

Chapter 4

The concept of local knowledge in rural Australian fire management

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Chapter summary

The concept of local knowledge in fire management has long been recognised as important. After the devastating 1939 fires Judge Stretton made a key recommendation in the Black Friday Royal Commission that local knowledge be further developed and utilised by forest officers. The concept was again acknowledged as a valuable tool after recent fires (Esplin et al. 2003; COAG 2004; McLeod 2003; Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2003; Government of South Australia 2005), specifically in the COAG Report into the 2003 Victorian fires and a report used by fire agencies and managers. Despite this, the significance of local knowledge in bushfire management, its meaning and practical application remain vague.

This chapter explores the concept in greater detail and seeks to define local knowledge and its role in fire management. This is not simply an academic exercise but one which considers the application of these traditions and experience. The role of local knowledge is discussed not only as a tool in fire planning but as a crucial part of community engagement, allowing rural communities the chance to play a more active role in fire management. The impact of this involvement and acknowledgment is considered in relation to the resilience of specific rural communities.

However, accessing and using local knowledge is not without difficulties: who holds this knowledge, where is it to be found, is it correct, how can it be verified? Oversimplification of the term, its use and understanding are all potential dangers. The historical relevance of the knowledge, the user's perspective and the place of local knowledge in the broader issues of fire strategies may complicate inclusion of this concept in bushfire response, but it remains fundamental to both future fire management and genuine community engagement.

Introduction

The concept of local knowledge is widely embraced and recognised as important in the debate surrounding fire management (post-fire public inquiries Esplin et al. 2003; COAG 2004; McLeod 2003, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2003, Government of South Australia 2005) particularly after the extensive 2003 fires throughout the alpine country of south-east Australia. During January of that year dry storms ignited a number of fires in the north-east of Victoria and Gippsland which, with deteriorating fire weather, developed until the firefronts joined. The fires burnt 1.12 million hectares of land, including over 108 000 hectares of private land. No lives were lost as a direct result of the fires (Esplin et al. 2003). In considering the resilience of these high country communities to fire and in speaking to