

Chapter 5

Social contexts of responses to bushfire threat

A case study of the Wangary fire¹

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Chapter summary

Using the Wangary fire in South Australia (January 2005) as a case study, we aim to deepen our understanding of how families respond to a bushfire event. This chapter focuses on gender and relationships including the following specific issues:

- What influences the decisions and actions of families when threatened by bushfire?
- Was the ‘prepare, stay and defend or leave early’ policy a feature in the accounts householders gave of their decision-making on the day?²
- How does the presence of children influence preparedness and response to bushfire?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted six months after the Wangary fire by three researchers from the Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre at 17 households across the fire-affected region.

This chapter proposes that concepts of role and identity within the broader framework of ‘community’ can be useful lenses through which to examine issues of community safety in relation to the threat of bushfire. Community safety messages, while often aimed at individuals, need to take into account social interactions at the household and neighbourhood level. Some households managed to remain more cohesive in their fire response, thus reducing their exposure to the threat of the fire.

This research supports the expansion of initiatives which enhance community members’ capacity to come together in groups to develop and expand their responses to the threat of fire. Volunteer firefighters, who are also farmers, are looked to by some community members for guidance. In the main, they did not voice the language of the ‘prepare, stay and defend or leave early’ policy which suggests scope for more discussion to understand the reason for this and to explore how it might be altered. In addition, the desire to remove children from perceived danger can be overwhelming and may result in high-risk behaviour.

Introduction

This chapter reports some of the findings from our analysis of 17 household interviews (35 participants) carried out in July 2005, six months after the Wangary fire.³ Three interrelated issues are discussed: different fire experiences among residents, the relative absence of the ‘home as refuge’ idea and the influence of children’s presence when thinking about preparedness and response. Implications from these three themes are presented for their contribution to dialogue within and between end-users, researchers, community services and community members.⁴