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IN THE LINE OF FIRE: THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING TOURISM OPERATIONS IN THE VICTORIAN ALPS

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Understanding the impact of bushfires on tourism operations in Australian national parks and regional communities is of growing importance, with evidence of their increased frequency and severity linked, in part, to climate change. This is particularly critical for Australian alpine regions, given their greater emphasis on the summer season in the wake of lighter winter snowfalls. This article focuses on management issues and challenges of maintaining tourist operations within the Victorian Alps post-bushfire, including operator reactions to the bushfires and their subsequent implementation (or not) of crisis management and disaster recovery strategies. It is based on a qualitative study involving semistructured interviews with 13 tour operators based in the Mt. Buller and Alpine National Parks. Findings of this study suggest that the majority of operators will experience some impact on their business after the fires, albeit to different degrees, and point to a paucity of forward recovery planning. Operators expressed their concerns about prolonged negative media attention about the fires, but did not have strategies in place to deal with this issue proactively. There appears to be scope for assisting operators on the ground with disaster recovery, including the provision of more positive and timely media communication.

Key words: Bushfires; Tourism operators; Crisis management; Recovery planning; Government; Media

Introduction

Recent periods of drought and rises in temperatures and storm activity, attributed in part to climate change, have led to an increase in the occurrence and severity of bushfires in the Australian Alps (Gómez Martín, 2005; Perry, 2006; Scott, Jones, & Konopek, 2007; Scott, Wall, & Mc-

Boyle, 2005; Worboys & De Lacy, 2003). Bushfires are now a perennial management issue for Australian national parks, and their impact on tourism needs to be more fully understood in order to develop appropriate strategic responses and address the issue of loss of revenue due to cancelled bookings and reduced visitation in the wake of these fires. During the past 6 years, there have

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been two significant outbreaks of major bushfires in the Australian Alps and high country, causing severe damage and lasting impacts on residents, tourism operators, and visitors. The Australian Alps stretches across parts of the states of Victoria and New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. This article focuses on the Victorian Alps and the impacts of the bushfires in 2006–2007 on tourism operations.

This impact is still being assessed and is of vital importance to the region, given the economic contribution of visitation to the alpine areas of Australia. It is noted that over 1.5 million people visit the Australian Alps National Parks annually (Pickering, Harrington, & Worboys, 2003) and the economic impact of visitors to the Victorian Alps, based on gross state product (GSP), has been estimated at $145.02 million, with 29% ($42.06 million) occurring in summer (Mules, Faulks, Stoeckl, & Cegielski 2005). There is also a growing recognition of the social/health benefits of visiting natural areas (Maller, Townsend, & Brown, 2002) and the value to society, in an educative sense, of people spending time in protected areas, with exposure to nature and the provision of interpretation affording opportunities to raise public consciousness about conservation and the environment (Orams, 1996). The Australian Alps have recently been selected as one of the "iconic landscapes" of Australia, which will be promoted to international markets via the National Landscapes program (Gorman-Murray, 2008). The viability of the Australian Alps as a tourist destination is thus critical to a number of stakeholders and underscores the need to develop a more in-depth understanding of the impact of bushfire on this fragile resource.

In 2003, an estimated 1.73 million hectares of the Australian Alps, including 1.2 million hectares in Victoria (Parks Victoria, 2005), were affected by bushfire, making this fire the largest in 60 years (Worboys, 2003). Even the national capital was affected, with 4 lives and 506 residences lost in Canberra (Armstrong & Ritchie, 2008; Worboys, 2003). Only 3 years then elapsed before an equally severe event, the 2006–2007 fires, tore through the Victorian Alps. According to Parks Victoria and the Department of Sustainability and the Environment (DSE) (2007); these fires were some of the worst on record and had a major effect on tour-

ism in the Victorian Alps, although the latter is yet to be quantified on a regional basis. Bookings and reduced visitation led to significant million-dollar revenue losses according to Parks Victoria and DSE (2007), with "a significant flow on effect . . . to other businesses, particularly in the retail sector" (p. 29). Figure 1 provides a map of the affected areas of the 2006–2007 bushfires.

