

How Organisational Change is Contributing to a Sustainable Bushfire Program

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Abstract

The Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC)'s Bushfire Program is unique amongst conservation organisations. The Program has been running for over ten years, focusing its campaign work mainly on government policy, legislation and commissions of inquiry. However, the Program was originally initiated to provide support to over 70 conservation representatives on bushfire management committees (from state to regional levels)

In 2003, the Community Bushfire Education Project (CBEP), which is funded by the Environment Trust (ET), was developed as an extension of the Bushfire Program. The CBEP's main focuses have included coordinating community and professional workshops, field trips and school visits.

The design and advocacy principles of the Bushfire Program have been significantly influenced by the CBEP. Principles associated with Education for Sustainability, including capacity building, partnerships and critical thinking, have been key drivers in this.

Traditionally, the NCC Bushfire Program has been a strong advocate of enforcing environmental assessment and controls through regulation. However, to date, bushfire regulations have only had limited success in changing unsustainable practices. We have learnt that a complimentary approach to regulation is voluntary action. This entails a participatory approach to bushfire management planning. We feel this change in philosophy can apply to all land management and environmental issues and may parallel a larger shift within the environment movement.

Through this paper we will show how the Bushfire Program has developed to incorporate community education as a central pillar of, rather than in addition to, its core campaign; the difficulties this presents and the strengths it provides. The NCC now sees community participation and empowerment as a key component of any natural resource management campaign.

Bushfire in Australia

Bushfires have been a component of the Australian continent for over 40 million years. Most native plants and animals have evolved ways of surviving fire, some to the point of profiting by it, yet for others, fire is a major threat to their survival. Aboriginal People have manipulated fire as a tool for various social and economic pursuits.

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Europeans used fire to clear land and improve grazing for their stock, yet it also posed a dangerous threat to property, stock, fences, sheds, houses and families, and still does today. In recent decades, vulnerability to bushfire has become a major issue for many Australians in both urban and rural areas. Today, bushfire management is influenced by issues of development, land use changes, population growth, as well as a range of environmental factors such as drought, climate change and fire's role in conservation management.

Bushfire management has become a complex natural resource management issue. While the risk and disaster mitigation component distinguishes it from more traditional environmental campaigns, it is also characterised by many of the same challenges of other environment issues.

History of the NCC Bushfire Program

By the early 1990's, the NCC had established a formal bushfire program, with a central aim of promoting ecologically sustainable bushfire management. The 1994 and 1997 fires stimulated legislative reviews and reforms, and the gazettal of the Rural Fires Act 1997. The new legislation placed a statutory responsibility on the NCC for appointing conservation representatives (Reps) to the newly created inter-stakeholder planning bodies: Bushfire Management Committees (BFMC) and NSW Bushfire Coordinating Committee. These changes gave the Program a direct role in planning and policy development.

The Role of Community Education

A need for greater support for the Reps led to a series of regionally based workshops focused on providing Reps with updated NCC policy and recent changes to regulations. However, these quickly evolved into community forums, attracting bushfire and land managers, farmers, householders, students and the general public.

By 2002, and with the onset of the severe Black Christmas fires, the community bushfire forums began to take on an even greater level of importance. The first workshop of 2002, held on the Central Coast, attracted over 100 farmers, fire fighters, conservationists and land managers. As a result the NCC considered expanding the education component of the Bushfire Program, so as to develop differentiated services for conservationists, the community, professionals and young people.

Community Bushfire Education Program

NCC was successful in attracting a twelve month Environmental Trust grant in 2003.

The objectives of the new Community Bushfire Education Program (CBEP) were to:

1. Assist a broad range of stakeholders to manage bushfire risk in an effective and coordinated way, and within a framework of ecological sustainable bushfire management.
2. Provide information to home-owners and property managers on effective bushfire preparedness, including property level risk management processes and strategies, and within a framework of ecological sustainable bushfire management.
3. Disseminate and develop local knowledge of the environment, with particular focus on knowledge and appreciation of ecological services, the interaction between fire ecology and human behaviour, and the role of bushfire management systems in achieving the objectives of the Rural Fires Act 1997.

4. Facilitate interaction and cooperation between government agencies and the broader community in regards to achieving Bushfire risk management and conservation outcomes.

We identified a range of specific target audiences including school students (K-12), "community" (including rural and urban land owners), professional land and fire managers, volunteers, conservationists and academics and a number of products and services were designed to suit these audiences. For example, web-based information, information sheets, school visits, field trips, workshops and forums.

Over the year the design of the CBEP changed to incorporate our learning experiences and this in turn influenced the Bushfire Program Strategic direction. There were two main sources of learning that led to these changes, first, education for sustainability forums (specifically the "It's a Living Thing- EFS" (ILT EFS) short course and mentoring program) and second, personal experiences from our events and involvement in bushfire decision making processes (at a local, state and national level).

