



# Bushfire and everyday life: Examining the awareness-action ‘gap’ in changing rural landscapes

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we use the notion of ‘everyday life’ to critically examine an apparent ‘gap’ between bushfire risk awareness and preparedness amongst diverse landholders in rural landscapes affected by amenity-led in-migration in southeast Australia. Landholders were found to bring their own agency to bushfire preparedness in the relationships between everyday procedures, dilemmas, and tradeoffs. Consequently, regardless of landholders’ awareness levels, attitudes towards bushfire and natural resource management influence if, how, and to what extent landowners prepare for bushfires. We argue that not only is the ‘gap’ complex but also paradoxical in that it is both evident in, and constituted by, landholder attitudes and action and simultaneously dissolved in their practices and decision-making in everyday life. Three dilemmas of everyday life in particular were found to underpin these attitudes: costs (in terms of monetary and time values), gender roles, and priorities. Using a mixed-methods research approach, this simultaneous cultural construction and material nature of bushfire in everyday life is mapped out through landholders’ narratives and actions that embody living with fire on the land. The place of bushfire in landholders’ everyday life has direct relevance to recent international discussions of the vulnerability of the growing number of people living in bushfire-prone rural–urban interface areas.

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## 1. Introduction: bushfire in changing rural landscapes

What are the implications for bushfire management, when bushfire is conceptualised not just as a natural phenomenon but as simultaneously a product of ongoing associations and negotiations in everyday life? We examine this question by investigating the ‘gap’ between bushfire risk awareness and preparedness amongst diverse landholders in changing rural landscapes in southeast Australia. The place of bushfire in landholders’ everyday life is an important international issue with the growing number of people living in rural–urban interface areas, the increased frequency of tragic bushfire events, and with the predicted increase in high fire danger weather with climate change (CSIRO, 2007; IPCC, 2007; Lucas et al., 2007; Bowman et al., 2009). The February 2009 bushfires in Victoria in areas strongly characterised by amenity-led in-migration provide a vivid example of the potential for loss under such circumstances. Highlighted in these bushfires and their aftermath has been the significance of the changing nature of rural populations and associated shifts in lifestyles and outlooks on, and expectations of, rural life and nature. This includes stances towards bushfire and natural resource management. These bushfires have once

again highlighted concern about landowners’ bushfire preparedness and awareness, and their assumptions about personal ability to act in the event of a bushfire (Teague et al., 2009). This lack of preparedness for bushfire is not new. Summarising conclusions from Australian bushfire inquiries since 1939, a 2004 Commonwealth inquiry into the severe bushfire season of 2002–2003 made similar findings, noting that ‘...a level of community complacency appears to have existed before every major fire event’ (Ellis et al., 2004, p. 254). A range of research on bushfires has made similar findings, suggesting that despite (or because of) awareness or experience of bushfires, landholder preparedness may fall short of the level deemed desirable by emergency and other agencies (Pyne, 1991; Gill, 2005; Brenkert-Smith et al., 2006; McCaffrey and Kumagai, 2007; Cottrell et al., 2008). This awareness-action ‘gap’ has a significant place in lay, official, and academic discourse and the assumption of the existence of a gap underpins much agency activity. Taking increasing rural lifestyle diversity as our starting point, we focus on these issues and use the concept of everyday life to better understand this ‘gap’ between bushfire awareness and action.

Consistent with a range of more recent geographical and other research on natural resource management (Rose, 2001; Gill, 2006; Suchet-Pearson and Howitt, 2006; Griffiths, 2007), we argue that the dichotomy between nature and culture is problematic both in theory and practice. Rather their indivisibility is an important

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factor in understanding if and how landholders' engage with bushfire management. Accordingly, the need to cross or integrate disciplines has become a dominant theme in discussions about bushfires and management solutions (Bradstock et al., 2002; Daniel et al., 2007). Bushfire studies have traditionally been framed within ecology or natural hazard research but as many environmental problems have social, economic and cultural causes, the solutions are often social, not just environmental. This is especially the case in rural landscapes affected by the structural and environmental changes associated with amenity-led migration from urban centres into rural landscapes since the 1970s. Amenity-led migration refers to the increasing urban-to-rural movement of people predicated on desires for lifestyle change, affordable property, and the attraction of natural and/or coastal environmental settings (Burnley and Murphy, 2004; Hugo, 2005). It is popularly referred to in Australia as "tree- or sea-change". Amenity-led migration has resulted not only in population growth but also a rapid re-composition of rural populations, as urban migrants purchase land, often subdivided farmland, whilst the more traditional rural population age or decline. We will refer to these areas as changing rural landscapes. Many new rural landowners have no history of bushfire in their families. They also bring lifestyles and values more commonly associated with urban areas into rural places. The effect of such fluidity and movement on bushfire policy implementation and local rural fire brigades has increasingly become an area of interest in natural hazards research (see McGee and Russell, 2003; McLennan and Birch, 2005; King and Cottrell, 2007; Handmer and Haynes, 2008).