This article is based on a study that explored the impact of the 2006–2007 bushfires on tourism in Victoria's Alpine National Parks and adjacent areas. The study utilized secondary visitor/tourism data, as well as qualitative data gathered from 13 interviews with tourism-related business operators in the Victorian high country. This article will examine the reaction of these operators to the bushfires and their subsequent implementation (or lack) of crisis management and disaster recovery strategies, as well as the implications of these findings for the broader alpine tourism industry and protected area managers. The article begins with a brief summary of the literature that was reviewed for the purposes of informing this study and provided the foundation of the research questions that were developed and subsequently explored during the interviews with operators. It then briefly outlines the methodology employed in the study and follows this with a description and analysis of the findings. This includes the outlining of recommendations for the future management of tourism in high risk bushfire regions such as the Victorian Alps, including the need for adequate and targeted on-the-ground resources and the importance of proactive media communication to encourage tourists to return to the alpine areas postfire.

Literature Review

Bushfires have been the context of a variety of studies, both from an Australian and international perspective, although the main focus of fire-related tourism research to date appears to be the US, Canada, and Australia, all of which have experienced large fires over the last 25 years, particularly in the western parts of the US/Canada (i.e., California, Wyoming, British Columbia) and southeastern Australia, particularly the state of Victoria (Pyne, 1997, 2006, 2007). This literature review will begin by discussing the more general litera-

Figure 1. Map of the 2006–2007 Alpine bushfires. Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment.

ture dealing with crises and disasters affecting tourism, together with specific studies on bush-fires, in order to frame a study of the impact of fire on tourism operators in Victoria's Alpine Region.

Few destinations actively plan for a crisis or disaster, despite the likelihood of this occurring at some point in time and the effect this can have on a variety of fronts, notably tourism (Faulkner, 2001; Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001). Research is therefore needed to study the impacts of these types of events on the tourism industry and the type and adequacy of their responses to these impacts (Faulkner, 2001). Although Faulkner (2001) makes a distinction between crises and disasters, arguing that crises are induced by an organization, while disasters have a natural or external cause, it would appear that in the case of bushfires, it is no longer very helpful to distinguish between the two concepts. As Faulkner (2001) argues, the boundaries are blurring, given that bushfires may be triggered by human involvement, including arson or back-burning gone wrong, as well as natural causes such as lightning strikes. In this article, we will refer to fires interchangeably as either a *disaster* or a *crisis* affecting a community or region and refer to *crisis management* or *disaster recovery* as the process by which the community or region seeks to deal with the implications of a disaster or crisis and minimize their impact.

A number of international studies to date have examined the impact of fire from a tourism perspective, although gaps still exist in the literature. Murphy and Bayley (1989) investigated the 1985 forest fires in the East Kootenay region of Canada, focusing on the nexus between tourism and natural disasters and recommending that tourism be given a greater role in disaster planning. They note that tourism "can advance the recovery stage by dispersing factual information internationally and by bringing visitors back to an affected area" (p. 39). A number of studies look at public perceptions of fires in tourist destinations. Bath (1993) looks at public attitudes toward fire policy and fire management issues, following the 1988 Yellowstone National Park fires, which were the subject of much criticism and misinformation. Lichtman (1998) also considered the public relations ramifications of these fires, and the importance of building sup-

port for programs of fire management. Lessons for tourism and visitation after the Yellowstone fires were documented by Franke (2000), covering public attitudes towards fire and exploring some of the barriers to visitation postfire. The point is made that some visitors may actually be attracted to these places due to the rarity value of witnessing ecological regeneration, while others see smoke and ash as a deterrent to visitation. It is also noted that the economic impact of these fires long term can be difficult to quantify, given the influence of a number of factors on visits to national parks, such as the price of fuel and climatic conditions (Franke, 2000).

The wildfires that raged through Florida in 1998 have been the subject of several important studies. Jacobson, Monroe, and Marynowski (2001) investigated the influence of experience and mass media on public knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions regarding wildland fire. They focused on public perceptions, rather than looking at operator/industry views of the impact of media coverage on visitation. Butry, Mercer, Prestemon, Pye, and Holmes (2001) utilized economic modeling to determine the economic impact of the fires on the local region and the state of Florida and to analyze "the amount we should spend to prevent and suppress wildfires" (p. 9). Thapa, Holland, and Absher (2003) took a more sociological approach in an effort to understand tourist knowledge of fire, situations, attitudes towards fire, and the effect of fire on travel behavior. Again, the focus was on understanding the demand side, rather than a supply side study of disaster recovery.