The Learning Process

Education for Sustainability

In March 2003 we attended the Penrith based Environmental Education Professional Development Program, provided by Macquarie University and the NSW Government "It's a Living Thing" campaign (ILT EFS). The ILT EFS course introduced some key principles, and a range of tools, most importantly:

- Participation and ownership;
- Values Clarification and Critical thinking;
- Capacity building; and
- Evaluation.

Participation and Ownership

As identified in aims three and four, participation in bushfire management by all stakeholders was considered an essential component right from the beginning. Participation was illustrated in previous workshops, run by the Bushfire Program, by allowing ample time for introductions and discussion. However, the ILT EFS course taught us that participation goes beyond simply making time for open discussion, and allows participants to feel the outcomes of the work are a result of their own input. Simple tools to achieve this might include inviting them to assist in development and delivery of the event.

The CBEP would do this by contacting key participants in the months leading up to an event, to volunteer their ideas on appropriate topics, activities and speakers.

Values Clarification and Critical Thinking

The ILT EFS course taught us that identification and expression of values within a group needs to be established, respected and built on for progress to be achieved. The CBEP encouraged participants to identify their ideas, values and vested interests during the events and as facilitators we endeavoured to establish a platform for debate that was open and transparent. We also consider that this process of "values clarification" allowed for critical examination of these values and the various bushfire management systems in place.

With a common perception that farmers and environmentalists blame one another or the government for destructive fires (this not always the case), the ability for

participants to critically analyse each others views is very important, as is the ability to respect differing viewpoints. Many participants have enthusiastically deconstructed the arguments coming from the extremes on either side, and as a result have come to recognise the importance of being open minded in these debates. Managing conflict in this way is perhaps one of the greatest achievements of our new program.

Capacity Building

Meaningful change occurs only when those you are asking to change have the willingness, capacity and opportunities to do so. Building the capacity of stakeholders (human resources) is an important process in any EFS program, but it is also increasingly recognised as a key aspect of natural resource management generally.

As already stated our education program encourages stakeholder participation not only at our events, but also in broader bushfire and land management activities. Bushfire management must be a shared responsibility – it requires everyone in bushfire prone areas to contribute to the responsible management of local lands. Therefore, human resource capacity building is not only a matter for public service agencies and volunteer bushfire brigades, but also for residents within bushland communities.

We encourage capacity building through our events by allowing for networking opportunities, and information sharing. Our workshops and forums also help people to identify the capacities of others and to consider how they might be able to form new partnerships.

Evaluation

Significant development in information collection, monitoring and evaluation of the CBEP is a direct result of the ILT EFS course. We have requested feedback from participants in written and verbal form at various times before, during and after events. This has enabled us to adapt our events to the changing needs of these stakeholders, ensure that our modes of delivery are suitable and assess whether we are meeting our objectives.

Experience

As already stated, the CBEP has provided us with a greater understanding of the issues that the bushfire prone community are faced with, which in turn has helped shape the strategic and advocacy directions of the program. Three of the main issues arising at all events include:

- Communication;
- Regulation vs Participation; and
- Realisation of Responsibility and Roles.

Communication

A lack of, or poor communication between fire managers and community members has been identified as a highly important issue at every event.

Regulation vs Voluntary Action

Bushfire management is regulated in NSW by the Rural Fires Act 1997 with some activities also subject to other environmental legislations such as the Environmental Protection and Assessment Act 1979. The general purpose of regulating bushfire management activities is to prevent practices that may put the environment and others at risk. However, it has become apparent through our community interaction that in general are perceived by some managers and any land owners as being a

barrier to responsible fire management. However, we believe that it is because of a general lack of understanding of the regulations, as well as lack of technical assistance and support, and a confusing and convoluted approval process. In addition to this, affected landowners and managers have felt that they have been unduly restricted in their day to day activities which they see as contrary to a collaborative approach and the dual aims of managing fire for protection and conservation.

Roles and Responsibilities

There are a variety of stakeholders in bushfire management, however, not all stakeholders have the same capacity and opportunity to take up their responsibilities. Our events have identified that a common problem in most areas is a lack of understanding of the role and capacity that various stakeholders have. By providing the opportunity for discussion and relationship building, we discovered that people were much more willing to accept their own roles and responsibilities, as well as the capacity of other stakeholders thereby promoting the potential for cooperative work.

Results of the CBEP

The CBEP is now coming to its end and extensive evaluation and reflection has allowed us to identify the following outcomes:

Amongst participants:

1. Greater appreciation and understanding of fire ecology (in general and locally).
2. Greater awareness of the roles of bushfire stakeholders.
3. Greater awareness of the complexities of bushfire management in relation to ecological factors.
4. Greater awareness of bushfire management systems including management structure and regulations.

For participants and NCC Bushfire Program:

5. Opportunity for networking.
6. Increased capacity to share knowledge and change practices.
7. Increase and improvement in capacity to participate in management process.

