

Recovery After Bushfire

After a bushfire, once the flames are extinguished, communities, households, and individuals begin the process of recovery. This complex and multi-faceted process, which varies in length from months to years, might include: the rebuilding or restoration of infrastructure and facilities; regrowth of the natural environment; re-establishing businesses and government services; and the healing of injuries to survivors' physical and mental health and wellbeing.

While often described as a return or 'bouncing back' to pre-fire life, recovery tends to transform communities and individual lives into something new.

This report examines the ongoing recovery journeys of individuals and households in one New South Wales (NSW) community.

In Kangaroo Valley, around 48 homes were destroyed by the Currowan Fire on the 4th of January 2020. Many more properties lost sheds, holiday rentals, and other buildings. The natural environment was devastated by the flames and countless animals were killed. Thankfully, no human lives were lost.

In the eighteen months following the fire, researchers at the University of Wollongong conducted forty interviews with Kangaroo Valley residents. Interviews discussed life in 'the Valley' before the Currowan Fire, preparations for and responses to the fire, as well as the recovery process up to the time

of the interview, which ranged from three to eighteen months post-disaster. Six participants were interviewed a second time to chart the progress of their recovery.

This report highlights elements of individual recovery journeys and is divided into three sections.

First, we consider how preparations for and responses to the fire each had their own long-term impacts on survivors. In the lead up to the fire, survivors were dealing with hard physical work and high-stake decisions in extremely difficult conditions. Even residents whose properties were not ultimately impacted by fire were nonetheless recovering from this physically, mentally, and emotionally challenging experience.

Second, we explore recovery processes in the first days and weeks after the fire. During this period, many survivors were processing the loss of home, concern for family, friends and neighbours, and the devastation of the local environment.

Finally, we trace survivors' recovery stories over the course of eighteen months post-fire. Rather than a quick renewal, recovery during this period can be seen as an incremental improvement that included a series of highs and lows. The challenges of recovery changed substantially over time, as did the coping strategies of survivors and the necessary support systems.



Heathland three months after the Currowan Fire's devastating impact on western Kangaroo Valley (photo – Dave Macquart).

Preparation and Response

The stress of preparing

Bushfires often start and spread with little warning time, and residents of high-risk areas need to be prepared and vigilant throughout fire seasons in case of sudden fire.

The Currowan Fire was somewhat unusual in that Kangaroo Valley residents were watching the fire's gradual progression north over several weeks. This afforded substantial preparation time, but also caused high levels of stress and anxiety.

"The community was on edge for a long time before the fires. So there was weeks and weeks of this sort of feeling that there was this imminent impact of the fire."

Adding to this stress was the long period of drought and hot weather that preceded the fire. Residents described grass so dry it cracked like glass under-foot, and surrounding bushland that had become a 'tinder-box' of dry vegetation.

The looming threat of fire prompted residents to prepare their properties, including clearing leaf litter, blocking gutters and filling them with water, and ad-hoc retrofitting of homes. This was physically challenging work undertaken in high temperatures and under the threat of looming disaster.

One participant told how, after waiting through the drought and tracing the Currowan Fire's progression north, the fire's eventual arrival in Kangaroo Valley was almost a relief as it ended weeks of uncertainty.

As we discuss below, recovery involves a great deal of challenging mental and physical labour. Many survivors began that post-fire process already exhausted from weeks of pre-fire preparation in hot and dry conditions.

The stress of leaving

Most participants in our study made the decision to leave Kangaroo Valley before the fire hit, rather than staying and defending their properties.

For some, this decision was part of long-established bushfire plans. For others, the decision to leave was made following warnings from local members of the Rural Fire Service (RFS) that staying was not advisable given the likely intensity of the approaching fire.

Tough decisions needed to be made about what level of preparation was possible before leaving, when was the best time to leave, where was the safest place to go, and what belongings could or should be packed. Clear thinking was difficult amid the heat and stress of the conditions.

"I'm looking at everything around me and saying, "Oh, I'll take that. Oh no, I won't take that, it's not going to happen. I'll take that." And we could only take so much to get in the cars, but the confusion that was in my head."

Leaving a home behind, uncertain whether it might be lost to fire, was highly challenging. Even for those whose homes survived, memories of this experience carried difficult emotions that took time to process.

