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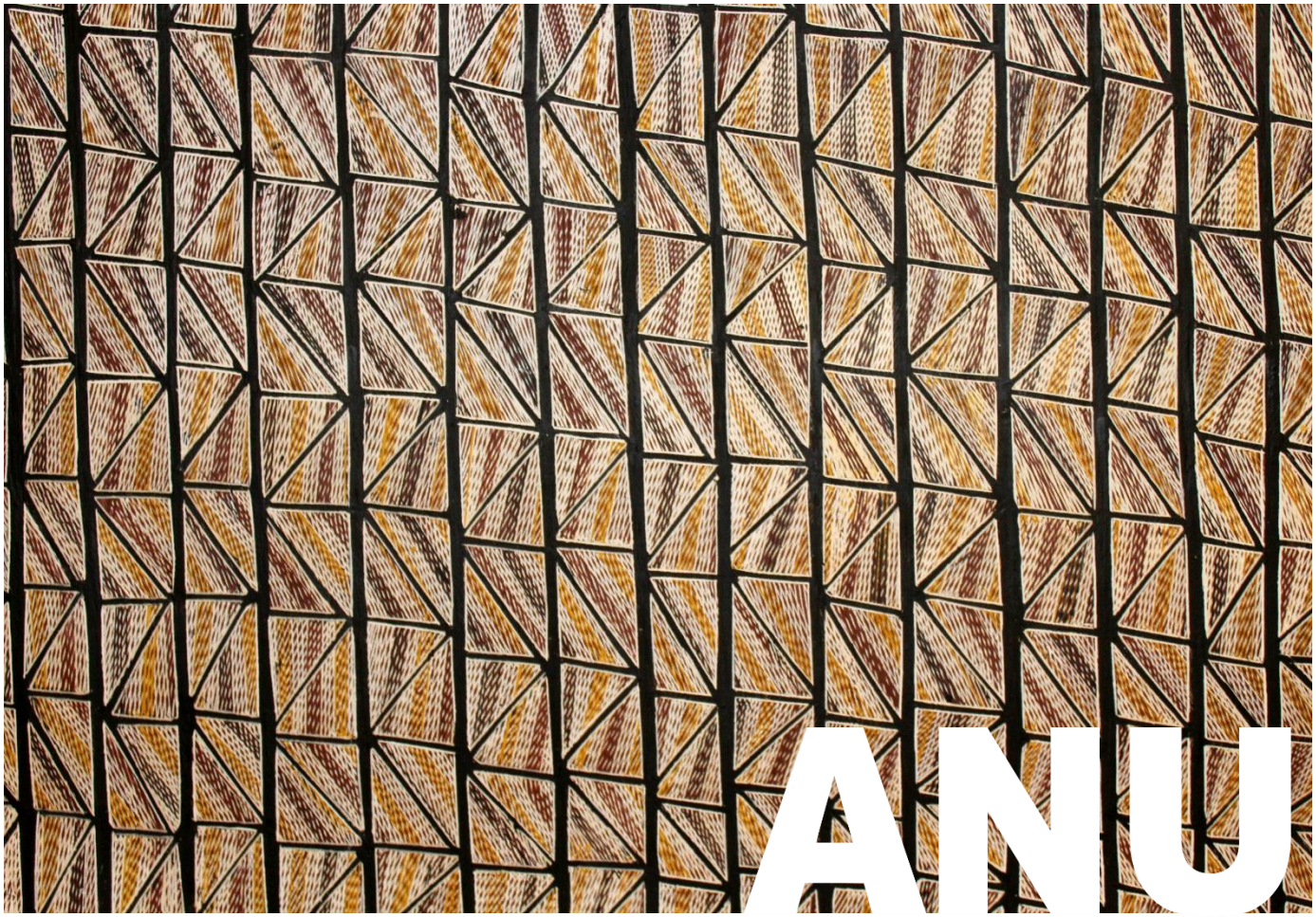

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE ON THE FRONTLINES AND FAULTLINES IN THE BLACK SUMMER BUSHFIRES

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Aboriginal community governance on the frontlines and faultlines in the Black Summer bushfires

B. Williamson

Abstract

The 2019–20 'Black Summer' bushfires were unprecedented in their size, scale, and devastation. It was widely acknowledged that the bushfires disproportionally impacted Aboriginal people both in terms of the population of people affected, and the deep impact felt as people connected to the land. Yet at the height of the crisis, stories emerged of culturally unsafe and unwelcoming relief and recovery services, as well as the uneven responses of emergency services to safeguard and protect cultural heritage. The rupturing of these demographic faultlines exposed Aboriginal people to additional risk and created a distinct Aboriginal experience within the larger bushfire catastrophe – a disaster within a disaster. In response, Aboriginal communities and their organisations rallied, evacuating community members, providing immediate relief and support to communities and families affected, and taking their own steps to protect their cultural and heritage values. This paper brings together these stories, captured through various media articles, reports, submissions and testimony, synthesising the common experiences of Aboriginal peoples and the response of their communities and organisations. It draws attention to deep constitutions of strength and resilience embedded within Aboriginal communities, whilst highlighting the trust deficit now engendered between Aboriginal people and relief and recovery agencies. It finishes by reaffirming the importance of community-controlled and representative Aboriginal organisations in emergency management, response, and recovery in future disasters.

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCHS	Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Sector
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ANU	Australian National University
ANZEMC	Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee
AVO	Apprehended Violence Order
BAC	Butchella Aboriginal Corporation
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFA	Country Fire Authority
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DELWP	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (Victoria)
DRC	Disaster Response Centre
EMSINA	Emergency Management Spatial Information Network Australia
GEGAC	Gippsland and East-Gippsland Aboriginal Community Cooperative
GLaWAC	Gunnaikurnai Lands and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
IMT	Incident Management Team
IT	Information Technology
NACCHO	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
NGO	Non-government organisation

NSW	New South Wales
QFES	Queensland Fire and Emergency Services
SEMP	State Emergency Management Plan
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation
VACCHO	Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

Foreword

In late 2020, the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI) commenced an exciting partnership with several First Nation partners, commenced a two-year applied research project –*The Indigenous Governance of Development*: *Self-Determination and Success Project (IGD)* – to explore the ways First Nations in Australia are strengthening and exercising their collective self-governance so they are in the driver's seat for their development agenda.

The first year in 2021 was an extremely productive one for the Project. A high-calibre multi-disciplinary research team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers was assembled, and the Project established a foundation of partnerships with First Nations. Our research teams are working alongside local communities, native title holders, leaders and their representative organisations. With the ongoing pandemic conditions we have been sensitive to the major COVID-19 pandemic stresses that continue to be faced by our First Nation partners. That has led to many conversations and collaborative innovations in how we do our research work together; we may be coming adept at zoom yarns, but are also meeting locally 'on country' when we can, to share experiences and insights.

At a time of great uncertainty and policy change in the national political environment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups face major challenges in rebuilding their own governance in practically effective, culturally strong ways. This Discussion Paper Series presents emerging evidence and analyses from the IGD Project's collaborative case studies. Our aim is to make this research count for First Nations, their leaders and community organisations across Australia, so they can use it for their own local purposes. The important matters raised in the papers also have direct relevance for industry and governments, who need to rebuild their own internal capacity and policy frameworks to better support Indigenous self-determined efforts to govern development.

This Discussion Paper series is a taste of the remarkable home-based solutions First Nations and their organisations are designing for their collective self-governance and futures. The papers capture a rich sample of changes, resilience and resurgence, describing examples where Indigenous practices of self-determined governance are being strengthened, and where development *with culture and identity* is a priority. We understand that the challenge on the road ahead is not merely to take control and put self-determination into practice, but to govern well and fairly on behalf of all the members of a First Nation. That way, chosen development has a better chance of delivering sustained outcomes.

We would like to thank the AIGI Board and staff, the CAEPR project team and staff, and the participating Indigenous nations and organisations who are working in partnership with us to carry out this applied research project. We believe our collective efforts will make a difference in informing constructive First Nations solutions for self-determined governance of development in Australia, and contribute to the formulation of more enabling government policy and industry engagement.

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Former Director
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research

Valerie Price-Beck
Chair, Board
Australian Indigenous Governance Institute

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Introduction

In 2019–20 Australia was beset by a crisis previously unthinkable. Beginning in August 2019 and lasting through to the end of March 2020, more than 15 000 bushfires burned through almost 19 million hectares, destroying over 3000 houses and killing 33 people[1] (Filkov et al., 2020). Conservative estimates put the total loss of wildlife at more than 1 billion animals with thick blanketing smoke covering parts of Aotearoa and circumnavigating the southern Pacific Ocean to affect countries as far away as Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil (Filkov et al., 2020). Direct financial impacts of the bushfires were estimated to reach more than $40 billion (Filkov et al., 2020), although the ongoing economic impacts are harder to quantify. No matter how one tries to understand or comprehend this extraordinary event, 'catastrophic' and 'unprecedented' are perhaps the most commonly used adjectives (see contributions in Anderson et al., 2020). In the immediate aftermath of the fires people described the event as the 'season of reckoning', the 'savage summer' and the 'red summer'. Eventually, the bushfire season that devastated Australia came to become popularly known as the 'Black Summer' (Griffiths, 2020).