In more recent studies, Hystad and Keller (2006, 2007) used the context of the 2003 forest fires in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada to examine the tourism industry's preparedness and response to disasters and the impact of this event on different sectors of tourism, as well as to develop a destination tourism disaster management framework. They combined a survey of 104 tourism businesses with analysis of secondary data (government reports and media articles). Three Australian studies focused on the 2003 bushfires that swept through large parts of Victoria, NSW, and the ACT. Cioccio and Michael (2007) explored how small tourism businesses deal with the impact of a natural disaster based on a sample of Alpine

locations in Victoria. They highlighted the lack of preparedness of the tourism industry, but noted that many operators rely on accumulated experience from trading during "tough times" to get them through a disaster. They also observed that these small operators see themselves as "an integral part of the community that was affected by the disaster" (Cioccio & Michael, 2007, p. 10), illustrating the importance of community-based responses to these events. Armstrong (2005) examined destination recovery after the 2003 fires on the NSW/ACT side of the border, focusing specifically on the role played by planning in this process. Armstrong and Ritchie (2008) dealt with the impact of recovery marketing campaigns in their study of the Canberra HEART advertising campaign, seeking to reinvigorate tourism in the wake of the 2003 fires. These studies have been a useful starting point to the current research, which can be distinguished in that it focuses on the 2006–2007 fires in Victoria and looks to examine whether there have been *improvements* in emergency management/disaster recovery as a result of the local tourism industry experiencing two major fires in the Australian alpine region within a short space of time (3 years).

The importance of forward recovery planning before a crisis occurs is discussed in a number of studies (Henderson, 2007; Hystad & Keller, 2006; Irvine & Anderson, 2005; Ritchie, 2004). It should encompass visitors as well as residents, given that the former is likely to be "relatively unfamiliar with an area and its local emergency plans" (Murphy & Bayley, 1989, p. 38). Armstrong (2007), however, argues that there has been a lack of attention paid to *disaster recovery planning*, "that is the planning that is fundamental to the recovery of a destination after a disaster has occurred." Hystad and Keller (2006) noted that few small businesses in their study implemented recovery strategies in the wake of a severe forest fire and observed that it was important for organizations seeking to aid the recovery of a destination to realize this and rectify the situation for future use. According to Hystad and Keller (2007), there are a number of barriers against disaster planning by tour operators, including lack of resources, lack of education or knowledge about development of a plan, the inability to effect change due to the size of the

business, and the lack of cohesion of the tourism industry in general.

The optimum time for disaster recovery to begin and the most effective ways to conduct the process have been considered in the literature, with Henderson (2007) arguing that marketing and promotion should only occur "once the situation has stabilized and rehabilitation has reached a suitable phase" (p. 96). Faulkner and Vikulov (2001) suggest that collective destination marketing is more effective than individual operator efforts in the wake of a disaster. Various strategies are suggested to encourage revisitation postfire. For example, events such as community festivals might be an appropriate way to draw people back to a disaster-affected region more quickly than might otherwise have been the case (Murphy & Bayley, 1989). Some destinations have diversified their market, product, or image (Cioccio & Michael, 2007; Hystad & Keller, 2006) or placed a greater emphasis on domestic tourists rather than international visitors during this postfire phase (Hystad & Keller, 2006).

The current situation, with two fires in relatively quick succession across the Victorian alpine region, provides the opportunity to examine both the impacts on tourism and the existence and efficacy of disaster recovery processes. This article considers the role played by operators in disaster recovery, the extent of planning that took place, and any lessons learned for future disaster recovery programs and campaigns.

Method

Qualitative research methods were used in this study to explore the impact of the 2006–2007 bushfires on tourism in Victoria's Alpine National Parks. A qualitative approach was selected as the most suitable method as it allowed for a deeper exploration of the multifarious issues surrounding the impacts of bushfires (Veal, 2005). On-site visits to several alpine locations including Falls Creek, Mt. Hotham, Dinner Plain, and Mt. Buller were undertaken. Data from interviews with 13 tourism operators are used in this article.

