



International Centre for Responsible Tourism – Australia

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**Encouraging Rural Tourism to embrace
Bush Fire Risk Management
through business and visitor improvement strategies**

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Supporting paper to presentation made at the LGNSW Tourism Conference 2013



Bush fires that involve primary infrastructure can make significant economic impact on tourism which cannot recover the loss in sales, due to the nature of tourism production which cannot be stored and sold at another time

(Princess Highway NSW Picture: RFS)

Introduction

Today and into the future we face the challenge of greater climate related economic threats to tourism destinations than we have seen before in Australia. This is due to the increased occurrences of extreme climate events with increased tourism infrastructure and visitors numbers located in remote places. Factors compounded by a low level of tourism provider risk preparedness - despite the publication of advice manuals. It is argued here that impact from extreme climate events has made managing risk a pre-requisite to business survival and responsible care for visitors. Yet, while mitigation and adaptation help to reduce exposure to risks and litigation, Parfitt, N. et al 2006 and Australian Standards 2010, some tourism operators (particularly small and medium sized) seem unwilling to embrace the concept (as reported below).

Tourism bodies (state, regional tourism organisations, local government, community cooperative groups and peak bodies) have therefore the difficult task to encourage the private sector to embrace Risk Management. They also have the task of reversing the declining domestic tourism trends, presenting Australia as a more competitive destination on the international stage, and improving the low productivity level of the industry. Against these important marketing tasks, Risk Management might appear as a resource draining, though important, responsibility.

The aim of this paper is to complement the Australian Standing Committee on Tourism and the Industry Resilience Working Group's work by recommending an approach to gain wider participation in implementing Prevention and Preparedness measures and at the same time help to create better tourism experiences.

Risk Management is focused on reducing the probability of harmful consequences through planning techniques. Common sense suggests that removing the risks of currently unseen threats is less motivating to tourism providers than the hand to mouth focus of sales and income. We accept that better experiences can improve sales and income, while preventing crisis is not going to financially directly benefit a business immediately. So it is proposed that by presenting Risk Management as a method to improve a tourism experience, and therefore sales and income, more tourism providers might be motivated to embrace strategies. Taking this approach also offers greater efficiencies. Tourism managers have limited resources so combining Risk Management techniques with new product and experience development could be time efficient.

Note, while this paper focuses on bush fires only, but the principles could be applied to other disaster areas.

The Economic Importance of Tourism



*Tourism can make a strong economic contribution to communities in rural NSW through the linkage with in-direct tourism business. Equally this makes communities vulnerable to tourism impacted by bush fire.
(Retailer in rural community)*

The visitor experience is central to the visitor economy. If we want to grow the visitor economy (the NSW Government aims to double visitor expenditure by 2020) we have to develop experiences.

Tourism is a unique industry, while other industries need to distribute their products, tourism is consumed by the visitor at the point of production. The money is spent directly in the community and the stronger the economic linkage between tourism providers and in-direct tourism businesses, the wider local economic benefits from tourism. So as we try to double visitor expenditure so we should spread the economic benefit by linking direct and in-direct businesses. This will encourage employment and help rural communities improve their quality of life. However, a larger rural visitor economy also makes communities more vulnerable to the effects of harmful consequences which negatively impact on tourism. So the more we grow tourism the more we need to consider Risk Management.

Putting this plainly, if we see tourism as the white knight to save many rural economies, and climate is at the very core of tourism, then being prepared for climate events makes common sense. However, as demonstrated in the Tasmanian fires in 2002-03 and the Black Saturday event in Victoria, tourism could be better prepared. This might be achieved with a more comprehensive change in the way we motivate tourism providers to take Risk Management action. UNEP and CAST (2008 p. 87) argues “the time has come for a radical shift in thinking, strategy and approach.”