Whilst the fires disrupted and had a profound impact on all communities within the disaster zone, Aboriginal people were particularly impacted (Williamson et al., 2020b). Whether as residents, families, discrete communities or traditional owners, Aboriginal people were disproportionately and uniquely affected by the bushfires (Williamson et al., 2020b). But bushfires weren't the only 'hazard' Aboriginal people encountered during the event (Williamson & Quinn, 2020). From the fire grounds and in evacuation centres throughout bushfire-affected areas, stories emerged of Aboriginal people being treated poorly, experiencing racism, and being made to feel unwelcome as they fled the disaster areas and sought help (Williamson & Quinn, 2020). Because of these experiences, Aboriginal people were reluctant to access mainstream services for fear of how they would be treated (Owens & O'Kane, 2020; Williamson & Quinn, 2020), resulting in people putting themselves at additional risk (Owens & O'Kane, 2020).

Aboriginal people were also reeling from devastation to the land. As cultural and spiritual beings with deep and ancestral attachments to the land, landscape features and the many plants, animals and forest resources, Aboriginal people experienced a unique trauma (Lay, 2020; Williamson et al., 2020c). These anxieties are heightened in bushfires because of the nature and hierarchy of emergency management which places life and property above the environment (Weir et al., 2020b). In response to these twin features – being treated poorly and distressed by damage to Country – Aboriginal communities and organisations assumed leadership responsibilities during, and after, the bushfires. This paper explores these experiences and argues that the ability of Aboriginal community organisations and cultural governing institutions to respond to, and lead, in the recovery of communities from bushfires and other disasters, is a key feature of community and organisational development.

To do this, I examine the experiences of Aboriginal people and communities during the bushfires, capturing their stories and unique impacts. I explore the response by Aboriginal communities and organisations to reveal how these community and cultural governing institutions rallied to support communities and protect Country when others who could have, and should have, would not. Reflecting on these experiences reveals seven key lessons:

- there is a trust deficit between Aboriginal communities and mainstream relief and recovery agencies
- Aboriginal community governing institutions are an asset in times of disaster
- there is an immediate need to acknowledge the work of Aboriginal community governing institutions in disasters and increase their funding
- the importance of standardising and collecting Indigenous data

[1] This does not include deaths from respiratory issues which was shown to significantly increase during the period of the bushfires (see Johnston et al., 2021).

- the importance of harnessing knowledge of Country
- there is a need to reform emergency management to require traditional owners in Incident Management Teams (IMTs)
- creating identified roles for Aboriginal people within and across disaster planning and preparation

These key lessons offer both a way of understanding and making sense of what happened during the crisis, as well as a practical blueprint for emergency management and disaster relief and recovery agencies to learn from mistakes and ensure that these are not repeated in the future. Before we begin however, I offer a section exploring the theory and contemporary scholarship relevant to this paper and a discussion of the employed methodology.

Theory and contemporary scholarship

Climate change-driven disasters continue to accelerate in both frequency and severity throughout the world (Paton & Buergelt, 2019). For instance, bushfire emergencies in the decade prior to the 2019–20 Black Summer include the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in central Victoria, the 2013 Blue Mountain bushfires, the 2018 Tathra bushfire, and the 2018–19 Tasmanian bushfires. Internationally, bushfires[2] devastated the Canadian province of British Columbia in 2017, then in 2018 California experienced their worst ever bushfire disaster, only to then suffer an even more devastating emergency in 2020. Most recently in 2021, Canada was gripped by a nation-wide bushfire emergency.

In response to these and other events, Indigenous peoples' cultural land management and in particular, fire management practices, have been brought into sharp focus by mainstream land management agencies and society-at-large as practices capable of mitigating against future bushfire risks. Although a well-developed practice and field of inquiry throughout northern Australia, Aboriginal fire management, or cultural burning, continues to develop in practice and theory in southern temperate Australia, with notable examples from central Victoria (Neale et al., 2019) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) (Freeman et al., 2021). Indeed, supporting Aboriginal peoples' cultural burning practices featured heavily in the recommendations of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements ('Bushfires Royal Commission') and the New South Wales (NSW) Independent Inquiry into the 2019–20 bushfires (Owens & O'Kane, 2020), whilst in Victoria a state-wide *Cultural fire management strategy* has been developed to better support traditional owner groups to re-establish their land and fire management practices (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, 2020). Concurrently, there continues to be emerging scholarship exploring the impacts of disasters on vulnerable[3] and marginalised groups and in particular, Indigenous peoples.

Internationally, Atallah (2016) explores the experiences of Mapuche people following earthquakes in Chile; Hsu (2016) and Hsu et al. (2014) investigate the experiences of Indigenous groups in Taiwan following typhoons; Kurnio et al. (2021) draw attention to Indigenous notions of resilience and recovery in response to earthquakes in Indonesia; Paton & Buergelt (2019), Jayasinghe et al. (2020), Kenney et al. (2015), and Phibbs et al. (2015) explore the experiences of Maori during and after the 2010–11 Christchurch earthquakes, including the role of Maori organisations in the rebuilding efforts; whilst McGee & Christianson (2021) investigate the experiences of Canadian First Nations evacuations during wildfires. In these examples, academics consistently connect the historical experiences of colonisation with modern day disasters, even when these disasters are considered 'natural' (such as earthquakes and typhoons). Atallah (2016) describes these events as 'socionatural', owing to the production of social vulnerabilities that make worse Indigenous peoples' experiences of natural disasters. In this paper I too adopt the term 'socionatural' disaster with respect to these developments. Poortinga & Pidgeon (2004) identify a key theme hidden beneath the surface of each of the previous contributions, the role of *trust* in

[2] In north America they are commonly referred to as Wildfires.
[3] For a nuanced discussion on the language of vulnerabilities, see Thurber et al., (2021).

disasters. Trust is the cornerstone in effective disaster responses. Trust-deficits (i.e., when people do not trust other parties), especially when built upon previous experiences, are a potentially intractable issue, as will be discussed later.

In Australia, there is little scholarship on Indigenous peoples in disaster relief and recovery relative to the size and significance of the topic itself. Notable contributions include Howitt et al., (2012); Ali et al., (2021); Sithole et al., (2019); Sangha et al., (2017, 2019); Morley et al., (2016); and Veland et al., (2010, 2013). Veland et al. (2010); Sangha et al., (2017, 2019); Sithole et al., (2019); Morley et al., (2016); and Ali et al., (2021) focus on Aboriginal groups in northern Australia with much of this scholarship being organised around the threat of cyclones. Consistent with international literature, colonisation runs through these contributions like a steady stream, whilst consistently drawing attention to the importance of embedding a justice framework in relation to Indigenous peoples in disaster recovery. These issues have been drawn out extensively in the nascent field of disaster justice.

Disaster justice calls attention to colonial processes of discrimination that produce vulnerabilities in marginalised communities, such as Indigenous peoples. In doing so, it seeks to understand the roots of vulnerabilities and use disaster events as transformative opportunities to seek more just terms between marginalised communities and mainstream populations. At a disaster justice workshop in November 2018, participants agreed to the following definition:

> *Disaster Justice recognizes that disasters can expose, magnify and deepen existing injustices in society, which can then lead to further injustices. This perspective purposefully situates the disaster event in relation to past and present social choices, and also acknowledges that the disaster itself is a dynamic opportunity to investigate perceived injustice and vulnerability using different dimensions of justice. As humans live with and within nature, these matters of justice include nature and consideration of our shared futures (as quoted in Weir, Sutton et al., 2020, p. 302).*

Weir et al. (2020a), who focus on disaster justice in relation to Indigenous peoples, connect the scholarly field with material outcomes for Indigenous peoples. In this way, disaster justice recognises that while all people are impacted by disasters, some are impacted in ways that are different with markedly different consequences (Weir, Sutton et al., 2020). For instance, in the context of this paper, Aboriginal peoples impacted by the 2019–20 bushfires had the same immediate needs as non-Indigenous peoples, such as the need for safety, shelter, food, supplies, financial assistance, mental health support, and more. However, as a group or groups of people with unique standing in Australia, with their own legal and governing institutions, with their own cultural and spiritual needs, and as a group or groups that continue to be marginalised and discriminated against, there was a unique Aboriginal experience within the bushfire disaster. These inter- and intra-group dynamics are perhaps best understood through the field of demographic faultlines.

The demographic faultlines field of study explores the dynamics of groups with multiple demographic characteristics (Lau & Murnighan, 2005). Where strong non-overlapping characteristics exist, for instance man–woman, old–young, Indigenous–non-Indigenous, within group members, a ‘demographic faultline’ exists between them (Lau & Murnighan, 2005). Other faultlines also exist between groups with different values and worldviews, for instance, environmental conservation–resource extraction (Paton & Buergelt, 2019). Much of the scholarly work on demographic faultlines speaks to workplace or educational settings where managers or teachers seek diverse groups to foster both self- and group-development, and create the conditions for innovative thinking by drawing from people’s different life experiences and bringing together their varying perspectives (Lau & Murnighan, 2005). However, as I argue later, demographic faultlines offers a theoretical framework to interpret and understand the experiences of groups – including dominant groups and sub-groups – and to help explain the nature and prevalence of conflict within and across groups. In fact, the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires offers

what I believe to be a real-world experiment in understanding and extending the field of demographic faultlines. I will return to this later.