Semistructured face-to-face interviews were chosen as the most suitable method for the collection of qualitative data for this study. This tech-

nique allows for more flexibility in gathering data and the opportunity to explore in some depth the complexity of bushfire recovery issues (Veal, 2005), some of which may still affect operators emotionally, given that their livelihoods might have been affected and they may have lost personal property in the fires. This approach also enabled the researchers to build a rapport with the participants through a conversational style, which assisted the participant to feel more comfortable about contributing personal opinions and providing additional information (Jennings, 2001). It also allowed the researcher to prompt for more detail or request additional clarification where necessary. Operator participants were selected from a population who were present at the field sites on the selected data collection days. Individuals were approached at random and asked if they would like to participate in the study. They were then presented with an information sheet and permission was sought to digitally record their responses. The duration of each interview was between 0.5 and 1 hour.

The interviews were all conducted approximately 1 year after the most recent fires in 2006–2007, during the summer and autumn months of 2008. This meant that operators could be interviewed during the seasons when the issue of bushfires was at the forefront of their minds and part of their immediate trading and operating priority. After the completion of the field interviews, all of the digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was source coded to maintain the confidentiality of all participants. The data set was then analyzed using a content analysis technique (Jennings, 2001; Sommer & Sommer, 2002), to draw out themes relevant to disaster recovery. This involved primary data being entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This data was then coded according to the emergent themes. The next part of the textual analysis involved the grouping of these themes according to their similarities and differences. This process was continued until it was considered that saturation of conceptual categories had occurred (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Jennings, 2001) and further collection of data was thus unnecessary. This article considers the themes that emerged from this process to include: (1) overall impact of the fires, (2) media coverage, (3) emergency response, (4) short-term recovery, (5) long-term recovery, (6) the role of government agencies in the recovery process, and (7) operators' perception of the future.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary description of the tourism operator participants who took part in this study, including details of their location, their type of tourism business, their role in the business, the age of the business, and an estimate (%) of how reliant their business was on access to an Alpine National Park.

The participants owned or managed a variety of business types, including accommodation, retail, tours, food and beverage, and equipment hire outlets. On average, these businesses have been operating in the alpine region for 17 years. Most participants noted that between 80% and 100% of their summer business was reliant on access to one or more of the Alpine National Parks. All were operating at the outbreak of the most recent major bushfire fire in the summer of 2006–2007.

Overall Impact of the Fires

The operators interviewed indicated that the 2006–2007 bushfires had a significantly negative impact on their towns and regions and that this effect was particularly harsh, given that the region was still recovering from the devastating bushfires fires of 2003. Most reported a major decline in visitor numbers, with some operators describing a complete loss of trade across the summer season, resulting in the retrenchment of staff and cancellation of orders. Some operators were forced to reduce their hours of operation, decreasing employment opportunities on the mountains during the summer season. This can have a flow-on effect, given that, due to the isolated nature of the alpine region, staff of one business are often the customers of another. Some operators did however manage to trade through the bushfire by servicing emergency personnel.

In one case, the fire was put forward as the reason the business was being put up for sale: "The cottage is now on the market as well because the business has not completely recovered. The tourism has suffered on a long-term basis so it is

Table 1
Tourism Operators

Location	Type of Business	Owner/ Manager	Years of Operation	Percentage of Business Reliant on Access to an Alpine National Park
Falls Creek	accommodation	manager	20	100
King Valley	food/beverage	owner	20	90
Falls Creek	retail	owner	22	50
Falls Creek	accommodation	manager	20	100
Falls Creek	food/beverage	manager	38	80
Mt Hotham	retail/hire	manager	10	100
Mt Hotham	accommodation	manager	2	90
Mt Hotham	tours/hire	owner	6	100
Mt Buller	accommodation	owner	12	90
Mt Buller	tours	manager	15	n/a
Mt Buller	tours	owner	26	0
Mt Buller	accommodation	manager	8	100
Mt Buller	accommodation	manager	22	100

not working to that extent and people are not coming up as much. Not as much influx." Of those who reported no significant changes, some were quite optimistic, suggesting that 1 year after the fires, the postfire marketing campaigns had worked well.

The greatest impact appears to have been related to road closures and the inability of visitors to access the mountains during the bushfire period. Some operators also spoke of the negative impact of the media, including television, radio, and newspapers, based on advice to the public to stay away from the alpine region at certain times. However, not all impact was negative. For example, one participant referred to the way in which the bushfire created bonds through the local area: "The impact was on a positive note—the impact was very good for the community. It brought the community together."