Risk Management

Risk Definition

Risk is defined by UNEP as “the probability of harmful consequences, or expected losses (deaths, injuries, property, livelihoods, economic activity disrupted or environment damaged) resulting from interactions between natural or human induced hazards and vulnerable conditions,”

UNEP (2008 p.8) Disaster Risk Management For Coastal Tourism Destinations Responding To Climate Change

There are many studies that discuss Reaction and Recovery Prideaux, B. (2004) and Walters, Gabrielle and Clulow, Valerie (2010). However, this paper recommends that Risk Management is presented as a method to improve the visitor’s experience and so improve sales and income for tourism operators, therefore the attention should also be focused on Prevention and Preparedness (as discussed below) . This is because tourism’s special quality, of being consumed at the point of production, requires a more holistic approach to Risk Management beyond the tourism provider’s own property and ought to also focus on the community. Tourism providers should “consider not only the implications of a crisis on your immediate surrounds, but also other elements of your business that may not be right in front of you”, Tourism Queensland (2011 p31). This requires planning at the grass roots level and must involve the tourism provider and the wider destination’s assets which the visitor enjoys. These are the same assets which might draw the visitors to the area in the first place and thus are central to the economic resilience of the tourism provider and the community.

To involve the tourism providers we need to demonstrate the economic value of their local assets and then empower them to share in the responsibility of analysing and managing risks to their livelihoods.

Bush Fires

Bush fires are a prime threat involving the largest number of fatalities of any natural disaster type in Australia. They can severely damage local visitor economies e.g. Kinglake in Victoria. This is because the rural visitor economy requires natural attractions, attractive cultural heritage and quality tourism services. One way for a destination to improve the visitor experience is by identifying special qualities that are the Locally Distinctive features of the area and harness them as a competitive advantage, Warren, C. (2011). If a bush fire destroys the distinctive environment then the destinations’ point of difference is weakened, certainly for the mid-term or even long term.

“80% of businesses that experience a major crisis and do not have a continuity plan do not survive more than 2 years” APEC 2008. The destruction to natural and cultural heritage assets through fire may prevent a quick return to normal. Visitors who know of a town’s fatalities may not wish to return out of respect, e.g. Kinglake.

Currently bush fire insurance damage averages at \$77 million per annum. This year (until March 2013) we have had \$89 million worth of damages in Tasmania and \$33 million claimed because of the Warrenbungles fire. These are generally the only figures discussed. However, the impact of a bush fire is more than the loss of insured fixtures and fittings. These figures do not take into consideration the loss of the aesthetic value of the landscape and the length of time it will take to recover.

There are economic positives from bush fires. For example, the 4 star motel in Coonabarabran (the only deluxe property) was full during February and March (normally a time of low bookings) and they see a bright future due to government officials and visiting scientists staying during the reconstruction phase in the Warrenbungles region. However, business travellers have different spending patterns to leisure tourists and the wider community economic benefits may not result in the same trickle down benefits as gained from leisure visitors. Meanwhile the caravan parks in the same area reported cash flow pressures as leisure tourists have declined. Moreover, other tourism providers, in neighbouring areas outside the Warrenbungles area for example, have seen lost bookings as a result of the fires that occurred hundreds of kilometres away in a different local government area. This lost revenue, cannot be recovered because of the nature of tourism production which cannot be stored and consumed at another time.

Primary infrastructure

In addition to tourism providers, risk management planning also needs to consider primary infrastructure and its economic impact on tourism. Fires that jump roads and close access can prevent travel, both for visitors trying to leave the region or arriving. This situation was most notable in the southern Shoalhaven in January 2013, when the Princes Highway, Main Road 92 and the Kings Highway were all closed thus essentially preventing any safe movement for tourist traffic to and from the region travelling to and from Sydney or Canberra, with the subsequent economic impacts in accommodation bookings as researched by Dunn, C. (2013). There is also a compelling evacuation reason to tackle such infrastructure. The Shoalhaven is a popular tourism region with a domestic population of 95,000 which swells with an additional 350,000 visitors during the summer holidays, stretching primary infrastructure capacity.

The long lasting impacts from bush fires indicate that preventing them occurring at all would be best. Therefore Risk Management is better focused on Prevention and Preparedness than Responding and Recovery. Such self-regulation has been left to 'best practice' codes and accreditations in tourism.

The Economic Impact of Natural Disasters

The 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean caused over 270,000 deaths, injured half a million and impacted 5 million people. The event affected tourism in Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. In January 2005 there was an 85% drop in international tourists, hotel occupancy rates fell 10%, overseas arrivals in Phuket dropped 67% in the first half of 2005 and 500 tourism enterprises there collapsed employing 3,000. (Henderson 2007 cited in UNEP 2008). Outside the OECD results from extreme natural disasters is the mortality rate. Developed countries like Australia have resources to mitigate leaving us with significant economic impacts.