This paper brings together these various interconnected fields in contemporary scholarship including Indigenous peoples in disaster recovery, cultural land management, disaster justice and demographic faultlines. Whilst lessons from this paper speak to each field in different ways, it is vitally important that the experiences of Aboriginal people in the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires be understood and respected as its own phenomenon and deserving of its own place within the broader scholarship.

Methodology

During and after the Black Summer bushfires, there was a proliferation of commentary describing the events and reporting on the impacts the fires had on people, communities and the land (e.g., Allam, 2020; Weir et al., 2020b; Williamson & Quinn, 2020). These commentaries are expressed in a range of formats including but not limited to: newspaper articles; radio broadcasts; television news reports; opinion pieces; submissions and reports to various inquiries and commissions; peer reviewed publications; edited books; and so on. Together, these resources provide insight into the significant events, general trends, experiences, thoughts, feelings, and mood of those who were directly affected by the bushfires, as well as providing expert commentary. There is richness and depth when engaging with these resources.

The widespread, prolonged, and devastating nature of the bushfires caused a re-examination of what it meant to be 'impacted'. For instance, as images of the fires raging throughout the east coast and the associated loss of life, damage to property, and exhaustive efforts of fire crews beamed into people's loungerooms, it may be fair to suggest that every Australian was impacted in some form during the disaster. This re-examination of what it meant to be 'impacted' blurs the line between people directly affected and independent or 'objective' expert observers. This was the case with me as the author of this paper, as well as a commentator providing analysis and insight into the experiences of Aboriginal people throughout and following the bushfires. For this reason, there are many references to my own work in this paper.

Nevertheless, there exists a rich database of resources from which to glean a picture of the bushfire events and the response. The particular focus of this paper is the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and communities in NSW although some references to relevant reports and bushfires events in Queensland are used. These various insights are organised into thematic sections including the impacts the fires had on Aboriginal peoples as well as the response by Aboriginal community organisations. From these various sources I distil common themes in the discussion, drawing out key lessons and offering ways forward. The synthesising and analysing of the source materials is a process known as *content analysis.*

Content analysis is a research method used to classify and quantify the contents of communication. It is utilised to synthesise discourses and make inferences by systematically identifying trends that exist within communications (Gilman, 2015). Macnamara (2005) states that:

> *Content analysis is used to study a broad range of 'texts' from transcripts of interviews and discussions in clinical and social research to the narrative and form of films, TV programs and the editorial and advertising content of newspapers and magazines (p. 1).*

The School of Columbia Public Health provides the following definition: 'Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data' (Columbia Public Health, 2021).

Stemler (2015) identifies that:

> *The widespread proliferation of email, the web, digital photography, social media, YouTube, text messaging, and cellular phones has yielded unprecedented amounts of permanent, archived data on individuals. As a result, analysts have dubbed this the era of 'big data'… Consequently, the methodological technique of content analysis appears to be on the verge of a renaissance (p. 1).*

A persistent critique of content analysis is its positing of a researcher as 'objective'. Macnamara (2005, p. 2) contends that 'even the most scientific methods of social research cannot produce totally objective results'. This is mostly attributed to the varied interpretations people may conclude from the same or similar stories or headings (Macnamara, 2005). What remains absent in this critique is the cultural and historical lens through which people see, interpret, and analyse events or communications. It is here that Indigenous methodologies are instructive.

Indigenous research methods have arisen due to the objectification of Indigenous peoples in research, and the marginalisation of Indigenous scholars in academic institutions (Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2013). Rather than 'observing', Indigenous methods instruct researchers that engagement with Indigenous peoples, including their histories, worldviews and ethics, form a central role in research processes (Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2013). Although known as 'Indigenous' methodologies', it bears significant consequence for non-Indigenous people as it compels all researchers to engage with their own standpoint, that is, understand how they see the world and from where their opinions have come (Smith, 2013). Indigenous methodologies reveal the myth of 'objectivity'. It illuminates that no matter the academic discipline, or research or scientific method employed, people's attitudes, opinions and interpretations are influenced by socio-cultural norms and life-experiences (Smith, 2013). In the context of this paper for instance, the sources quoted, and conclusions drawn, are all informed by the author's opinions. Thus, it is worth taking a moment to reflect on who I am in relation to this research endeavour.

Firstly, I am a Euahlayi man from the northwest of NSW, with family ties to northwest Queensland. I have wide academic interests including Indigenous governance, Indigenous young people, Indigenous data and Indigenous men and masculinities. However, much of my academic and professional career (to date) has been in the field of Indigenous cultural land management. Specifically, I have worked with, and continue to work with, Indigenous ranger groups with a particular focus on cultural burning in south-eastern Australia. My work in this sector has also extended into governance and advocacy, assuming roles on the ACT Bushfire Council (2017–2021), the NSW Forest Monitoring and Improvement Program (2020–present) and the environmental charity Country Needs People (2020–present). Declaring these interests makes clear that I am committed to Aboriginal peoples and communities and continue to advocate for their empowerment through self-governance and increased involvement in cultural land management and cultural burning.

Throughout the summer of 2019–20, I lived in Queanbeyan, directly adjacent to the ACT. As such, my family and I were directly impacted by various fires including the North Black Range fire in Tallaganda National Park, the Beard Fire between Canberra Airport and Queanbeyan, and the Orroral Valley megafire that started in Namadgi National Park south of Canberra. Throughout the fires our family were evacuated in response to the Beard Fire, and we spent New Year's Eve 2019 in hospital because our (then) 1-year-old son experienced breathing difficulties due to the smoke from the North Black Range fire.

Consequently, I consider myself to be both an observer *and* someone directly impacted by the fires. Furthermore, as an Aboriginal person and member of a large Aboriginal community in Canberra and Queanbeyan that extends to the NSW South Coast and southern mountain areas such as Tumut–Brungle and into Albury–Wodonga, my views and opinions have been formed in large part by the stories of Aboriginal peoples that I know, who also experienced the bushfires, and the response to the bushfires. My positionality in this regard is not incidental to the topic of focus here, but central.

In this paper I bring my various positions as an Aboriginal person, someone who was directly affected, who knows Aboriginal people directly affected, as an academic, and as an advocate and advisor, into dialogue with the various articles, broadcasts, submissions and reports, to form a personal, intellectual, and Indigenous-informed opinion about the events of the 2019–20 Black Summer.

Planning for emergencies

A key pillar in emergency management is the creation of planning documents that guide jurisdictional and agency activities in preparation for major disasters such as fires, floods, cyclones, earthquakes, and more. These planning documents are often coordinated between jurisdictions (such as state and federal, between states, and interagency) recognising that disasters have little regard for state boundaries or the siloed working arrangements of government agencies (Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee (ANZEMC), 2018; Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2011)

For Australia, the *National strategy for disaster resilience*, released in 2011, outlines the high-level priorities of Australia's various governments to enhance national capability for dealing with disasters, and offering steps to create resilient communities (COAG, 2011). Importantly, the Strategy lays the foundation for the National Emergency Management Committee. From this, the National Emergency Management Committee, now ANZEMC, was formed. The ANZEMC is:

> *responsible for informing, influencing and advocating for national policies and capabilities that reduce disaster risk, minimise the potential for harm and uphold public trust and confidence in emergency management arrangements (ANZEMC, 2021).*

In 2018, the ANZEMC released the *Australian disaster preparedness framework*, which offers high-level policy advice from which states and territories can develop their own emergency management plans. The Framework's stated intention is to 'support Australia to develop the required capability to effectively prepare for and' manage severe to catastrophic disasters (p. 5)', as well as to provide 'guidance to all jurisdictions in understanding, developing and enhancing capability requirements to prepare for, manage and recover from severe to catastrophic disasters' (p. 5). From this Framework, states and territories prepare their own policies, beginning with state emergency management plans.

In Victoria, the *Victorian strategic management action plan 2016–2019* (Emergency Management Victoria, 2016) 'outlines state-wide strategic priorities, with corresponding actions, to support Victoria in achieving its vision of safer and more resilient communities' (p. 4).

The Strategic Management Plan then outlines four key themes and priorities which include:

- Communities and Business
- People and Culture
- Governance
- Services and Systems.

The plan identifies a number of 'Priorities' within each theme against which state government agencies can prepare for disasters.

In NSW, the state government prepared the *NSW state emergency management plan* in 2018. This plan outlines four key objectives (NSW Government, 2018):

1. provide clarity as to command and control, roles and coordination of functions in emergency management across all levels
2. emphasise risk management across the full spectrum of prevention, preparation, response and recovery
3. emphasise community engagement in the development and exercise of plans as well as in their operational employment
4. ensure that the capability and resourcing requirements of these responsibilities are understood (p. 6).

It goes on to detail a range of 'Principles of Emergency Management' which guide the qualities and features, including continuous improvement, local capability, community and stakeholder engagement, and more, expected by agencies as they prepare for disasters (NSW Government, 2018).

From these strategic documents, regional emergency management plans are developed that identify likely disaster threats (such as flooding or bushfire) and focus on the characteristics of local communities, local economies and ecologies to develop locally specific plans to respond to disasters and promote recovery in a timely and effective manner. A key theme running through these policy instruments is the need to foster trust between government agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs). The success or otherwise of relief and recovery efforts is contingent on the community knowing and trusting the institutions responsible for their safety and welfare (Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2004).

