

Submission Number: NND.001.01142

Submission Of: Katrina Dickson

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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise? organisational collaboration learning, adaptation, transformation

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation?

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

- highly effective volunteerism (including firefighters and wildlife rescue helpers)
- the inspiring leadership of Shane Fitzsimmons
- regular media updates
- impressive, visible, transparent State Premiers
- fire apps on mobile phones, and text messages
- kindness of community members
- collaboration between agencies

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

- communication across jurisdictions, including state boundaries eg RFS and CFA were unable to communicate
- confusion for people living and working along state boundaries during and following fires because of inconsistencies between jurisdictions
- lack of empathy and leadership of PM
- resources allocated by Federal Government arrived too late. The potential for catastrophic fires was clear soon after fires started in the Northern NSW Hinterland; this was clear to many organisations and organisations, but clearly not the Federal Government and PM. Why? despite previous calls from fire chiefs and other experts to meet with the PM months before the disasters played out?
- bureaucratic red tape that impeded prudent and fast decision-making and action, within and between different levels of government

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

Recommendation 1: Agencies, NGOs and other stakeholder groups and networks commit to becoming learning organisations:

Preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for natural disasters can improve by agencies become learning organisations. As environmental problems and human conflicts over resource management increase, budgets tighten and societal expectations grow, natural resource and other agencies need to be flexible and adaptable and to learn continuously. Adaptive and transformative learning is vitally important as humans deal with increasingly wicked and super-wicked challenges characterised dynamic complexities, interconnectedness, rates of change and values conflicts, meaning they are hard to identify, manage, analyse and resolve. A complex, fast-changing world requires complexity thinking as a shift away from traditional, reductive, linear thinking. A 'learning organisation' is one in which knowledge is created, integrated and applied on an ongoing basis as part of daily work, behavioural change results from learning, and this enables the organisation to continually adapt and transform in response to internal and external changes. Much of this learning happens informally, so incidental and informal learning must be valued rather than viewed as wasting time. In a learning organisation members continuously share knowledge, skills, perceptions and ideas, changing behaviours when necessary, and adapting and transforming their approaches in response to changing circumstances.

The ways in which agencies most effectively achieve public good outcomes usually involve collaboration with multiple external stakeholders who need to work and learn together over long periods of time. The pivotal roles of agencies extend beyond the provision of technical, scientific and policy information, to include acting as facilitators, educators, mediators and public relations specialists while also contributing resources, including funding and data. Becoming learning organisations may assist public sector organisations to meet the increasing expectations from communities and other stakeholders for services and outcomes, with associated pressure to innovate, within the challenging context of declining funding. Institutional and cultural barriers, however, often prevent knowledge sharing, social learning and collaborative action between multiple stakeholders in the public sector. Becoming learning organisations, including increasing focus on 'human dimensions' involves dealing with these barriers.

Becoming a learning organisation requires attention to three key areas: leadership, the learning environment and operationalising organisational learning through systematic formal and informal activities. Leadership, cultural and structural changes are likely to be necessary, particularly if these tend to be overly hierarchical and bureaucratic. Leaders need to maintain an appropriate balance between adaptive leadership and administrative leadership. This allows leaders and staff to respond effectively to complex challenges of social-ecological systems while meeting the administrative requirements of upper management. Cultures that support learning and adaptability are characterised by high levels of trust and psychological safety, constructive conflict, welcoming diverse opinions, complexity thinking, experimental approaches, learning from failure, prioritising time for reflection and dialogue as well as action, collaborating in groups, high levels of autonomy, positive emotions, affective commitment, workplace stability, and staff with attributes suited to organisational learning. Regular systematic learning activities and processes that operationalise organisational learning are necessary. These may be many and varied, with after-action reviews being a highly relevant example.