There are plenty of international examples where extreme weather events subsequently damage the visitor experience e.g. heavy rains in Peru with subsequent loss of wildlife reducing ecotourism experiences, droughts in Brazil and unappealing landscape reduces visitor motivation to visit the region, and floods in England reducing visitor numbers. In all these examples it is the economic impact of reduced visitor numbers that effects the survival of communities while the loss of biodiversity negatively impacts on the visitor experience afterwards.

Accreditations, Regulations and Awards

The RFS does provide a helpful Bush Fire Survival Plan which assists property owners in determining action required to prepare for a bush fire. However, as the RFS confirms this is primarily for urban dwellings rather than rural tourism properties.

As discussed above, fires have their own special risks and long term devastation impacts while tourism providers are morally and legally responsible for their guests. This suggests that the RFS Bush Fire Survival Plan could be enhanced for rural tourism providers to:

- Prevent and Prepare for bush fires on their property
- take care of their guests
- reflect the geography and road infrastructure or the area as evacuation routes
- consider their destination's assets and the need for their protection.

By their very nature bush fires can take many different forms (how big the front is, wind speed, dryness, embers, grass height) and so the threats may vary and the preventative action required is broader than the tourism provider may be aware, who might assume incorrectly that all fires are the same.

The RFS recommends that each bush fire survival plan needs to be prepared on an individual assessment of the property, which could include:

- location and vegetation
- vulnerability for visitors to travel to and from the area in high risk periods

Factors which have also proven to be important are:

- the owner's local knowledge, their life experience and socio-demographics (factors which have proven important in Preparedness)

Currently tourism encourages responsible practice through voluntary programmes like accreditations, self regulation by community or special category groups and awards. However, as explained about bush fire Risk Management requires expertise on site to develop and implement a Prevention and Preparedness plan specific to the local context.

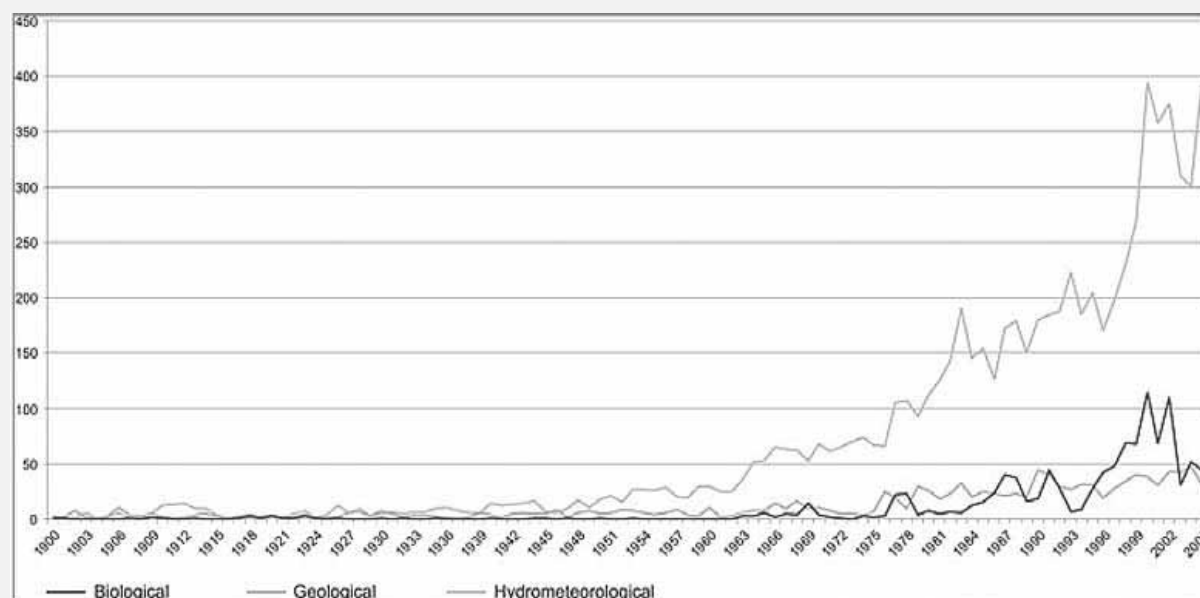
Current accreditations and self regulation alone are not sufficient for existing tourism providers in bush fire prone area. They can not therefore be relied upon to tackle the future alone without modification