Facing the flames

Residents who stayed and defended their properties were confronted with a terrifying landscape of flames, heat, and noise. Although some participants had experienced past bushfires, including as RFS members, they described the scale and intensity of the Currowan Fire as unlike anything they had seen before.



*Fire advancing through trees in Kangaroo Valley
4th January 2020 (photo – Maureen Bell).*

These memories shared by residents highlight the importance of detailed, well-equipped, and frequently rehearsed planning for any householders intending to stay and defend their homes during a bushfire.

The best prepared among our participants had not only developed their physical capacity to fight the fire, but had also developed their mental preparedness by familiarising themselves with likely fire conditions.

Confronted with the scale of the fire, several participants remembered feeling uncertain about their decision to stay. Fortunately,

“People need to know how much psychological strength you need to have if you’re going to stay. ... Like, concentrate on having your hoses ready and your gutters blocked and things like that, but really what does it mean to be in a bushfire? Even with a perfectly safe bunker, what’s it like to face that?”

despite some very close calls, none were killed or injured.

The majority of participants who stayed and defended stated that they would make the same choice in a future fire. Several expressed satisfaction that their planning and preparedness had successfully equipped them to protect their homes against an extremely damaging bushfire.

Nonetheless, several participants described ongoing negative impacts to their mental health and wellbeing, which manifested in frequent feelings of anger and tearfulness.

Others described continued fear and anxiety triggered by the smell of smoke.

The choice to stay and defend requires cognisance, not only of the threats to physical health and life during the fire, but of the potential longer-

term impacts on mental health and wellbeing.



Looking down on the Shoalhaven River and Tallowa Dam from where the Currowan Fire impacted the south west of Kangaroo Valley, three months after the fire (photo – Dave Macquart).

The First Days and Weeks after the Fire

The loss of a home

Eighteen participants lost their homes in the fire. Most were told about their loss by friends or neighbours before they returned home. Being confronted with the home in ruins was a devastating experience.

Faced with the fire's material impacts, some survivors found value in spending time with the ruins of their home. Fossicking for salvageable belongings, or simply sitting with the damaged space, acted as a way of processing loss and saying goodbye.

"I remember I screamed when I saw the house had gone, I couldn't believe it. I guess we had a hope that somehow or other it wasn't true. And then when you're confronted with it, physically, you can't deny it anymore."

At times, however, the ruins were too dangerous to be searched, and some survivors found being with the space too emotionally distressing.



RFS crew checking on residents and properties Kangaroo Valley the day after the fire (photo – Maureen Bell).

The destruction of home was a highly destabilising experience. Participants' homes were filled with memories that provided a sense of history and identity. Their destruction in the fire created an uncertain present and future. Recovery journeys were made more difficult without the stability of home.



A heavily fire-impacted area two days after the fire (photos – Maureen Bell).

The loss of the environment

When asked why they had chosen to live in Kangaroo Valley, all participants replied that the natural environment was key. Residents lived surrounded by beautiful bushland filled with birdsong. They shared their properties with wombats, kangaroos, and other wildlife. Several had taken out Conservation Agreements on their property and felt a responsibility for protecting its natural diversity.

"Really the reason we live where we live is the nature. When that is, basically becomes a lunar landscape. I mean there weren't even animal skeletons, they were vaporised, it was so hot. ... The ground was like baked clay."

For many residents, definitions of 'home' were not limited to a house. It also included carefully maintained gardens and the natural world that surrounded and merged with them.



A bushfire-surviving possum enjoying some fruit left out for it two days after the fire (photo – Maureen Bell).

While some areas of the Valley remained untouched, the fire left a devastating environmental scar described by one participant as a ‘moonscape’ (see the separate *Bushfire Research Brief ‘Preparation and Recovery in a Changing Environment’*).

The absence of vegetation made rock-faces newly visible. Thick bush was reduced to burnt stumps. The lack of birds produced an eerie silence broken by the sound of falling trees.



Creek bed two days after the fire – previously thick with undergrowth of native plants (photo – Maureen Bell).

For those who lost their homes, this damage to the environment added to their heartbreak.

Many of those whose houses survived equally found themselves mourning the destroyed gardens and bushland that were

a critical part of home. At times, this was a difficult loss to acknowledge, with residents struggling to balance their good fortune in having a house that survived, with their deep sadness at their environmental losses.

