

Place matters

Mae Proudley, Monash University, explores the disrupted relationship between people and place in the aftermath of bushfire.

ABSTRACT

Home is where one starts from.
(T. S. Eliot, 1940)

Emotional bonds with places can form or change through experiences of tragedy and loss. The loss of one's chosen dwelling place in a bushfire is sudden and devastating. This paper explores the disruption of traditional gender roles and sense of place that occurs in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. Narratives of fire-affected men and women, residents of Central Gippsland whose lives were fundamentally altered by the 2009 Black Saturday fires in Victoria, reveal the complexity of identity and belonging in the post-bushfire landscape. Decision-making after the fires, particularly for those who lost everything, about whether to rebuild or relocate is a major theme. This ongoing research focuses on the role that place has in the lives of individuals, couples and families impacted by a severe bushfire. It is clear that more Australian research addressing the role of place attachment (and place detachment) within the context of disaster recovery and community resilience is needed. ^R

Introduction

This paper reports on a case study which is, primarily, exploring the role place has in the lives of individuals, couples and families affected by bushfire. What is presented here reflects the ongoing nature of the research.

During late January and early February 2009 a heatwave descended on south-eastern Australia. According to the Bureau of Meteorology, records were set in Adelaide and Melbourne for the most number of consecutive days above 43°C (109.4°F). Health authorities believed that Victoria's "record-breaking heatwave might have contributed to the deaths of 374 people" (Cooper, 2009).

After years of drought, the heatwave created extreme bushfire weather conditions. On Saturday 7 February 2009 hundreds of fires burned across Victoria. In Melbourne the temperature peaked at 46.4°C (115.52°F) – exceeding the previous all-time record. When 173 men, women and children perished on that day, now widely referred to as Black Saturday, Australia suffered its highest loss of life from a bushfire. Over 2 000 homes were destroyed and in excess of 7 500 people were displaced across 78 townships. Behind these clinical statistics are permanently altered lives. The Black Saturday fires dramatically changed the physical and social landscape.

To be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place (Relph, 1986, p1).

Place attachment

There is an abundance of literature, across many disciplines (urban studies, human geography, environmental psychology, to name a few), about the connections between people and their physical environments. Multiple concepts have been proposed to describe how space evolves into a meaningful or special 'place.' Some of these include: 'sense of community,' 'sense of place,' 'place identity,' 'rootedness to place,' 'place dependence' and 'place attachment' (Tuan, 1975; Relph, 1986; Altman and Low, 1992; Manzo, 2003; Vanclay, *et al.*, 2008).

Cox's (1996) study of the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires investigated the loss of sense of place in a Victorian coastal community. The "relationship that many people have in this area with the natural environment: the bushland; the ocean; the flora and fauna" was a key theme which featured in the 40 interviews she conducted with residents and relief workers ten years after the event (Cox, 1996, p210). Cox (1996) reported links, articulated by some of the interviewees, between the regeneration of the landscape and personal healing.



Image credit: Mae Proudley

The loss of property, possessions and a loved environment is devastating after bushfire.

In 2003 Albrecht, an Australian environmental philosopher, created a new term – *solastalgia* – to describe the lived experience of negative environmental change (mining, natural disaster or climate change are examples). Albrecht (2005, p48) noted that there are places on Earth that are not completely lost, but are radically transformed and that solastalgia is “a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home.’” This concept describes what many men, women and children confront in a post-bushfire landscape; “the most poignant moments of solastalgia occur when individuals directly experience the transformation of a loved environment” (Albrecht, 2005, p49).

In their Tasmanian study Paton, *et al.*, (2008) identified how attachment to place can influence the level of preparedness undertaken by householders living in high bushfire risk areas. The emotional investment that residents have with their interior (home/garden) and exterior (neighbours, the landscape and the wider community) can potentially motivate them to enhance their safety.