These planning documents are critical to understanding the nature of natural (and other) disaster threats, and the social, political, legal, and economic landscape of states and regions. These planning documents are critical sites where it is possible to observe who or what is prioritised during emergencies, and who or what is prioritised in recovery. Critically examining these documents also reveals who and what are not prioritised or worse, made absent. In the context of this paper, examining these policy documents reveals the almost complete absence of Aboriginal peoples.

A cursory search for the words 'Indigenous'[4] and 'Aboriginal' in the *National strategy for disaster resilience* reveals that no such words are used (COAG, 2011). The term 'culture', including 'cultural' and 'culturally', exist in relation to 'culturally and linguistically diverse communities' (pp. 10 (footnote) & 19), with one reference to 'cultural heritage' (p. 5). The word 'culture' is used twice in reference to the 'culture of resilience' (p. 8).

The *Australian disaster preparedness framework 2018* does not mention the words 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal', or 'cultural'. There is one use of the word 'traditional', although this is in the Foreword and is specifically in relation to 'traditional boundaries' between jurisdictions, agencies and organisations (p. 4). Use of the word 'culture' is used in relation to the ability of agencies and organisations to work together, referenced as a 'culture of working as one' (p. 8). There is one passing acknowledgment of the need to communicate warnings and information effectively across different cultural groups (p. 11).

Theme 2 in the *Victorian strategic management action plan 2016–2019* is 'People and Culture' (Emergency Management Victoria, 2016). Although closer examination reveals that 'culture' in this theme is not about Indigenous or Aboriginal culture but rather, workforce culture within emergency service agencies. The Plan does not mention the word 'Indigenous' at all. However, it does have two references to 'Aboriginal'. The first is an Acknowledgment to Country (p. 2, footnote) whilst the second is in reference to how the Victorian community is changing over time and how emergency agencies need to adapt their practices to effectively engage with diverse communities. In this way, Aboriginal peoples are mentioned as a sub-group along with other religious groups, linguistically diverse people, people with a disability, and others (p. 5).

[4] One mention of the term 'Indigenous' is in relation to the Bachelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education which is listed in 'Appendix D: Consultation List' (p. 24).

Not to be outdone, the *NSW state emergency management plan* also does not mention 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' or 'culture'. The one mention of the word 'traditional' is in relation to 'traditional and social media' (p.10). The closest the Plan comes to inferring any kind of cultural considerations is its references to 'cultural conservation' (pp. 50, 56 & 57) or 'cultural and historical conservation' (pp. 52, 53 & 55).

The absence of Aboriginal[5] peoples in disaster planning in Australia is stark. It is clear that the concerns, values, interests and legal status of Aboriginal peoples generally, but in particular in NSW and Victoria were, at the time of the Black Summer bushfires, not accounted for *at all*. Further research is required as to whether this erasure extends to emergency management plans in other jurisdictions, or to regional emergency management plans in NSW and Victoria. Notwithstanding that at the time of the Black Summer bushfires, there may have been regional emergency management plans in NSW and Victoria that engaged with Aboriginal peoples and communities, especially where traditional ownership has been recognised, I suggest that these absences were not anomalies but part of a larger practice of erasing Aboriginal peoples from disaster planning and preparation in Australia. This is significant in particular for traditional owner groups who have legal obligations to care for and protect cultural and heritage values. Perhaps most importantly, the absence of Aboriginal peoples in disaster planning compromises the ability of agencies to know the nature, extent and profile of Aboriginal populations, understand the unique needs of communities and develop culturally responsive strategies to support communities during and after disasters. Without taking steps to connect with and understand Aboriginal communities – including any legal status, population profiles, local cultures, families, economies, and more – agencies and organisations are unable to develop familiar and trusting relationships.

The most significant policy document that I am aware of which engages with the unique needs of Indigenous peoples in disasters is the *Guide to disaster risk management in Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities* (Queensland Government Department of Emergency Services, 2004). The Guide was developed to support emergency and recovery agencies to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout Queensland. The policy details the unique needs, risks and hazards likely to be encountered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Queensland Government Department of Emergency Services, 2004). Although this guide represented a significant step in the development of disaster planning and management strategies, it appears to be a one-off. The only other specific document that speaks to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in disaster planning and preparation is the *Keeping our mob climatesafe* 'Fact Sheet' published in 2009 (Queensland Government, 2009). There appears to be few, if any, recent developments towards the inclusion of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in other emergency planning documents. The next section details the consequences of this negligent planning.

Aboriginal peoples and the Black Summer bushfires

Aboriginal peoples were disproportionally impacted by the Black Summer bushfires (Williamson et al., 2020b). Williamson et al. (2020b) completed an analysis on the size, composition, features and distribution of the Aboriginal population in fire-affected areas. The analysis focused in particular on NSW, Victoria, ACT and Jervis Bay Territory as some of the hardest hit and most disrupted states and territories. The analysis found that more than 96 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were directly affected by the bushfires (Williamson, 2020).

To place this in perspective, in the four jurisdictions, Indigenous people comprise 2.3% of the general population. Yet for the areas directly affected by the fires, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population doubles to 4.6%, meaning that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in these four jurisdictions were twice as likely to be impacted as non-Indigenous peoples (Williamson, 2020).

[5] Including allied terms Indigenous, First Nation, native title, Indigenous communities, etc.

In terms of the general Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia, 96 000 individuals represent 29% of the combined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of these four states and territories, or 12% of the entire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia (Williamson, 2020). It is also important to note that 9%, or 35 000 children, in fire-affected areas are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Among this group, 12 000 are pre-school age or younger (Williamson, 2020; Williamson et al., 2020a).

A number of discrete Aboriginal communities that were directly impacted by the fires are shown in Fig. 1, including Lake Tyres in Victoria, Wreck Bay in the Jervis Bay Territory, and Wallaga Lake, Mogo, Jabullum, and Cabbage Tree Island, to name a few, in NSW (Williamson et al., 2020b). Many of these discrete communities have an entirely (100%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, while in some larger towns such as Lismore, Ballina, Kempsey, Bateman's Bay and Nowra in NSW, and Lakes Entrance, Orbost and Shepparton in Victoria, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people constitute a significant portion of the general population (Williamson et al., 2020b).

But it is not only in demography that we find important information regarding the unique and disproportionate impacts suffered by Aboriginal peoples. There exists a significant extent of rights and interest in land, water, culture and heritage, that have been formally recognised by Australian governments (Williamson et al., 2020b). These rights are recognised through a number of legislative regimes including federally through native title and land acquired through the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation, as well as state-based mechanisms such as the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights regime, or the *Aboriginal Lands Act 1970,* the *Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2006* and the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010* in Victoria (Williamson et al., 2020b). There are also a number of co-management arrangements throughout fire-affected areas including Booderee National Park (Federal) in the Jervis Bay Territory, the Worimi Conservation Reserve north of Newcastle in NSW, and Budj Bim Cultural Landscape in western Victoria. These data provide important context for this discussion, and it is important to understand the nuance. Yet despite the range of populations, distribution, demographic profile, land, water and cultural heritage rights, there was a great deal of commonality in Aboriginal peoples' experiences of the bushfires.

Throughout the fire-affected areas, common stories began emerging of culturally unsafe and inappropriate relief and recovery services and agencies (Williamson & Quinn, 2020). The South Coast Women's Health and Welfare Aboriginal Corporation (Waminda) shared through a submission by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) that:

> *Waminda, located in Nowra, advised during the bushfire crisis that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the region were not able to access evacuation services and supplies. Waminda reported that some who tried were treated badly (NACCHO, 2020, p. 4).*

After evacuating from their home in east Gippsland, Victoria, one Aboriginal elder was told by a relief worker 'We've helped enough of your people today' (Moore, 2020).

Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Community Co-operative (GEGAC) stated:

> *Transport of community members quickly became an issue as many community members did not have access to vehicles and the services had limited transport options during the crisis (NACCHO, 2020, p. 5).*

In many instances, Aboriginal community members chose to stay rather than evacuate. Kerry Tregonning, a community member and traditional owner in the Lake Tyres Aboriginal Community in far east Gippsland, Victoria, shared with NITV that:

> *There's roughly 35 community [members] who have stayed. Most of them were born out here, they have no transport, some of them are hooked up to oxygen, there's a lot of things (Hayman-Reber, 2019).*

The warning bells were sounding on these issues earlier in February 2019 when a fire threatened the small Aboriginal community of Jabullum in northern NSW. Residents were made to wait up to six hours to evacuate from their local community to the adjacent town of Tabulam after they were told to evacuate (*Northern Star*, 2019). Nicola Mercer, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Jabullum Local Aboriginal Land Council, told the local newspaper, *The Northern Star*, that 'We were treated like cattle. We had no water or food and there was no seating for elders. No-one offered them anything' (*Northern Star*, 2019).

Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Service (Katungul) undertook an immediate review following the fires and found that 'No agencies at the Disaster Response Centres (DRCs) had protocols or guidelines on assisting Aboriginal people' (Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Services, 2020).

Katungul also found that while some relief agencies collected data on the status of Aboriginal people accessing their services, others did not (Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Services, 2020). When asked why agencies did not collect data on Indigenous status, representatives of the agencies stated: 'It was racist to ask Indigenous status and that "everyone should be treated the same" or "we are all equal"' (Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Services, 2020, p. 9).