Examples of current risk management encouragement:

- Tourism Victoria Corporate website provides advice on bush fire ratings, terms of business advice, guest information, employee entitlements, crisis communications, CFA link
- Tourism Queensland provides a business continuity template, climate change tool kit, climate event business kit, risk management manuals for RTO and tourism providers, extreme climate event case studies to demonstrate impacts. Bush fires are listed with other extreme climate events
- Ecotourism Certification and Climate Action Accreditation do have risk management compartments in their programmes, though these are not bush fire specific.
- Tourism Awards Programme does ask entrants to identify risk issues and mitigation strategies, but there is no specific requirement to indicate bush fire Prevention and Preparedness for rural tourism providers
- AAATourism conducts quality of facilities, cleanliness and does include guest relations but excludes any risk management. However, its strength is its 10 assessors who physically examine over 7,000 properties annually
- TQUAL approved accreditations programmes do not have to provide Bush Fire Risk Management or evaluation criteria for properties set in rural locations.
- www.stazy.com.au has over 32,000 listed properties; many are weekenders (second privately owned homes). They believe in self-regulation and have a Code of Conduct, there is no on site verification, nor requests for copies of bush fire plans nor supply of insurance details.
- Bed & Breakfast and Farm Stay Association of NSW has a membership requirement to show proof of insurance but no bush fire plans are requested.

The Future

Increase in Global disasters 1900 - 2005



Source: www.unisdr.org and EM-DAT: The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database. <http://www.em-dat.net>, UCL – Brussels, Belgium.

In the future tourism providers and communities will need to be more self-sufficient to tackle Bush Fire Risk Management. This is because while there is an increasing threat of bush fires while we also will have emergency services resource limitation. The Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism predicts that bush fire occurrences will increase by 7-35% over the next few decades in the Blue Mountains and “a 20-25% increase in the occurrence of crown fires (high intensity fires) that have the potential to cause the greatest ecological and property damage” by 2020, Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism (2009 p.46).

However, looking at the whole of the South Eastern Australia and analysing weather data, the CSIRO has reported that we have already had a 10-40% increase in fire danger comparing the 1980-2000 data with 2001-2007. Their modelling suggests that there will be a 5-65% increase in the occurrences of extreme fire danger by 2020, Williams, R. (2009). Bush fires will not be only predominate in summer as there may also be a change in the seasonality of fire, Steffen, W. *et al* (2009).

This will stretch emergency services because more people live in the bush, and cities are ever expanding out to the bush. This will require emergency services to focus on primary

infrastructure on a regional basis. However, as explained earlier, tourism is about experiences consumed at the point of production, at a community level, which therefore makes tourism vulnerable. The more tourism is economically linked with indirect business so the impact of bush fires will have a broader economic impact on the community. These impacts may be felt for a longer term than just the fire period because it will take time to restore the landscape, ecology and heritage values.

There are also economic pressures as tourism has a low productivity rate, Tourism Research Australia (2010 p.25). Increases on insurance premium and extra expenditure on fire prevention will be difficult for small and medium businesses, which form the bulk of tourism operators in rural NSW. These are also least likely types of business to be crisis prepared, Ritchie, B. (2011).

There has been no research which indicates the number of tourism businesses that have a bush fire plan. There has been research which tested if tourism businesses were crisis prepared. 75% said they were. However, the question did not specifically ask if they had a bush fire plan.

From NSW interviews conducted in March 2013, all accommodation providers, with the exception of one, admitted they did not have a bush fire plan. The sole operator with a plan said on the day of a recent fire her husband and son left the caravan park to go and protect their farm, this prevented them implementing their plan at the park. Many rural tourism providers have dual employment roles simply because the industry's productivity is low. Making tourism more productive could help.

It is hard for a tourism provider to look into the future and imagine the type of bush fire threat they could face. It is therefore difficult for them to quantify how much they should spend on threat reduction and fire fighting equipment. It is also hard for them to imagine the long term economic impact they could face from a bush fire in their local area.