Hurricane Katrina (August 2005), in the USA, generated an abundance of social science disaster research. In contrast to Australia, international research that focuses on sense of place from the post-disaster perspective is thriving. Understanding the dearth of Australian literature on the subject, this paper endeavours to provide a step towards recognising the important role that sense of place plays within the context of disaster resilience.

Gippsland case study

The Latrobe Valley, in the Central Gippsland region of Victoria, is the geographic focus of this research. To the north of the fieldwork site is the Great Dividing Range

and to the south are the Strzelecki Ranges. This region is recognised as the centre of the Victorian electricity industry, with one of the largest brown coal reserves in the world. The biggest town, Traralgon, has a population of approximately 22 000 and is a two-hour drive east of Melbourne.

On Black Saturday the Churchill-Jeeralang fire, which began in pine plantation a kilometre south east of Churchill at about 1:30pm, created havoc across the small communities of Callignee, Koornalla, Le Roy, Traralgon South and surrounding areas. The fire destroyed 247 houses and caused 11 fatalities—eight men and three women.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the changes and upheavals triggered by a severe bushfire, 25 in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted, over two years after Black Saturday. This involved 33 men and women in the townships of Callignee, Callignee South, Koornalla, Traralgon South and Traralgon. Participants were recruited through established networks (including the local branch of the Country Women’s Association, a playgroup, the Stitch & Chat craft group) and community notice boards (at the General Store in Traralgon South and the Gippsland campus of Monash University in the town of Churchill). Further contributions were obtained through suggestions offered by several participants in the study. Across the interviews there were variations in age (ranging from 20 – 70 years), occupation, cultural background, family structure and socio-economic status. As in research in South Australia, (Proudley, 2010), more women (20) than men (13) shared their reflections of living in, or being displaced from, a post-bushfire landscape. The established and active groups in the community who circulated the invitation to participate on behalf of the researcher, were all female which mirrored the higher

participation rate of women. Just under half (16 interviewees in total) had property burnt out (rendered homeless) by the fires.

Couples were given the choice of being interviewed together or separately. The benefit of interviewing couples together is the potential of learning from rich exchanges (through disagreements and debates) and witnessing the relationship dynamic. Interviewing couples separately removes the interactive component but adds the possibility of hearing a point of view that might not be expressed in the presence of the partner/husband/wife.

This case study, primarily, is based on narrative understanding. As White points out: *"listening to narratives about people's lives helps the researcher figure out what a particular place meant or means, how the actor understands the world, and how the actor perceives causality for the unfolding of life"* (White, 2012, p159). The Gippsland narratives form the core of this case study; inclusive of those who were displaced and those whose house survived (intact or damaged).

Place disruption

The focus now shifts to the myriad losses and upheavals that feature heavily across the Gippsland narratives. Separating the losses and impacts of the bushfires into neat categories is complicated. For those who were burnt out, the primary focus was on loss of home and possessions—the repercussions that flowed from what Read eloquently describes as the "journey to nothing" (Read, 1996, pviii). For these men and women, objects saved during evacuation and objects distorted by extreme heat were sometimes given new meanings. Tension or changes (positive and negative) in relationships, loss of the natural landscape, concerns about mental health and wellbeing, new friendships and community connections were discussed by those whose homes survived or remained habitable immediately after the fires and those who were burnt out. The experiences of the burnt and the unburnt intersect and yet each individual has his or her own unique post-bushfire experience.

Loss

All of the participants reflected on how they came to be living in that particular place. For some the bond to their land, or 'dwelling place,' was swift and for others it crept up on them. One man, in his early 60s, reminisced about the day he saw the 'For Sale' sign and walked around the 16 acres of land for the first time. He described feeling an instant connection,

"Yeah it was a good feeling. I thought 'Well this is it. This is where I'll spend the rest of my days.'"

He built a house for his family which he tried to defend on the day of the fires and was on the property, alone, when it burned. After the fires all that remained was the scorched land – their insurance had expired – and his wife said she would not return.