In Australia, the most widely used service to collect information on individuals evacuating from disasters is Register.Find.Reunite, an online platform administered by the Australian Red Cross in partnership with Australian governments (Owens & O'Kane, 2020, p. 378). There were many issues identified with the Register.Find.Reunite service during the bushfires including limited connectivity due to mobile towers being impacted, loss of power, staff not having enough equipment such as tablets and phones, the number of people that needing registering, and the lack of appropriately trained staff to respond to the scale of the event (Owens & O'Kane, 2020, pp. 378–379). These issues invariably affected all people evacuating the bushfires. Another issue in Register.Find.Reunite at the time of the bushfires is that the Red Cross had only recently included a question on Indigenous status (S. Whitton, *pers. comm*., October 28, 2021). Because this had only recently been included, the online Register.Find.Reunite form included the Indigenous status question but older paper forms did not (S. Whitton, *pers. comm*., October 28, 2021). As a result, people who completed Register.Find.Reunite online (including staff filling forms out via tablets or computers at evacuation centres) were collecting data on Indigenous status whilst those using paper forms were not (S. Whitton, *pers. comm*., October 28, 2021). This resulted in uneven and inaccurate data. For instance, emergency agencies wanting information on where Indigenous individuals were located during the crisis accessed the online system without full knowledge that data collected via paper forms did not ask the question, resulting in Indigenous individuals being made absent in official counts (S. Whitton, *pers. comm*., October 28, 2021). As the main system that collects and shares data on people impacted by bushfires, this system failure had enormous consequences for the ability of agencies and Aboriginal community organisations to target their resources. Issues of Indigenous data are complicated further when considering the unique data needs of Indigenous peoples as outlined in the field of Indigenous data sovereignty[6].

In relation to the issues of outreach, Katungul found that 'with very few exceptions, services were provided at the DRC alone' (Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Services, 2020).

[6] See contributions in Kukutai & Taylor (2016) and Walter et al., (2020) for comprehensive definitions and analysis of Indigenous data sovereignty.

In their submission to the Senate Finance and Public Affairs Reference Committee, one of NACCHO's key points was that it:

> *…collected anecdotal evidence that there was a lack of support provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during and after the emergency, including experiences of racism and discrimination when evacuating and accessing emergency support and supplies (including at evacuation centres) (National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, 2020, p. 3).*

These experiences were acknowledged in the final report of the NSW bushfire inquiry. Owens and O'Kane (2020) found that:

> *The Inquiry acknowledges that Aboriginal communities across the State were greatly affected by bush fires…. The Inquiry was disappointed to learn that in some communities Aboriginal people felt unwelcome at evacuation centres, and in some cases support services were reluctant to provide immediate relief. These experiences compounded the trauma they had already experienced as a result of the bush fires, and in some cases led to people putting themselves at risk as they feared how they would be treated (p. 379).*

But it wasn't only the impacts of culturally inept relief agencies that deeply affected Aboriginal people; the trauma suffered by Country and the destruction of cultural heritage sites and artefacts was also a significant trauma.

Gamilaraay and Yawalaraay journalist Lorena Allam wrote for *The Guardian* that:

> *Like you, I've watched in anguish and horror as fire lays waste to precious Yuin land, taking everything with it – lives, homes, animals, trees – but for First Nations people it is also burning up our memories, our sacred places, all the things which make us who we are. It's a particular grief, to lose forever what connects you to a place in the landscape. Our ancestors felt it, our elders felt it, and now we are feeling it all over again as we watch how the mistreatment and neglect of our land and waters for generations, and the pig-headed foolishness of coal-obsessed climate change denialists turn everything and everyone to ash (Allam, 2020).*

Bundjalung and Wonnarua scholar Vanessa Cavanagh wrote about what it meant for her to lose a Grandmother tree she had grown up with on Darkinjung Country:

> *The sight of this old tree with her crown removed brought warm, stinging tears to my eyes. It was a deep hurt of losing someone far older and wiser than me. Losing someone who was respected and adored. Someone with knowledge I cannot fathom or comprehend. When I told my mum that evening she reacted similarly, a personal and family loss. To others she might just be a big tree (Cavanagh, 2020).*

Sherrie Nye, the supervisor of the Mogo Environmental Team spoke to ABC News following the fires and shared 'Being so connected with the land through my work and my ancestry, I'm grieving for the plants, the animals, the birds' (Milton, 2020).

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council stated in their submission to the NSW Independent Inquiry that:

> *We also wish to highlight the mental health impacts on Aboriginal communities as a result the recent bushfires. This trauma has been amplified by the fact that important cultural and sacred sites homes and livelihoods have been destroyed. Country, trees, plants and animals are intensely significant to Aboriginal people, as a conduit for connecting Traditional Custodians to their culture, country, lore and ancestors. As such, any damage to country causes an immense sense of grief. Aboriginal culture and livelihoods*

> *continue to be connected to all aspects of country, including animals and plants (NSW Aboriginal Land Council, 2020, p. 4).*

These sentiments were captured in 'After the Flames', a report prepared by Ken Lay for the Victorian Government. Lay (2020) outlined that:

> *For Aboriginal people relationships to Country, culture and community are not only interconnected, they are intrinsically linked to one's identity. This means that when one of these foundations is impacted by a disaster, Aboriginal Victorians experience unique pain and loss (p. 64).*

It is clear that the devastation caused by the bushfires produced immense trauma for Aboriginal people, communities and First Nations. It is also clear that Aboriginal people, communities and First Nations were made to feel unwelcome, and that agencies were, in many instances, reluctant to provide relief (Williamson & Quinn, 2020). These sentiments were captured by Firesticks Alliance Aboriginal Corporation in their submission to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry in which they highlight:

> *Many Aboriginal communities' lives, assets and cultural values were threatened or impacted by recent fire seasons. Greater support for Indigenous led community-controlled bushfire response capacity and capability is critical to combat future emergencies and natural disasters. Current resourcing and mechanisms are often disempowering and do not support Aboriginal community needs and values (Firesticks Alliance Aboriginal Corporation, 2020, p. 6).*

At the height of the bushfire crisis, The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) released a media statement in which it highlighted the:

> *Large-scale displacement of Aboriginal people and families in these regions, and the impact of this on the wellbeing of Communities, and concurrent expectations of our Community organisations cannot be underestimated (VACCHO, 2020).*

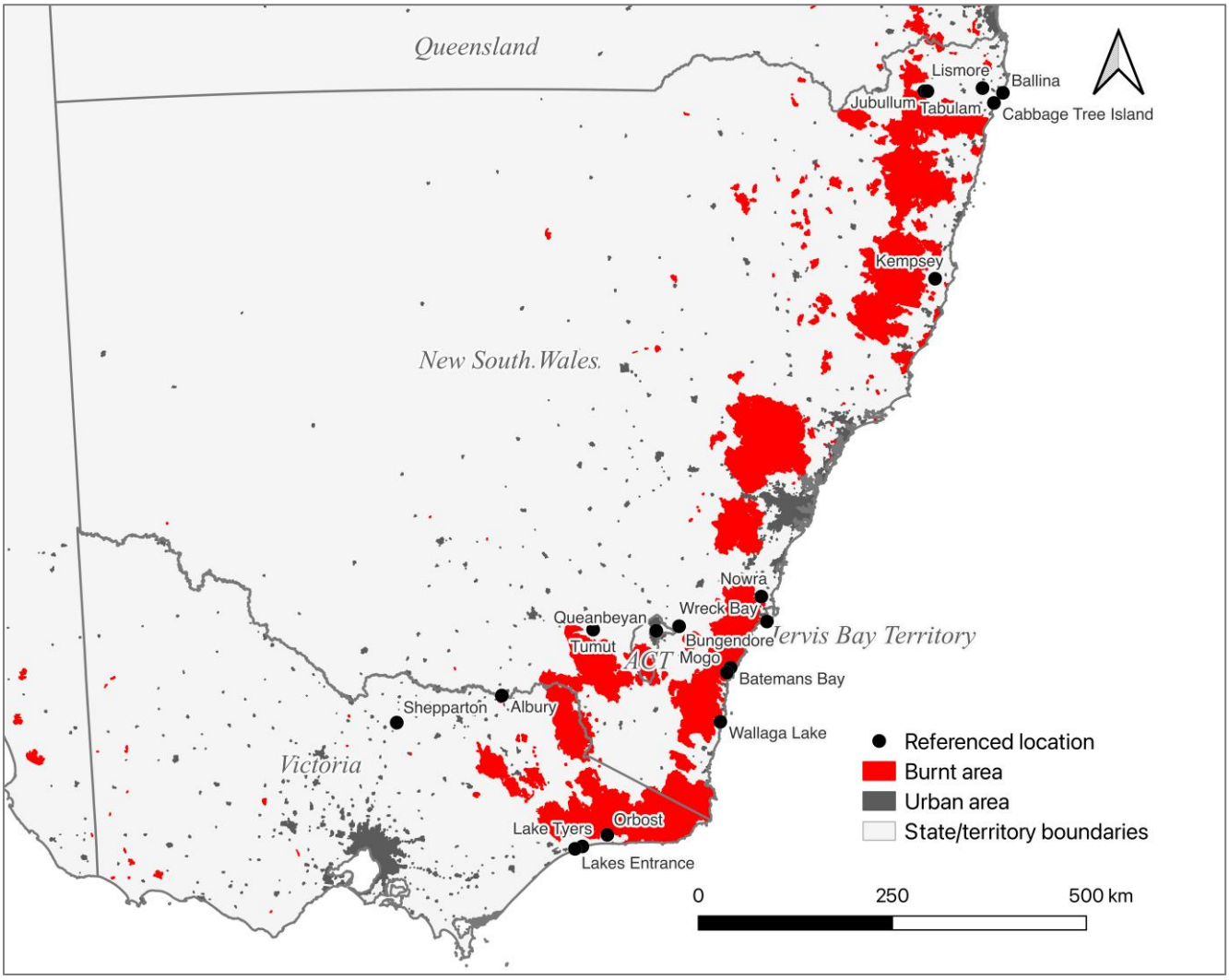
Acknowledgment of the unique impacts of the bushfires on Aboriginal people were also presented in the submissions of non-Indigenous people and organisations. For instance, in their submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry, the Australian Red Cross state:

