

2023

The Black Summer Bushfires in the Eurobodalla Shire; the Role of the Local Newspaper in Framing the Event and Experience

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The Black Summer Bushfires in the Eurobodalla Shire; the Role of the Local Newspaper in Framing the Event and Experience



(Image sourced: *BBC News*, 2 January 2020)

Thesis submitted by
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for the attainment of
Master of Research (History)

Student number: 4285487 | Submitted: 31st August 2021

Acknowledgements

I, Katarina Culic, declare this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the Master of Research degree from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

~

To Associate Professor Georgine Clarsen and Professor Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, thank you both for your incredible support and guidance of this work and for continuously inspiring me throughout this journey.

To Rory, who has been by my side through the bushfires, Covid-19 pandemic and all of life's other challenges, thank you for being the best partner in the world and supporting me through it all with your endless love.

To my family, friends and community in the Eurobodalla Shire who experienced the devastation, loss and trauma of the Black Summer bushfires and are still healing from its effects – this is our story.

~

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Introduction: The Black Summer Bushfires

This thesis focuses on the Black Summer bushfires that occurred in the Eurobodalla Shire, which is located on the South Coast of New South Wales, Australia (NSW). The bushfires experienced in the Eurobodalla were a significant part of the devastating nation-wide bushfire season experienced across Australia, which has since become colloquially named as 'Black Summer'. The Black Summer bushfires are the most recent of many other severe, 'black' bushfire events in Australia's recorded history.¹ Although Australia is familiar with severe bushfires due to its history, climate and ecology, the Black Summer bushfires have been labelled by mainstream media, politicians, and the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (2021) as 'unprecedented', due to the extent and severity of these fires. The bushfires received not only national but international media attention, and countries such as America, New Zealand, Canada and Singapore came to aid Australia in their fight against the fires. The devastation caused by the Black Summer bushfires on communities like the Eurobodalla is immense, and at least momentarily, brought the topic of bushfire disasters in Australia to the forefront of public, media and political debate.

This thesis focuses particularly on how local newspapers framed these debates, particularly in relation to climate change and human relations with non-human animals and the natural environment. I have chosen to focus on the local newspapers because the newspapers were important in capturing events as they happened and framed the issue of climate change even while national newspapers (such as *The Australian*) were studiously avoiding the topic. The newspapers highlight local experiences, provide a platform for residents to speak to global issues (climate change) and to circulate stories of hope and resilience, frequently realised through stories involving animals (but not all animals, in particular companion

¹ Liz Williams, 'The worst bushfires in Australia's history', *Australian Geographic* (3 November 2011), <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/science-environment/2011/11/the-worst-bushfires-in-australias-history/> (accessed 29 April 2021). Other severe bushfires in Australia's recorded history include Black Saturday (2009), Black Tuesday (1967), Black Friday (1939), Black Sunday (1926) and Ash Wednesday (1983).

species and native animals). The newspapers also reveal, in their gaps and omissions, and in their privileging of some voices over others, what stories get told and by whom.

The Eurobodalla Shire had been on high alert since 26 November 2019, when the Currowan fire had first ignited in the bushland due to a lightning strike, eventually spreading out of control. In the next few weeks, other major bushfires approached the Eurobodalla, including the Clyde Mountain fire, which had begun as a pyrocumulonimbus (a bushfire-generated storm) and the Araluen Road fire. The following weeks would prove to be catastrophic to the many towns and communities who were unfortunate enough to be in the path of these devastating bushfires. By the end of the Black Summer, the fires had burned across 270,000ha in the Eurobodalla Shire, equating to 79 per cent of the total land mass of that shire: 380 homes were lost, 188 more homes were damaged, 543 outbuildings destroyed, and 4 people died due to the bushfires in Eurobodalla alone.²