"I said 'well I'm staying' so I haven't really spent any time away from the block other than sleeping next door." (Male, 60s)

His experience—losing his home, possessions, marriage, and his entire way of life—illustrates the complicated tangle of loss in the aftermath of bushfire and how life, is suddenly and comprehensively, turned upside down.

Unsettledness

One woman who, with her husband, was burnt out by the fires, sold their cleared few acres and purchased a house in Traralgon, said,

"There's an unsettledness, I don't know what it is, whether it is a lack of belonging, of not really knowing where you are or where you should be and I think we both very much are still experiencing that." (Female, 60s)

One word that is peppered across the Gippsland narratives is 'control.' For those who lost their home and possessions the decision that was required, to rebuild or relocate, was sudden and unwelcome. This major life decision was triggered by a bushfire— one that was the result of arson. The woman who mulled over the sensation of feeling unsettled referred to that lack of control.

"I don't know, I can't explain it because I was even thinking that it was getting too much for us out there, and so if we had moved I wouldn't have felt like I do now. I think it's this being forced into something, and the decisions. You know the lack of involvement of things in your life. We're too old to start completely again, so that was why we're here, and we've sort of stayed here. It's small [their house] and it drives me crazy." (Female, 60s)

One man, who was burnt out and quickly rebuilt, spoke about ongoing unsettledness. His family was relieved to escape the cramped conditions of their temporary accommodation and appreciated the space offered by their new home,

"But it's sterile, it's still sterile now. The worst thing about – I don't know, everyday it's a different worse thing, but one of the most difficult things about losing everything in a fire, and I guess people lose to house fires all the time, but it totally changed everything about our place, not just the inside, not just the house, not just our stuff, but all our history. Basically it just wiped us, for the last 14 years, off the planet." (Male, 40s)

He spoke about hasty decisions.

"We wanted to get back so bad that we probably rushed it, but I just hated living where we were living and I just wanted to get back out here. I always wanted to from the word go, anyway, so I saw no reason to hold back, but looking back, hindsight's a wonderful thing."

Another family that rebuilt (she wanted to, he didn't) had their house up for sale at the time of the interview. In a similar vein, when they first moved into the new house

(“44 weeks to the day we were stuck in Traralgon”) they were simply grateful to be back on their five acres.

“But to this day it still doesn’t feel like home, it’s just a house, and I think a lot of it is because we resent it, because we had to do it....if we had a bit more hindsight, or thought it through a bit more we wouldn’t have rebuilt.” (Female, 40s)

The reflections, from all participants, about their unsettledness reinforce the view that sense of place plays a central role in post-disaster decision-making.

Tension within families

For the participants who relocated to Traralgon (at the time of interview two couples had retained their land and two couples had sold) age was cited as the primary reason for that decision. Of the two couples who still owned their land, conflict and unresolved tension about the decision to move into town was discussed. One woman in her 50s, living in a recently purchased house in town, spoke about her yearning to return to their 11 acres in Callignee. She describes living in Traralgon as “horrible”. She misses the birdlife (rosellas, rainbow lorikeets and kookaburras) and the peace and quiet – “you can hear the neighbours talking out in the yard”. The house they purchased is simply that “a house, it’s not my home”. She has a design for a new house but her husband is “not keen on moving back. At this stage he’s still having troubles, yeah. No. Not ready at all.” She is caught between her desire to return to the landscape she loves and her family.

Tierney (2012, p252) states that women and men “organize their lives and cope with life’s vicissitudes within specific places and spaces”. Several men expressed frustration at not being able to work.

“I haven’t worked since about the May after the fires. I don’t believe I’ll ever go back to the sort of work that I used to do [management role] because I can’t get that focus.” (Male, 60s)

A common concern raised by the female participants was the wellbeing of their men.

