

Understanding fire in our landscape: a community conversation

12-13 November 2016, Newstead Community Centre

Final session: Rethinking fire at a landscape scale

Taking what we have heard over the two days, how can we rethink 'fire' at a landscape-scale, not just as a threat to a house or a town?

What might we do differently?

What have we learnt? What are we puzzled by?

This session was facilitated by Jinette de Gooijer.

The notes from this session - created through small group discussions where people moved around the topic tables in a 'world café' format, are presented below as they were written down in the session.

Rethinking ... Values

- Welcome pack for new residents arriving in district – Mt Alexander Shire have one – add to Tarrengower Times, Newstead Echo, visit primary school with information
- Fire retardant trees – planting for tree types – create a brochure
- Dja Dja Wurrung cultural influence
- Difference of values and respect difference
- Importance/education about hollows in trees, leaf litter and sustainability of ecology
- Get better at "mapping" local knowledge
- Fire hazards at the Newstead racecourse – grass, old tyres, stables
- Important to hear from 'good local people' – from diverse perspectives
- It should be an evolving discussion
- Community perception of risk – locals decide what they might be willing to accept
- Need to move on from the economic assessment of value
- Individual vs community view of value
- Important to communicate the outcomes of discussion/documentation of values.

Rethinking ... History

- Aboriginal use of fire
- Last big fire in the Sandon area was 1969 – a grass fire from the south
- Large fires are relatively infrequent
- Advances in technology will assist firefighting strategies (e.g. 3-day weather forecasts)
- Many of today's locals are less familiar with fire
- New residents knowing the history of fire
- Sharing stories of the different fire types
- Getting school children to record their own family stories of fires

- Relearning the Aboriginal practice for fire
- History is littered with fire as cultural life
- “Twigg burns” in the Mallee
- Rethinking natural history
- Traditional “aussie campfire” family knowledge is passed down to younger generations
- Need to appreciate natural history of area – what are “assets” and focus of this
- History suggests arsonists attack drainage/weed lines and this may suggest where to target on fire danger days and who to target
- Traditional burning and knowledge – consider the current context – the bush is no longer the same and is it (traditional burning) still relevant?
- History needs to be local history and not any other areas – the Box-Ironbark landscape is not a ‘fire driven’ landscape
- Caution about the view that Indigenous cultural burning is ‘ready to go’ – needs more dialogue/co-learning
- Need to adopt a longer term frame of reference.

Rethinking ... Fears

- I used to think ‘run away’ when I thought about fire – now I think about being more informed, having a strategy at property level
- Increased learnings about what fires can do
- Fears are valid – it’s legitimate to be fearful – does it drive you into doing something?
- Working at a collaborative approach to appease fears around risk and response
- Fear can be a positive motivator for a community to come together, and for individuals to take action
- Expressing fear is not invalid response, it’s not a silly fear – it is acknowledging risk
- Some fear is healthy
- Things that cause too much fear can turn people off/disempower or shut them down (e.g. material presented in community fireguard groups or by CFA brigades)
- Fear responses vary amongst the community and their responses/understandings also vary
- Knowledge and understanding risk – reduces fear
- Good to acknowledge your fear, know that it is a normal response/part of the process
- Working at a community level can be empowering/simplifying and you can know that you are contributing to a solution. Even just knowing what others are doing around you.
- Fear that the next big fire will produce another round of knee-jerk decisions, acrimony and divisiveness
- Fear that red tape could prevent appropriate timely action
- Fear of pyromaniacs, psychopaths/sociopaths.
- Fear of loss of communications during a fire crisis (and absence of reception in blackspots during summer)

- Do we get a fire bunker – but would need to give up on the house?! Stay and defend maybe not possible – consider bunker?
- Fear of not knowing where and how to evacuate – so many variables / scenarios
- Use the new app – Emergency Services Victoria – switch on fire alerts.

Rethinking ... Local risk

- Need to agree on a definition of 'risk' in each context that it's used
- Understanding of risk and increased knowledge to reduce anxiety
- Planning for managing fire risk needs to take place in 'winter'
- How much risk are we willing to accept?
- Remove risks at racecourse – old shed, tyres, old trees
- Evacuation – how and to where?
- Planning for risk
- Educate re fire plans and practicing actions in the event of fire
- Actions of humans – e.g. cigarette butt throwing - bad activity on high risk days
- What information do we need to understand risks?
- Storytelling from people who experienced fire
- Understanding the difference between grass fire and forest fire
- 'Undoing' the myths about fire
- Use 'Phoenix' to model a Newstead fire (use local data).

Rethinking ... Understanding fire in our landscape

- Opportunities for public-private land – a whole of Country approach
- What are our lived experiences of fire/bushfires? Change our language around fire.
- Working as a community – learning together – taking responsibility
- Understand what's in the bush
- Learn how fire behaves in our area – what are the realistic risks?
- Look at needs and responses to fire/burning regime 15-20 years: David Cheal's burning graph (it showed that immediately after a burn, the fuel reduces, but then increases to a much higher level over several years before reducing down to a lower level at around 30 years post fire – it illustrates a process of stabilization of forest landscapes/ecosystems.
- Traditional owners' relationship to fire re: assets – recognise that assets are two-fold – homes/towns and biodiversity
- No one size fits all
- Need to manage for a whole variety of uses
- Understanding our landscape – only 200 years of European occupation, then 40,000 + years of Indigenous occupation – we have changed much (in 200 years)
- Understanding climate/seasonal/vegetation changes – how to plan into the unknown

- Taking into account how constantly evolving use of technology will influence fire warnings, predictions (etc).