Encouraging tourism providers to look further than "what is front of you" and acknowledging their destination's assets may help to stimulate deeper thought on the losses in the advent of a crisis. This should be encouraged as a group activity

We need to encourage greater community self-sufficiency in Bush Fire Risk Management because resources will increasingly be stretched.

Resilient communities are going to be those that contribute to the potential future resource gap.

Expectations

Tourism managers of local government areas are facing strong challenges as they are expected:

- to help double visitor expenditure and stimulate economic development by the NSW State Government
- to conduct Risk Management assessment as part of their Destination Management Planning process as recommend by the Australia Regional Tourism Network, and required as part of Destination NSW funding criteria
- to contribute to the Federal Government's Australian Standing Committee on Tourism and the Industry Resilience Working Group's regional crisis management plan and participate in a RTO Crisis Management Group
- to provide visitor care as consumers expect that they will travel safely in the destinations

Local Tourism Groups are expected to:

- coordinate with local members and their LGA (who in turn liaise with the RTO's Crisis Management Group)
- have local knowledge and stimulate member participation in capacity building programmes

There is an expectation from Federal Government and advisory groups that RTOs “ have established a Tourism Crisis Management Group to help the tourism industry prepare for crisis events, to coordinate the tourism industry's response to a crisis, to disseminate information during a crisis and devise marketing activities to aid business recovery” page 12 'Don't Risk It!'

As there is a drive to build the economic benefits from tourism then the time and energy must primarily be focused at the point of production, in the communities, translating the Bush Fire Risk Management factors through to improved visitor care. As proposed above by directly involving tourism providers it also spreads the responsibility of analysing and managing risks, to their livelihood and community using a collective participatory process. There may be motivational benefits to all if tourism providers and the wider community recognise their inter connectedness, because the more prepared communities are the more resilient they will be.

Managing Disasters

Another way to maximise resources is to focus on the most beneficial Risk Management action to take.

Risk Management can be divided into four categories:

- **Prevention:** identifying hazards, risks and mitigating the dangers. This has been traditionally focused on legislation, building codes and land use, as recommended by AICST (2006). UNEP and CAST (2008)'s recommend destinations involve communities to determine what is best to reduce (bush fire) risks using their local knowledge.
- **Preparedness:** develop a preparedness plan and training (a specific area of emphasis in the Australian Standards). The more operators have planned and implement mitigation actions the better they will be in handling any crisis event, Ritchie, B. et al (2011).
- **Response:** led by government emergency services.
- **Recovery:** set in motion steps to return the destination back to its original state

“Experience has shown, time and again, that it is local people who are best placed to save lives and to coordinate the return to normality. It is the degree to which people are prepared for disasters that determines how vulnerable or resilient their community will be.”
UNEP (2008)

It is more efficient for tourism to focus on Prevention and Preparedness to minimise the risks to the visitor economy than the cost of Recovery. Prevention and Preparedness involves the tourism providers and community. Our challenge is how do we get them involved? To answer this we need to understand why they are not involved.

Barriers & Context

Why don't tourism providers take the logical step to prepare for bush fires?

Barriers

- Lack of money - reducing the risk from bush fires is expensive for tourism operators
- Lack of knowledge – not aware of what action to take or not aware that they are in a high risk area
- Lack of time to plan and implement a mitigation plan

Context

- No action because - free rider problem – where tourism providers do nothing to protect the destination, leaving the resources to be provided by others.

- See threat in ‘the bush’ not in their village
- Not all owners are present e.g. holiday homes
- Their bush fire survival plan does not consider the threats outside the perimeter of their property’s fence line
- In many cases the tourism providers can be new to a region and not benefit from long term knowledge of previous bush fire events.
- Have previously had a bush fire and believe that it won’t be back for a long time

Barriers and context can be used as part of a denial process. Lack of action by tourism providers is acceptable because the majority comply with similar denial strategies. Lack of action and involvement by LGAs and RTOs make the situation ‘normal’ and so socially acceptable.

Our task is therefore to make bush fire survival planning in tourism ‘normal’ by integrating its methods into business performance, focusing mainly of the positive commercial benefits rather than tackling head on the barriers and contexts. The complexity of barriers and context suggest that there will not be a ‘one size fits’ all approach. From this explanation it is clear that role models are important and that LGAs and RTOs led through demonstration thus making it less acceptable to ignore Bush Fire Risk Management.