Media Coverage

The operators' perceptions of the impact of the media coverage after the fire were mostly negative. One operator simply stated: "It caused the stoppage of my business." In particular, some operators recalled the perceived influence of public officials, such as the personal advice of the Victorian Premier to stay away from the northeast Victorian region, as particularly strong negative media messages. Others felt that the media reporting

was mostly accurate and actually helped to keep potential visitors informed of the immediate dangers of traveling into the region at the height of the fires: "The media coverage encouraged our decision to cancel and also backed up our decision to customers. In other words, they were not as disappointed when their trip was cancelled as they knew what was going on with the fires." Some operators observed that the media needed to focus on recovery at an earlier stage, once the immediate danger had passed for the region, but did not mention strategies they employed to encourage this process: "Shock tactics were evident in headlines which frightens people, whilst there was no emphasis given to recovery because it's not news." There was a passivity in evidence, even though many of the operators had experienced a similar phenomenon of bushfire in 2003–2004.

Emergency Response

Participants were then invited to consider and comment on emergency response plans that were in place at the time of the fires, whether personal or at a community or regional level. While two operators were not aware of the emergency response plans of their town at the time of the 2006–2007 bushfires, most operators were reasonably well informed and active in their local communities, with regular attendance at community meetings covering emergency management. One par-

ticipant, for example, was a member of the local State Emergency Service (SES), while another spoke of local strategies such as a community "phone tree" to ensure that locals, including operators, were kept informed of the latest developments related to the fires:

> Every household had private fire plans activated and then we had a phone tree where everyone was in contact with someone else in case of emergency in case there were fires coming in the middle of the night. We had practically daily meetings in the town hall and we were informed what the fire situation was. It was a very good plan and coordination amongst people and authorities.

Overall, it would appear that operators were well prepared for the 2006–2007 bushfires, given that all but one had previously prepared a formal emergency plan for their business.

Short-Term Recovery

In terms of steps taken to rebuild their business directly after the fire, approximately half of the participants had invested in some form of marketing. The remainder, however, did nothing or relied on parent companies or the regional tourism association to market their business or destination on their behalf. As one operator noted: "I relied on the tourist body to promote the area. I pay the huge rates and hope for the benefit." When asked if their business had participated in any recovery marketing as an individual or as part of a regional marketing campaign, only half of the participants agreed, with one operator stating that they were not aware of any marketing activities at all in the region. Those who did participate in regional marketing activities, however, acknowledged the strong support of regional organizations and/or government bodies: "There was extra promotion for Falls Creek on radio and TV and we participated as part of that group with Tourism Victoria" and "Regional shires, e.g., Rural City of Wangaratta and Alpine Shire bent over backwards to work through all the issues."

Participants were divided in their responses as to whether they felt that the relevant government agencies such as the parks agency (Parks Victoria), state tourism organization (Tourism Victoria), the local municipality (Alpine Shire), or the local

tourism organization communicated effectively with their business about recovery efforts immediately after the fires. Those who agreed that communication was effective mentioned regular contact from a variety of these sources: "Yes we had e-mails sent every single day reporting on plans which increased to 2 per day—one from Parks Victoria and one from DSE. Everyone finds out everything fast in this small community too."

Those operators who did not feel that there was effective communication provided a variety of reasons for this perception, including the fact that communication was not directed specifically to operators and that any promises given were not followed through, as illustrated by the following quote: "We were actually interviewed by the Commissioner for Emergency Services and he was going to do a lot of things but I don't think that's happened. Not for us personally, but for the mountain." One operator acknowledged that there may have been effective communication but they were not open to receiving it at the time it was delivered: "Well I think they probably did but we probably didn't take it all on board." The timing of communication was thus an issue.

Long-Term Recovery

On the issue of the recovery of individual businesses, 1 year on from the most recent fires, there was a range of responses, ranging from the business being fully recovered and businesses returning to a 60% recovery state, to reports that business was still significantly down compared to previous good summers. One operator noted that: "This summer we've seen a glimpse of how it should be which we have not seen for 7 years. The summer in between the fires was not a great summer but this one is going OK." Of those businesses still recovering, some operators appeared to be optimistic that they would fully recover by the next summer season: "We are back to 60/70% of our business. By next year we should be back to normal if there are no fires." Only one operator made a link between their marketing efforts and a slower summer season 1 year on: "I think that we suffered this summer mainly due to last year's fire—so then the promotion has not been done very well because then people might think that it

might happen again. We have to spell it out to people very clearly . . .”

