard work.*

They reflected on their life together, living in the house built on a site they chose when they were married, and explained that they felt like they had come full circle as a direct consequence of the fire:

*Wife: Now we say well we’re back to where we were when we were first married.*

*Husband: That’s where it’s just heart-breaking. That took forty years to get to that and I’ve run out of lifetimes. I love my environment and we’ve lost all our big trees that’s they’re gone. The regeneration under the scrub is just unbelievable so in twenty years time it will probably be better scrub than before the fire.*

*Beautiful area around here, it was. Well, one day it will be again but I’ll never see it like that again.*

A couple also in their sixties expressed sadness at the devastation of the landscape:

*Husband: To me the fire was an absolute disaster for the environment apart from the loss of life, it was an absolute disaster. The environment on this place, the flora and fauna will never recover. It's just devastated it. When you get a disaster like this it does incredible damage and it may partially recover in three or four hundred years.*

*Nature in its own way can be very, very vicious and totally unforgiving. We're nothing for nature.*

His wife spoke about her reaction to the landscape after the bushfire. At the time of the interview, nearly two years after the bushfire, she continued to cope with the dramatic change in the environment:

*I went out there the other day and I just thought ahh, this is all too hard. I went outside and I looked around and it's all black still. Virtually still black and I said to [my husband] 'I can't stand looking at this anymore, I just don't even want to be here.'*

*One thing that has affected me I guess is when I go out to Wanilla it's like...a moonscape and when you drive you get very familiar with the vegetation and it's like a whole different new world now. It's not like home anymore. It's like a different area. Because I'm 61 I'm ready not to be out there anyway. We're at that stage of our lives and just the fire has exacerbated, I suppose, the isolation and it doesn't look nice anymore. I'm not emotional about that. I accept it, I suppose.*

In these reflections she described a sense of estrangement from the landscape which is, for her, unresolved.

Younger interviewees expressed sorrow at the losses their older neighbours are facing. One woman spoke about how hard her husband and children are having to work and feels for the older people who have spent more time working on the land:

*I just think, you know, all these years that we've strived to try and make life better...I sort of think of the older people because I think for them we will see it sort of change and it will get better and I mean, there is glimpses now but shit, it's still bloody hard you know...you're working and you've got kids and trying*

*to have a normal life but I think those older people it would just ahhh, kill them I reckon.*

One couple who live on 90 acres but do not rely on their land for income said:

*Wife: Because we're hobby farmers you sort of really felt for the farmers. Although the fire was over and we had a lot of work to do the next day we didn't have to worry about stock or...*

*Husband: Or income.*

They referred to their neighbouring farmer who had to immediately start digging large pits to bury his burnt livestock.

A woman in her twenties put the losses she and her husband suffered in generational perspective and explained why they did not register for any assistance irrespective of their eligibility:

*We lost our home but we're young, we don't have any children, we don't rely on our land for income, we don't you know, we earn good money doing what we do. The last thing we want to do is take advantage of the situation.*

With this theme it becomes apparent that the sense of loss around the couples and individuals connectedness to nature and the environment is quite profound. A real sense of grieving comes through in a number of these bushfire narratives; the dramatic visual changes and the scarring of the landscape was a common theme across the interviews but particularly with the older generation of participants. Sadness, bitterness and anger at the loss of their connection to the landscape occurred during several interviews within the older demographic. It is possible that the circumstances of the destruction, caused by an event perceived by many to have been preventable, may have contributed to a heightened or exacerbated sense of loss. These bushfire narratives demonstrate the value people place on their connection to the landscape. The environment, both domestic and the wider landscape (particularly for rural dwellers), in which people live plays a fundamental role in their quality of life.



### 5.3 Spirituality

*I've got a strong faith.*

Some of the interviewees, while reflecting on their experience of the Wangary fire and their actions on the day, made reference to faith. This theme is important as it has acknowledged and recognised the role that faith (whether traditional or non-traditional beliefs) plays for some people when they are threatened by bushfire. Spirituality was a key component of identity for some people and it was a significant source of strength for a number of interviewees during the recovery process.

Two women from the second group, who have adult children in their twenties and thirties, explained the role that faith had for them on the day of the Wangary fire. Both of these women spoke at length on the theme of faith, returning to the topic on several occasions throughout the interview.

The first woman, who was aware of the fire at Wangary on the Monday afternoon, described when she became alert to the bushfire threat on the Tuesday morning:

*I could see this huge, rolling smoke. It was so huge and thick and it looked like it was heading for Lincoln and I thought 'Oh no,' and in my simple way I said a prayer to God that 'Please don't change the wind, just stop it.' I didn't want the wind to turn because it would come to us. Just stop it.*

*I've got a fairly good prayer system going on. Everything I do has got a prayer in it.*

She left the property in her car and the family home was destroyed.

The second woman, who was inside her home alone, described how she managed to remain calm despite the danger:

*I remember the house starting to fill up with smoke and I could see it was near. It jumped all the fire breaks. I remember thinking 'My house could burn' but I was still calm. I'm coming from the place of being a Christian... I really just prayed and I said 'Lord, just save my house and me,' and I just covered my face and from that point onwards I just had this amazing calmness and I just believe*

*that is a strength from God, so that's where I'm coming from. As well as being calm I just had that, um, strength which I believe was given to me at that time through my faith.*

She explained the role that faith played in her ability to stay calm and resist the urge to flee:

*I didn't really show that emotion, I was really strong. Whether that was my faith or me or a combination, I'm not sure. And, um, because sometimes the supernatural power takes over and gives you this amazing...it has to be. It has to be because I'm a really emotional person. So it had to be a strength somehow and I just say that's my faith. I've got a strong faith.*

A woman, who had two teenage children at home with her on the day of the fire, made reference to her faith as she reflected on her actions:

*And um [sigh], I'm one of Jehovah's Witnesses so as I drove out I was just praying for calmness and wisdom to, um, make wise decisions and at each place like we headed that way and when we got to the intersection I said to the kids 'You know, which way do we go? Do we go North Shields or White Flat?' And they sort of thinking 'Oh North Shields' and quick decision 'No, we'll go White Flat', because there was so much smoke in that direction so we were heading away from the smoke but towards the, um, coast just thinking 'Get to the coast, and at least everything else might burn but we would be safe.'*

Their home was destroyed.

This was the only mention she made of her religious beliefs, in relation to the experience of bushfire, in her narrative of the day.<sup>60</sup>

The woman quoted earlier, who prayed for the fire to stop, talked about the relationship between faith, trauma and coping. I asked her if faith had helped her after the fire in her healing and she responded:

*I'd say so, I would say. I would say. Ah, maybe I'd have been different if [my son] had been burnt on the truck like those other two men or like the little*

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<sup>60</sup> This was the first time an interviewee (during my third interview) made reference to faith – unfortunately I did not immediately recognise the importance of this and it was not until I heard it mentioned in later interviews that I picked up on the cue.

*children, all of that sort of thing, it may have been very different. I don't know. I mean, I've been through the loss of a child, ah, that is something that you just, ah, yeah it's terribly difficult but out of that experience I know I've grown, I know I've changed and I know that I'm a better person for it. It probably sounds strange but because of that I'm more understanding of others.*

As this woman reflected on the memorial she attended at Wangary which occurred on the first anniversary of the bushfire, she said while it was painful it played an essential role in the healing process:

*I think it helped a lot of people. It was awful, they were showing pictures of the children, Star and Jack Borlase and their Grandma and all the victims. Yes, you get emotional. I think it was important to go. It was another one of those things, you have to go through all these different stages.*

*We all feel for those [the Borlase family] and the Murnanes and Richardsons and so forth. I think that might be why some of us are coping because we haven't had to go through that. And there are some that aren't coping and you may have interviewed some that aren't coping. I'm not being prying and I don't want to know who they are, but have they got any faith?*

Through the course of our conversation she questioned the role of faith in recovery, with particular reference to a woman she knew who had also lost her home in the fire and who, in her opinion, was not coping:

*Is it her health situation...or is it her faith or not? What is it? But then we're all different. Some people are more emotional than others. Some people are affected differently by different things. What'll upset one person won't upset another quite as badly. I just wondered because I just feel, well, it's even like an illness or death, you think, well, how do they cope if they haven't got God to talk to? They've got no one to talk to. I don't want to be preaching. I really feel, I can speak from my own experience, if I hadn't had God there next to me I don't think I would have coped. Because I, I don't know, I just need him there.*

She said people have asked her 'Why do all these bad things happen to you?' The implication is that with her strong faith she should not have to endure the trauma that she has, but that is not how she believes it works and recited that 'God never sends you more than you can cope with.' With a laugh she followed this line with 'I'd wish he'd go and look at somebody else.'

*It's just something that, um, I think it happens to you but you're given the grace to cope with it.*

One of the women quoted earlier in this theme spoke about viewing the landscape for the first time after the fire and seeing all the devastation: 'It was just all black, the houses had gone, it looked shocking' and 'our little church at Wanilla was saved, the fire went right round it'.<sup>61</sup>

In talking about the immediate recovery effort this woman mentioned that 'the Ministers came out and Ministers from Adelaide came over through the Uniting Church here to help people...it was quite phenomenal the amount of support that was there'.

It is interesting that of the 20 interviewees that feature in this study, those who spoke at length about their faith and the important role that it has had in their recovery were women. Only one male interviewee made a passing reference to faith and that was in recalling what the family was left with after the fire; his wife's Bible was one of the items they had packed in the car on the Monday.

A younger female interviewee made a more subtle reference to religion and spirituality: 'God himself couldn't have stopped the fire.'

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<sup>61</sup> Other interviewees who participated in this project (but not included in this text) made reference to the St Matthew's Anglican Mission Church in Poonindie. The church was built in 1854. A number of people implied that it was 'saved' or 'spared' on the day of the Wangary fire – that there was a spiritual intervention to explain why it was not destroyed by the fire. One of the male interviewees (also not in the 14) described to me how he had actively defended this church on the day of the Wangary fire. He was aware of the historical value of the church and he, not God, played a crucial role in preserving that particular building on 11 January 2005. [Refer to page 107 for a photo of the Poonindie Church].

## 5.4 Positives

The key positive impacts that were mentioned by the interviewees encompassed personal growth and the acquisition of new friends. One woman described how she learned new skills through necessity during the aftermath of the fire, undertaking tasks that she had never done before:

*That was very overwhelming, wasn't it? The amount of work we had to do...it was like everyone had a job to do.*

*My main job was feeding stock [laughter]. I had [my husband's] ute. I had to learn to use the front-end loader with the prongs on it to lift the big bales up onto the ute and off I would go and feed stock. Sometimes I had someone with me to help feed out and sometimes I didn't, I had to do it by myself. So you know, you'd put the vehicle in low range and let it just potter along safely in a nice clear paddock and get on the back and shovel the hay. I did have a bit of a mishap with the tractor at one stage [laughter]. It was a huge, huge learning curve. Very, very little housework done...it wasn't until after we'd got all that stock work done that I could turn my attention to the housework.*

One couple moved from the family farm into a property that they purchased in Port Lincoln. The woman said:

*Not a day goes by when something doesn't remind you of it. Living here in this house when that lounge suite was given to us, the piano was given to me, the table down there, the quilts...this table and chairs, I mean, there's so much that was given to us and that's where it's really overwhelming. [Sigh] When you think you had nothing and you can furnish a house.*

*It was a new beginning.*

## 5.5 Conclusion

These two chapters have, through the exploration of six main themes, delved into the interviews and revealed how a select number of couples and families coped on the day of the Wangary fire and in the aftermath.

Traditional gender roles and family dynamics are key functions of how people react in a crisis. Differences between couples, of perceptions of risk, contributed to the isolation that a few of the women experienced during the bushfire. Importantly, the Wangary fire narratives have confirmed that age and the family life cycle are significant factors. There were stark differences between the generations (particularly with the women), indicating that decision-making in contemporary society is less straightforward.

The presence of children - as a major complicating factor for decision-making in advance of and during a bushfire event – is highly emotional. Throughout the interviews (and this variable is not necessarily contained to interviewees who are parents of young children), there is tension and anxiety about what is the safest action to take when threatened by a bushfire. Grandparents, and couples who might have children in the future, are highly aware of the complexity of decision-making when babies or young children are present. It is this concern, the welfare and safety of children, which captures the paradox of the ‘stay or go’ policy. The desire to flee a bushfire is powerful and difficult to resist. This crisis is, for many women intensified by their physical isolation as men are more likely to be absent when the fire front arrives. It is not necessarily logical, particularly when there is no other adult present, that staying in the home as a bushfire advances is the safest option. Juggling the tasks of actively defending the home with the welfare and safety of babies and young children has not been considered or addressed by the national ‘stay or go’ policy.

The less complicated themes (‘packing the car,’ ‘role of pets and livestock in decision-making,’ ‘sense of place and connectedness to the land’ and ‘spirituality’) are important. Male farmers often prioritise their livestock and focus on how to minimise the impact of the fire on their livelihood. Packing the car appears to be predominantly a woman’s role and, often, domestic animals are incorporated into this activity. Arguably, the longer a person resides in a landscape, the greater their connection and sense of loss when it is destroyed. The most powerful themes were those that were strongly linked to identity: pets, livestock and the landscape.