> *Red Cross acknowledges the intrinsic connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to their Country and the unique pain and impacts felt as a result of natural disasters and emergencies (Australian Red Cross, 2020, p. 5).*

Further confirmation of the impacts of both the fires on Aboriginal people came in the Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report 2020 report which states that:

> *Aboriginal people are disproportionately affected by the impact of fires due to existing structural and financial inequalities, a backdrop of historical and intergenerational trauma, and the significant impacts that bushfires and bushfire protection has on Country and cultural heritage (p. 10).*

Fig. 1 Communities and townships referenced, New South Wales, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and Jervis Bay Territory



Source: Map prepared by Francis Markham from spatial data published by the Emergency Management Spatial Information Network Australia (EMSINA) & the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

The role of Aboriginal community governance

In the absence of culturally safe and community-centred relief and recovery agencies and efforts during and after the 2019–20 bushfire period, Aboriginal community organisations found themselves at the frontlines, providing immediate relief, support, and safety. The following section sections details their stories.

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council (2020) said in their submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry that:

> *Aboriginal community organisations were working on the ground to respond to the bushfire crisis, providing vital assistance and guidance to Aboriginal people and communities including health, housing, food and mental health supports. The role of Aboriginal community organisations was and continues to be vital in providing and coordinating responses (p. 6).*

GEGAC shared through the NACCHO submission that:

> *GEGAC was under considerable pressure during the bushfire crisis. The service opened its doors to the community as surrounding townships were ordered to evacuate and provided food and shelter to evacuees (NACCHO, 2020, p. 5).*

Similarly, Waminda shared:

> *To support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the area affected by the bushfires, Waminda purchased and supplied emergency items such as torches, batteries, portable stoves, gas cylinders, sleeping bags, eskies, sanitary items, wipes, nappies, fresh food, petrol and water. These supplies were purchased by Waminda by re-directing existing funding, no additional funding was allocated. Waminda also provided support to Aboriginal communities on the coast which do not fall in their usual area of service (NACCHO, 2020, p. 4).*

In the north-eastern NSW Aboriginal community of Baryulgil, the warning to evacuate came too late which meant that it was no longer safe for the community to evacuate (Mottram, 2019). Aunty Lynette Donnelly shared with ABC's *PM* radio program that by virtue of her having a key to the Baryulgil school hall, she was able to provide a safe shelter for community members as the Rural Fire Service arrived (Mottram, 2019).

The South Coast and Far South Coast regions of NSW were perhaps the hardest hit area in the bushfires. Katungul, as the Aboriginal health organisation in this region, was significantly impacted (Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Services, 2020). Katungul shared in the NACCHO submission that 'Katungul staff were both victims, as well as first responders to the bushfire crisis' (Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Services, 2020, p. 7). This meant that Katungul staff had to deal with both personal trauma, and vicarious trauma of clients, as a result of the bushfires (Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Services, 2020). Nevertheless, in the immediate time following the bushfires, Katungul conducted a 'Health Service Needs Assessment' of Aboriginal people in the regions because 'no other organisation has conducted a health needs assessment' (Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Services, 2020, p. 4).

Further stories of being both victims and first responders in the bushfires were also captured by VACCHO who stated that:

> *VACCHO Members organisations have been both impacted by the bushfires, and are playing an essential role in emergency relief and as first responder particularly (VACCHO, 2020).*

These sentiments were perhaps best captured by the NACCHO who stated:

> *The Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service (ACCHS) sector played a crucial role during and after the bushfire crisis. ACCHOs[7] provided immediate support to communities affected by the bushfire crisis, through the provision of emergency supplies, and working closely with appropriate state emergency structures.*
>
> *As ACCHOs are local organisations, staffed and controlled by the community in which they operate, staff were directly affected by the bushfires. In some cases, their homes were directly threatened, staff holidays and normal shut down procedures over the Christmas and New Year holidays had to be abandoned and clinical staff worked under the risk of burnout and increasingly stretched resources.*

[7] Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs).

> *This burden also fell on ACCHOs operating outside of the directly affected bushfire areas as families evacuated and moved to stay with relatives in areas unaffected by the bushfire crisis. Populations were forced to move as a result of evacuations and destruction of property in their communities. These secondary service impacts meant ACCHOs outside of the immediate bushfire affected area experienced an increase in client numbers as families were displaced from their communities. This increase in client numbers was not accompanied by an increase in funding and support to ACCHOs to service these clients (NACCHO, 2020: 5–6).*

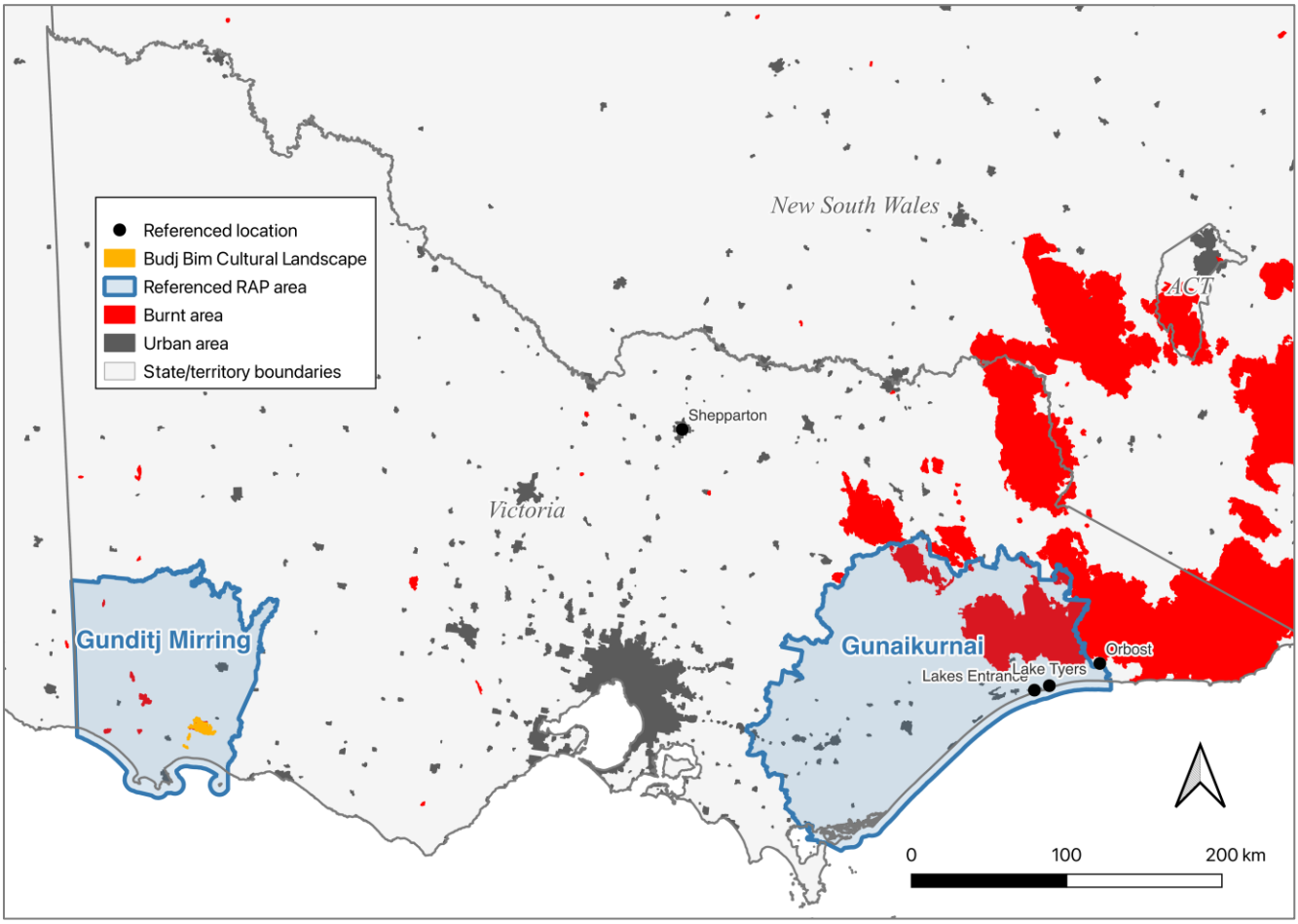
Just as community-controlled organisations provided significant support to Aboriginal communities during the bushfires, traditional owner corporations similarly provided support to Emergency Services to assist in the suppression of fire and care for Country and cultural heritage.