The Role of Government Agencies in the Recovery Process

Operators were also asked to articulate how effective they believed the recovery efforts had been with respect to a number of key government agencies. While some participants stated that they felt that the efforts of the parks agency had been good, others reported that had not heard from them or were not aware of anything being carried out. Some operators felt that more could be done in terms of repair of infrastructure and removal of obsolete warning signs, that acted as a deterrent to visitors: “They put lots of signs up saying ‘This area has been burnt by fire—be careful’ and those signs are still up and should be taken down or updated or remove the problem if it still exists.”

Most of the operators felt that the state tourism organization had played an important role in the recovery effort, with one operator noting that “they backed us up on anything we tried to promote.” Only one operator felt that they did not do enough; however, their quote indicates that they may have been confusing the activities of Tourism Victoria with their local council: “Although I pay rates to them they didn’t benefit small operators.” This in itself is a concern, as it would appear that the agencies and their activities are not distinctive to some operators.

When it came to the role of the local council, only a few of the operators interviewed felt that they were effective: “[The shire was] really proactive” and “they bent over backwards to help.” One operator felt that the resort management board did more for the village than the shire, while another noted that their village was somewhat overlooked, given its location on the border of two shires. A number of operators stated that they did not know or could not recall any specific recovery activities carried out by the shires.

The majority of operators interviewed were happy with the distribution and timing of the recovery moneys: “The money given to the resort has been well spent. Used for infrastructure, marketing.” Some responded that they didn’t know where the money had gone, while others acknowl-

edged that efforts were being made and provided some suggestions on how this aspect of recovery could have been improved: “Don’t know enough about how it was spent but I think a lot was spent straight away and maybe it would have been better to wait. There are still some funds in the community which haven’t been tapped into yet.” There was almost a resignation that the season of the fires was effectively a lost cause, as illustrated by the following quote: “Money should have been spent on the following summer rather than trying to retrieve the previous one.”

Operators’ Perception of the Future

Operators were asked, with the benefit of hindsight, 1 year on, to nominate what they believe could have been done more effectively to encourage a quicker recovery for their towns and businesses. A number responded that more positive and more accurate media coverage would have been helpful: “Media in Melbourne and major cities could have communicated exactly where the fires were and where they weren’t and encouraged people to go back to the areas when the fires were safely past.” It was felt that the media exaggerated some of the risks: “Tourists were getting different stories which create fear. Sensational stories about fire frighten people off unnecessarily.”

Some operators believed that more marketing activities could have been undertaken involving the region: “They could have advertised a bit more that the bush is recovering and that the bush is back to normal, a campaign to bring people back into the region . . .” One operator suggested that the marketing effort was too slow and did not show evidence of forward planning:

> There are a lot of things they should have done much quicker and when you think about marketing and promotions and putting money into something and government money it’s going to take time to come through anyway. It’s not going to be instant—if they have a master plan during the disaster they’ve got time to plan what they are going to do after . . . but they don’t, they start planning when everything is finished and that’s the way it’s done here.

Only one operator recommended that more direct financial assistance be made available to operators:

Direct financial assistance would have been a great benefit. We only received the marketing assistance, but the interruption to the business would have benefited by some direct funding to help pay bills and wages. Some of the staff moved away from the area to find other work which would have had a flow-on effect to the rest of the region.

Operators were specifically asked if they believed that major fires were a danger every summer and whether they had any plans in place to assist with quicker recovery after any future fires. Half the operators stated their belief that fires would reoccur more frequently, while the others did not think that this was likely, even in the face of two fires within the space of 3 years. Of those who did not believe fires would reoccur with such frequency, many were advocates of burn offs and/or alpine grazing: "We have been unlucky to have 2 [fires] so close to each other. Perhaps it's because they don't burn off as often as they used to." Others stated that it was just part of the Australian landscape process: "They are a possibility every year and could be managed better. Burning off could help but in a few years time it might happen again—they are a natural hazard."

Only one operator interviewed mentioned new plans in the wake of the fires, such as a new enthusiasm for clearing debris that could contribute to a future fire: "I don't know—on private level, yes, for us here on Mt. Buller (the locals that live here), we would be better prepared because we had a close shave. We have to be better prepared and clean around the houses, etc." None of the participants mentioned any proposed developments to diversify or modify their businesses to make them more competitive or to improve their chances of withstanding a future crisis or disaster affecting their region.