“Our emotional recovery has been baby steps of moving forward. ... So, now there’s a clean paddock and I’m keen to go down to mow the lawns because they’re all overgrown and even tiny things, cutting up a fallen tree, they’re a positive step towards restoring it to what it was like. So, I find that therapeutic.”

It is important to recognise the potential trauma or distress that may come from these losses. Witnessing and living within a much-loved landscape severely damaged by fire has significantly impacted the mental health and wellbeing of many Kangaroo Valley residents.

The hard work of recovery

Having worked for weeks or months to prepare, fire-impacted residents of the Valley faced a long list of new and challenging tasks post-fire.

Difficult decisions needed to be made, complex bureaucracies navigated, and hard physical work completed at a time when survivors often felt least able to concentrate, complete tasks, or make choices. Many found this work overwhelming and exhausting.

Heavy rain and flooding just weeks after the fire added to the strain. Dams that had been dry through the drought were filled by the welcome rain, but were also clogged with ashy mud washed down from scorched hillsides.

Some residents coped through this time by committing themselves to specific daily tasks. Small day-by-day achievements could be celebrated. They provided a mental and physical focus that countered the

overwhelming requirements and immensity of rebuilding and recovery.

Experiences with insurance companies and service providers (including reconnecting electricity, internet, and phone lines) were extremely varied.

Pleasingly, most insurance providers responded quickly and provided emotional as well as financial support in the days following the fire. Yet, for a minority of residents, problems with insurance began early and have continued over many months. Similarly, while electricity was re-established relatively quickly, delays with phone services caused substantial difficulties for many residents.

Being without essential services exacerbated both practical difficulties and the strain on survivors' mental health and wellbeing. As residents worked hard to return to the standard of life enjoyed before the fire, frustrating impediments sparked anger and anxiety.

Support systems

Survivors described a range of support systems that were crucial to their early recovery. These included the support of partners, friends, and family, who provided emotional support, as well as financial assistance, accommodation, and help with clearing properties.

Also critical were support systems within the Kangaroo Valley community. This included a 'Drop In Centre' established in the town's main street, which assisted with locating accommodation and accessing services (see the separate *Bushfire Research Brief - Community Connections*).

Well-developed community connections, long-established in Kangaroo Valley, became a critical element of residents' recovery journeys.

Quickly accessible grants from the state government and charities removed some of the immediate financial pressure on survivors. Charitable donations, in particular, acted as both practical and emotional support, reassuring survivors that they were supported by the broader Australian community.

Support from the NSW government also included assistance with the clearing of destroyed buildings. This was often a highly emotional experience, as survivors watched the ruins of their home taken away. One resident noted the kind and compassionate way with which their property was cleared. The crew who undertook the work understood that this was not simply a collection of rubble, but the remains of a much-loved home.



The building used as the Drop In Centre, looking towards the village centre (photo - Paul Cooper).

The First Eighteen Months after the Fire

Longer term mental health and wellbeing

The continued impacts of the fire on mental health and wellbeing varied substantially across the community.

Several participants continued to seek treatment for diagnosable mental illnesses resulting from their experiences in the fire. Others

"I still have some things that will send me into tears quite randomly, and I still get impacted."

identified enduring impacts on wellbeing as they continued to grieve the loss of home and/or the damage to the landscape.

The experiences of Kangaroo Valley residents align with past research into mental health and bushfire recovery. While the majority of survivors do successfully recover with time, a variety of triggers or setbacks are often experienced as part of this gradual process.

The impacts of COVID-19

In the past two years, residents of Kangaroo Valley have faced a series of compounding disasters: drought, bushfire, floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The longevity of the pandemic has resulted in varied impacts on survivors in the Valley.

Some described the first lockdowns in 2020 as a welcome break and an opportunity to breathe and take stock without interruptions. They noted that lockdowns did not have

"Because we were home we just put all that time into rebuilding, and cutting the trees, and doing the garden, and clearing up and doing all those jobs. So [COVID] actually was good for us in that respect, and we're happy to be home and we had plenty to do."

the same consequences for residents of rural properties as in heavily populated cities.

For others, COVID-related restrictions have limited opportunities to connect with other people. One participant described the difficulty of not being able to hug friends and neighbours as a simple act of support and kindness. Others noted limitations on community gatherings, which would normally provide opportunities to share stories and offer or receive support.

