# UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES PROJECT
## *UPDATE - NOVEMBER 2007*

→ The Understanding Communities Project (C1) was established as part of a Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre program - Community Self-sufficiency for Fire Safety. The overall objective of the project is to increase community safety and resilience to bushfires.

→ **COMMUNITY, RISK, VULNERABILITY AND CAPACITY**

Initial activities within the Understanding Communities project were developed to identify and examine existing knowledge about communities in bushfire prone areas. Stakeholder consultation identified limited community capacity to prepare for and respond to bushfires and reliance on fire services as the most significant issues in local bushfire management. While these issues were confirmed through related Australian case studies, the research also demonstrated that key concepts such as community, risk, vulnerability, and capacity, are often confused and unclear.

→ **Community**

Examples of community in the context of bushfire management include geographical location, physical boundaries, local government administrative areas and fire services areas of responsibility.  For populations living in bushfire prone areas, community may equally refer to locality, social networks, a sense of belonging, or shared values. Fire services tend to operate on a definition of community as being those people living in the area that they are defined as serving. Communities are not just the individuals who live there, but include the organisations to which they belong and the networks they have. These organisations and networks can be used to increase capacity in the community and reduce vulnerability to bushfires.

→ **Risk**

In practice, apart from issues of physical exposure and threat of bushfires, survey information collected in several peri-urban regions reveals a diversity of individual values, attitudes, and needs, in relation to

bushfire risk and management within communities. Local understanding of the issues remains very important. The research indicates that the bushfire risk is not always seen the same way by fire service providers and the communities they serve. Of particular concern is that many people who live in the urban interface think they have adequate plans for dealing with bushfires, but when we delve into those plans they are clearly not enough.

→ **Vulnerability and Capacity**

In general hazards and disasters literature, vulnerability reflects "the degree to which a population, individual or organisation is unable to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impacts of disasters" (Blaikie Cannon, Davis and Wisner 1994:9). Although vulnerability is often associated with specific groups of people such as the poor or disabled, research in this project has demonstrated that vulnerability to bushfire hazards can be variable and dynamic. Migration patterns, environmental conditions, town planning decisions, and housing characteristics each influence aspects of vulnerability. Therefore, initiatives to increase coping capacity and operational services should be based on familiarity, knowledge and resources of the locality.

## CONTINUING RESEARCH

While the Understanding Communities project continues to examine community resilience to bushfires, progressive research efforts are intended to develop a systematic process to assess local community capacity and vulnerability to bushfire risk. Any model or framework to enhance bushfire management needs to be based on a thorough understanding of local issues, needs and practices. Consequently such a framework should be flexible and adaptable enough to enable regular review and reform. This Community Profiling Framework represents a practical method to identify likely issues and support local capacity building and resilience. Many brigades already use this type of information to a greater or lesser extent. The Understanding Communities Project has the task of systematically integrating the types of information used.

## References

Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., Davis, I. and Wisner, B. (1994) At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters. Routledge: London

Further details are available through the Understanding Communities website, Centre for Disaster Studies James Cook University at:

**http://www.tesag.jcu.edu.au/CDS/Pages/bf_home.html**

## PUBLICATIONS UPDATE

### Publications

Bushnell, S, Balcombe, L & Cottrell, A 2007, 'Community and fire service perceptions of bushfire issues in Tamborine Mountain: what's the difference?' The Australian Journal of Emergency Management, Vol.22, no. 3, pp. 3-9

Monaghan, J 2007, 'Fire risk in Aboriginal peri-urban landscapes in northern Australia: Case studies from western Cape York Peninsula', in D King & A Cottrell (eds), Communities Living with Hazards, Centre for Disaster Studies, James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, pp. 156-192

Balcombe, L 2007, 'Bushfires at the urban-rural interface', in D King & A Cottrell (eds), Communities Living with Hazards, Centre for Disaster Studies, James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, pp. 193-214

Bushnell, S & Cottrell, A 2007, 'Living with bushfires: What do people expect?' in D King & A Cottrell (eds), Communities Living with Hazards, Centre for Disaster Studies, James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, pp. 215-253

Bushnell, S & Cottrell, A 2007 'Increasing community resilience to bushfire – implications from a North Queensland community case study', The Australian Journal of Emergency Management, Vol.22, no. 2, pp. 3-9

Bushnell, S, Cottrell, A, Spillman, M & Lowe D 2006 The Thuringowa Bushfire Case Study – Technical Report, Bushfire CRC Understanding Communities report, James Cook University

Glasgow, K 2006 The Sudanese Refugees and Fire Hazard Study, Bushfire CRC Understanding Communities report, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service

Cottrell, A 2005 'Communities and bushfire hazard in Australia: More questions than answers', Environmental Hazards, vol.6, no. 2, pp.109-114

### Bulletins/Posters

Cottrell, A 2007 'Community Profiling Framework' Poster presented at Bushfire CRC/AFAC Annual Conference, Hobart

Bushnell, S, Cottrell, A, Spillman, M & Lowe D 2006 Understanding Communities Living with Bushfire: The Thuringowa Bushfire Case Study Fire Note issue 9, Bushfire CRC, Melbourne

Bushnell, S 2006 Thuringowa peri-urban residents and bushfire: Who prepares for bushfire? Bulletin no 10, Bushfire CRC Understanding Communities, James Cook University

Bushnell, S 2006 Thuringowa peri-urban residents and bushfire: How knowledgeable are people? What are their perceptions of service providers and others in their locality? Bulletin no 9, Bushfire CRC Understanding Communities, James Cook University

Bushnell, S 2006 Thuringowa peri-urban residents and bushfire: Do people who own or rent their homes have different values, knowledge, perceptions and expectations? Bulletin no 8, Bushfire CRC Understanding Communities, James Cook University

Bushnell, S 2006 Thuringowa peri-urban residents and bushfire: Do people living on different block sizes have different values, knowledge, perceptions and expectations? Bulletin no 7, Bushfire CRC Understanding Communities, James Cook University

Bushnell, S 2006 Communities living with bushfire: desktop review, Bulletin no 6, Bushfire CRC Understanding Communities, James Cook University

Cottrell, A 2005 What's in a name – peri-urban communities? Bulletin no 5, Bushfire CRC Understanding Communities, James Cook University

Cottrell, A 2005 Defining Communities, Bulletin no 4, Bushfire CRC Understanding Communities, James Cook University

Numerous presentations and poster sessions have been conducted at national and international conferences.

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