Analysis and Discussion

Unlike some of the situations reported in the literature on previous fires (see, e.g., Cioccio & Michael, 2007; Hystad & Keller, 2007), almost all the tourism operators interviewed in this study had formal emergency plans in place and were involved in their communities. However, they appeared to be less prepared for recovery once the initial emergency or disaster had passed. Findings

of this study suggest that the short-term effect of the 2006–2007 bushfires was particularly harsh for businesses in the Victorian Alps, with some experiencing a complete loss of trade for almost the entire summer season. Others were affected by more ephemeral effects such as road closures, closures of the mountains during the fires, and cancelled bookings. It was beyond the scope of this study to quantify the extent of the impact of the fires on tourism in the Victorian Alps, but it would appear that the summer season after the fires occurred was effectively written off by many operators and some businesses failed to survive this catastrophic event; leading them to close their doors. More targeted assistance for these operators appears to be critical, given that these events are likely to continue to occur in the future and are linked to climate change (Brown, 2009).

Although the operators interviewed had on average been operating for a long duration (7 of the 13 participants had been in business for over 20 years) and at least half of their business income was reliant on access to a protected area within the Australian Alps, few operators indicated that they had undertaken disaster recovery planning before the 2006–2007 fires, even after the 2003 fires had taken place. This outcome is consistent with the results of previous studies such as Armstrong and Ritchie (2008) and Hystad and Keller (2006), which found that few operators had undertaken forward recovery planning and the implementation of recovery activities was haphazard. This was despite the fact that many of these businesses had a strong stake in seeing visitation affected as little as possible from the impact of bushfires and in improving disaster recovery, both for their businesses and for their regions as a whole.

It would be interesting to conduct follow-up research in the Victorian alpine regions to explore whether this is still the case, particularly given the devastating Victorian bushfires in the summer of 2009, known as Black Saturday ("Bushfire victims," 2009). These fires skirted the alpine flanks in some cases, but decimated the foothills tourist town of Marysville, and had a severe impact on an additional 77 bush communities. They also led to the loss of 173 lives and 2,028 homes (Epstein, 2009). The case for the need for disaster recovery

planning has never been made so plainly, with the crisis making headlines around the world and resulting in more Australian lives lost than the Bali bombings in 2002 and Cyclone Tracy in 1974 ("Fire Death Toll," 2009). Local tourism authorities are now trying to get this message across in a stark way, as illustrated by the following comment by Will Flamsteed from North East Victoria Tourism ("Fire-Hit Victorian Tourism," 2009): "Local tourism operators have to accept [that] bushfires are a reality of their business[es]."

A positive note in this study was struck by those operators who indicated that they were well prepared for the event and in fact felt that the fires actually contributed to the building of social capital and community camaraderie, as people were forced to cooperate to deal with the disaster. This supports the findings of research undertaken by Kaniasty and Norris (1999), who note that the "interactional character of disaster experience should not be ignored or taken for granted, as coping efforts of individuals and their communities are interwoven" (p. 26). Future research could examine the building of social capital in the wake of disasters in more depth, including the ways in which it is created or strengthened and the long-term effects it has on a community.

The impact of the media was also an issue in the current study. It was noted that negative and possibly sensationalist media reporting affected tourism business during the initial period after the fires in 2006–2007, given that potential visitors were advised to keep away from the alpine region. There was also a lack of information about the recovery process being undertaken, which might have offered a more positive story for potential tourists. This is consistent with the findings of a number of studies of disasters affecting tourist destinations (Faulkner, 2001; Hystad & Keller, 2006; Irvine & Anderson, 2005). It would indicate that there is scope for more proactive media liaison by both operators and the government agencies in the first few months after the fire, for example through more frequent and informative media releases, the active seeking of visits by media agencies, and arranging media events to facilitate more accurate and positive reporting about recovery postfire.

When probed about disaster recovery, most participants in this study indicated that they did not actively market their business after the 2006–2007 fires, or relied on others, such as the government, RTO, or local authority, to take up the shortfall. Very few reported that they contacted their customer database or prepared special mailouts or newsletters to encourage visitors to return. These operators may therefore require assistance on the ground in this short to medium term period from a dedicated "recovery officer" based close to each community (i.e., on each affected mountain peak or major town in the region). The role of this individual would be to advise local operators on how best to market their businesses during this period and act as an interface between the parks agency, local government, and the community. This may be a more efficient use of resources than providing more direct financial assistance to operators, and may enable recovery to take place far quicker than it has occurred in the past across the Victorian alpine region.