The impact of the Wangary fire, clearly portrayed by the words of the participants, has been profound and recovery for the majority of interviewees was (at the time of the interview) an ongoing process.

It is vital to acknowledge, and make an effort to understand, the trials and struggles that people endure long after the fire has been extinguished. Disasters have a ripple effect on individuals, their families and the wider community.

The chapter that follows will build on these six themes that emerged from the Wangary fire narratives.



**Figure 3:**

St Matthews' Anglican Mission Church,  
in Poonindie, was built in 1854.



## Chapter 6: Discussion

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### 6.1 Introduction

*Families are facing the future with growing diversity and complexity in structure, gender, culture, class, and life-cycle patterns (Walsh, 2003, p. 20).*

This discussion hinges on questions about current bushfire community education approaches and, reflecting on the findings, explores how factors including gender and generation, and role and relationship inform decision-making in a crisis (in this case the Wangary fire) and in the recovery process. The findings chapter has explored six themes and this discussion will follow that format (for reasons of clarity and in order to achieve a balance), incorporating family therapy and disaster research from the Australian and international perspectives.

*The rain will make the grass grow, and this reminds her how she fought a bush fire once while her husband was away. The grass was long, and very dry, and the fire threatened to burn her out...The sight of his mother in trousers greatly amused Tommy, who worked like a little hero by her side, but the terrified baby howled lustily for his 'mummy.'* (Henry Lawson, 'The Drover's Wife.')

### 6.2 Family responses and experiences

The case study narratives established that families with young children are likely to have women making major decisions about safety when threatened with bushfire. Family dynamics and traditional gender roles can affect the resilience of women and their capacity to take on that major decision-making role. In a post-modern society the decisions about bushfire safety are less certain because of changing family roles and dynamics – the fluid nature of roles having to change as society transforms.

There were variations of the shared and individual experience of bushfire across the stories from 14 couples and families. A noticeable contrast was evident in the descriptions of family roles, expectations and responsibilities. Among the 20 participants, the life cycle and composition of the family proved to be defining factors

in determining the levels of certainty or uncertainty in relation to bushfire decision-making. Haddock, Zimmerman and Lyness write:

*Gender and generation are the two fundamental, organizing principles of family life. The names of family roles (mother, son, sister, nephew, grandma, uncle) tell us both the gender and generational location of family members. Gender typically indicates as much about the expectations for, and status or power of, a person in a family as does generational location.* (Haddock, Zimmerman and Lyness, 2003, p. 304)

The fire-affected interviewees lived on the remote Lower Eyre Peninsula and were largely an agricultural community. This was an important factor in the context of the behaviour and decisions made by these men and women during the fire. In her qualitative study of farming women in southern New South Wales, Alston revealed that despite improved circumstances and ‘changing societal attitudes’, ‘women have little power and control within the family production unit’ (Alston, 1995, p. 67). The ‘invisible’ status of women on farms is perpetuated by the ‘practice of passing the farm from father to son (patrilineal inheritance), a practice which ensures that farms are owned and controlled by men and that women’s most common point of entry to farming is through marriage’ (Alston, 1995, p. 7).<sup>62</sup>

### 6.2.1 Older interviewees

Older men and women in their fifties and sixties clearly articulated what they believe is their role in a bushfire.<sup>63</sup> The individual experience for these older people was related to the defined (and well understood) boundaries around their established traditional gender roles and as such the way these roles were played out in the context of families and as married couples.

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<sup>62</sup> ‘In many small inland rural communities, agriculture is still the dominant industry. The control of the resources of agriculture ensures that men have greater influence in industry and in communities reliant on agriculture. The practice of patrilineal inheritance has made male ownership and control of land and the resources of agriculture the norm, giving male landholders enhanced prestige and influence in small communities’ (Alston, 2005, p. 142).

<sup>63</sup> I interviewed elderly residents (in their eighties); one woman watched from the beach as her home (in which she had been born) burned. The experience of the elderly in the Wangary fire is important and I aim to explore these narratives in the future. Incorporating the perspectives of the elderly is beyond the scope of this particular study.

The older men and women had reference points – previous bushfires (and other crisis scenarios over the course of their marriage and/or their lives) – which informed their clear articulation and acceptance of their roles and responsibilities during this bushfire event. Walsh writes that if a ‘family was successful in mastering similar crises or transitions in the past, its members will approach a current situation with greater confidence’ (Walsh, 1998, p. 55). As they did not have to take into account the welfare and safety of children their decision-making was almost certainly less complicated. It was amongst the farming couples in this older-age group that the gender roles and responsibilities in bushfire were described at length. The women who had married, decades prior, into these farming families described how they had gleaned useful knowledge by either listening to conversations amongst the men (their husband, sons and farm hands) or by engaging in dialogue with their husband about the potential for bushfire.

According to this age group, during a bushfire the woman either remained sheltering inside the home, or she was to pack the car and leave well in advance of the fire front (this latter option relies on an early warning). The man, meanwhile, would be outside defending their farm assets or assisting to minimise the spread of the bushfire to neighbouring farms.

Knowing that they were united in this acceptance of their roles is of particular assistance to the man, as he will be confident of his wife’s safety while he is fighting the fire. In this shared understanding, the male farmer is reassured in the knowledge that his wife will not, in a state of panic, risk her life by fleeing late. It was the woman’s role to worry about the safety of her husband. These clearly defined and accepted gender roles, articulated by the older farming couples about bushfire decisions and safety, seem to be a direct extension of their roles and relationships in everyday life.

Recently, severe drought across much of Australia has contributed to shifts in gender roles amongst farming couples.<sup>64</sup> Bushfire and drought have factors in common, the most obvious being the dramatic changes to the landscape. While bushfire is brief

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<sup>64</sup> Alston wrote that ‘...younger women are not as accepting of prescribed patriarchal gender roles as the older women interviewed, and that it appears they are developing a consciousness of gender issues’ (Alston, 1995, p. 135).

and drought is long-lasting, the stresses that impact on families (in the aftermath of the former and during the latter) are similar. The financial repercussions stemming from these events can trigger an additional crisis, and this situation often requires women to take on paid work. Stehlik et al (1999, p. 29) defined this as the ‘de-traditionalisation of rural society.’ The Alston and Kent (2004) drought study looked deeper into the multiple roles of women (where through financial necessity they are forced to seek off-farm work) and how that has added strain to the family and changed the conventional male (‘outside’) and female (‘inside’) roles. Stehlik et al identified:

*...a perception amongst the women interviewed that in many cases they did not feel involved in major decision making. In a number of cases, women explained that decision making rested with their husbands or their fathers-in-law, or in some cases, with their sons. One woman described the decision-making process in her household as one based on precedent and history: ‘I usually hear about things when they happen over the phone. Our family is one based on precedent, what [husband’s] father did – generations change but some things stay the same. (Stehlik et al, 1999, p. 83)*

### 6.2.2 *Younger interviewees*

The ambiguity of gender roles and confused expectations comes through strongly in the bushfire narratives from the parents with young children. Younger interviewees (as noted earlier, due to the low participation of young men these mostly gave the woman’s perspective) were less certain or sure about their role in decisions about bushfire safety. For this generation the shifts in employment, the responsibility of dependent children, financial and social pressures have clouded women’s expectations about their role in the family. The confusion around roles in a bushfire for the younger interviewees was expressed by the women as isolation or alienation (‘What am I supposed to do?’). They were unsure about what decisions to make with many of them having insufficient knowledge and skills to form independent decisions about bushfire safety. This was exacerbated by the absence of their partners and the conflict of whether they needed to be independent or dependent. Haddock et al wrote that gender inequality ‘is manifested in intimate relationships in many ways’ and one example of this gender-based power differential is ‘granting him greater influence in important family decisions’ (Haddock et al, 2003, p. 305).

Critical decision-making and the presence of children is at the heart of this research project and the discussion of the findings related to this important theme aims to contribute to the way that bushfire safety education programs are developed and delivered in the future. How the presence of babies and young children informs family decision-making in advance of, or during, a bushfire has not been considered or studied in any detail within the Australian research landscape.

Traditions, norms, values and role expectations all contribute to the way a family and the members of that family communicate, relate and make decisions in a crisis. Walsh states that families develop their own internal norms, ‘expressed through explicit and unspoken relationship rules’ (Walsh, 2005, p. 7).<sup>65</sup> All but one of the women relied on, or attempted to obtain, their husband’s advice in order for them to decide on appropriate action. There was an acceptance still that critical decision-making is, more frequently, the domain of their husbands. What is apparent from these interviews is that a number of the women who were alone during the bushfire crisis had no reference point for making the required critical decisions. Traditionally, their role would be to carry out their husband’s instructions.

Technology, specifically the mobile telephone, proved crucial for two women who received instructions from their husbands to stay in the home and not to panic and flee at the last minute. The fire was so quick that a spontaneous decision was required and the women who were home alone with young children had no control of any of the variables. The trauma of the bushfire and having to make life-saving decisions was influenced by the ‘aleness’ they experienced, their incomplete knowledge, the overwhelming need to protect their children and their fear.

### **6.2.2.1 Associating the act of fleeing with safety**

Only two of the seven women in the first group had their husbands with them at home, on the day of the Wangary fire. One of these women was instructed by her husband to flee with their two young children. Due to the lack of visibility she drove into a tree.

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Family belief systems are shared values and assumptions that provide meaning and organize experience in the social world and guide family life’ (Walsh, 2005, p. 7).

This couple had not discussed what they would do prior to, or on the day of, the fire. The husband described his instruction as an instinct and his cue for this was seeing the flames. This highlights the common association of fleeing the bushfire with safety. Both the husband and the wife were under the impression that the children were being removed from danger. Although they were initially together (sharing the experience), preparing the house for the impending fire, they ended up having an individual experience due to the wife leaving in a vehicle with the two children at the last minute. I believe the instance of women being sent away from the fire is low in this sample, due to the lack of opportunity; the majority of young women were home alone. In speaking to this couple it becomes apparent how dangerous behaviour can appear to be the appropriate form of action during a bushfire event. In retrospect they said it was not an action they would replicate in the future.

The CFA study, *Stay or Go: Understanding community responses to emergencies*, found:

*In general people placed a higher value on protecting life than property. They undertook actions they believed were most likely to ensure their safety. For example, a number of people left their property believing it was the safest course of action and because they were not prepared to risk life for material property. Others stayed for the same reasons; that is, they believed staying was the safest strategy and saw the defence of their property as an additional advantage.* (Reinhold et al, 1999b, p. 38)

Walsh writes that ‘mothers, expected to preserve the well-being of all family members, typically play a key role in buffering families emotionally from the impact of crises’ (Walsh, 1998, p. 93). One of the most disturbing features of bushfire, for women, is that they do not know which action will minimise the trauma that their children may experience. The agonising decision of whether to ‘stay or go’ was palpable in several of the interviews. What was evident was the overwhelming and powerful desire to flee and, often, removing children from the threat of fire (even when the flames could be seen from the window) was a natural response and one that was considered the safest action. Kenworthy noted the clinical nature of analysis and recommendations derived from the circumstances of those who perished in the Ash

Wednesday fires.<sup>66</sup> The simplicity of the ‘stay or go’ policy does not take into account the complex factors, such as women being responsible for (and often alone with) young children, and the strong desire to remove them from the danger in order to minimise their trauma and maximise their chances of survival.

#### **6.2.2.2 Variation in trauma levels: leaving early, leaving late**

*A number of studies have found that communication clarity is essential for effective family functioning. (Walsh, 1998, p. 107)*

The only woman who was able to arrange for her children to be removed from the threat of bushfire hours before the fire arrived, managed to have a shared experience with her husband despite his absence. This shows that it is possible for a family to have a common understanding of crisis decision-making and that a plan can be jointly delegated and agreed on regardless of whether the couple are together or apart at that time. In this case the shared decision-making relied on telecommunications working throughout the crisis. This woman’s experience was in direct contrast with the mother who was home alone with her seven-year-old daughter. She tried many times to obtain her husband’s decision on whether she should stay or leave but was unable to reach him on his mobile telephone. There was no reference point for her to make the crucial decision alone. Her inability to contact her husband magnified her traumatic individual and isolated experience of the Wangary fire (both emotional and physical isolation). In their analysis of family system changes and family stress from the terrorist attack on the United States (September 11, 2001), Olson and Gorall observed that the ‘ability of the family to change in a fluid manner rather than stay stuck in a particular level is very functional, since it enables them to adapt more adequately to major events’ (Olson and Gorall, 2003, p. 527). Walsh wrote that because ‘communication facilitates all family functioning, intervention efforts to strengthen

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<sup>66</sup> ‘In the cold light of day, with all sorts of information to be accessed, it is easy to say what should or should not have been done by these poor people, but the note takers can never factor into their report the emotion of that time, the sheer terror, the helplessness, the panic, that surely influenced our people to take the action they DID take on that terrible night’ (Kenworthy, 2007, p. 205).

family resilience focus on increasing family members' abilities to express and respond to needs and concerns, and to negotiate system change to meet new demands at crisis points' (Walsh, 1998, p. 107).

