

# Exploring the role and importance of post-disaster events in rural communities



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## ABSTRACT

A series of events is often held in the wake of natural disasters in rural communities, as a tool to assist in recovery. While this phenomenon is increasingly ubiquitous, there have been few studies which acknowledge this, and none to date that examine the types of events that assist disaster recovery, the roles they play and their importance in this process. This exploratory study aims to fill this gap using a case study of 87 events held after the Black Saturday fires in Victoria, Australia, in 2009. Findings suggest that there are eight main types of events held after a natural disaster – fundraising events, grieving events, community information sessions, community rebuilding events, re-openings, VIP visits, commemorations and thanksgiving events – and that these events perform different roles in disaster recovery. A portfolio of events might be usefully employed to combat disaster fatigue, through scheduling different types of events at different times.

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## 1. Introduction

The Black Saturday fires of 7 February 2009 devastated large areas of rural land surrounding the city of Melbourne, Australia. Resulting in the deaths of 173 people and the destruction of over 2000 homes, it was one of the worst bushfires in Australian history (Tyler and Fairbrother, 2013). Its estimated economic cost was \$4.4 billion and litigation for compensation is expected to continue. The areas most affected (Fig. 1) were a belt of small rural towns and peri-urban areas within 100 km of Melbourne (Teague et al., 2010).

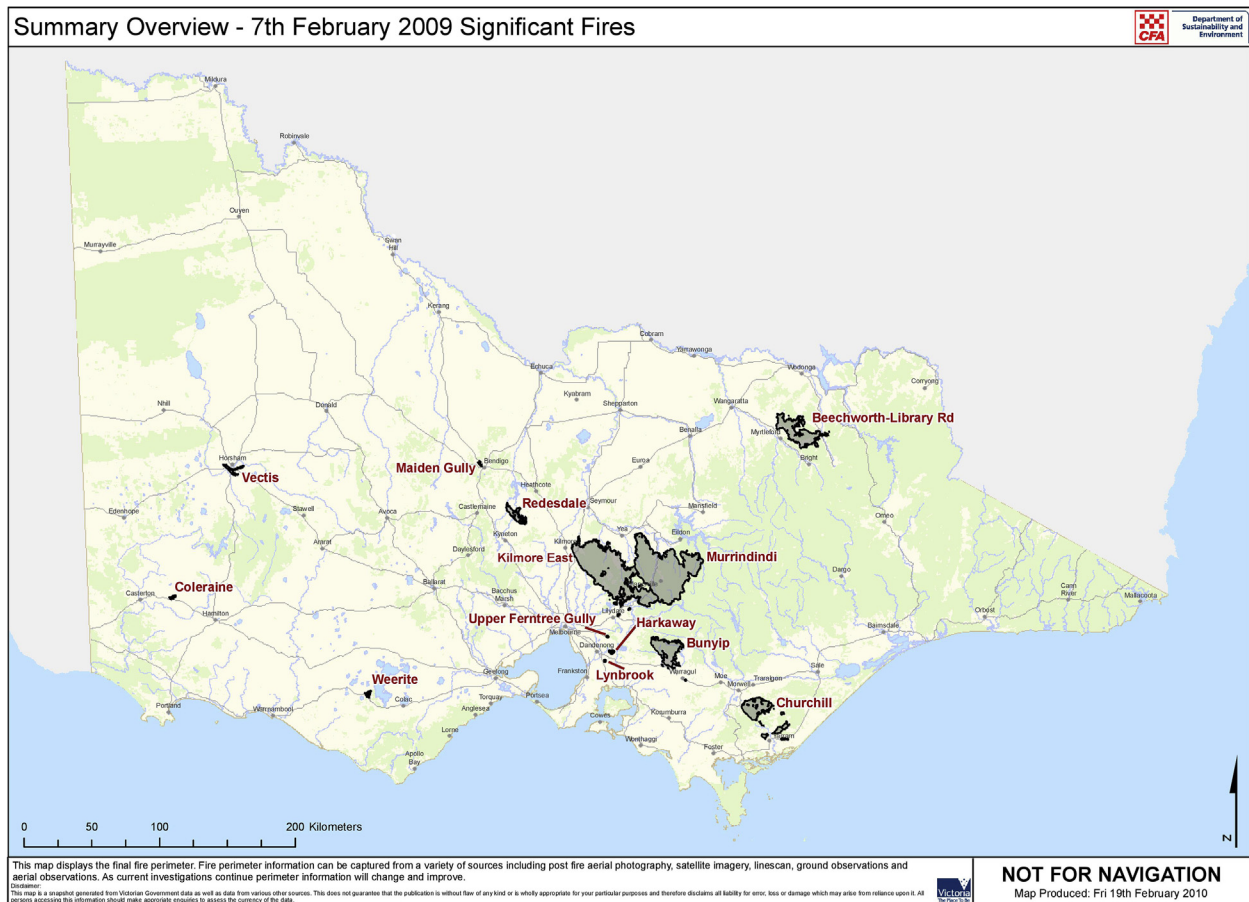
Natural disasters like Black Saturday are a recurring threat around the world. In the last few years, for example, communities have dealt with bushfires in Alberta, B.C. and California in the United States, floods in Central Europe and northern India, typhoons in the Philippines and cyclones in Vanuatu. Climate change is mostly responsible for an increase in the occurrence and severity of these crises (Gómez Martín, 2005; Scott et al., 2007), but they can