“I think a lot of us women have found that we’ve sort of ‘lost our men.’ In a lot of ways they’ve changed. My husband hasn’t worked since the fires. He’s very, very forgetful – can’t keep things straight.” (Female, late 50s)

One male, who openly spoke about being on medication and unable to work since the fires believes that men “insulate themselves very, very much” and that “there are a lot of blokes who I think are going to have long-term hassles, really long-term hassles” as a direct result of not accessing or seeking assistance (Male, late 50s).

The concern for the mental health of men was not restricted to those who were burnt out. One woman whose house survived said she knew her husband:

“...was not happy and I’m thinking ‘I have to leave. We might have to go. I might have to give up here

because I want my marriage.’ My marriage is more important than my house, and my area and all that sort of stuff. I know of a few marriages that have hit the rocks.” (Female, 40s).

Within the Gippsland narratives – the burnt and the unburnt – are couples united and couples divided about where ‘home’ is, isn’t or might be. In some instances the yearning to recreate what was lost is a driving force. For those who remain unsettled, the upheavals inflicted by the catastrophic fires linger; they have yet to find or reconcile themselves with their specific place or space.

Environment, wildlife, livestock and pets

Similar to the findings of Cox (1996) people’s relationship with the landscape and their sense of connection to the natural environment, was powerfully articulated by the Gippsland participants. The most emotional topic, particularly for those who owned livestock, was the loss of animals and the concern for the welfare of livestock and domestic pets immediately after the fires when many people were prevented from returning to their properties for several days. One male participant (who was interviewed with his wife) said:

“The thing that hurt me, I couldn’t stay out there [their burnt out 10 acres in Callignee]. We went out several times to do stuff up until the point in time we sold it, but the thing that used to upset me was I would only be there for half an hour and I would start to feel very melancholy because of the loss of the animals, and particularly of the goats.” (Male, early 70s)

Another man described his distress at finding their goats.

“I cried everyone. I had to bury 86.....and I cried every time I picked one up. ‘Oh Boy.’” (Male, 60s)

For participants who were able to continue living in their home they were confronted by a dramatically altered landscape. Not only was it blackened, covered in ash and unrecognisable, it was silent.

“One day I remember, all of a sudden there was a bird. I went outside and I started crying – I saw a bird. Who would think – I saw one bird, and you were just beside yourself.” (Female, 40s)

The value people place on their connection to landscape, the domestic and wider environment, comes through strongly in the Gippsland narratives.

“A solemn contract with each of these communities to rebuild: brick by brick, home by home, school by school, church by church, community by community.”

Kevin Rudd, then Prime Minister of Australia, speaking at the National Day of Mourning, 22 February 2009.

Discussion: rebuild or relocate?

The differences in responses to bushfire are affected by gender, age and socio-economic status. Other personal factors, such as personality, history of traumatic events and family structure, also play a part in how people react and cope in the aftermath. Economically-stressed households have fewer options and lack the buffer that the well-resourced, and/or fully insured, can use after the catastrophe. The pressures that flow from insecure or barely habitable housing can compound the trauma and grief. The link between financial security and resilience should not be neglected.

For outsiders, those untouched by a catastrophic event such as bushfire, recovery is often measured by the speed with which structures are rebuilt. The urgent priority, from a government perspective, is the restoration of essential services. At a domestic level, in the weeks and months following the fires individuals and families rendered homeless, often in shock, make major decisions about where their future will be, in the medium and longer term. Commonly, those who are burnt outface two options: to rebuild in the same location or relocate elsewhere (usually through renting or buying).

Rebuilding quickly, returning to as close to normal as possible, makes intuitive sense. A number of Gippslanders described how their immediate instinct was to rebuild—for some that decision paid off and for others it didn't. One man, living in a shed at the time of the interview, said he had met people who didn't want to rebuild but felt that it was their only option.