### **6.2.2.3 Decision-making and uncertainty about future fire events**

When they reflected on their experience of the Wangary fire, specifically around whether they would do anything differently in future fire events, it became apparent that their uncertainties relating to their position in the family and the dependent or independent nature of the relationship to their partner were complex and not easily resolved. Men, who were the fire-fighters, adopted a defined role throughout the bushfire and did not appear to understand the loss of certainty that their women were experiencing. Perhaps the women were acknowledging an emotional as well as physical isolation, which is likely to have reduced their confidence to be clear about the decisions they needed to make.

In some families the discussion had either not been had or was unresolved. Other than one man who decided not to go out and fight the fire but to stay and defend his home, farm and family, none of the complexities of the presence of children and the recognition of having no control over who is present when the crisis occurs had been addressed. Walsh emphasised the value and importance of communication within families who have survived a crisis: 'Communication processes foster resilience by bringing clarity to crisis situations, encouraging open emotional expression and fostering collaborative problem solving' (Walsh, 2003, p. 413).

### **6.2.2.4 Volunteer fire-fighters and their families**

The role of women as primary carer and nurturer to young children often means that they are likely to be home during the day. There are low numbers of women (particularly women with young children) participating in local brigades as fire-fighters and the overwhelming majority of volunteers who fought the Wangary fire



were men.<sup>67</sup> This meant that those men who had the fire-fighting skills and knowledge were at the fire fronts, not at their homes, when the Wangary fire broke containment lines. Kenworthy explored this role conflict in her bushfire study:

*The feeling of guilt that a fire fighter might have that he was not with his family when they most had need of him...the resentment of partners who felt that fire-fighters had put the welfare of the community before the welfare of the family...the pushing aside of thoughts of how close you had come to losing your life, or the life of a loved one...the lack of acknowledgement of your struggle to reach safety...the realisation that your terrifying experience could not be understood by anyone else. (Kenworthy, 2007, p. 199)*

The tensions between volunteering and protecting the family has been an important finding and one that is apparently not addressed anywhere in fire agency literature or bushfire community education material. Men from the younger group of interviewees who were volunteer fire-fighters (either on a brigade truck or a private unit) found that they were unable to return to their homes to assist their families, when the fire broke containment lines. Three of the wives, who were home alone, had access to a fire truck on their property but were unable to operate it. This strict division of roles within a household, according to gender, is not uncommon amongst farming families. However, it highlights the need for husbands and wives (partners) to share bushfire safety skills and knowledge in order to enhance the confidence of women to make the best possible bushfire safety decisions for themselves and their children. The failure to teach and provide women with the skills necessary to defend their home as a bushfire threatens perpetuates the isolated experience (of bushfire) which reduces confidence and increases vulnerability and risk.

Cox (1996) and Kenworthy (2007), who have written about the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires in Victoria, acknowledged the difference in the experiences of men and women in a bushfire.<sup>68</sup> Poiner's (1990) book chapter, 'Trial by Fire,' documented

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<sup>67</sup> For more details on the traditionally low representation of women in volunteer fire-fighter brigades refer to: Beatson, R. and McLennan, J. (2005).

<sup>68</sup> A 1983 LaTrobe University survey, titled 'Fire Fighters' Wives and Families questionnaire', overlooked the female fire-fighters in the Macedon Brigade and Kenworthy said it 'caused more than a ripple' (Kenworthy, 2007, p. 198). I did encounter three female fire-fighters during my fieldwork and one was interviewed but is not part of the 20 that feature in this analysis.

women's role in a crisis and stated that with the absence of men from the home 'it usually falls to the women of the family to move temporarily into what are generally perceived as male roles, in order to do the jobs that cannot be postponed' (Poiner, 1990, p. 172). Cottrell and Berry explored the needs of women who are 'household managers and who have dependants' and live in a region of Australia where regular seasonal flooding and cyclones occur (Cottrell and Berry, 2002, p. 8). Preparing for the wet season was, generally, perceived by the participants as a woman's task (Cottrell and Berry, 2002, p.25). Irrespective of the threat, be it cyclone or bushfire, it appears that during a crisis women on the whole have responsibility for the welfare and safety of the young children in their care. This links in with the findings from the CFA report, (Reinholdt et al, 1999b), which acknowledged the various social and cultural influences on people's responses to bushfire threat. That report noted: 'There is significant desire to protect children from the physical and emotional experience of fire and remove them from the event. When children are present, women often become responsible for their evacuation' (Reinholdt et al, 1999b, p. 38).

### ***6.2.3 Roles and responsibilities - clarity and confusion***

Women and men (with and without children) confirmed that a man's role in a bushfire is visible and defined whilst a woman's role in a bushfire is concealed and undefined. There is a great deal of ambiguity within the bushfire narratives of younger women and men about their respective roles and responsibilities in a bushfire and numerous women in this age group expressed a strong desire to learn the skills that they believed they lacked that day. These women wanted to be better prepared for the next fire but, according to them, there had been no resolution with their husbands about making decisions for their children's safety. The woman, frequently, had to determine the best option for herself and her children, in isolation from her husband. Unlike the older women, who had a reference point from previous fires, there was no sense of applying what was learned in the Wangary fire to future fires because, in some of the families, the conversations about bushfire threat, safety and preparation were yet to be held. Some women stated that there was reluctance on the part of their husbands to discuss and explore options for future bushfire events. Scanlon stated that in order to fully

utilise the abilities of women, 'ways need to be found to free them from sole responsibilities for their families in times of crisis' (Scanlon, 1998, p. 50).

The roles of women in contemporary society, including those on farms, have broadened to include participation in diverse non-farming sectors of society and culture. These narratives have revealed that bushfire experience is predominantly an individual one but, in spite of this, it can be influenced by a shared acceptance of knowledge, decisions, behaviour and roles. Three of the younger families did have, to varying degrees, a shared experience of the Wangary fire (despite the absence of the husband in one of these instances). In one of these households both the husband and the wife were at home and each played an active role in extinguishing spot fires and patrolling their property for embers. For the older interviewees there was no expectation that the husband and wife would be acting in unison during a bushfire threat. However, there was no confusion amongst the older farming couples concerning their separate roles.

There was tension in the younger interviewees about how to achieve a shared experience of bushfire in the future when it is likely that the woman will again be home alone with children. In all but one household in the younger age group, there was a glaring gap in knowledge and skill between the men and women, which reduced the resilience of these families to the bushfire and their ability to make optimal safe decisions. This erosion of confidence was exacerbated when the perception of risk was not shared between the couples, when risk perceptions were individual and their decision-making was confused and difficult.

The resilience of families relies on the sharing of skills and knowledge and not the investment of hope in a particular family member being present at the exact time when they are most needed. How to communicate with families, and particularly women, that fleeing a fire is not safe, is a sensitive and vital part of the bushfire safety education process. There needs to be a sophisticated approach, one which recognises the complexity of current family structures and functioning:

*Today the idealized 1950s model of the white, middle-class, intact nuclear family, headed by a breadwinner father and supported by a home-maker mother, is only a narrow band on the broad spectrum of normal families. In its*

*place, a diverse reshaping of contemporary family life, termed the 'postmodern family', is a hodgepodge of multiple, evolving family cultures and structures: working mothers and two-earner households; divorced, single-parent, remarried, and adoptive families; and domestic partners, both gay and straight. (Walsh, 2003, p. 12)*

### 6.3 *Packing the car*

*To lose a home or the sum of one's belongings is to lose evidence as to who one is and where one belongs in the world. (Erikson, 1976, quoted in Fothergill, 2004, p. 249)*

The bushfire narratives confirm that the act of packing the car is predominantly a female one and that it has been constructed as a domestic task rather than an activity that is associated with evacuation or protective behaviour. Five of the 14 families in this study had their homes destroyed by the Wangary fire. Packing the car for these five families (and in all but one family it was the woman undertaking this task) meant that the items selected took on a special meaning and that (in most cases) their valuing of these items was heightened as these belongings represented the only tangible link to the family's history. This theme ties in with a number of others: the shared and individual experience of bushfire, impacts of the bushfire and the loss of sense of place (primarily for those who were rendered homeless by the Wangary fire).

In Enarson and Scanlon's flood study, in which 41 residents were interviewed,<sup>69</sup> most couples 'worked collaboratively to prepare their families and property and shared a general orientation toward mitigation activities. When they disagreed, women took flood risk more seriously and tried to mitigate its effects, confirming findings from earlier work about gender and risk awareness and communication' (Enarson and Scanlon, 1999, p. 109). They stated that there was conflict in a number of households when couples faced decisions 'about when or whether to move household goods or furniture up from the basement or out of the house, what possessions were most valued and worth protecting, what and how much to pack for use in temporary living quarters, what alternate arrangements to make for livestock and pets, who to ask for help – and

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<sup>69</sup> These 41 interviews were carried out by 19 different people (the researchers and 17 journalism students) which is a major weakness in the study.

whose job it was to ask for help' (Enarson and Scanlon, 1999, p. 109). There was no such conflict within the bushfire narratives and this was, in the main, due to the small numbers of couples who were together or remained together throughout the crisis – and perhaps the uncertainty of how the bushfire might affect them.

For some of the interviewees, gathering valuable and sentimental belongings was a task that they were able to conduct with some clarity, while for others the lack of warning meant a frantic scramble to salvage a few choice items. Cox's study of the impacts of the Ash Wednesday bushfires on a coastal community in Victoria incorporated stories of what people took with them when they evacuated: 'Many people told stories humorous at least in retrospect...oddly chosen items taken by evacuees, including cases accidentally empty but dutifully toted around all night' (Cox, 1996, p. 90).

The age of a person and their household demographic seemed to determine the possessions of personal significance that were prioritised in the rush to flee the Wangary fire. Two women spoke of saving non-emotional items such as the computer hard drive, insurance policies and financial information; they also packed photographs which were the most common items to be saved. With the advent of technology it is interesting to note that all of those who salvaged items took photographs either in frames (from the walls or sideboards) or in albums.<sup>70</sup>

Mothers of young children were mainly focused on preserving the memorabilia associated with their children's milestones. It is worthwhile to reflect on how those women felt when undertaking this domestic task; two interviewees (one who fled with five children and one who stayed with her six-month-old daughter and received assistance) remarked on feeling 'foolish' or 'silly' while they were taking the precaution of packing items to take with them. The woman who fled had the foresight to pack, hours before the fire front arrived, what she valued most (photographs) and this is all that her family salvaged from their pre-bushfire life. The primary reason these two women 'felt silly' was that their husbands did not take their concerns about the bushfire

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<sup>70</sup> This might change in the future as digital images are increasingly stored on hard drives or memory sticks. People in future disasters might not prioritise traditional photographs.

threat seriously. In the households where opposing views on what constituted risk or danger and the likelihood of a fire occurring in the future were most pronounced, the need for a family bushfire plan has remained unresolved.

It is possible that there is a direct correlation with the task of packing the car being predominantly undertaken by women, and women generally having a heightened sense of risk. Fothergill (2004) investigated, through her study of the Grand Forks flood, the roles of women in disaster. Fothergill found that women 'brought belongings up from the basement while their husbands were either working at their paid jobs, doing community work or not helping because they believed the disaster was not really going to happen' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 43). This was also touched on by Cox (1996) in her exploration of role conflict in the Ash Wednesday bushfires. She encountered stories of male and female fire-fighters who were not able to 'evacuate their families or to support them after their homes were burnt' (Cox, 1996, p. 62).

Another explanation Fothergill provided for this 'female task' is that 'historically, the private domain of the home has been women's domain' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 173). The traditional role of women can inform what are considered to be their responsibilities during a crisis. Notably, amongst the Wangary fire interviewees, women were often alone at home with children (arguably amplifying their sense of isolation and risk) and they were in a situation where if household objects and sentimental items were going to be saved then it was up to them to achieve this.

Hoffman (1998), an anthropologist, lost her home and office in the Oakland Firestorm of 1991. Although she lost no family or friends, '...to describe the devastation both physical and psychological of this kind of loss is like trying to define eternity or infinity. It defies words, evades phrase, and renders mute any and every euphemistic catchall' (Hoffman, 1998, p. 55). In both Australian and international disaster literature there is a recognition that the destruction of personal items and belongings has had a profound affect on survivors. In her bushfire study, Cox encountered a woman who said that 'everything you thought made you who you were and that had been the life that you put together was gone' (Cox, 1996, 74). The Wangary fire interviewees expressed grief not only for what they, personally, lost in the

fire but what other family members had lost. One woman spoke about how she felt powerless to salvage sentimental items belonging to her adult children who lived interstate. The ripple effect of loss is felt beyond those who lived in the home when the crisis occurred. Those who grew up in that home are also affected by the destruction of links to their own past and childhood.