In the longer term, COVID restrictions have at times limited opportunities to travel away from Kangaroo Valley for much-needed holidays, as well as for friends and family to visit and offer their support.

Rebuilding

Financial challenges meant that a minority of participants were unable to rebuild post-fire. Instead, they have sold or are intending to sell their property.

While all of the others plan to rebuild, only one participant had managed to complete and move into their new home in the eighteen months following the fire. A range of factors have affected the rebuilding process, including:

"It's getting wearing because it's been too long, it's just been too long. Just desperate to have a house, a home."

- The process of selecting or designing a new home with increased bushfire resilience.
- Ongoing legal battles with insurance companies.
- The limited availability of architects, builders, and materials.
- Challenging and extended development approval processes, including meeting revised Bushfire

Attack Level (BAL) ratings and/or environmental assessments.

Overcoming these hurdles has had (and continues to have) negative impacts on the mental health of some survivors. It has been difficult to move on from the disaster when its impacts continue to dominate day-to-day life.

The negative impacts of the fire on mental health have increased the difficulty of rebuilding. Past research has shown that bushfire survivors may experience depression, anxiety, and trouble focussing or planning. This escalates the difficulties of decision-making in house design, in navigating complex approval processes, or in coping with setbacks in rebuilding.

Conversely, the rebuilding process has provided a valuable focus for some survivors, as well as excitement at the possibilities for building back better. In these cases, continued sadness for what has been lost sits alongside a sense of achievement in over-coming substantial obstacles and making progress towards a new home with increased resilience.

Managing and supporting regrowth

There continues to be a deep connection between the recovery of survivors and that of the surrounding environment. Watching regrowth of vegetation and the return of wildlife was both a point of celebration and excitement, as well as of concern and anxiety.

In the months after the fire, the growth of weeds and other pioneer species added to the stress and hard work of recovery. Many residents felt a responsibility to manage

"I'm surprised that I was as strong as what I was and I think that had a lot to do with the support. ... We experienced great loving and caring and support from other people, some of them we didn't even know. I think that's what helped."

weed growth on their properties, creating challenging physical labour.

Supporting local wildlife was also highly important to many residents. Volunteer groups were established to collect and distribute food for surviving animals living in depleted areas.

"We used to have lyrebirds. Since the fire there's been none and I kept saying, "As soon as I see the first lyrebirds I'll be really happy." And the other day we were sitting outside and I looked up and the lyrebirds ran across the paddock. ... And it brought such a sense of joy."

Witnessing charred, blackened landscapes turn green again and hearing the return of birdsong was described by Kangaroo Valley residents as nourishing and reassuring. The local environment has provided a sense that recovery was slowly progressing.



*Recovering ecosystem in north western Kangaroo Valley
14 weeks after the fire (photo – Maureen Bell).*

This may not mean an immediate return to pre-fire life, but a gradual process into something that, while different, is no less beautiful.

Support systems

Support from friends, family, and community remained critical over the longer term. This support shifted as needs changed. Several participants described a

sense that the community had been drawn closer together because of their shared experience with the fire.

Important work by volunteer groups was valued by many residents. Crews from the charity BlazeAid replaced or repaired damaged fences on many properties. Local Landcare groups provided advice on issues like managing weeds, as well as working groups to assist with weeding, clearing, and replanting on impacted properties.



Mother and baby wombat residents of a fire-impacted garden in Kangaroo Valley - helping with some lawn mowing 14 months after the fire (photo – Maureen Bell).

Additional Resources

Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (2018), Community Recovery Handbook, <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/5634/community-recovery-handbook.pdf>

Fraser, Peg (2018) *Black Saturday: Not the End of the Story*, Monash University Publishing

Gibbs L, et al. (2020) *10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report*, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/_data/asset/s/pdf_file/0009/3645090/BB-10-years-report_spread.pdf

The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR) YouTube page also includes a range of informative videos, including: [What is Disaster Recovery](#) and [Mental Health Recovery After Disaster](#).

After The Disaster: ABC Radio Podcast <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/after-the-disaster/>

The CSIRO Bushfire Best Practice Guide: <https://research.csiro.au/bushfire/bushfire-basics/>

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If this document has raised challenging issues for you, Lifeline Australia provides crisis support 24 hours a day: call 13 11 14 or see <https://www.lifeline.org.au>

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