

Improve people's responses to bushfire threats by addressing their motivations (abstract only)

A. A. G. WILSON¹

¹ Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, PO Box 41, East Melbourne 3002, Victoria.

ABSTRACT

Many people do not make their houses bushfire safe; they do not learn simple survival strategies about sheltering in houses or vehicles; they do not evacuate well before a fire arrives nor by the safest route; they don't keep out of fire areas; or they unnecessarily attempt to fight the fire. This inappropriate behaviour is a major reason that bushfires kill people and destroy houses. Bushfire and other emergency agencies aim to reduce the losses of life and property partly by influencing these behaviours.

Behaviour can be changed, but only if motivation is changed. Providing information and advice (e.g. distributing educational materials before fires on safe houses and the need for any evacuation to be early) and instructions (e.g. telling people during fires when and how to evacuate) in itself causes no change in behaviour. People's perception of personal risk, convenience, needs, priorities and relevance of information will strongly affect their motivations and actions, as illustrated by observations that people:

- allow their lives to be threatened by such factors as an unroadworthy car, poor diet, lack of exercise and continued use of cigarettes. These factors generally have a higher risk and profile than bushfires but have also been difficult to change.
- respond to a general fire threat (e.g. that there is a fire somewhere in their district) by trying to obtain better information, so they can choose a good strategy. The alternative of immediate action could cause them unwarranted inconvenience (e.g. being late for an important appointment despite not actually being in danger), or a bad strategy (e.g. driving towards rather than away from the path of the fire).

- are highly motivated during a fire to protect family members or possessions, if necessary by driving along a possibly dangerous route to reach them.

People fail to address many priorities that may to others appear legitimate; and do address many other priorities besides personal survival.

Professional conditioning may lead fire managers to identify readily these responses as being inappropriate but not to appreciate how the general population reacts to unfamiliar circumstances. Fire managers may benefit from contemplating their own motivations and focus in non-fire situations, by participating in the following exercise. Picture travelling to an important wedding and hearing of some roads being cut by rising floodwaters: do you necessarily turn back or do you seek more information or take some measured chances? Later, while ankle-deep in the rising waters and fading light, with your very best friends stuck nearby in deeper water and calling for your help, do you simply head for dry land without risking any time and effort to help them?

The more that bushfire and emergency agencies recognize and work with people's motivations the more that people will respond to fire threats effectively. Incisive studies of human behaviour before and during bushfires, and of the literature on community psychology in response to other types of disaster, should help identify people's behaviour patterns and strategies for influencing them. Outcomes may include efforts to improve the processes which allow community members to network high quality information during fire events; and to develop leadership throughout the community, to increase the extent of effective decision-making during fires.