In her chapter titled ‘The Re-Creation of Domestic Culture,’ Fothergill examined how women responded to the destruction of their homes and found that their ‘belongings were meaningful and connected to the lives they had lived’ and ‘represented who they were and where they had come from’ (Fothergill, 2004, p. 196). There is a strong link between a person’s identity and their home. Fothergill states that the ‘women who lose their homes, from a natural disaster or any other crisis, must construct identity without the home, without the rituals, routines, and artifacts, as a framework’ (Fothergill, 2004, p. 202). The loss of meaningful items is not just about material loss but about emotional pain and a disconnection from the past. This was captured in a radio program on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) which included interviews with people who had experienced the Canberra fires of 2003. One interviewee on this program recalled: ‘It was heart-rending, picking through bits and pieces finding some things that seemed relatively intact and going through a process of remembering really good times in the family, in the home and really tough times. They seemed to be all symbolised in what was left in the ashes’ (‘Giving It Away,’ *Encounter*, ABC, 25/5/08).

This theme, ‘packing the car,’ is strongly connected to the individual experience of bushfire as most of the participants were either alone or the only adult present when they were faced with selecting sentimental and emotionally valuable items.

*Of significance is the gendered differences emerging in the interviews. Men noted the link to land and stock and the emotional trauma of watching the land and stock suffer. (Alston and Kent, 2004, p.51)*

#### **6.4 *The role of pets and livestock in decision-making***<sup>71</sup>

For the men and women interviewed for this project, domestic pets and livestock played a pivotal role in their decision-making on the day of the Wangary fire. The bushfire narratives, mirroring the responses to the dramatic changes to the landscape, revealed that this was an emotional theme for many of the interviewees.<sup>72</sup> This theme intersects with ‘the impacts of the bushfire’ and this discussion will incorporate how people responded to the pain and suffering of their pets and livestock during and after the Wangary fire.

It was noted in the discussion of the first theme (the shared and individual experience of bushfire) that the primary focus of male farmers, when they are not filling fire-fighting roles, is on the welfare of their livestock. When a bushfire threatens, farmers herd livestock scattered over various paddocks to a central, safer, location. Poiner noted that ‘ironically, if it comes to the worst, this defence might be the responsibility of those female members of the family left at home’ (Poiner, 1990, p. 172). Poiner stated that often, women temporarily fill ‘male’ roles during a bushfire event (Poiner, 1990, p. 172). Amongst the interviewees, only the men were active in mustering livestock. I listened to many stories of male farmers being exposed to a fire front while they desperately herded their sheep (one couple’s son-in-law was in a ute herding animals when the vehicle caught fire). Cox noted that within the community she studied, ‘a farmer died trying to rescue livestock trapped in a paddock’ (Cox, 1996, p. 58).

Two of the women were focused on the welfare of animals during their decision-making on the day of the Wangary fire. One woman, at home alone with her six month-old-daughter, wanted to leave but hesitated as she was unable to transport the two

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<sup>71</sup> For details of the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina see: ‘Pet loss due to natural disaster or personal tragedy,’ in *Pet Loss and Human Emotion* (Ross and Baron-Sorensen, 2007).

<sup>72</sup> Two of the female interviewees, with young children, made no mention of domestic pets. Both of these families resided on one-acre blocks of land on a coastal highway.



family dogs safely in the car with her baby. She phoned her mother-in-law to ask if she would assist by driving out to the farm and collecting the dogs. A young woman, without children, was determined to take her dog and horse to safety and fled with them to the beach in North Shields – a popular refuge point for many fire-affected residents. The coastal community studied by Cox (1996) had a similar, surreal connection to water during the bushfires of Ash Wednesday: ‘The scene at the river and beach on the night of the fire was portrayed by many people as really strange: there were dogs, cats, birds, horses and even a cow on the beach and there was not one animal fight the whole night’ (Cox, 1996, p. 58).

The loss of domestic pets was felt by those who escaped the 2003 Canberra fires, which impacted heavily on suburban residents: ‘People missed their pets, I’d have to say the stuff around animals, the grief and loss – particularly there’s a group of girls perhaps an age group of thirteen to fifteen, who have these wonderful relationships with their horses and that was absolutely tragic’ (ABC Radio, ‘Encounter,’ 25 May 2008).<sup>73</sup> Cox found amongst her interviewees that ‘people in all groups spoke of loss of animals, pets and wildlife. People spoke of finding the bodies of their pets, dogs, horses and birds’ (Cox, 1996, p. 60). Ross and Baron-Sorenson write that ‘failure to acknowledge and address the effects of pet loss in the aftermath of disaster may seriously impede the process of recovery for disaster victims’ (Ross and Baron-Sorenson, 2007, p. 182).

One woman I interviewed described the screams of the sheep as they burnt. Witnessing the animals, dazed and burnt, wandering in the charred landscape were powerful images described by many of the Wangary fire interviewees. Alston and Kent’s drought study noted the emotional impacts experienced by the men. Due to a lack of feed and money, the farmers sometimes resorted to shooting their stock (Alston and Kent, 2004, p. 107). This sense of powerlessness was echoed by the farming men in their bushfire narratives. The animals are such a significant part of their lives (in terms of time, energy and money) and farming is not only their occupation but their identity. Farming defines who these men are and this can be snatched away by years of drought

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<sup>73</sup> 401 urban and 87 rural dwellings were destroyed in the 2003 Canberra fires (‘The Report of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce: Australian Capital Territory October 2003’).

or a bushfire. One woman, who married into a farming family, observed that if the man's farm is destroyed, his life is destroyed.

Farming families have a different bushfire experience (and recovery) in comparison to non-farming families and this can sometimes cause tension or division within a community. Farming families are seen to be the focus of the recovery effort, even though other non-farming families have also lost their livelihood.

The welfare of pets and livestock plays a major role in what people do and the decisions that they make when they are threatened by bushfire (and other natural disasters, such as cyclone and flood). This needs to be recognised and addressed by the fire agencies in their community education material. The bushfire narratives demonstrated the risks that people take for their pets and livestock at the height of a crisis. The connection to their animals, particularly for male farmers, is a strong one and adds another dimension of complexity to bushfire preparedness and decision-making. The loss of livestock represented the severing of a link to family farming history. The valued bloodlines, a legacy of generations, cannot be replaced.

*The interpersonal dynamics within family units provide important measures of the social and emotional effects of a disaster. (Morrow, 1997, p. 143)*

## **6.5 *Impacts of the fire***

Interviewees spoke in detail and, in many cases, at great length about this theme. Every participant talked about how the fire had affected them, their families and the wider community. Morrow wrote that disasters 'need to be understood as family crises in which these emotional bonds are critical factors for recovery' (Morrow, 1997, p. 142). Walsh emphasised that family resilience 'involves many interactive processes over time – from a family's approach to a threatening situation, through its ability to manage disruptive transitions, to varied strategies for coping with emerging stresses in the immediate and long-term aftermath' (Walsh, 1998, p. 21). This discussion will draw on family resilience research, in conjunction with the bushfire, flood and drought studies.

In her study of recovery in a coastal community affected by the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, Cox used the phrase ‘cascade of tensions’ to describe the immediate aftermath of the bushfires once people had made the initial assessment about the extent of their losses (Cox, 1996, p. 58). This word, ‘cascade,’ suggests that the impacts of a natural disaster flow on and on and on for many people.<sup>74</sup> Social and economic resources can have a vital role in an individual’s or family’s capacity to cope after a crisis; ‘the importance of financial security for resilience should not be neglected (Walsh, 2003, p. 412). Wraith, writing from the perspective of disaster impacted women, reinforced this socio-economic aspect noting that ‘while women typically lack resources and relative power, they are not equally disadvantaged, and low-income and affluent women do not recover in identical ways’ (Wraith, 1997, p. 10). This observation, of uneven recovery, can be extended to families.<sup>75</sup>

Cox’s interviewees reflected on their recovery from a greater distance (10 years after the bushfire) and her work was a valuable resource for this discussion. Cox stated that, ‘in particular, I was interested in whether they see themselves as healed and if so, what helped them to heal; how did they make sense of and manage the experience that so disrupted their lives?’ (Cox, 1996, p.5). Walsh and Pryce distinguished curing from healing and emphasised that people sometimes ‘heal physically but do not heal emotionally, mentally or spiritually...yet we can heal psychosocially even when we do not heal physically, or when a traumatic event cannot be reversed’ (Walsh, 2003, p. 357). Morrow (1997) has studied the importance of kin networks in disaster recovery. The demands of rebuilding homes and lives ‘place tremendous strains on a family. Many are unable to cope and are torn apart, while others persevere and even grow stronger’ (Morrow, 1997, p. 141).

Each person who participated in this study was impacted by the Wangary fire in a unique way. The majority of the 20 interviewees were exposed to extreme levels of

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<sup>74</sup> In her study of Hurricane Andrew, Morrow writes that ‘the initial shock and chaos was only the beginning of weeks, months, even years, marked by tremendous demands, changes, and emotional upheaval’ (Morrow, 1997, p. 141).

<sup>75</sup> ‘The economic and personal resources of a family, including its relative position within the community power structure, will determine the extent to which it can autonomously facilitate its own recovery’ (Morrow, 1997, p. 143).

danger and came close to perishing in the Wangary fire.<sup>76</sup> There were many layers to the impacts that people experienced in the aftermath. Within the context of both family and the wider community, these impacts fall under the major categories of the emotional, financial, material, psychological and social.<sup>77</sup>

It was clear that men and women had different roles and experiences of the Wangary fire. Consistent with this, men and women experience recovery quite differently. It was common for couples not to have discussed their experience of the fire with each other prior to the interview.<sup>78</sup> Walsh stated that ‘family members may be out of sync over time; one may continue to be quite upset when others feel ready to move on’ (Walsh, 2003, p. 414). Gender differences feed into this and Walsh believed that masculine stereotypes of strength can ‘constrain men from showing fear, vulnerability, or sadness, which are framed pejoratively as ‘losing control’ and ‘falling apart’ (Walsh, 2003, p. 414). The side effects of not being able to share strong emotions are ‘increased risk of substance abuse, symptoms such as depression, self-destructive behaviours, and relational conflict or estrangement’ (Walsh, 2003, p. 414). A traumatic event puts strain on families and recovery is an uneven process.

Golden has written about healing from a gendered perspective (Golden, 1996). He noted the different approaches in communication but stressed that this alone ‘doesn’t explain the difference in a man and a woman’s nature in processing emotions’ (Golden, 1996, p. 73). Physical differences (in brain structure and levels of the hormone prolactin) and psychological differences contribute to variations in the healing process (Golden, 1996). It is interesting that Golden’s analysis incorporated an exploration of ‘men and the hierarchy’ (Golden, 1996, p. 75). He wrote: ‘Men tend towards a hierarchical nature, viewing the world in terms of who is governing whom. Women, on

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<sup>76</sup> Across the 14 households, only three couples were together during the Wangary fire.

<sup>77</sup> Raphael writes: ‘Disaster may bring many deaths and many losses. The numbers of the bereaved are then very great. Their grief and mourning may be intense. There may be many other losses for them as well, such as loss of home and treasured possessions, loss of community, and loss of security in the world as it was known. All these losses must be grieved and mourned. Not only may there be the acute stresses of such losses, but also deprivations may continue for a long time afterward, acting as a chronic stressor’ (Raphael, 1994, p. 321).

<sup>78</sup> ‘Even after 24 years, there are many, many families who have still not spoken together about their Ash Wednesday experiences and the impact that time has had upon their lives. I hope they will. I hope they will celebrate their survival and pass the story on to the next generation’ (Kenworthy, 2007, p. 79).

the other hand, tend to view the world through the lens of who is relating to whom' (Golden, 1996, p. 75).<sup>79</sup> This observation is particularly relevant to the male-dominated emergency management sector. All of these factors, Golden stated, have 'dramatically different strengths and paths in processing emotions, and therefore, in the way men and women grieve' (Golden, 1996, p. 79). This contrasting experience of grief and healing, within couples, can lead to misunderstandings:

*Men and women tend to be suspicious about the other's mode of grief. He may think she is 'overdoing it' as she emotes in the presence of those close to her. She may feel that the man is not really grieving because he grieves in private or through action, not sharing his tears in the same ways she does. Yet both styles need to be honoured because both, when used effectively, accomplish the same goal – coming to terms with the loss. (Golden, 1996, p. 83)*

This is reinforced by Raphael who writes that family systems may actively interfere with grief (Raphael, 1990, p. 389). Raphael writes about the importance of working with bereaved families as the 'differential rates of grieving of the various members may also lead to friction, further pain, and misunderstanding. And, finally the family as a whole system is hurt and wounded, perhaps even broken, by the loss' (Raphael, 1990, p. 389).

One striking finding was the commonness for the female interviewees to speak at length about the emotional and social impacts of the fire on themselves, their family and their friends and neighbours. One male interviewee did talk openly about his fragile mental health and his frustration with that one event affecting his daily life. In the main, however, men were more inclined to speak about the environmental effects of the fire and the time, energy and resources that were needed to replace fencing and farming

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<sup>79</sup> Golden (1996, p. 78) provides examples in the contemporary workplace where men play out these ideas of hierarchy: 'Fire fighting, for example, has long been a male-dominated profession....A fireman expects to put himself at great physical risk as he performs the job of protecting the community. He does this within a hierarchy designated by rank. Similarly, policeman put themselves at risk to protect their community, also within a hierarchy of rank.' He refers to the armed forces, the construction business and sports such as baseball and football as further examples (Golden, 1996, p. 78). This 'hierarchy' undermines the emergency sector.

infrastructure.<sup>80</sup> Women talked about their children and the disruption to their domestic lives. One identical element between the interviews with men and women was to understate or downplay their losses. Most interviewees were mindful of – and all made reference to – those who perished in the fire and the immediate families impacted by this loss.

