Community perceptions of bushfire risk

Alison Cottrell, Sally Bushnell, Margaret Spillman, Judy Newton, David Lowe & Luke Balcombe

Chapter summary

The public often view and evaluate risk differently from researchers and experts. Understanding how the public construct their perceptions of risk can greatly improve risk communication, and direct risk reduction strategies most appropriately.

This chapter explores the social construction of risk in two peri-urban bushfire-prone communities in Queensland. These case studies were undertaken in 2005 using a multiple-methods approach, which included group interviews with community and fire brigade members, and a community survey.

While there are common factors that can similarly influence perceptions of bushfire risks within and between communities, there are often local-based issues unique to a community that have important implications for bushfire management. Through understanding and clarifying fire issues in communities, fire managers can address problems affecting bushfire risk mitigation in their local community. Engaging the community through a number of means could help considerably. The community should be viewed as a resource – communities have the capacity to act, despite vulnerabilities.

Introduction

The research reported in this chapter was undertaken to help facilitate the development of appropriate bushfire mitigation strategies at the local level by fire agencies, through developing a better understanding of the individual communities they serve. In particular, understanding how a community perceives a certain risk can greatly improve risk communication and direct risk reduction strategies most appropriately. Two case studies in peri-urban bushfire-prone communities in Queensland show how a picture of bushfire risk was constructed in the different communities. The case studies highlight the significance of locality – how factors at the local level influence community construction of risk, which can result in very different perceptions of the hazard within and between communities. This indicates that generic strategies to manage risk may not be appropriate in all situations, and a local focus may be required. This is problematic for fire agencies for two major reasons: first, they are not social researchers; second, they may not have the resources to adapt strategies at the local level. The final section of this chapter discusses ways to address this issue.

Social construction of risk

In contemporary social research, a useful approach for understanding disasters and hazards is 'social constructionism'. This kind of approach allows the acceptance of real environmental and social problems, but the way that society deals with these problems is socially constructed