



Community preparation

As someone who has grown up in Latrobe Valley, visits & holidays around greater Gippsland & still has many friends & family around the region, I think we are well educated & unfortunately VERY experienced in protecting ourselves & homes from fire. Each year the fires get bigger & move faster, closer to communities, last longer & cause more prolonged danger & anxiety. The fire danger season isn't just a couple of months any more, it's prolonged from - depending on the region because Gippsland is so large - October/ November to sometimes April... that's 6 months to be On guard & on edge.

The increased severity of the dry months, dry forests, dry rivers & dams & more severe weather events has been studied for an exceptionally long time & directly linked to CLIMATE CHANGE. With the climate & forests drying & changing the risk in conducting 'so called controlled cool burns' has not been possible without the risk of starting an outright bushfire. Communities try to clean up their properties, however after the fire restrictions come on there's no way to burn excess prunings or tidying up of fallen leaf litter & growth.

It's also exhausting to try to maintain water supply, land, gutters and gardens for the duration of the extended fire season. These problems wouldn't be so bad if climate change was acted upon & we as a WORLD community & species of our own could start to bring our season, weather evens & natural forests back to the moisture content that they used to hold.

Victorian Government and emergency services preparation

There's no point in controlled burns if the combination of ferocity of wind, fire movement & dry forests can combine... the fire crowns & takes off in a fire storm with its own generated dangerous climate. The only way to prevent another extended & catastrophic fire event (which will wipe out the remaining virgin bush land) is to really act & create jobs in tackling CLIMATE CHANGE. I don't believe there is any plan or anything in place to protect animals or biodiversity around Latrobe Valley or Gippsland.

Every year the fire season is a sprinting marathon to protect lives & assets / buildings... there's no funding for national parks, rangers or wildlife groups to build refugees or security populations. Every year we & our community clean up any dry material surrounding our houses, mow & plow property fire breaks, pack a fire emergency bag/ kit, prepare & practise a fire plan (including extensive home circumnavigated sprinkler system, water barrels around the home incase the mains water goes down & attend community meetings at the local CFA station... however it doesn't really help when the local fire brigade are largely in their mid 70's, their trucks are not licensed to attend a "going" fire because they're old design & safety equipment (mainly the cabin which only fits 2 members of a team of 5... 3 members have to sit in an open air shelter/ canopy on the Back of the truck) is not up to the latest safety standards & pumps/ engines/ gears & breaks regularly break down.

The younger community volunteers do not feel safe to turn out & risk their lives in these old trucks, therefore decreasing volunteer numbers. Our community of Yinnar South maintain being really worried for many dry months. Fire safety needs to be taught in schools from primary school up to high school, to rural & city communities & to new citizens. Fire effects everyone & everyone reacts

differently in the face of danger... people will behave very differently this dry season or break down in fear.

Community response

My family & I were caught up in the New Years Eve bushfires. We were camping in a caravan park outside Bermagui. We've stayed in the same caravan park since the early 80's & never seen the landscape so dry, from East Gippsland... especially through Eden & up to Bermi. We relied heavily & cross referenced the NSW fires near me & Vic Emergency apps (when they were not jammed up with extremely heavy use & poor phone reception).

The 24 hour In advance fire spread prediction maps provided on the NSW app were invaluable & probably saved our lives + the ABC coverage was also a life saver while travelling, mobile signal was down & to make informed movement & safety decisions. I woke at 3am NYEve with warning from my sister in Merimbula that the fire was predicted to head towards & circle Bermagui. Being practised in fire survival (my husband & I got caught in the fires that engulfed the Tasmanian East coast & we're stuck in Port Arthur for 5 days) in my mind I prepared my fire plan, packing of essentials & movements before the predicted 8am wind change. I woke at 5am & saw the fires glow as it tore through distant cobargo & hills behind Mt Dromedary.

On checking the app (before hundreds of others clogged it up) I realised the wind or fires spread had come early & This is when I activated my fire plan to evacuate into Bermagui township (not wanting to be cut off or secluded for days on a beach or surrounded with Bush & coping with children). We were in pitch darkness, ash raining down, felt extreme radiant heat & saw the glow surround the town until about 10am. The Bermagui & Narooma community were AMAZING. They largely forgot about their own loss & danger & dropped everything to open civic centres for shelter & facilities at 5am, provided free food, held hourly & daily update meetings, medics roved around the beaches & streets to make sure there were no injured.

We were guided to leave Bermagui township before the next wind change by 11:30 because the sewer & freshwater system had been impacted & could not support 5,000 people. So we convoyed to the safety of the Narooma golf course & we're really well looked after by the Lions Club & community. The next day (New Years day) the police, fire & local government regularly communicated with us & encouraged us to head to Canberra while it was safe.. so we made the 5 hour journey down to Tathra, to Cooma & onto family in Canberra. The state of disaster enforced the seriousness of the danger... my mother in law was in a state of shock & panic, which prevented her from being able to make decisions, know how to evacuate or didn't know where to start in getting packed (although well educated).

Victorian Government and emergency services response

I think the Victorian governments response was spot on. I just wish we had more Large air support In each state To put these monster fires out before they take hold & cause so much damage to life, habituate & Precious species what will we do if COVID-19 stops the Canadian & American water bombers coming out this fire season?????

Relief activities

The fund raising was a bit of a joke with the majority of donations going to NSW without people realising. Don't get me wrong, the amount of money raised was great... if it's been distributed & supporting communities rebuild, that's been over shadowed by Covid-19. I hope communities are doing ok.

Recovery activities

I think there will be ongoing mental health issues... they might not come until the next dry season. I know I'm wary of how it will cope, act & feel you the end of this year.