### 6.5.1 *Immediate impacts*

Studies of resilience all find that ‘humour is invaluable in coping with adversity’ (Walsh, 1998, p. 66). Walsh wrote that, for families, humour helps members cope with difficult situations and that it can be particularly beneficial ‘when it points out the incongruous aspects of a harrowing situation – the inconsistent, bizarre, silly or illogical things that happen (Walsh, 1998, p. 67).<sup>81</sup>

Cox found that there was a definite division within the community she studied after the Ash Wednesday bushfires: ‘the town quickly divided itself into the “burnts” and the “not burnts”’ (Cox, 1996, p. 58). Kenworthy (2007, p. 76), in her personal account of the Ash Wednesday fires in the Victorian townships of Macedon and Mount Macedon, noticed an identical division. This evident tension was not as defined amongst the Wangary fire interviewees. It is a shocking transition to have a home one day and not the next. For the five families, across the younger and older participants, that found themselves in this situation, there was nothing familiar in their post-bushfire lives. Fothergill refers to the home as a ‘sacred space’ (Fothergill, 2004, p. 174). Hoffman described how dramatically her life was altered after the Oakland Firestorm: ‘The pattern of my days, my plans, my routines were irrevocably ruptured. The warp of my past was torn from the weave of my future. Who I am, what I was, what I intended to do, the fabric of my life, utterly unraveled’ (Hoffman, 1998, p. 56). There is little

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<sup>80</sup> Enarson and Morrow studied the effects of Hurricane Andrew from a gendered perspective: ‘Many observers noted that men seemed to focus on the instrumental tasks of rebuilding, both at home and at work, and to withdraw from their partners and children. The reported accounts of increased incidence of male suicide, alcoholism, and violence are vivid indicators of men’s pain and distress’ (Enarson and Morrow, 1997, p. 123).

<sup>81</sup> ‘Throughout the long process of recovery, however, has run a thread of courage, often expressed as humor’ (Morrow, 1997, p. 1).

research available relating to how routines in a post-disaster environment are re-established by people and families who experience a natural disaster or crisis which has rendered them homeless.

### *6.5.2 Impacts that have emerged over time*

It does appear that, over time, people might change their views or their sympathy might have an end date when fire-affected individuals or families are not seen to be making a rapid enough recovery. The concept of recovery is often defined by structural rebuilding and the reacquisition of material items.<sup>82</sup> For those who lived in the town of Port Lincoln and who did not have direct experience of the fire, the building of new homes was the yardstick by which people's recovery was commonly measured. The complexity and long-term nature of the fire event was frequently overlooked by those who did not live in the fire-affected region.

Several interviewees who were burnt out mentioned that they were offended by comments made by some who were either not fire-affected at all, or who were fire-affected but their home was not destroyed. There was a clear frustration expressed by those who live on the land and were fire-affected with those who live in town. One woman who was sleeping in a modified shed at the time of the interview, nearly two years after the fire, expressed frustration with people who suggested she was lucky to be having a new home built.

A flood-affected interviewee, in a study conducted in 1976, described the difference between a home and a house: 'I have a new home right now, and I would say that it is a much nicer home than what I had before. But it is a house, it is not a home' (Erikson quoted in Fothergill, 2004, p. 249). The building of a new house is not something this family wanted or had planned to do. This interviewee had no control over the circumstances that rendered her family homeless.

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<sup>82</sup> 'Household recovery is a dynamic process where households, as interdependent social units, interact with their environments to re-establish their living conditions and patterns of interaction' (Peacock and Ragsdale, 1997, p. 25).

Women who lost their homes spoke at length about their need for a domestic anchor. The frustration that was voiced most was regarding the lack of understanding and sympathy from residents in Port Lincoln. The couple who moved back into their semi-destroyed home prematurely felt that the eight months following the fire were harder for them than for people who had moved into rental accommodation in town. They could see how having everything destroyed (where they would need to remove themselves from their environment in the short term) might have enhanced their recovery process.<sup>83</sup>

### 6.5.3 *Community, friendships and relationships*

The findings detailed the changes that occurred within personal relationships, friendships and community functioning.<sup>84</sup> Variations to friendships were a common theme for a number of the Wangary fire-affected women that I interviewed. Women who lost everything in the fire anticipated emotional support that was either not forthcoming or was temporary in nature. Hoffman's observations of the social changes that occurred in the aftermath of the Oakland Firestorm had a relationship focus:

*Friendships bear no understood schedule of obligations, no course of expected action, no set of proscribed emotions. As a consequence, while some friends proved themselves rocks of Gibraltar, virtually every survivor suffered wrenching shifts in former associations. Friends did not, or could not, offer aid*

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<sup>83</sup> I interviewed one man (not amongst the 14 interviews analysed in depth for this thesis) in his caravan. Directly across the road from him was the newly built home of his neighbours. They had suffered a similar loss (where everything was burnt) but had a very different recovery and this, along with misunderstandings of actions and communications on the day of the fire, has led to a deterioration in their relationship. There is not necessarily a naturally forming alliance between fire-affected families (who have lost everything). Morrow writes that 'the unevenness of recovery progress often caused strain among neighbours' in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew (Morrow, 1997, p. 167).

<sup>84</sup> Only one woman made a direct comment about the brittle state of her marriage and how the bushfire had substantially escalated the stress. Kenworthy makes fleeting references to the Ash Wednesday fires and the impact on marriages. One reference occurs during a discussion about relocating caravans: 'There were also some instances where the break down of family relationships necessitated a shift' (Kenworthy, 2007, p. 236). Morrow looks at the rise in divorce after Hurricane Andrew, for further details on the effects of natural disaster on family relationships see: Morrow, 1997. Enarson and Scanlon note that 'these couples rode out the flood with equanimity' and cite another flood study that found 'post-flood impacts on relationships were modest and tended to reinforce pre-flood dynamics; flood experiences increased conflict and stress in couples with weak and less egalitarian relationships but strengthened bonds between women and men with stronger more egalitarian relationships' (Enarson and Scanlon, 1999, p. 122).



*or comfort. Friends grew impatient, grew unsympathetic and disappeared.*  
(Hoffman, 1998, p. 58)

She wrote that women suffered ‘greatly over the loss of friendships’ after the fires of 1991 (Hoffman, 1998, p. 59).

A 1985 survey, ‘the first attempt in Australia and overseas to comprehensively evaluate the impact of a major disaster upon the total population affected,’ was carried out in the aftermath of the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires (Clayer, Bookless-Pratz and McFarlane, 1985).<sup>85</sup> One of its key aims was to identify the ‘impact of the bushfires upon the health and psychosocial status of the community both immediately and in the longer term’ (Clayer et al, 1985, p. 7). In their analysis of the survey results, under the sub-heading ‘other people’s behaviour’, the authors noted that a ‘total of 376 people complained of other people’s attitudes’ (Clayer et al, 1985, p. 32). This resonates with the Wangary fire narratives, where (mostly women) interviewees remarked on the inability of people to behave appropriately towards them. This report on the survivors of the Ash Wednesday bushfires quotes two respondents who reported distress at other people’s behaviour:

*The tourists immediately after the fires made us feel very aggressive, particularly the looters and those who came to see the houses where our friends and neighbours died and those who had their pictures taken sitting in the car where the girl died...*

*The only people I can really discuss the fire with are those who were present and involved on the day of the fire. I was totally shocked at the way sightseers appeared for months after the fire. It was hard to work on the garden when people drove past slowly, pointing and staring.* (Clayer et al, 1985, p. 34)

The men that I interviewed did not talk at all about their friendships and the social impact the fire might have had on them. There was grief surrounding the breaking up of the Wanilla community. People were forced to process and accept that their lives, due

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<sup>85</sup> Shortly after the first anniversary of the bushfires 2254 households were posted two copies of the study questionnaire ‘together with a request that, where possible, two adult members of the household complete one copy each’ (Clayer et al, 1985, p. 8). This number was reduced by 280 (due to their present address being unknown to Australia Post). Of the 1974 households, 1023 responded: ‘A single reply was received from 520, a double reply from 503 (resulting in 1526 questionnaires returned)’ (Clayer et al, 1985, p. 9).

to the Wangary fire, would be completely different and this was painful. Families and couples that were required to relocate because they were burnt out, have left a void in the community.

#### *6.5.4 Mental health of interviewees*

In Fothergill's flood study, a number of her interviewees found that their work role transformed into new jobs that emerged directly out of the crisis (Fothergill, 2004, p. 49). This did not occur for any of the Wangary fire interviewees. Fothergill states that for her female participants the return to work was important for their 'sense of self as a working person, as well as for establishing a sense of normalcy and routine in their lives which is a pattern in the disaster recovery process found by other researchers' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 50). The Wangary bushfire narratives demonstrated that returning to the work environment could assist with the healing process but this relied on compassion and understanding within the workplace. Employers do not necessarily understand the needs of their employees as they recover from their traumatic experience and might not have the capacity or skills to manage this sensitive situation (particularly if they are not directly affected by the event). Within the Australian research environment, this is a neglected area of study.

The Alston and Kent study explores, among numerous other repercussions, the health implications on families occurring as a result of ongoing drought (Alston and Kent, 2004, p. xiii). Alston and Kent note that the stress levels of men (who are generally 'stoic in the face of adversity') is 'registered by their wives and service providers' while women are more likely to 'hide their levels of stress from their partners or family' (Alston and Kent, 2004, p. 53-54). The lack of mental health services in rural areas of Australia has been documented by Alston and Kent (2005, p 32), who also state that the impacts of ongoing drought are compounded by reduced access to services (Alston and Kent, 2004, p. 55). While this was less of a factor, for survivors of the Wangary fire during the recovery program when resources were available, it was during the medium to long term that people struggled to access the services when they were most needed (after the recovery program had concluded). Many of the farming families

noted that the workload after the fire meant that everything else, including physical and mental health, fell by the wayside.<sup>86</sup> Some interviewees voiced their concerns for families who had lost everything and were under-insured or not insured; they fear that a mental health time-bomb is potentially a hidden legacy of the Wangary fire. They expressed apprehension for the mental health of Wangary fire survivors, particularly those who have not engaged with the services that might assist them.

### 6.5.5 *Mental health of children*

Walsh wrote that ‘how a family confronts and manages a disruptive experience, buffers stress, effectively reorganizes itself, and moves forward with life will influence immediate and long-term adaptation for every family member *and* for the very survival and well-being of the family unit’ (Walsh, 1998, p. 14). Children are emotionally, psychologically and physically vulnerable to the effects of disaster (Peek, 2008, p. 7). Regardless of the situation they were subjected to (whether they had direct experience of the fire or not), children were traumatised by the Wangary fire. All but one of the mothers I interviewed talked about the behavioural changes they noticed, and grappled with, in their young children directly after the fire.<sup>87</sup> In the preface to *Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children*, Malchiodi wrote that children ‘relive their traumas not only in their minds but also through their actions’ (Malchiodi, 2008, p. xiv). What was consistent across the interviews was the impossibility of preventing these impacts. These women felt powerless to protect their children from fear and terror, in part due to the lack of warning about the impending crisis and the uncertainty (lack of context and reference points) surrounding their decisions.

It was not only at the height of the fire that children were confronted with terrifying scenes but in the days that followed, when there were dead sheep scattered across the landscape and for months, a black environment. A common response in young children, reported by their mothers, was for them to become ‘clingy’ and refuse to attend school

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<sup>86</sup> Kenworthy notes that ‘In the first couple of months after the fire we were mostly able to deal with the emotional or marital problems that people brought to us, but later there were times that people really were in crisis situations and there were no counsellors available’ (2007, p. 230).

<sup>87</sup> The six-month-old baby appeared not to be affected by the Wangary fire, unlike the 10-month-old from a different family.

or leave their family home. Their parents witnessed a regression in the behaviour of their children as a direct consequence of the fire. They would get upset easily, not sleep as well as they did prior to the fire and generally need reassurance. One of the women who had her children with her in the car, trying to flee the fire, said that in a counselling session months after the fire, her son said his biggest worry was that his sister had died; she went limp. Two of the children (Zoe Russell-Kay and Graham Russell) who perished in the fire were of primary school age. Students who were friends of the two children and who attended the Poonindie Primary School had a particularly difficult recovery.

The personal growth and development of children can be disrupted and this can result in short- and long-term negative effects. Alston and Kent noted in their drought study that ‘children and young adults are likely to try to deal with their own levels of stress in isolation so as not to upset their parents’ and there were households where this was occurring in the aftermath of the Wangary fire (Alston and Kent, 2004, p. 54).