Tourism operators connection to the problem

Coonabarabran Example

All but one tourism accommodation provider interviewed did not have a bush fire survival plan. The reason mooted often was laziness or no time. Would they now have a plan after the recent fire event? They recognised the need but all accepted they may not because “it will go to the back burner, you think well it has now been and gone and you’ve got other things to do like tax stuff” B&B owner.

Kangaroo Valley Example

A draft bush fire survival plan was distributed to members of the Kangaroo Valley Tourist Association. It has 92 members, 56 opened the email to read the attached plan. This was the highest recorded number of opened emails sent out from the association.

The situation may be seen as a disconnect from an outsider’s perspective, but the real motivations for many small and medium business are sales and income. If we wish to encourage change then we need to consider offering incentives that achieve a behaviour change through a parallel process, Warren, C. (2012) i.e. risk management through product development which improve the visitor experience leading to improved sales and income.

Tourism Manager's Opportunity

Creating better experiences and developing linkages are recognised as methods to grow the visitor economy. While from the tourism providers' point of view increasing sales income is important. Therefore it is proposed here that Tourism Managers should consider integrating Risk Management strategies into campaigns which seek to improve experiences and raise income. In other words use the development of the visitor economy as a method to raise awareness of the need for Bush Fire Risk Management and combine Prevention and Preparedness plans as part of the visitor experience. By improving the visitor experience operators may well be in a position to either charge more or achieve a higher guest satisfaction level with subsequent increase of sales through word of mouth.

Visitor experiences can be created from Locally Distinctive values, Warren, C. (2011). By linking product development to community values and the conservation of cultural heritage, tourism providers might be encouraged to take Bush Fire Prevention and Preparedness measures as they learn of the values of local assets and their inter connectedness with their own livelihoods. That is to say "looking further than what's in front of you" to include protection of the destination's assets.

Here are six examples that can be conveyed through a tourism community consultation process. These are examples - there is no 'one size fits all':

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Bush Fire Prevention- Preparedness Benefit</i>	<i>Local Economic Development Benefit</i>
<p>Local Distinctiveness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with each community identify key distinguishing features • Together integrate into a competitive advantage which the group can use in the promotion of their destination • Discuss protection plan for the assets and tourism's contribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages each operator's risk management plan to see wider scope and the inter relatedness of assets in the destination • Encourages volunteer support to the RFS at a community level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shares cost burden • Social pressure to act on 'free loaders'
<p>Networking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stimulate networking sessions with operators in a community • Find common goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local communication and alert network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages economic linkage through cross referral of business • Encourages 'packages'

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activate communication system (social media) 		
Hospitality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct hospitality training • Integrate bush fire policy into skills training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepared evacuation plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify terms of business • Improved customer satisfaction
Civic Hospitality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote friendliness of community • Demonstrate through civic hospitality: signage at parks, car parking, VICs, BBQ, toilets, playgrounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider distribution of bush fire survival action • Consistent message • Demonstrates action to tourism providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilise existing signage budget
New Products <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn bush fire prevention into visitor activity • New product development ideas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) sheep grazing to reduce grass fire risk b) Collect sticks • Involve guests and provide interpretation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces risk of grass fires • Alerts guests to dangers • Fun activity for kids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates a competitive edge for the business • Higher guest satisfaction
Promotional Incentive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free participation for those who have taken responsible risk management action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of a bush fire survival plan • Terms of business in extreme weather events • Guest evacuation policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefit from stronger promotion of participating businesses

There are of course alternatives to these approaches like capacity building workshops and distribution of brochures and advertising. However, conveying information alone is not sufficient; Tourism Managers need to persuade operators to take action. Although they have resource limitations, combining experience development campaigns with Risk Management as an integrated approach will bring about greater efficiency than dealing with the topics separately. Moreover, the tourism providers will be able to see more tangible links and thus may become more positively influenced to act.