The effect of such social change on societal perceptions of bushfire risk in an everyday context, however, has remained until recently an area of little geographical and natural hazards research (notable exceptions are: Gill, 1994; McCaffrey, 2004; Whittaker and Mercer, 2004; Brenkert-Smith et al., 2006; Daniel et al., 2007). This is despite a long-standing critique of both the dominant biophysical focus of natural hazards research (Kates, 1971; Handmer and Dovers, 2008) and of the behavioural approaches that have dominated social research on hazards (Torry, 1979; Watts, 1983). Nonetheless behavioural hazards research has shown that the two categories that have the greatest impact on how people respond to natural hazards are awareness and perception of a natural hazard, plus factors that influence how that knowledge translates into action (Burton et al., 1993; McCaffrey, 2004). Despite this constructive contribution, behavioural models in natural hazards research remain problematic in their attempt to separate knowledge and action. Barr (2008) furthermore emphasises the tendency in research on behavioural change to neglect the importance of the actual gap between knowledge and action and stresses that: 'Ignoring the discord between intentions and action and simply focusing on 'what influences behaviour' can be misleading, not least because previous research (Ajzen, 1991) has demonstrated that the gap between intentions and actions is complex' (Barr, 2008, p. 191). It is this 'gap' and its complexity that we focus on in this paper. Our aim is to show that not only is the 'gap' complex but also that it is paradoxical in that it is both evident in, and constituted by, landholder attitudes and action and simultaneously dissolved in their practices and decision-making in everyday life. Thus the 'gap' becomes visible and an object of concern for both agencies and many landholders. At the same time decisions are made by landholders about bushfire amid competing everyday priorities, so that the very notion of a 'gap' characterised by ignorance or complacency is problematic. This is significant for bushfire management as it demonstrates that the agency of landholders plays a significant role in bringing bushfire into everyday existence as potential event, risk, and object of social action. In so doing, it emplaces bushfire awareness, preparedness and attitudes in diverse associations.

This paper maps out the simultaneous cultural construction and geographical nature of bushfire in landholders' everyday lives. By focusing on the lived experience of bushfire hazards we attempt to bridge the knowledge gap that currently prevents risk engagement initiatives from addressing a disconnect that exists between many landholders' bushfire awareness and preparedness. We firstly consider the value of de Certeau's (1984) conceptualisation of the practice of everyday life for embedding landholders' attitudes and actions towards bushfire risk in everyday life decisions and concerns (Section 2). The paper then outlines the research methodology (Section 3), before examining the empirical research findings in the context of everyday tradeoffs between environmental risks and benefits (Section 4) and dilemmas of everyday life (Sections 5–5.3). We argue that the complex nature of bushfire is the reason why seemingly simple bushfire management questions require complex answers in changing rural landscapes, as bushfire risk only exists for people in its association with tradeoffs, dilemmas and procedures in their everyday life.

## 2. The embodiment of bushfire in everyday life

When examining the total context of social practices it becomes apparent that the relationships between diverse aspects of everyday life are key to understanding why many landholders in changing rural landscapes do not translate bushfire risk awareness into risk reduction strategies. A focus on everyday life is important because it is a distinctive realm where practices often are repetitive and unconscious. To this end de Certeau's (1984) concept of 'The Practice of Everyday Life' is useful as it: '...reveal[s] the invisible backstage but everyday *procedures* which, in drawing attention to their products, also divert attention away from their workings; and ... suggest[s] ways in which such products may be subverted – by discussing not what they *present* to "consumers", but how supposed consumers can be agencies in their own right, and put such presentations to their *own uses*' (Shotter on de Certeau 1987, pp. 407–408 (*italics in original*)).

de Certeau's (1984) ontological awareness of the unseen in the everyday lays bare the shortfalls of mere epistemological considerations of the practice of everyday life (Harrison, 2000). It looks beyond the ordinary, routine and repetitive aspect of everyday life, which often result in everyday practices and procedures being overlooked and taken-for-granted despite their pervasiveness (Gregory et al., 2009, 224). Instead, de Certeau (1984) depicts everyday life as a constant, subconscious struggle against the 'ordinary'. Individuals and their everyday practices are creative, productive and actively recombine existing frameworks in order to navigate material and social worlds. Thus the practice of everyday life becomes a way of noticing knowledge, intuition, and innovations that underpin '...the elusive, phantasmic, emergent and often only just there fabric of everyday life' (Thrift, 2000, p. 407). This conceptualisation of everyday life aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) argument that practices and perceptions are affected by complex social constructions of 'space', which are based on values and the social production of meanings.

Everyday life is thus characterised by singular, individual acts, at the same time as it can be understood as an overarching structure common to a larger group of people (Highmore, 2002). The very building blocks of everyday life, and the place(s) of bushfire within them, therefore needs to be considered to understand how and why the official rationality of bushfire management does not translate well into landholders' everyday life. de Certeau's (1984, p. 110) distinction between 'strategy' and 'tactics' can help explain this mismatch. He links 'strategy' to institutions and structures of power, whilst 'tactics' are used by individuals to create their own 'spaces' in environments defined by strategies. Maps,

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