In Kenworthy’s account of life after the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires she expressed particular concern for the fire-affected children: ‘Children who had long been toilet-trained reverted to wetting and soiling clothes and bedding and engaged in such tension outlets as head-banging and rocking. The sound of a strong wind or sudden noises would bring a look of terror to little faces and some would begin to wail in a way that hurt your heart to hear’ (Kenworthy, 2007, p. 229). Echoing what some of the Wangary women said about returning to work to experience normalcy, Kenworthy wrote that the importance of the school to the community can not be understated as this was the only familiar environment that existed for children who had been burnt out: ‘...something of THEIRS remained...in their classrooms, on the walls and hanging on the hat pegs. This one place had not changed’ (Kenworthy, 2007, p. 75).

Peek has documented the possible reasons behind the lack of focus on children’s experiences and needs in disaster by researchers and practitioners (Peek, 2008, p. 2). While there is material available on the recovery of children from disasters, there is ‘still much to be learned about children’s experiences of disasters, their unique vulnerabilities, and their special capacities’ (Peek, 2008, p. 3). Peek emphasised that ‘in

order to fully understand the nature and scope of children's vulnerability of disasters, we need to learn more about the children's experiences from children themselves' (Peek, 2008, p. 10). The material I acquired about the effects of the Wangary fire on children was all gained through their mothers.<sup>88</sup>

Malchiodi, Steele and Kuban (2008, p. 291) reinforced that the relationship between a parent or caregiver and a child is 'considered the strongest factor for resilience in children and is a significant factor in how well children do after a trauma.' They acknowledged the growing body of research on children's recovery from trauma and interventions to reduce post traumatic stress but highlighted the gap in research on 'how to promote posttraumatic growth' (Malchiodi, Steele and Kuban, 2008, p. 297). Three interventions are listed in their chapter, 'Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth in Traumatized Children,' one of which is 'developing a cohesive trauma narrative (telling one's story, being heard, and being validated)' which goes to the heart of this thesis. Loumeau-May has studied the impacts of mass terrorism on children<sup>89</sup> and writes on the use of art therapy in recovery from traumatic grief. She wrote that the children 'did not like talking about it at home because it was too scary and it upset their remaining parent' (Loumeau-May, 2008, p. 99). Parents are often fearful of 'their children being overwhelmed by trauma that they encourage them to avoid thinking about it' and this can obstruct their child's healing and recovery (Loumeau-May, 2008, p. 99).

The vulnerability of children can be reduced by promoting their resilience (Peek, 2008, p. 20). Peek suggested various ways of enhancing the resilience of children: 'encouraging their participation in disaster preparedness and response activities, offering personal and community support, and ensuring equitable treatment' (Peek, 2008, p. 20). In the Australian context of bushfire, children are seen only in the recovery phase. Children are overlooked in the bushfire education material that encourages residents to either plan to stay and defend their property or leave early. This oversight

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<sup>88</sup> I did not have ethics approval to interview children. There were children present in the background of three interviews; two interacted with their parents about their bushfire experience.

<sup>89</sup> 'More than 3 000 children and teenagers lost parents on September 11, 2001, in the worst terrorist attack in US history. Even those children who did not lose a parent were affected' (Loumeau-May, 2008, p. 81).

has been explored more deeply in an earlier discussion in this chapter on the theme of decision-making and the presence of children.

#### ***6.5.6 Adult children – the trauma of fire-fighting and absent adult children***

The interviews revealed that adult children who were active in fire-fighting had a unique experience of the Wangary fire. These findings were accessed indirectly (from their parents) and detailed the tensions that existed for those who were volunteer fire-fighters in a rural community. These young men encountered the bodies of the fire-fighters who had perished (unaware of who they were) and were unable to use their skills and resources to defend the family farm during the crisis. Simply knowing that adult children were actively fighting the fire was stressful and anxiety provoking for a number of the interviewees. Two of the mothers of volunteer fire-fighters made direct and indirect remarks about the fragile mental health of their sons and how they have coped – or have not coped – with the trauma of their Wangary fire experience.

There is no mention in the literature of the impacts to family members who no longer reside in the home in which they grew up. Their loss, of the place that holds meaning and memories of their childhood, deserves attention. They have been forced to process, in the absence of direct experience of the crisis, the sudden disappearance of materials that were associated with their past and their family's history. The ABC radio program that explored possession and dispossession of material goods made reference (from the perspective of the parents) to the loss of paraphernalia that comes with the raising of children (such as art work they produced in school) in the Canberra fires of 2003.<sup>90</sup> Some of these absent adult children will shoulder concern and anxiety about the financial future of their parents and how the family, as a whole, will cope, move on from and rebuild in the aftermath of the fire. Taking time off work to assist their families, to reconstruct their everyday lives and start the recovery process, was not always possible. These absent adult children lose not only the objects associated with their past (and historically meaningful family heirlooms) but, in some cases, any prospect of inheritance. Walsh wrote that 'even individuals who are not directly touched

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<sup>90</sup> 'Giving It Away,' *Encounter*, ABC Radio National, 25/5/08: [www.abc.net.au/rn/encounter](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/encounter)

by a crisis are affected by the family response, with reverberations for all other relationships (Walsh, 1998, p. 14).

This discussion skates the surface of broad and rich themes that deserves more attention and analysis. The impacts of the Wangary fire, for the 20 interviewees in this study, were profound. For some, escaping to the beach by driving through a fire front or having one bearing down on them in the rear-view mirror, the day had substantial psychological and emotional repercussions. Most of those who described suffering from debilitating effects in the weeks and months after the fire, felt that they were on the way to a full recovery. Many articulated that they have come to terms with this event having a defining influence on the rest of their lives.

The impacts of the Wangary fire can contribute to the knowledge of resilience in communities and families and, particularly, in enhancing community education programs. There are substantial benefits to be gained from an investment in facilitating and teaching family resilience. Teaching psychological preparedness (and emphasising the potential repercussions of a crisis) is an important element to bushfire education.

*I don't have any lawn because it's totally covered by sand. There's one to two feet of sand drift in our yard. The visual aspect of the drought has been very, very devastating.* (Farm woman, Alston and Kent, 2004, p.49).

## **6.6 *Sense of place and connectedness to the landscape***

This theme focused on the impact of the Wangary fire on the domestic garden and the wider landscape and how people felt and responded to living in a scarred environment.

There is an intrinsic link, at both a visual and an emotional level, between fire-affected and drought-ravaged landscapes. While the differences must be recognised – bushfire is swift and the re-greening of the landscape soon follows, whereas drought is painfully slow with no end in sight – the similarities are striking. The dramatic changes brought about by drought and fire on the landscape are painful for those who reside there. They are confronting, and unavoidable, scenes for residents to live in. Cox's (1996) thesis on the Ash Wednesday bushfires and the two drought studies by Stehlik et

al (1999) and Alston and Kent (2004) form the primary references for the discussion of this important theme.

### 6.6.1 *The landscape*

Age, again, is a defining factor particularly in relation to the wider natural environment and the powerful articulation of hurt by the older male interviewees. All of the participants in this group spoke about the difficulty they faced in living in the scarred environment and their sadness at knowing it would not be the same again in their lifetime. It was the older men and women who expressed emotion when talking about this theme. These farming couples had a strong connection with the land and a respect for nature.

Although the younger interviewees did speak to this theme it was in a different way: with less thought and feeling, possibly due to their children (and the survival of their children) being the primary focus.<sup>91</sup> For the younger interviewees there was recognition that while the environment was charred it would soon regenerate and they had time on their side. They will witness the revival of the landscape.

For the male farmers who had inherited their property from their fathers (who, in turn, had inherited it from their fathers), their connection to the land stretched back a long way while their wives did not have this historic link to the farm. The older women, having spent a number of decades living on the farm, expressed sorrow at what their husbands were confronted with; the generations of hard work that had been destroyed. These farming men powerfully expressed their strong sense of connection to the landscape. In their drought study Stehlik et al identified a ‘strong correlation between maintaining personal health and wellbeing and maintaining property health and wellbeing’ (Stehlik et al, 1999, p. 80). Their drought report quotes another author, Farmer, who writes:

*Producers report an intense bonding with the land, something that is perhaps difficult for nonfarmers to appreciate. The farm represents the collective effort*

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<sup>91</sup> The reluctance of young men to participate is a factor too.



*and wisdom of several generations working with a particular plot of land; the wisdom of managing it is part and parcel of the family's identity and its legacy for the future. And connected with this strong sense of landedness is a sense of freedom that comes with being independent operators.* (Stehlik et al, 1999, p. 80)

In her study of recovery in survivors of the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires, Cox found that 'by far the most significant factor to which people attributed their recovery was the return of the environment' (Cox, 1996, p. 92). What emerged from Cox's interviews with residents who experienced the bushfires of Ash Wednesday was 'the relationship that many people have in this area [a Victorian coastal community] with the natural environment: the bushland; the ocean; the flora and fauna.....It was very evident that it was a dominant theme' (Cox, 1996, p. 210).

Some of the older Wangary fire interviewees experienced a dislocation with their sense of place and belonging as they were unable to reconcile the charred landscape with the environment they had lived in for so long (in the case of the farming men, their entire lives). One farming woman described it as a 'whole new world' and 'like a moonscape,' indicating the extent of the alienation she felt with the landscape she had lived in all her married life. Cox explains that, in the context of people's relationship and connection with the environment, when the bushland is scarred the people feel pain. As the bushland heals, that healing energy soothes the people' (Cox, 1996, p. 92). The Wangary narratives have identified that male farmers have a strong connection to the land (when it has been passed down to sons for generations, as is the tradition). Their deep connection to the land, in conjunction with their age, influenced how and if they would recover and the extent to which they were emotionally and mentally affected by the bushfire's impact on their farm.<sup>92</sup>

### 6.6.2 *The domestic garden*

In this theme the noticeable gender difference related to women and their relationship with the domestic garden. This focus had, in a number of instances, a healing effect.

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<sup>92</sup> Insurance is a factor too but, for the farmers, monetary compensation cannot restore their land to the condition it was in prior to the bushfire.

While the older male interviewees spoke about the garden it was clearly the territory of their wives. The men might mow the lawn and admire the garden but that was the limit of their involvement in it. It was a contained area that the women could either revive and restore or completely start over. There was mention of the challenges in deciding what and where to replant (proximity of fuel to the house); however, gardens were, mostly, associated with enjoyment by the female interviewees.

This finding is reinforced by the research conducted on the social impact of drought. Stehlik et al found that women ‘often sought two sites of peace – the garden and their personal spirituality’ (Stehlik et al 1999, p. 91). They went on to state that ‘our study suggests that the garden can be seen as a powerful antithesis to drought – a place of water, serenity and greenness’ (Stehlik et al, 1999, p. 91). Unfortunately, not all women living with drought will have the luxury of a garden and thus it can be a place of sadness.

One of the Wangary fire women referred to the establishment of her vegetable garden after the bushfire and the time she invested in it daily, as a form of meditation. She could immerse herself in a satisfying task and cease, for that brief time, to worry about the living conditions of her family and all that they had lost. The women who were active gardeners before the bushfire embraced the challenge of restoring their gardens to their former glory. The growth (and regrowth) in their domestic gardens was a source of comfort for the bushfire-affected women when the wider landscape was charred and barren. They were able to draw solace from their gardens in the aftermath of the Wangary fire.

## 6.7 *Spirituality*

*Religious issues in disasters have been notoriously under-researched by social science disaster scholars. (Fothergill, 2004, p.146)*

The bushfire narratives reveal that faith can be sustaining during a crisis and in the aftermath. For the women who spoke at length about their faith and the role it played for them on the day of the Wangary fire, their belief system (whether connected to

experience within or outside formal religious structures) was at the core of their thoughts and decisions about how they endeavoured to process this traumatic event. These women derived assurance from their faith at a time when their lives were being threatened by the approaching bushfire. One woman marvelled at how calm she was throughout the two days of the Wangary fire and, particularly, when she could see that the fire was near as her home filled up with smoke. She drew on her faith at this time and was able to remain in control of her emotions. Her faith and belief in God had an empowering affect. Praying for calmness and wisdom at a time when fear and confusion could easily overwhelm and cloud judgement was a natural response to the bushfire threat for several of the interviewees. When the bushfire removed all of their usual values about safety and protection, these women were able to draw on their faith and this helped them to make crucial decisions.

The other significant aspect of faith for the Wangary women was at the time, when their lives were at risk, they had no one else to turn to and faith reduced the isolation of their bushfire experience. They needed some form of reassurance for the decisions they were about to make – and given that the bushfire and its sudden ferocity had wiped out their usual knowledge and value base, there needed to be something else – relying on faith could possibly have been their only other resource under these circumstances. Their faith gave them clarity at the height of the crisis; it was a major source of support for them in the aftermath of the Wangary fire.

Within the Australian disaster research landscape the linkage between spirituality and disasters is a neglected area of study. In the last section of Stehlik et al's (1999) report on drought, there are a few paragraphs dedicated to spirituality. It is referred to as one of two sources of comfort for 'many of the women producers' (Stehlik et al, 1990, p. 91). Faith was found to give numerous women the strength to survive a six-year drought. Similar to the Wangary fire interviewees, faith was the domain of the female participants: 'Only one male producer confided his religious beliefs to us at interview' (Stehlik et al, 1999, p. 91).