Partnership can also help resource gaps. Here are some suggested partners with whom Tourism Managers can work. For example:

- Blue Shield Australia, the international resource to protect cultural heritage threatened by natural disasters. They could take a leadership role in the prevention and preparedness to conserve cultural heritage assets. This could also galvanise the community, permit sharing of stories and enable tourism operators to learn more about their area and to better promote the depth of heritage they have. In effect improve the visitor experience.
- Local wildlife conservation groups who would be able to convey the natural heritage and involve tourists in conservation and donations through the introduction
- Aboriginal communities who are seeking to revitalise their knowledge and practices to steward the land and implement traditional land care practices. Note that the use of traditional burning practices at Yellow Water in Kakadu has seen a significant return of birdlife which is widely enjoyed by visitors with subsequent economic benefits.
- Partner with Rural Fires Services. Fund raisers could be integrated into visitor events and festivals permitting close understanding and influencing people to take precautions, making them a social norm.

These partnerships will also lead you to new tourism development opportunities. From a Destination Management Planning point of view consider in your Development Plan the scope for:

- Museums working more closely with the community for the conservation of cultural heritage items; they can contribute to capacity building based on local knowledge.
- In the event of bush fires collect fire effected 'scarred' materials, film and exhibits to create a bush fire exhibition
- Integration of wildlife rescue and sanctuaries which can in some situations provide ecotourism and educational tourism opportunities
- Aboriginal tourism experiences which involve land care and their cultural belief systems which interlock humans with nature. This can involve storytelling and interpretation with subsequent opportunities to sell craft items.

Note that these are all local economic development opportunities, not burdensome risk management bureaucracy. They all seek to educate tourist providers about their patch, they all seek to deliver better visitor experiences, and ultimately deliver high visitor satisfaction. By truly integrating bush fire Prevention and Preparedness into your planning they become a positive not a negative by focusing on benefits rather than process.

Above all it is key that the local community and tourism providers own the concept and drive it themselves.

Criteria for Success at Community Level

- Change Management requires willingness to work as a group and give volunteer time
- An Individual leader or a catalyst (such as an event that brings people together through a shared traumatic experience) that ignites actions
- Community led to maintain long-lasting impacts
- External expertise and guidance
- Funding
- Integration of Prevention and Preparedness that combines the Local Distinctiveness (local historical societies) the mitigation and adaptation strategies(with RFS) to create a competitive edge

Above all is the understanding that there is no 'one size fits all', each tourism provider and each community has to have their own unique plan.

Peak Industry & Accreditation Bodies

The following actions are recommended to foster actions

Policy	Recommendation
1. Awards Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide case studies to demonstrate the range of issues that are tackled in Bush Fire Risk Management as part of the advisory information • Include a Bush Fire Risk Management question which asks the entrants for examples of Prevention and Preparedness and how they innovatively have improved the visitor experience
2. On Site Check for Certification Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include a Bush Fire Risk Management section • When assessors are present they must sight Bush Fire Prevention and Preparedness examples
3. RFS and DNSW Bush Fire & Tourism Survival Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a dedicated Prevention and Preparedness plan which is a complying requirement to participate as any TQUAL approved accreditation • Demonstrate how the plan can be used to improve the visitor's experience
4. Capacity Building Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate the use of Bush Fire Risk Management as a method to create better tourism experiences at dedicated New Product Development, Innovation and Economic Development Events
5. Insurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiate special lower rates for TQUAL accredited tourism providers

Government Policy

The World Economic Forum prepares a Travel and Tourism competitiveness index. It uses 14 categories of excellence to evaluate a countries standing. In 2008 Australia was ranked 4th out of 133 countries. In 2011 we had dropped to 13th place. The cause for this decline was because of a low score for environmental sustainability.

Within this category specific criteria our world ranking for travel and tourism development has dropped from 17th in 2009 to 31st, compared to our neighbours Singapore who are ranked 4th and New Zealand ranked 5th globally.

The impact of natural disasters like bush fires on our precarious wildlife situation do not help Australia's competitiveness either. Our global ranking for threatened species has dropped from 121 in 2009, to 127th in 2011, out of 133 places. The ranking of our protected areas has dropped from 31st in 52nd. This slide is all the more emphasised when one considers that Australia's World Heritage natural sites are recognised as the earth's best.



It is not simply the loss of the bush but those that inhabit it that also impacts on tourism's attractiveness

(Warrenbungles NP Picture - Australian Geographic)

They are certainly a crowd puller for international visitors. This clearly supports the view that we need to take Preventative and Preparedness measures to protect the visitor economy and tourism development.

