

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES PROJECT - Bulletin No 1

The Bushfire CRC was established under the Commonwealth Government's Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Programme.

Our objectives can be summarised as providing research which enhances the management of the bushfire risk to the community in an economically and ecologically sustainable way.

Fire risk in Aboriginal peri-urban landscapes in North Australia - Case studies from western Cape York Peninsula by Jim Monaghan

This bulletin reviews the paper by Jim Monaghan, Kowanyama Land and Natural Resource Management Office which will be published as a book chapter by the Centre for Disaster Studies, James Cook University.

In his paper Monaghan examines the peri-urban characteristics, fire ecology and sociology of Aboriginal communities in far North Queensland with particular reference to two communities, Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama. Aboriginal settlement in rural North Australia is of three main kinds:

- Aboriginal towns
- Town camps
- Aboriginal communities

In addition, increasing numbers of outstations are emerging around Aboriginal communities. Outstations are small settlements located in their resident's traditional country and mainly occupied in the dry season, which is also the time of the greatest fire risk in the landscape.

The association of traditional owners with the land and the reasons for fire setting are summarized as "an expression of identity, of control of the physical, mythical and social world, as well as a land management technique." (Monaghan, 2004)

Monaghan describes the fire behaviour and fire risk in the region with reference to fire frequency maps and extracts from the fire management plans for both Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama. The Pormpuraaw study identified several issues relevant to the development of effective natural hazard risk management: the difference in perceptions of risk from natural hazards between local people and the 'Staff' population; the maintenance of risk standards in the future planning of community housing, infrastructure and land use; the absence of a rate revenue base and the reliance on external funding for Council operations; and training and equipping of SES volunteers and community rangers (Monaghan and Taylor 2003).

Monaghan emphasizes that "The main issues in bushfire risk management planning in remote Aboriginal communities revolve around the socio-political context of each community in terms of Staff - community relations and local indigenous systems of governance." (Monaghan, 2004). The management of remote Aboriginal peri-urban landscapes is undertaken by two forms of government.

The locally elected council tends to look after the township and the 'Aboriginal domain' of tribe, clan or kinship affiliations looks after the landscape.

In addition there are homeland groups who have to be consulted in land management issues. Monaghan argues that it is essential to recognize these diverse interests within and between

Aboriginal communities if bushfire risk assessment and plans are to be successful. In conclusion, Monaghan draws attention to the changes occurring as a result of the introduction of Shire councils and of ongoing Native Title determinations.

Monaghan, J. (2004) *Fire risk in Aboriginal peri-urban landscapes in North Australia: case studies from western Cape York Peninsula*, report for Bushfire CRC, unpublished.
Monaghan, J & Taylor, J C (2003) '*Natural Disaster Risk Mitigation Plan for the Pormpuraaw Community*', report to the Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Council and Queensland State Emergency Services.
Norris, V (2003) '*Kowanyama Natural Resource Management Plan*', Kowanyama Land and Natural Resource Management Office.