A key difference between the drought and Wangary fire interviews is that the former found that, for some women, the drought challenged their faith. In a number of

cases their faith was tested and questioned as the drought dragged on. However, none of the Wangary fire interviewees who spoke about their faith raised any doubts or mentioned that the bushfire had altered their faith in any way. The discussion of faith in the bushfire narratives did not include any repercussions; their faith remained steadfast in the face of devastation and loss. Faith, for one woman in particular, was her primary source of comfort in the months and years after the Wangary fire and she was puzzled by people who were not drawing on their faith in a similar fashion. It is possible that spirituality and faith are used differently in an emergency situation than for a longer challenge such as drought (though the recovery from bushfire can, like drought, drag on for many years). Walsh and Pryce, writing from a family therapy perspective, acknowledged the value of spirituality: ‘For some, traditional religious beliefs and practices can be a positive stabilizing resource in weathering crisis’ (Walsh and Pryce, 2003, p. 359).

Fothergill’s (2004) book on the Grand Forks, North Dakota flood of 1997 featured a chapter titled ‘Family and Religion: Heavens in a flooded world?’ Divided into two themes, Fothergill examined the women’s relationship to these ‘two critical social institutions, family and religion’ (Fothergill, 2004, p. 137). The section on religion revealed the diversity of responses to questions about how their spirituality was affected by the flood and how their spirituality affected their coping with the flood (Fothergill, 2004, p. 146). Fothergill noted that within her sample of 40 women (some of whom were agnostic), a diverse response was captured. She stated that ‘many women in Grand Forks felt that their spirituality, belief system, or faith was not affected by the disaster, and their faith did not play a large role in their coping strategies’ (Fothergill, 2004, p. 146). For those who felt differently, they either reported a deeper connection to their faith or struggled to reconcile their faith with the events they were forced to endure (‘I’m sure the Lord had something in mind for all of us by having this happen’ Fothergill, 2004, p. 148).<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> ‘The United States is one of the most religious nations in the industrialized world in the level of attested spiritual beliefs and practices’ (Walsh, 2003, p. 341). This needs to be kept in mind when reading studies carried out in the United States – a significant difference exists in Australian society.

Fothergill observed that 'women's well-being in the disaster was often affected by their relationship to their church or place of worship and by their feelings about spirituality and God' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 146). Citing a reference from 1972, Fothergill wrote that 'some researchers have found that belief in God and the workings of fate played a role in how people reacted to, prepared for, and perceived a natural disaster threat. Religion and spirituality can also be a coping strategy to deal with trauma and loss' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 138). One contemporary study, a 1998 University of South Carolina PhD, is referred to in a footnote where she states that 'almost no research has been done on religion as a coping strategy in disasters' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 247). Fothergill's analysis reveals that 'women's feelings about their own spirituality and their relationships with their place of worship are complicated and varied, and would benefit from further study' (Fothergill, 2004, p. 155).

Walsh wrote that 'religion and spirituality offer comfort and meaning beyond comprehension in the face of adversity' and that 'personal faith supports the belief that we can overcome our challenges' (Walsh, 1998, p. 71). Echoing Fothergill, Walsh observed that 'spirituality has long been neglected in the mental health field' (1998, p. 72). She, too, stated that a crisis can trigger questioning of long-held beliefs and result in 'spiritual distress' (Walsh, 1998, p. 71).

The matter of spirituality and faith is another factor that has remained unspoken and invisible in bushfire safety community education strategies and material. Research has been conducted on the relationship between spirituality and recovery (in particular from trauma). In his paper on spiritual issues and recovery management, Crawford wrote that there 'is a significant need for a holistic approach that doesn't segment personhood and eliminate the spiritual elements that frequently surface in disasters' (Crawford, 1998, p. 32). The bushfire awareness and preparedness information for communities does not address values or the need to have a frame of reference at all, and perhaps this is the problem. Considering the crucial role that faith played for a number of the female interviewees, I believe that this theme deserves recognition and research from an Australian perspective, particularly in the context of natural disasters and disaster preparedness, response and safety.

## 6.8 *Positives*

Along with major upheaval and distress, disaster can bring positive changes and these were highlighted in several of the interviews. To live in a community for decades and not feel like you truly belong until a shared crisis, such as a bushfire, occurred was one example of a positive outcome. Connection to others was a common topic that featured in the bushfire narratives and extended to the volunteers who came from across the country and New Zealand to assist with the re-fencing and reconstruction effort. Poiner refers to the ‘unifying forces of disaster’ and its ‘socially therapeutic features’ (Poiner, 1990, p. 160). The concept of communion, Poiner wrote, is ‘particularly appropriate, for in the shared experience of crisis the ties of dependencies of community are thrown into high relief’ (Poiner, 1990, p. 160).<sup>94</sup>

Personal growth, particularly for women, and the acquisition of new friends were positives arising from the fire. In their research on spiritual resources in family therapy, Walsh and Pryce wrote that ‘the paradox of resilience is that the worst of times can also bring out the best. A crisis can spark a reordering of life priorities for more meaningful connections’ (Walsh, 2003, p. 360). This ‘reordering’ featured in a number of the bushfire narratives; the Wangary fire brought a new perspective for how some of the survivors approached life and what they wanted from it. Painful loss might ‘thrust us in new and unforeseen directions’ (Walsh, 1998, p. 7).

*Emergency management in Canada, as elsewhere, is colored by its historically military origins and such male-dominated occupations as law enforcement, fire fighting, engineering and senior management.* (Enarson, 2008, p. 2)

## 6.9 *Conclusion*

The first three themes that were discussed in this chapter (family responses and experiences; packing the car; the role of pets and livestock in decision-making)

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<sup>94</sup> Poiner explores the concept of communion and quotes Schmalenbach: ‘The widespread sharing of danger, loss and deprivation produces an intimate, primary group solidarity among the survivors, which overcomes social isolation and provides a channel for intimate communication and expression and a major source of physical and emotional support and reassurance’ (Schmalenbach, 1961, p. 680).

focused on the lived experience of the Wangary fire and reinforced the complexities of decision-making in a bushfire event. The national bushfire safety ‘stay or go’ policy relies on people taking a clinical or mechanical approach to bushfire mitigation and decision-making in a bushfire event. There is little recognition of the emotional attachment that people have to their homes, possessions and domestic pets or livestock and how this has an influence on people’s behaviour and responses prior to and during a bushfire.

The three themes that followed (impacts of the bushfire; sense of place and connectedness to the landscape; spirituality) delved into the immediate aftermath of the Wangary fire and the short- to medium-term recovery of fire-affected people. There is an abundance of contemporary literature available, internationally and nationally (from the perspectives of developing and developed countries), on recovery from hazards and disasters but very little specifically on bushfire.

Investigations and research were conducted in the wake of the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires, when 75 people perished, on topics that relate to this discussion (such as research on children’s responses to bushfire). However, not much has been produced in the intervening decades on the human and family aspect of the bushfire experience in Australia. Regular inquiries, undertaken by all levels of government across numerous States and Territories in Australia, have incorporated the theme of how to reduce the impacts of bushfires on the community. There seems, nonetheless, to be a disconnection between what was learned and studied in the aftermath of Ash Wednesday and the repetitious recommendations made over the last decade. There does not appear to be recognition of that work (or a sense of its value), or an appreciation of its relevance today. There is no meaningful engagement with the insights and lessons obtained from the bushfires of the past.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> The first inquiry into a bushfire event was conducted by Judge Stretton in 1939. It was convened three weeks after the January 13, 1939 fires, known as Black Friday (71 people perished). This bushfire event is considered to be one of the worst natural bushfires in the world (2 00 000 hectares or 4 942 000 acres of land were burnt). One of Stretton’s recommendations focused on education: ‘Probably the best means of prevention and protection is that of education, both of adults and children. It is with the children of today that future forest safety lies. It is not the province of this Report to seek to occupy the field of pedagogics. But it is suggested that the dull lecture in the form of education will fail.’ (Sourced from the ABC: Online documentary about the 1939 Victorian bushfires, [www.abc.net.au/blackfriday](http://www.abc.net.au/blackfriday)).

This discussion has engaged with how families respond and make decisions together and this provides valuable insight into the intricacies of family dynamics and decision-making.





**Figure 4:**

*Tractor on a farm in Greenpatch.*

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

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*Public policy, designed for the many, under great stress and in times of turbulence, often assumes homogeneity where none exists. It tends not to challenge 'taken for granted' assumptions. (Stehlik, 2003a, p.7)*

The south-eastern region of Australia is often cited as being the most bushfire-prone location in the world. Considering the frequency and severity of fires, there is a disturbing lack of research in Australia which focuses on bushfire from the perspective of families.

Scant attention is paid to women and their roles in the emergency management landscape. Critical decision-making often influenced by the presence of children in bushfire and other emergency situations has been central to this qualitative case study.

This research has identified the value of exploring the bushfire experiences of families with particular emphasis on the role of women. As Morrow has observed, it is “within the family that most people ‘define the situation’ and make decisions about household preparedness and evacuation” (Morrow, 1997, p. 142). The issues of family dynamics, roles and responsibilities and the importance of these factors to survival and safety is an important component of this case study.

Being able to understand the experiences of families and women as they react to a major emergency is a fundamental part of understanding communities. There are strong links, throughout this case study (incorporating the negatives and positives of living through a bushfire), to community. The bushfire narratives revealed the way that people function together, as a neighbourhood, a town, a community. There is also a strong link between family resilience and community resilience.

The management of bushfire in Australia remains underpinned by policies and community education preparedness and awareness programs which are still displaying the traditions and structures where roles, societal norms and values are ordered and predictable. The existing policy of community bushfire response, fails to address the

information and decision needs of families and households where roles, decisions and responsibilities are part of a rapidly changing social system.

Many factors inform and influence the decisions that people make about their actions during a bushfire. In order to assist families to function in a bushfire (and reduce high risk behaviour) bushfire education programs need to incorporate an understanding of the dynamics of present-day families and acknowledge that simply prescribing behaviour ('stay' or 'go') is insufficient.

Generational difference is another major variable in decision making which goes unnoticed by fire agencies. Older people have reference points (of other crises) and are more likely to have experienced bushfire (and this can inform their behaviour during the event— appropriate or inappropriate; depending on what they 'learned' earlier). Focusing on the way families interact can assist with enhancing the safety messages for bushfires and other natural and man-made hazards.

In regional and rural locations the community rely on volunteer fire fighters – who are mostly men. This often exposes the families of those volunteers to greater risk. Whilst the men are out attempting to contain and extinguish the fire the women and children are left to defend the home.

Children are neglected in the bushfire education material that encourages residents to either plan to prepare, stay and defend their property or leave early. As previously stated, the simplicity of the national 'stay or go' policy does not take into account the complex factors, such as women being responsible for (and often alone with) infants, and the strong desire to remove them from the danger in order to minimise their trauma and maximise their survival. Associating the act of evacuation with safety is common; informed by trying to juggle a fire front and the welfare of babies/infants and/or young children. Their dilemma, about what is the safest action to take, requires attention.

This study has identified a number of gaps in the literature; within bushfire research and, more broadly, in the field of disaster research. Inclusive qualitative research is time intensive and challenging. When qualitative researchers focus on individuals of

one gender, only one perspective is explored and the simplicity of the findings can be deceiving. It is crucial that family focused research is conducted in the future with an emphasis on obtaining and exploring the perspectives of young men.

The impacts of the Wangary fire can contribute to the knowledge of resilience in communities and families and, particularly, in enhancing community education programs. There are substantial benefits in investing in facilitating and teaching family resilience. Teaching psychological preparedness (and emphasising the potential repercussions of a crisis) is an important element to bushfire education.

Primarily, the 'stay or go' policy can and should be strengthened by ensuring it reflects the changing structures in contemporary society. The major obstruction to effective implementation of this (currently flawed) policy is the lack of basic resources (funded time).

People's decision making is heavily dependent on information, experience and the acquisition of useful skills. Community bushfire safety is severely under-funded (it varies from State to State) and this undermines the rhetoric surrounding the national 'stay or go' policy. If this token approach to bushfire safety persists the vulnerabilities of those who reside in high bushfire risk areas will not be diminished. The ability to make optimal safe decisions in a bushfire event relies on a meaningful commitment (in the form of resources at the coal face) from fire agencies at the senior level.

This research has raised and discussed a number of key issues that have not been considered by fire agencies and, more broadly, the emergency management sector.

The findings generated by this case study are not limited to bushfire or the state of South Australia. It is important (in any hazard or location) to focus on the framework of family dynamics and family decision making and whether or not role traditions and the demographics of an area have any bearing on people's behaviours and their responses to education material about risk awareness. Some of the dilemmas that women have, when they are home alone with their children and are confronted with having to make

critical decisions are relevant to any location and disaster situation. These issues need to be considered in the context of emergency management planning.