The impacts of climate change may also have additional influences on fires e.g. wildfire management of coniferous forests where the increase temperature has been recorded to influence the life cycle of beetles leading to more beetles which in turn devastate the old trees which then become more susceptible to fires, Steffen, W. *et al* (2009 p. 99). The impacts of eco systems may therefore have an impact on the natural heritage assets utilised for tourism.

Federal and State government support is therefore vital to protect our natural heritage and core rural tourism assets. The following are recommended policy directions:

Strategic Policy Requirement	Recommended Actions
1. Strong Prevention and Preparedness framework support for local governments to protect the visitor economy	1.1 Research the economic impacts of bush fires on tourism and communities 1.2 New Product Development funding which rewards the integration bush fire Risk Management strategies 1.3 Funding for Local Government to conduct their own Local Distinctiveness mapping 1.4 DNSW website bush fire resource
2. Strong investment into infrastructure for travel and tourism as preventative measures	2.1 Investigate primary road infrastructure in high risk regions and develop an Prevention plan 2.2 Clear road sign, VIC and tourism provider communication for the FIT Drive market during high risk period
3. Encourage community resilience through greater self-motivation for Prevention and Preparedness	3.1 Funding for communities to conduct their own Local Distinctiveness mapping 3.2 Additional funding to help museums and cultural heritage conservation to be Bush Fire Prepared 3.3 Community Bush Fire Prevention, Preparedness and Innovation prize awards with specific tourism provider and local tourism community group categories 3.4 Bushfire recovery fund that focus on creating experiences from the events that occurred they tell a story for visitors and help communities heal) 3.5 Incorporate bush fire training as part of the Tourism 2020 labour skills programme 3.6 Rural bush fire volunteer recruitment 3.7 Separate TQUAL bush fire grant funding

There is also a real threat to ecotourism that should be considered in local government planning. As insurance premiums rise there is a real threat to some ecotourism businesses that might become uninsurable, or worse, some operators will choose not to be insured.

While councils must be cautious in preparing development plans in rural destination management planning, we don't want to ignore the fact that ecotourism is growing at three times the rate as the tourism industry as a whole. While it makes economic sense to protect our eco systems and therefore control ecotourism potential, there are methods to combine ecotourism and Bush Fire Prevention and Preparedness, for example employing the traditional Aboriginal land care systems which purposely burnt the land. Taking this approach protects the ecosystems, offers income opportunities for Aboriginal communities and can enriches the ecotourism visitor experience (Yellow Waters example).

Conclusion

Growing the visitor economy and encouraging the trickle-down effect to benefit communities is an excellent vision. We must also be cautious that as the value of tourism in rural NSW grows so does its vulnerability to bush fires and economic disintegration. We owe it to our neighbouring regions that also might be impacted by disasters outside their control.

The emergency services are responsible for saving lives. Tourism professionals are responsible for helping communities be resilient and able to sustain their livelihoods.

Tourism professionals should encourage greater participation in Prevention and Preparedness by using a benefit led plan, through community consultation, that awakens tourism providers to their rich cultural heritage and incentives to stimulate action. Thereby encouraging tourism operators to both develop experiences which reflect the unique characteristics of their area and encourage them to recognise the need to nurture and take action to protect the destination themselves.

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Limitations

The author acknowledges that the scale of primary research interviews with tourism providers is limited and further research could be undertaken on a larger scale to validate the level of bush fire preparedness. However, the recent bush fire events and the economic impacts in Tasmania, Victoria and NSW demonstrate lack of Prevention and Preparedness by tourism providers. While we wait for a scientific study to be funded and conducted the author urges that we should still commence action for the next bush fire season; that is to integrate new product development and experience development with Bush Fire Prevention and Preparedness innovations because threats are escalating.

Primary Research

Five interviews with tourist accommodation providers in Coonabarabran, NSW (March 2013), correspondence and telephone conversations with Shoalhaven City Council NSW and Shoalhaven Tourism Board (January 2013), three interviews with ecotourism operators in Queensland (March 2013), interview with Rural Fire Services Community Liaison Department (March 2013), interview with Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (March 2013), Kangaroo Valley Tourist Association (December 2012).

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