Recommendation 2: Increase attention to human dimensions

Social-ecological systems and the institutions involved in their management may be viewed as complex adaptive systems. In practice, the interconnectedness of social-ecological systems is often ignored, and lack of attention to social relationships in shaping environmental outcomes has led to disappointing results and natural resource management (NRM) failures. Continuing to treat social systems and ecosystems separately is unlikely to lead to sustainable outcomes. Given the role of humanity in NRM challenges, it is critical that humans are as much a focus as the environment, particularly if the wicked challenges of the Anthropocene are to be addressed. 'How' people manage, and 'why' they manage is just as important as 'what' they manage. Greater attention human dimensions, that is the social attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, behaviours, values, desires, needs and interactions of people working together to maintain, protect, enhance and use natural resources is required. Attention to human dimensions in organisations includes considering agency staff, stakeholders and communities, and the relationships and interactions between them. This attention is required when becoming a learning organisation.

Recommendation 3: Implement adaptive management including traditional knowledge across landscapes

Adaptive management is often regarded as the preferred continuous improvement system applicable to natural resource management; however, successful cases are rare in practice. There has been some interest in pursuing adaptive management as a tool for reducing risks and harm to ecosystems and communities in Australia. For example, I attended weeklong course in Adaptive Management for Conservation in September 2019. Facilitated by the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute, participants from around Australia and Asia Pacific were enthusiastic about bringing new ways of thinking and new frameworks back to their organisations and communities. The threat of bushfires was a key area of focus in the Adaptive Management for Conservation course. We did not know at the time that our new knowledge was prophetic and timely, yet too late. The indigenous course participants emphasised the need to re-instigate 'right-way fire' across many areas of Australia. The costs of managing landscapes and ecosystems without traditional knowledge are now clear to see.

Scientists and land managers in South Africa's Kruger National Park in the mid-1990's developed a closely aligned and highly effective framework, Strategic Adaptive Management. Strategic Adaptive Management is a structured, cyclical, iterative decision-making process aimed at building knowledge, learning, and improving management through responding to the intended and unintended outcomes of actions. The aim of Strategic Adaptive Management is to maintain natural resources in a healthy state through adapting management approaches in response to social-ecological changes, and at the same time address different and sometimes conflicting stakeholder perceptions, values and objectives. It brings together a wide range of knowledge types through collaboration and social learning with multiple-stakeholders. 'Thresholds of potential concern' (TPCs) are used as triggers for responsive and adaptive action.

Barriers to the implementation of adaptive management tend to be social and institutional. Agencies, work units, teams and networks can address these barriers by becoming learning organisations. Becoming learning organisations and implementing effective adaptive management will help responsible organisations, community groups and other stakeholders prepare and plan for future natural disasters, including bushfire threats and risks, and identify appropriate action to adapt to these risks to communities and ecosystems.

Recommendation 4: Climate action

The drought and heat of late 2019 and early 2020 were unprecedented. There is a clear link between the extent and severity of the bushfires and anthropogenic climate change. The world is in a climate emergency with an urgent need for a rapid transition to renewable energy sources and away from fossil fuels. The Federal Government must support these changes and lobby others to do the same. Life as we know it is at stake.

Recommendation 5: No new coal mines

The fires caused the death of many native animals, including koalas, and their habitats. We need to protect those that remain. Proposed mines, such as Shenhua Watermark Coal Mine, the location of threatened species, including koalas and vegetation communities, including White Box Woodlands must not go ahead.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

My heart aches for those who lost so much in the recent bushfires, for the terror they experienced and the traumatic impact on our landscapes, fauna, flora and fragile ecosystems. I have recently submitted my PhD Thesis, 'Making time for tea in the public sector: Natural resource management agencies as learning organisations.' The first paragraph of my PhD is valid here:

"As I write this, much of the world has gone into lockdown because of COVID-19; Australia, its people and ecosystems are recovering from extensive and devastating bushfires; and, drought continues in many areas. Now more than ever, organisations and their people need to be flexible and adaptive in order to respond to complex and growing social-ecological challenges..."

I have a Masters of Business Administration (MBA), a Post Graduate Diploma in Agricultural Economics and Honours Degree in Rural Science. I am a certified Action Learning Coach, and Meta-Coach. My thirty year career includes work in a wide range of sectors and organisations, both in paid and voluntary capacities, and particularly in NRM and agriculture.

My PhD research and findings are very pertinent to the challenges of these times, and the increasing uncertainty of the complex adaptive systems of which we are part. I look forward to playing a part in new ways of living and working. I am available for consulting, coaching and project work. Please contact me for further information and assistance.

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