The following two images are of the remains of the historic Greenpatch Homestead.  
I was provided access to this property by a participant in my case study.

**Figure 5:**  
The Greenpatch Homestead





**Figure 6:**

The owners, who had restored the heritage listed Georgian Greenpatch Homestead and gardens, have not returned to their burnt-out home.

It is a haunting reminder of the Wangary fire.



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## **Appendix 1: AFAC Position Paper on Bushfires and Community Safety**

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### **AUSTRALASIAN FIRE AUTHORITIES COUNCIL**

#### ***POSITION PAPER ON BUSHFIRES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY***

**Issue Date: 28th November 2005**

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## **PREAMBLE**

This paper expresses the Australasian Fire Authorities Council's (AFAC's) position on the safety of residents and their homes during bushfire events. The paper includes principles for national application by member agencies in all Australian states and territories, subject to relevant local legislation and local refinement. The paper provides guidance on good practice for managing community safety in bushfires, and is supported by sub-papers that expand on key points. This position is based on available evidence and experience, and may change following further research, including research conducted by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this paper is to articulate a national position that provides the doctrine and describes good practice in relation to creating and maintaining bushfire-safe communities throughout Australia.

## **POSITION**

### ***Bushfires are a common and normal occurrence***

Fire is a normal part of Australia's natural environment, and bushfires are a common occurrence during drier periods of the year in most places. The frequency and intensity of fires varies throughout the landscape under natural regimes. Various land uses and land management practices have modified, and continue to modify, natural fire regimes.

### ***Bushfires can cause death and injury to people and animals, and damage to property, the natural environment and other community assets***

Bushfires can be dangerous events that threaten life and property. Bushfires that occur on hot, dry and windy days frequently cause significant damage to built assets and occasionally cause loss of life. While fire is important to maintain many natural ecosystems, fire of inappropriate frequency and/or intensity can cause damage to natural ecosystems. Inappropriate fire regimes are a threat to biodiversity, water catchments, air quality and landscape values. Both too much and too little fire can damage ecosystems.

### ***Losses can be reduced, not all will be saved***

Loss can be reduced or avoided in some cases, but cannot be entirely prevented. It is theoretically possible to prevent all loss by bushfire through the total removal of all bushfire fuels across the landscape. Such a measure is not possible in practical terms and is unacceptable to the community. A balance must be struck between measures taken to reduce or avoid loss due to bushfire and the protection of other values. This compromise involves acceptance of the inevitability of some loss.

Governments can assist the community to determine what level of risk it is prepared to accept. Fire agencies can inform governments and communities about these risks. The risk management approach adopted should be consistent with planning for other natural hazards. Losses can be reduced if buildings are designed, constructed and maintained to resist bushfire.

Totally bushfire-resistant buildings could be designed and built, at significant expense. However, other measures such as appropriate building siting and the management of site fuels can provide high levels of protection to less fire-resistant structures.

Appropriately prepared and constructed buildings offer protection to people during bushfires, reducing the likelihood of bushfire-related injury and fatality.

***Managing risk and reducing loss is a shared responsibility between government, householders and land managers***

Fire agencies and some land management agencies have statutory responsibilities for managing bushfires. However, the steps that householders take to prepare for bushfires are crucial to the protection of their life and property. Fire-fighting agencies will provide support and assistance during bushfires when and where possible, but their effectiveness will be compromised if people or properties are not adequately prepared for bushfire.

Householders need to be allowed and encouraged to take responsibility for their own preparedness and safety in bushfires. Fire agencies should support and assist the community to manage and prepare for bushfire, and encourage people to understand fire and to take actions necessary for their own protection and safety.

Education of the community should foster a sense of partnership between residents, neighbours, land-owners and managers, fire agencies and government in terms of bushfire risk management and response. Householders should be provided with knowledge and skills to enable them to prepare themselves and their property adequately to survive a bushfire, and to enable them to decide whether or not they will remain with their property if a bushfire threatens.

***Fire-fighting resources cannot always protect every property***

In most circumstances fire agencies will be able to provide sufficient fire-fighting resources to defend threatened properties when bushfire occurs. However, there will be circumstances, such as on days of very high or extreme fire danger, when fire agencies are unable to provide fire-fighting resources in sufficient time and strength to prevent all loss of life and damage to property. Therefore people planning to defend their properties must be prepared to be self-sufficient.

In a bushfire, fire-fighting resources are likely to be allocated where they will be most effective, not necessarily where losses are most likely.

***People need to prepare, then stay and defend their property, or leave early***

With proper preparation, most buildings can be successfully defended from bushfire. People need to prepare their properties so that they can be defended when bushfire threatens. They need to plan to stay and defend them, or plan to leave early. It must be recognised that in limited cases, some buildings, due to their construction methods, construction materials, the site they are located on or their proximity to high and unmanageable fuel loads, cannot for all practical purposes be defended against high intensity bushfires. In these circumstances, householders should be encouraged to relocate early if the intensity of an approaching bushfire is likely to make conditions unsafe.

***Prepare:***

The most important aspect of preparation for people and their property is the creation and maintenance of a space within which a building can be defended against bushfire embers and radiant heat. Within this defensible space, bushfire fuels must be reduced to prevent or significantly reduce the ability of a fire to burn (and consequently spread to buildings).

Other preparatory measures should be taken to minimise the chance of buildings igniting. Properties should be prepared so that they provide a safe refuge: sheltering from radiant heat and ember attack in a properly prepared building should be the first choice of residents when a bushfire threatens.

Properties should be prepared for bushfire regardless of whether the occupants intend to stay and defend their property or relocate to a place where they feel safer. Proper preparation will improve the safety of fire-fighters and their ability to defend a building successfully even if the occupants are absent when a bushfire threatens. Well-prepared properties are also more likely to survive in the event that neither residents nor fire-fighters are available to protect them.

An unprepared property is not only at risk itself, but may also endanger neighbouring properties if it contributes to a bushfire's intensity. Fire-fighters may not defend unprepared properties.

***Stay and defend:***

Buildings are more likely to survive a bushfire if someone is there to protect them. While fire agencies will strive to provide fire-fighting crews to protect properties during a bushfire, in some circumstances the fire agency may have insufficient resources to assign a crew to every threatened property. It is particularly during these times that well-prepared people can take action to save their properties.

Most buildings lost in bushfires ignite from small fires caused by sparks and embers. These ignitions often occur immediately before, during, or up to several hours after, the passage of the main fire. By extinguishing small initial ignitions, people of adequate

mental, emotional and physical fitness, equipped with appropriate skills and basic resources can save a building that would otherwise be lost in a fire.

If people remain to defend adequately prepared homes, losses and community disruption can be reduced. Education of the community should include providing residents with the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to remain and protect their homes when a bushfire threatens.

***Go early:***

People should decide well in advance of a bushfire whether they will stay with their homes to defend them or leave if a bushfire threatens. They need to be provided with sufficient information to enable them to competently make this decision. Key factors to be considered include:

- whether the home is adequately constructed, maintained and prepared to withstand the impact of a fire at its expected intensity;
- contingency plans in case a fire is more intense than expected, or if the building catches fire and cannot be extinguished;
- and the physical, mental and emotional fitness of the people to cope with the impact of a bushfire.

If planning to leave early, people must decide where they will go, how they will get there, and what trigger they will use to initiate their plan (for example, vulnerable family members may be relocated to a safer place on days of high or extreme fire danger, even if no fire is burning in the locality). People who plan to leave early must recognise that on days of very high or extreme fire danger, bushfires may break out nearby and spread at a rate that provides very little time to relocate.

- It needs to be emphasised that people do not necessarily have to go far to be safe – a neighbouring property may be capable of providing a safe refuge.
- Relocation to an adequately prepared place within the immediate vicinity often involves less disruption than travel to a more distant location, allows people to return quickly to their own property, and can be less distressing for those involved.

***People who cannot cope with bushfire should relocate well before the fire impacts their location***

Due to physical, mental or emotional incapacity to cope with the circumstances, some people would be safer well away rather than attempting to remain with their homes if threatened by fire.

Particular attention needs to be paid to providing for vulnerable residents who may need or wish to be relocated ahead of a bushfire. Plans need to be made well in advance to

cope with the expected numbers and special needs of vulnerable populations. Particular consideration must be given to the needs of people who are relatively immobile due to age, disability, injury or illness, who have special medical needs (eg respirators, dialysis) or require the care of others (eg people with mental disabilities).

Vulnerable people living in areas where warning times may be very short should consider relocating permanently.

***Last-minute evacuations are dangerous***

Evacuation at the last minute ahead of a bushfire is dangerous. Smoke, noise, heat, flames, fire-fighting vehicles and panic all make fleeing in a vehicle or on foot dangerous.

The risk of being overrun by fire is very real and has resulted in numerous fatalities. People caught in the open are likely to face severe and often fatal levels of radiant heat. All things being equal, people are safer in houses than in cars in a bushfire, and safer in cars than in the open.

It is much safer for people to remain in buildings than flee in the face of an approaching fire. Education of the community must focus on encouraging people to prepare and stay in their homes as a fire approaches, rather than to flee at the last minute.

***Mass evacuation is not the favoured option***

Provided that adequate preparations have been made, it is better for people to remain with their homes than to be relocated to an evacuation point.

Large-scale, mass evacuations of entire suburbs or communities require significant lead times, which are often unavailable. They are difficult to organise and execute efficiently, and involve significant disruption to people and communities. Large-scale evacuations demand intensive management of issues such as shelter, feeding, transport, safety, communications, hygiene, medical needs, housing of pets and personal belongings. Mass evacuations can increase the tendency to panic.

Notwithstanding, it is recognised that there may be limited occasions where selective early relocation of vulnerable people may be appropriate. Any such relocation should be planned for and carried out well ahead of the fire. Planned and orderly relocation well ahead of the fire is always preferable to last-minute emergency evacuation.

***The decision whether to order evacuation should be made by the lead fire combat authority***

Ideally, people should make the decision of whether to stay or go for themselves. However, there will be cases where ordered evacuation will be considered by the authorities, overriding individual choice in the interests of public safety. The lead fire combat authority is the best placed to decide whether evacuations should be ordered.



Where legislation confers on the police service the power to order evacuation, a formal agreement should be developed between fire agencies and police to specify procedures for consultation should ordered evacuation be contemplated.

Adequately prepared and resourced people should not be forcibly removed from adequately prepared properties. Forcible evacuation of residents who resist should not be pursued at the cost of missing out on notifying others, or where this would unreasonably endanger the lives of police officers or others.

***Road access must be carefully managed during fire events***

Roads can be very dangerous during bushfires due to smoke reducing visibility, fallen trees and power lines, panicked drivers and the risk of fire overrun. Road use should be carefully managed to ensure safety and unimpeded access for fire-fighting vehicles. As far as possible, access should be maintained for residents and landowners, and denied to sight-seers. Access to roads should only be limited while conditions are unsafe, and access reinstated as soon as possible to allow people to return to their properties, and infrastructure providers to restore essential services.

Access should be managed by police on the advice of the fire agency. Safety is the overriding concern, but every effort should be made to allow residents and landowners to reach their properties before the fire impacts and as soon as possible after the fire has passed.

***It is essential for people in threatened communities to have ready access to accurate information to assist in decision-making***

Access to accurate and timely information during periods of high fire danger and fire events is crucial to enable people to make appropriate decisions concerning their safety.

Information for threatened communities should be gathered by the fire agency and distributed through a variety of media appropriate to the situation, such as radio, television, newspapers/magazines, local newsletters, internet sites, recorded/staffed telephone messages, direct contact, and leaflet drop. Fire agencies need to provide the media and the community with information that is accurate, relevant, adequate, consistent, useful and timely. Sufficient information should be provided to allow householders to make an informed choice as to whether to stay and defend their properties or relocate elsewhere.

As the print and electronic media are a primary means of providing information to the community, and media organisations have a legitimate right to information regarding fire events, fire agencies should facilitate their access to relevant information and fire events.

Fire agencies should manage media access to firegrounds to provide for the safety of media crews.

***Fire emergency plans should be developed for all areas with a bushfire risk***

Fire plans and strategies to provide for community safety should be developed for all areas with a bushfire risk. Fire agencies, local government, land managers and other stakeholders should collaborate to ensure appropriate and effective plans are in place well in advance of the bushfire season.

People do not necessarily make logical or rational decisions in times of stress; plans will help ensure rational decisions are made. Plans must provide contingencies for a range of possible outcomes.

***Land use planning should be used to enhance community resilience to bushfire***

Bushfire considerations should be incorporated into every phase of land development from land use zoning and subdivision design, to building siting and design, access provisions and landscaping.

Planning for protection from bushfire should happen at all levels – there should be a continuum of planning from the national, state and local levels through to householders.

Planning, particularly at the community and individual scale, can have significant benefits for community safety. The use of relevant legislation to facilitate such planning and preparation is supported.

***Fire agencies should support community recovery***

Planning for effective community recovery from bushfires is an essential component of bushfire management. Fire agencies should facilitate and support the recovery of communities and infrastructure.

Establishment of a sense of partnership between the community and fire-fighting agencies is essential for successful recovery after bushfire events.