In East Gippsland, Gunaikurnai people are recognised native title holders and as a Registered Aboriginal Party, as well as being recognised through the 2010 Gunaikurnai Settlement Agreement under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act* (Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, 2021). Figure 2 shows the extent of formally recognised Gunaikurnai rights over land, culture, and heritage. As in 2003, significant alpine bushfires devastated Gunaikurnai Country (GLaWAC, 2020). During this event, a great many cultural heritage sites were damaged or destroyed (GLaWAC, 2020). Most of this damage however, was not as a result of the fires themselves – rather, they were a result of the actions of Emergency Services to make safe townships and assets, such as creating firebreaks (GLaWAC, 2020).

As a result of this event, Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC), the traditional owner corporation representing the interests of Gunaikurnai people, organised for a number of Gunaikurnai rangers to complete bushfire awareness training (GLaWAC, 2020). This meant that at any future fire event, they would be qualified to be present on the fire ground ((GLaWAC), 2020). Further, senior staff within GLaWAC made significant efforts to establish relationships with Emergency Management staff and integrate GLaWAC, as much as possible, with Emergency Management structures such as through IMTs (GLaWAC, 2020). This was viewed as a high priority by GLaWAC as the legal arrangements in disasters means that in a time of disaster, such as a bushfire, legislation permits emergency management authorities to destroy or damage cultural heritage sites (GLaWAC, 2020).

The result of these efforts was that in the bushfires of 2019–20, which impacted significant areas of Gunaikurnai Country, cultural heritage officers from GLaWAC were permitted to work with emergency management crews such as walking in front of vehicles to identify scarred trees or other heritage values (GLaWAC, 2020). The result of these efforts was that more than 100 cultural heritage sites were identified and made safe during the response to the bushfires (GLaWAC, 2020).

Fig. 2 Boundaries of formally recognised traditional ownership by Gunaikurnai people and Gunditjmara people overlayed with fire scar from 2019-20 bushfires.



Source: Map prepared by Francis Markham from spatial data published by EMSINA, DEWLP & ABS.

Similarly, in central Victoria where Gunditjmara people are the recognised traditional owners and native title holders and share co-management of Budj Bim Cultural Landscape[8] (Figure 2), similar stories emerged of the central role the community played in response to the bushfires. In his extensive evidence provided to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, Uncle Denis Rose, a Gunditjmara Elder, reflected on the time he spent within the IMT managing a bushfire that threatened much of Budj Bim and a significant portion of the UNESCO[9] listed Eel Traps (Rose, 2020). The advice provided by Uncle Denis – someone with a keen and intimate knowledge of the landscape – about the cultural and heritage values of Gunditjmara people proved critical in designing a fire containment strategy (Rose, 2020).

For example, due to much of the terrain being a lava flow, heavy earth-moving vehicles would have found it difficult to establish mineral (hard earth) containment lines (Rose, 2020). Further, it was advised that traditional owners did not want to have machinery operating in or near stone arrangements such as fish and eel traps, or stone houses (Rose, 2020). This included areas where there were no registered heritage values because much of the Country is yet to be mapped (Rose, 2020) . As a result, a strategy was developed by the emergency management agencies (i.e. Victoria's Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), Country Fire Authority (CFA) and others) to establish containment lines using retardant dropped by water bombers, as well as hose lines

[8] Formerly Mt Eccles National Park.
[9] UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation.

and natural water barriers such as lakes, creeks and wetlands (Rose, 2020). The containment lines held and the fires were declared under control on December 31, 2019 (Rose, 2020).

A similar scenario unfolded in Queensland where a bushfire took hold on K'Gari (Fraser Island) in October 2019, burning through approximately 85 000 hectares, more than half the island (Office of the Inspector-General Emergency Management, 2021, p. 9). The Butchella people are traditional owners and recognised native title holders over lands and waters in and around K'Gari (Office of the Inspector-General Emergency Management, 2021). During the bushfire event, a representative from the Butchella Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) was embedded within the IMT, advising the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) on cultural heritage, cultural values, connection to Country and perhaps most importantly, cultural knowledge of Country including fire behaviour in the landscape (Office of the Inspector-General Emergency Management, 2021).

Following the event, the BAC representative spoke of their pride in being able to protect country in such an event and staff from QFES spoke of the value of having a traditional owner in the IMT to advise throughout the emergency (Office of the Inspector-General Emergency Management, 2021).

These instances clearly demonstrate the immense value of engaging with traditional owners in responding to emergency events such as bushfires. It is important to note that there is no legal requirements compelling Emergency Services to engage with traditional owners in emergencies in any Australian jurisdiction. In fact, quite the opposite is true, and in Victoria, NSW and Queensland the various Emergency Services Acts take precedence over cultural heritage values and protections. This means that emergency management staff can damage or destroy cultural heritage in order to make safe lives, livelihoods and assets.

In the examples of successful engagement presented here, traditional owners were recognised through some level of formal recognition, with the organisational capacity to undertake training, and represent their community as delegates of registered traditional owners corporations.

Discussion

The examples provided in this paper are clearly not isolated. Rather, I suggest that these stories, captured through various mediums, represent a larger trend that emerged during and after the bushfires – that Aboriginal governing institutions played a key role in making Aboriginal peoples and communities safe, and assumed a central role in emergency management. This is significant as it responds to previously highlighted capacity deficits that produce vulnerabilities in Indigenous communities in times of disaster.

Howitt et al., (2012) states:

> *It is the absence of the services, institutions, and infrastructure of everyday governance that is characteristic, and it is the lack of capacity within government agencies and other so-called 'helping organisations' to work constructively and consistently with Indigenous institutions – or even to recognise their presence and importance – that is the most urgent capacity deficit (p. 54).*

This study has shown that in communities where the 'services, institutions, and infrastructure of everyday governance' are strong, Aboriginal peoples remain at significant risk from mainstream government and non-government agencies and organisations that cannot work 'constructively and consistently' with Aboriginal peoples. This has previously been highlighted by Sithole et al. (2019) and is confirmed here. In this way, I argue that in times of socionatural disaster, mainstream agencies and organisations present the most significant hazard that Aboriginal peoples are likely to encounter.

In relation to the field of demographic faultlines, the needs of Aboriginal peoples and mainstream communities during the bushfire emergency were, at surface level, much the same. For instance, both communities experienced extreme stress, anxiety, uncertainty, threats to their homes and livelihoods, and both needed basic support and clear communications from authorities. Based on this, one could conjecture that these shared needs would be sufficient to overcome pre-existing faultlines; however, the opposite has been shown to be true. Rather than the emergency galvanising the community-at-large into one cohesive, supportive unit, the bushfire emergency ruptured pre-existing faultlines between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream populations. These experiences dispel any suggestion that the needs of Aboriginal peoples will be met within mainstream responses to disaster, thus Indigenous-specific measures must be developed and embedded within disaster responses. This is consistent with findings from McGee & Christianson (2021) that investigated the unique experiences of First Nations in wildfire evacuations throughout Canada. McGee & Christianson's (2021) book, *First Nations wildfire evacuations: A guide for communities and external agencies*, guides recovery practitioners and policy makers through the significant elements needed in Indigenous-specific relief and recovery strategies during wildfires. In the context of Aboriginal communities affected by the 2019–20 bushfires, developing targeted strategies is made more important given the trust-deficit that now exists, which will likely result in Aboriginal peoples being suspicious and untrusting of mainstream disaster relief services and institutions, and thus unwilling to access their support. But targeted Indigenous strategies may also offer previously unrealised and untapped opportunities for relief and recovery agencies.

In their study of post-earthquake Christchurch, Phibbs et al. (2015) document the strategic resources available to emergency services and disaster agencies by engaging with Maori communities and organisations. In particular, they identified how Maori had access to doctors, nurses and medical supplies, heavy machinery contractors and earth movers, and assets such as *marae* (Maori tribal buildings) that could be used as evacuation points and relief centres (Phibbs et al., 2015). Further, the strategic knowledge of their community meant that Maori organisations would have offered important information on community characteristics including the elderly and unwell, families, and people with a disability. These data are so highly valuable in the midst of disasters and immediate responses. So, whilst it is vital that relief and recovery agencies and organisations are able to reach and service Indigenous peoples, there are added opportunities through harnessing the assets available in Indigenous organisations.

As governments, shire councils, and local townships seek to rebuild post-bushfires, it is vital that notions of 'rebuilding' or 'building back better' are not limited to infrastructure and industry. Building back better requires examination of the failures in the emergency and (re)building emergency processes and institutions that are capable of supporting *all* people in a disaster. Including capacity building within a post-disaster recovery landscape has been previously highlighted by Paton & Buergelt (2019) as critical to fostering transformative change and thus creating resilient communities.

Clearly, there is much to reflect on and learn from the events of the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires. Below I organise key themes that have arisen in this study, from which relief and recovery agencies and organisations can begin the work of creating transformative change in their institutions and that Aboriginal peoples may draw upon to better prepare for future socionatural disasters.

There is a trust deficit between Aboriginal communities and mainstream relief and recovery agencies

To support communities effectively, there needs to be a level of trust that exists between community members and the agencies leading the response (Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2004). As noted in the feedback provided by multiple communities in multiple regions, Aboriginal peoples were treated poorly, made to feel unwelcome and were not provided culturally appropriate support by mainstream support agencies when evacuating from the bushfires (NACCHO, 2020; Owens & O'Kane, 2020; Williamson & Quinn, 20O20). This resulted in people putting

themselves at further risk because they did not feel comfortable accessing support or services (Owens & O'Kane, 2020).