"You know, if that's all you own is the block, and sometimes you think, 'Well, that's the only option, and some are quite happy and some are not, and until you build how would you know what you would be?'" (Male, 60s)

Rapid restoration might have consequences in the longer-term. In their study of two small communities affected by a 2003 wildfire in Canada, Cox and Perry (2011) found that the "urgency driving the recovery and rebuilding process can obscure and leave unaddressed important social-psychological processes and unmet needs that can undermine long-term sustainability and community resilience" (Cox and Perry, 2011, p408).



After devastating bushfires, people face two options, rebuild or relocate.

The consultation with the local community cannot commence in a meaningful way until fire-affected people are allowed time to process the event—their input is crucial. Within the Gippsland narratives, across the burnt and the unburnt, men and women emphasised how time consuming it can be to re-establish their homes, gardens, routines and lives. Often, when they have reached the point of being able to engage with or contribute to the recovery effort at a community level it is too late. What comes through clearly in the Gippsland narratives is that the reconstruction of home and everyday routines is not a linear process. Several men and women who lost everything in the fires stressed that, for them, it only got harder with time.

"Yeah, that's what – I think probably of everything that's the thing that I would like to get any sort of message out to anyone whose managing this stuff in the future or even now, that it's actually harder now to get yourself sorted, keep things going, than it ever was." (Male, 40s)

Tierney (2012, p251) questions whether recovery exists. The word, 'recovery,' implies that there is a point of closure. How is recovery measured and who judges what constitutes a complete or successful recovery? When lives are disrupted so profoundly it takes time to process the trauma and weave it into our life story. The event then forms, to varying degrees, part of the person's identity in the present and into their future. Recent anniversaries of two severe bushfires in Australia – 30 years since Ash Wednesday, 10 years since the Canberra fires – remind us that recovery (or healing) is an ongoing process.

Conclusion

This paper has flagged some emerging findings from an ongoing Gippsland case study of the 2009 Black Saturday fires. For some participants the losses were extensive and overwhelming. When politicians, with the best intentions, pledge to rebuild it is worth remembering that the "havoc raised by natural disasters extends far beyond physical destruction" (Morrow, 1997, p141). The recovery process needs to more meaningfully consider the role of place (Cox and Perry, 2011). Explaining how that might occur or be developed, within the context of the emergency management landscape in Australia, will be addressed deeper into the Gippsland case study.

There is no doubt that "extreme weather events are increasing across the globe and are likely to be more intense and to have a greater impact on people" (Alston, 2009, p121). Large or mass-scale displacement will continue to occur in Australia. Rebuilding a devastated community involves different strategies that should, "in the first instance, include a strong focus on building resilience – supporting people to restore their lives, whether in the community or away from it, and assisting communities to redevelop" (Alston, 2009, p126).

Recovery policies and practices might benefit from learning more about how fire-affected (or cyclone or flood-affected) people cope in their dramatically altered environment. How can survivors be better supported through the process of reconstruction? Can the resilience of communities living in high fire or flood risk locations be enhanced (prior to an extreme or catastrophic event) by connecting the disciplines of disaster studies and place-based research? How should recovery, as it is applied in practice from an emergency management perspective, focus on place?

The Gippsland narratives represent diverse experiences and responses. The narratives accentuate the need for context specificity in disaster management practices. The words of one woman, who experienced being burnt out and rebuilding on the same site, illustrate that variation of experience. She spoke about how she quickly embraced the altered landscape.

"I'm much closer with this area and with people who I never met before. We did not realise where all the houses were, because we couldn't see each other before. It was all bush and trees, and it was closed, so now it's open and I love openness. There was lights again, and sound again and movement. Life." (Female, 50s)

Acknowledgements

This work is funded by a scholarship from the Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability Research Unit in the Department of Social Work at Monash University. The author extends a warm thank you to the Morrissey family of Traralgon South and to all of the participants who kindly shared their reflections and insights into living in, and being displaced from, a post-bushfire landscape. The author would like to thank Fiona McDermott for her advice and feedback during the writing of this paper. The comments and suggestions from the reviewers were much appreciated.

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