For CBEP and Bushfire Program:

8. Development of Program design towards the principles of Education for Sustainability.

Critical to the success of these outcomes were several factors:

1. Providing a variety of opportunities for bushfire stakeholders around the State to share ideas, concerns and learn from each other.
2. Support from local community networks in target areas to identify issues (in this case mainly through our Reps).
3. Engagement of agency personnel at various levels of management to ensure confidence in programs and support for delegates.
4. Use of local case studies and speakers.
5. Identification of channels to influence State level bushfire management.

An important component of several of these outcomes has been the positioning of the Bushfire Program as a participant of the CBEP (Outcomes 5–8 and Critical Success Factor 5). It is because of this role and the involvement of the Bushfire Program in the CBEP's learning process that changes in design and advocacy principles have occurred.

Influence on the Bushfire Program Overall

It has always been NCC's policy to take issues of concern raised at our events to higher levels of planning and management, thus there has always been a natural link between the education activities and the campaign aspects of the Bushfire Program. However, we noticed that the principles (or tools) of Participation, Values Clarification, Critical Thinking, Capacity Building and Evaluation are closely linked to encouraging and achieving better outcomes for identified issues and that to get the best out of these tools people must "practice what they preach". As such it was a natural progression for the CBEP to advocate for these principles to be adopted on all levels of Bushfire Management Planning, thus placing the education component of management in a much stronger and more influential position than before.

We are now trying to incorporate the lessons we have learnt through the CBEP into the Bushfire Program in the following ways:

Participation

NCC itself has been an important stakeholder in Bushfire Management since the Bushfire Program first began. However, this year has seen an extension of this role of advocating for meaningful participation in bushfire risk planning to not only NCC representatives, but all bushfire stakeholders including land owners and managers, community members, interest and minority groups as well as young people. Through a participatory approach to our education work and through our continued involvement in policy development and inquiries we aim to demonstrate/advocate the value of inclusive processes in bushfire management planning, as well as assist in developing a capacity for cooperative approaches to management.

Values Clarification and Critical Thinking

While we are not yet in a position to promote the need for values clarification per se within formal bushfire management planning processes, our experiences have shown that unless this is done at the beginning of any process it will be difficult to move forward. Our way of indirectly advocating for this is to highlight the unique needs of individual stakeholders, while also assessing our own values regularly and in light of our experiences. Critical Thinking is a tool that everyone should use whether they be campaigning or educating. In order for NCC to be a major stakeholder in its areas of campaigning it is essential that constant analysis of our own, other organisations' and government's policies are undertaken; the CBEP has provided the Bushfire Program with a greater ability to do this through the increased contact we have had with stakeholders and the exercises set through the EFS programs.

Capacity Building

The CBEP has played a crucial role in building our own capacity as a stakeholder in bushfire management as well as contributing to the development of those participating in our events. We have now developed a much more detailed understanding of how the issues of concern actually manifest in real life situations and this in turn directly influences our own policies and advocacy positions which we use to influence planning and management at district, state and national levels.

Communication

Increased communication between stakeholders has become not only the key objective of our education program, but is now also featuring as one of our main policy prescriptions for bushfire management itself.

Regulation vs Participation

While we still see a role for regulation of hazard reduction activities, including prescribed burning, we have now expanded this position to emphasise the importance of supporting regulations with technical, administrative and practical assistance, as well as related community education programs and programs to support voluntary initiatives. Ensuring this occurs has become one of the major contributions we aim to make to the bushfire planning process in the next few years.

Roles and Responsibilities

The importance of stakeholders understanding and taking responsibility for their own roles in bushfire management, is a fundamental principle of our education program as well as the broader campaign.

Conclusion

By applying these lessons the CBEP has been successful in facilitating inter-stakeholder communication and planning at district and regional levels and in empowering conservationists, aboriginal groups, volunteers, school students and other minority groups. Moreover, the application of these principals to the CBEP and the Bushfire Program, have helped us to develop a new way of approaching our campaigning work, and most importantly, to constantly evaluate and assess our performance in relation to our new focus on participation and human resource capacity building. As stated throughout this paper the experiences and information collected through our interaction with local and state level stakeholders now feed directly back into our overall program to help us to determine an appropriate strategic direction, as well as more discrete campaigning opportunities.

However, with the strengths come difficulties. As with most programs, resourcing (human, time and economic) proves to be a limiting factor in achieving what we know is possible. We are sometimes challenged to share with others what we are learning. Another challenge we face is that by opening up to new ideas some may see us as compromising our position; this is an important issue as the NCC represents over 120 environmental member groups in NSW. Despite these challenges, the shift that has occurred is a positive one and we look forward to learning more and passing on the lessons over the next few years.

Keywords: participation; evaluation; change; campaign; voluntary action.