The trust deficit that now exists between Aboriginal peoples and recovery agencies means that targeted strategies must be put in place to support communities in future disasters. Trust is much easier to destroy than create (Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2004), so these strategies must be long-term.

Aboriginal community governing institutions are an asset in times of disaster

Aboriginal community organisations and cultural governing institutions are an asset in times of disaster, including for the communities that they represent and service, as well as the wider emergency response. They provide critical information about local populations such as distribution, families (large, small, size, structure, etc.), visitors (such as families visiting in school holidays), health of local people, number and location of elders, people with a disability and other at-risk groups, mobility (e.g., who does and does not have access to transport), avoidance relationships (such as people subject to Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs) or disputing families), and more.

As organisations embedded in, and governed by, local communities, trust and familiarity already exists between Aboriginal communities and their organisations. In socionatural disasters, it is a natural fit that these governing institutions be utilised to support communities, whether as evacuation centres, outreach, providing relief or coordinating external agencies. Indeed, these activities were seen to occur during the Black Summer bushfires by organisations such as GEGAC, Waminda and Katungul.

There is an immediate need to acknowledge the work of Aboriginal community governing institutions in disasters and increase their funding

Currently, no Aboriginal organisation, whether as a community co-operative, community-controlled health organisation, local land council, native title corporation, or other, are acknowledged for the role they play in disasters, let alone renumerated for this (Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health & Community Services, 2020; NACCHO, 2020). The activities provided by Aboriginal governing bodies were done at-cost borne by the Aboriginal organisations during the bushfires (NACCHO, 2020). These costs included financial (such as buying goods), time (sitting in IMTs and working overtime) and emotional (supporting communities as first responders when staff are also victims). Clearly this must change.

Until such a time that the emergency management and disaster relief and recovery sectors reform and appropriately include Aboriginal peoples in planning and preparation, Aboriginal community organisations will continue to play a central role in emergency management and disaster relief and recovery. These added responsibilities must be formally acknowledged and supported with increased funding, resourcing, and training. Aboriginal organisations must have the financial capability to support communities including buying supplies, providing emergency housing, transport, providing for health needs, food, water, and communications. They also need the financial ability to pay staff for their time, including the inevitable overtime and hazard pay. But additional funding in-and-of-itself may be insufficient. Organisations would require a significant investment of resources including physical infrastructure, back-up generators, vehicles, and Information Technology (IT) systems to function in high pressure and volatile environments.

Additional training would also be required for staff to ensure they have the requisite skills such as advanced first aid, mental health first aid, 4WD training, emergency management, IT training, and more. Taken together, the increase in funding, additional resources and targeted training would create a surge capacity within Aboriginal organisations that can be called upon in times of socionatural disaster.

The importance of standardising and collecting Indigenous data

Issues of data collection must also be addressed. As previously highlighted, relief and recovery agencies collect uneven and irregular data on Aboriginal peoples and communities. To ensure that accurate and timely information is being collected in order to target resources and support communities, the urgent compilation of data on how many Aboriginal people are being impacted, where they are impacted, what support they need, and more, must be standardised across agencies. To ensure that these data are not misinterpreted or mistreated, Indigenous data governance[10] (Maiam nayri Wingara & Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, 2018) arrangements to manage Aboriginal data must be put in place.

The importance of harnessing knowledge of Country

In relation to emergency planning, management and response, traditional owner corporations provide important information regarding Country, such as recent land management activities that may impact on fire spread or severity (for instance, if parts of the Country were recently burned or cleared); landscape features that may be an asset (such as mountain ridges, creeks, waterholes etc.); cultural heritage values; cultural resources important to communities; wildlife populations (such as animals, birds, fish etc.) including locations of threatened species, threatened or endangered plants or trees; climate; topography; fuel loads; soil; and more. Traditional owners also possess knowledge of previous disaster events, either through lived experience or through traditional stories, with these offering a different and potentially deep source of knowledge about hazards, as previously been identified by Sithole et al. (2019, p. 30). This information is highly valuable in formulating strategies and responses to emergencies such as bushfires.

This was demonstrated in the response to both the K'Gari and Budj Bim fires where representatives from local traditional owner corporations participated in IMTs. Furthermore, GLaWAC highlights how cultural heritage values can be safeguarded by working with cultural heritage officers on the ground by surveying the landscape before emergency management vehicles conduct activities such as create mineral earth containment lines. But these partnerships between emergency agencies and traditional owner corporations were developed largely on the back of local relationships and the initiative of staff.

Reforming emergency management to require traditional owners in IMTs

There is no legislation in Australia that *requires* local traditional owners to be members of an IMT, or other comparable decision-making groups. This is not to say that there are not requirements to have regard for cultural heritage values during disasters, but it is not mandated to have traditional owners within emergency management decision-making structures, or that traditional owner corporations have any formal role in emergency situations where disasters such as bushfire often threaten cultural and heritage values. This needs to change.

Creating identified roles for Aboriginal people within and across disaster planning preparation

Whether cultural heritage or relief and recovery, it is clear that much needs to be done to better support Aboriginal peoples during and after disasters. Rather than wait for the next disaster, the time for addressing these shortcomings lies in the period of calm between disasters, which requires planning. As was highlighted earlier, there currently exists a shameful lack of engagement with Aboriginal peoples, whether as communities or

[10] Indigenous data governance is defined as 'the right of Indigenous peoples to autonomously decide what, how and why Indigenous Data are collected, accessed and used. It ensures that data on or about Indigenous peoples reflects our priorities, values, cultures, worldviews and diversity' (Maiam nayri Wingara & Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, 2018).

traditional owner groups, in emergency and disaster planning. Now is the time to address the historical marginalisation of Aboriginal peoples and adequately prepare for the next disaster event.

As a practical step to address these shortcomings, it is necessary and urgent to begin to include Aboriginal peoples within the planning structures, organisations, and agency staff. This was put forward by the Australian Red Cross who, in their submission to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry, recommended that:

> *…the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities are involved in emergency management preparedness, response and recovery planning and implementation (Australian Red Cross, 2020, p. 6).*

In Victoria, this process has somewhat begun with a new *Victorian state emergency management plan* being adopted in 2021, post-bushfires (Emergency Management Victoria, 2021). This plan, for the first time, explicitly acknowledges the role of traditional owners who have been formally recognised in emergency planning, preparation, response, and recovery. It states that:

> *Traditional Owners who are party to Indigenous Land Use Agreements with the Victorian Government should be involved and consulted in accordance with the requirements of the agreement, when implementing the SEMP and otherwise managing emergencies (Emergency Management Victoria, 2020, p. 6).*

It goes on to state that 'Agencies should consider the role and inclusion of Traditional Owners in mitigation, response and recovery activities throughout Victoria' (Emergency Management Victoria, 2020, p. 10).

Although small acknowledgments, these texts provide a foundation for Aboriginal groups, in Victoria at least, that previously did not exist. Much more needs to be done, but policy levers such as these provide both Aboriginal groups and policy makers the necessary base to begin changing practice. These changes in practice must be led by Aboriginal people and so identified positions within and across agencies and organisations are necessary.

Perhaps most notable in this study are the deep constitutions of strength and resilience in Aboriginal communities. At the height of the bushfire crisis, Aboriginal communities and organisations rallied, evacuating community members, providing immediate relief and support to communities and families affected, and taking their own steps to protect their cultural and heritage values. These extraordinary efforts at the frontlines and faultlines must be acknowledged, honoured, and applauded. As relief and recovery organisations reform their practice and engage with Aboriginal peoples (some for the first time) in planning for future socionatural disasters, these engagements must be built on the strengths and resilience embedded within and across Aboriginal communities. Importantly, these relationships must also be developed at the local or regional levels where the distinct knowledges of Aboriginal groups and communities is most important and most accurate. This 'decolonial turn'[11] in resilience thinking makes visible settler-colonial structures and processes in emergency responses, and supports Aboriginal peoples through the dismantling of systems of marginalisation and discrimination that produce disasters within disasters.

Conclusion

There is much to be learned by reflecting on the events of the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires. In relation to Aboriginal peoples, whether as individuals, communities or traditional owners, the fires weren't the only hazard, or indeed, the most significant hazard, that they encountered. That Aboriginal peoples were made to feel unwelcome at the height of the crisis is a sore and shameful chapter in what was perhaps the most significant

[11] See Atalla (2016, p. 97) for a discussion on 'decolonial turn'.

socionatural disaster ever in Australia. But while the response by relief and recovery agencies was lacking, Aboriginal community organisations demonstrated a previously unrecognised, or under-recognised, value and capacity.

Aboriginal community organisations were pivotal agents in the response to the bushfires and played a significant role in making safe Aboriginal peoples, communities, and Country. The trust deficit between Aboriginal peoples and government, mainstream agencies and NGOs now engendered as a result of the bushfires will not abate quickly, and not without positive and urgent action. As a foundation, it is imperative that Aboriginal community organisations be recognised for their role in responding to the bushfires, and their continued role in responding to future socionatural disasters. Indeed, this must be understood as a distinct form of community and organisational development.

Having highly developed Aboriginal community organisations insulates communities against the culturally unsafe recovery agencies and allows traditional owners to be embedded in emergency responses at a time when their culture and heritage is directly threatened. In this way, Aboriginal community organisations can be understood as a critical component in resilient communities and safeguard, to a certain extent, Aboriginal communities and Country against inevitable disasters to come.

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