also be attributed to population growth, urbanisation, global economic pressures, wars triggering displacement of populations into vulnerable areas and the impacts of technology (Faulkner and Russell, 2000). Dealing with their aftermath and facilitating the disaster recovery of communities is a global problem.

The impact of natural disasters such as Black Saturday tends to be exacerbated in rural places, partly due to lack of resources (Irvine and Anderson, 2005), but also a combination of regular exposure to these hazards and a diminished capacity to cope and adapt, resulting in *vulnerability* (Whittaker et al., 2012). In an Australian context, many small rural towns are already dealing with the effects of decline, including high unemployment, an ageing population, government services being withdrawn, and the mass exodus of young people to cities in search of work and greater opportunities (Edwards, 2012; McManus et al., 2012; Whittaker et al., 2012). While this has been ameliorated in some areas by an influx of amenity migrants – usually affluent, well-educated and in search of a simpler, less complicated lifestyle – these newcomers have brought their own tensions and potential divisions (Eriksen et al., 2010; Wheeler and Laing, 2008). The pace and scale of change affecting rural lives is thus complex and arguably unprecedented (Garrod et al., 2006). Communities affected by Black Saturday ranged from those with low socio-economic status and

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**Fig. 1.** Location of Black Saturday fires in Victoria.  
(Source: Country Fire Authority)

resources – cheap fringe areas attracting those on low or fixed incomes – to tourism villages and wealthier hobby-farm localities. Accordingly community resilience and social capital varied considerably across the disaster area.

There is a substantial and growing body of literature on crisis and disaster recovery in rural communities, including natural disasters such as bushfires. Despite this, there is little acknowledgement of the role played by *events* in the recovery process, despite their ubiquity. While a wide range of events occurred after Black Saturday and attracted wide-ranging support and media coverage, they were often viewed as peripheral to the recovery effort. This article aims to make a contribution to the rural sciences literature, through a case study of some of these events and the role they played in disaster recovery of local communities.

*Events or planned events* can be defined as “live, social events created to achieve specific outcomes, including those related to business, the economy, culture, society and [the] environment” (Getz, 2012, p. 9). Examples of events include festivals, cultural celebrations, sporting contests, arts events, and business events such as conferences and exhibitions and they can be staged within both the public and private domains. We focus in this article on planned events held in the public domain and refer to them as an *event*, utilising the more commonly used nomenclature.

## 2. Rural communities and natural disasters

It is important to acknowledge that the concept of *community* is complex and multifaceted, particularly in the context of a natural

disaster. It is a “social construct, one that is created (and enacted) by people” (Liepins, 2000a, p. 29), and may be contested or have a variety of meanings for different individuals. In the wake of a natural disaster, people may be dispossessed and living in multiple locations, yet still identify with their former geographic community and the people beside whom they once lived, as a *community of interest*. Another dimension of community might involve common processes or practices, which in the context of this article includes events (Liepins, 2000b). Thus, in this article, we have adopted Liepin’s definition of a community as “a social phenomena that unifies people in their ability to speak together even while being located in many positions and holding a variety of contrasting identities” (2000a, p. 27).

Various studies have examined the recovery of communities after a natural disaster. These studies have highlighted the importance of recovery marketing (Faulkner and Vikulov, 2001; Scott et al., 2008), community-focused recovery (Pyles, 2007; Régnier et al., 2008) and the development of planning frameworks for recovery (Faulkner, 2001; Huang et al., 2008). Lack of readiness to deal with these disasters is a concern (Whittaker et al., 2013) and there is a need for “social networks of support” and access to government assistance (Whittaker et al., 2012, p. 171). It could be argued that attending events might help to fill that gap in knowledge and support and thus assist recovery and make rural communities more prepared and less vulnerable when these disasters occur.

The work to date on *resilience* gives another clue as to the role that events might play after a natural disaster. This concept

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