It was also a key finding of this study that, despite two major fires over the last 6 years, and even though the scientific evidence appears to be weighted to the contrary (Scott et al., 2005; Worboys & De Lacy, 2003), only half of the operators interviewed anticipate more frequent occurrence of fires in the future. Part of the role of the disaster recovery officer may be to change this perception and encourage operators to prepare for these events, by undertaking a combination of emergency and disaster recovery planning in their businesses. The building of memorials and community repositories of artifacts relating to the recent 2009 fires ("Govts to Help," 2009), helped by government pledges of more than AU$4 million, could also be adopted across those parts of the alpine regions affected by the 2003 and 2006–2007 fires, as a subtle warning about the need for vigilance and preparedness when running a tourism business in a fragile and fire-prone part of the globe.

Timing of recovery efforts also appeared to be an issue with operators in this study. A number indicated that some recovery money should be allocated for long-term use, rather than spending the majority or all of it in the initial period after the fire. This approach is consistent with Henderson (2007), as well as Hystad and Keller (2007), who note that their study of the tourism industry after

the 2003 Kelowna fires in British Columbia reveals that some businesses "may have implemented their recovery strategy too early" (p. 156). While it is important to be seen to be assisting with initial disaster recovery, allocating a proportion of disaster recovery funding for improving future seasons and advising operators that this is to occur may alleviate some of this community concern.

Conclusion

This study investigated tourism operator perceptions of the impact of the 2006–2007 bushfires on visitation to Victoria's alpine areas, including the existence of any disaster recovery program and the contribution of government agencies and the role of the media in the recovery process. This study contributes to the suite of work that has been undertaken in the area of bushfire recovery and impact on tourism, by demonstrating that there is still a long way to go before operators in the alpine regions are fully prepared for the effects of bushfires on their businesses, despite the ever-increasing frequency and duration of these events. The heavy reliance of alpine areas on the summer season, given often disappointing winter snowfalls in recent years, can lead underprepared businesses to fold, in the absence of careful planning to ensure that recovery after a disaster is as smooth and rapid as possible.

Key findings of this study include the lack of forward recovery planning and the fact that all operators appear to have experienced some impact on their business, albeit to different degrees. It appeared that there was a generally positive opinion of the constructive role of government agencies in ensuring visitor and community safety and a confidence that these bodies would advise of any potential risks connected to the fires. The challenges experienced by these operators therefore appear to relate mainly to tourism recovery in the region, although the recent 2009 fires point to the need for constant revision of fire warning strategies and policies, with some tourists losing their lives and claims being made that adequate warning was not given in some cases (Caldwell, 2009).

The existence of prolonged negative media attention was also highlighted in this study. There is scope, however, for improving the media response by providing them with more timely and positive messages about the recovery process and the introduction of a joint agency "disaster recovery" officer based on location in each of the affected mountain areas may assist with this goal. This person would provide an interface between the agencies, including state and local government, and the operators on the ground, providing personal assistance with business operations and marketing during the initial recovery period and laying the groundwork for future recovery planning.

Timing of assistance with recovery is another issue raised in this study. There is a role for the allocation of some of the disaster recovery resources for future seasons, rather than spending it all in the season that the disaster occurs. This recognizes the fact that it takes time to turn around the perceptions of visitors and to rebuild their confidence in visiting the area after a major bushfire.

Research into recovery of tourist destinations after experiencing bushfires appears to be increasing in importance, given that these events appear to be on the rise, possibly connected to climatic conditions such as drought, higher temperatures, and strong winds. The alpine regions in Australia are particularly vulnerable to the effects of fire, with their history over the past 6 years and their growing emphasis on tourism in what was previously their "off season"—the Australian summer. Operators in these regions appear to be still unprepared for the need for forward recovery planning with respect to bushfires, and strategies that assist with this process are required urgently, in order to minimize the risks of business losses. This study helps to inform government and tourism authorities about the state of play on the ground and reveals a worrying trend to dismiss bushfire risks as merely a byproduct of operating in a natural setting, rather than as likely recurrent events that can be planned for and managed, to minimize their impacts and ensure business survival. Further research is needed to explore this phenomenon in more depth and to examine whether more recent fire events may have provided a "reality check" that can no longer be ignored or swept under the carpet.

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