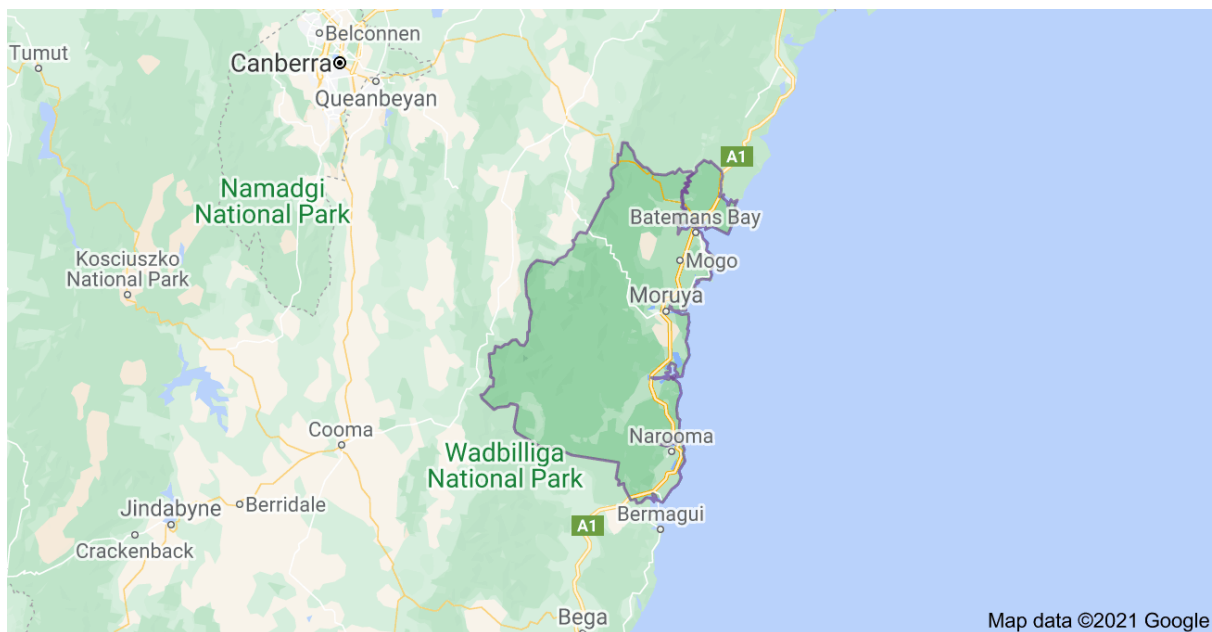


Image 1: The Eurobodalla Shire Council Area³

² Albert McKnight, 'Bushfire damage count: two-thirds of Far South Coast burnt, eight lives lost', *Illawarra Mercury*, 29 Feb 2020.

³ Google Maps, 'Eurobodalla, NSW', *Google Maps*, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Eurobodalla,+NSW/@35.9317721,149.3649239,9z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x6b15ff2edd774033:0xd1f5391e52d0afc!8m2!3d-35.8894726!4d149.9334764>, (accessed 2 July 2021).

At the time of writing, it has been nearly two years since the 2019-2020 bushfires devastated local communities on NSW's South Coast. The nation has since been faced with plenty of other challenges, some of which have taken priority as a matter of urgency. Just weeks after the Black Summer bushfires had finally ceased, the Covid-19 pandemic began in Australia, and the focus of mainstream media shifted from one disaster onto the next. The sense of urgency which was momentarily communicated across mainstream media has passed. At the risk of being forgotten in the shadow of an international pandemic, it seems timely to re-examine the bushfire emergency, now more so than ever.

Across Australia, the Black Summer bushfires claimed 33 lives, destroyed more than 3,000 houses and burned over 18,000,000 hectares of land across the nation and killing or displacing approximately 3 billion animals.⁴ A Royal Commission was conducted immediately after the Black Summer bushfires to try to make sense of the fires and how Australia might better prepare for future bushfire disasters. These numbers of course only provide a glimpse of the measurable and immediate losses and damage to both humans and non-human animals as well as cultural and natural environments. Understanding these events, and their impact, is crucial as Australia moves into unfamiliar territory in terms of climate change and the probability of more severe natural disasters occurring more frequently. The local newspapers provide one important way to understand the impacts of these events. If, as media scholars such as Mathew Nisbet suggest, news media provides a vitally important role in framing experience, then the *local aspects* of that framing should not be overlooked.

This thesis explores how local journalists reported on the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires as they were occurring, particularly in relation to how they discussed the topics of climate change and the non-human world and environment. Printed newspaper reports from one of the Eurobodalla Shire's most popular local newspaper, the *Bay Post*, will be the primary sources used for this analysis. The weekly editions of this newspaper for the period of the bushfires provide insight into how local journalists reporting on these events framed

⁴ Ross Bradstock, Hamish Clarke, Luke Collins, Michael Clarke, Rachael Helene Nolan and Trent Penman, 'A staggering 1.8 million hectares burned in 'high-severity' fires during Australia's Black Summer', *The Conversation* (30 March 2021), <https://theconversation.com/a-staggering-1-8-million-hectares-burned-in-high-severity-fires-during-australias-black-summer-157883>, (accessed 3 May 2021).

the bushfire crisis as it was developing. Letters to the editors, articles and editorials which were published in the newspaper captured the immediacy of these events as they unfolded, reflecting the trauma, loss and emotions felt by the local community and indeed those individuals themselves as they experienced the Black Summer bushfires firsthand. They also represented interventions into a national conversation about how and whether climate change should be a topic for discussion while the bushfires raged.

In the broader context of news reporting on the bushfires in Australia, local newspapers such as the *Bay Post* play an important role, including offering a regional, ‘frontline’ perspective of the Black Summer bushfires. By contrast, the national newspaper *The Australian* was criticized for downplaying the bushfire crisis by ‘failing to put a picture of the disaster on the front page of an edition’, even when the bushfires were making international news and featuring in newspapers around the world.⁵ News Corp newspapers (including *The Australian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Herald Sun*) are widely understood as fostering climate change denial, frequently publishing material which denies or challenges the topic of climate change. This issue at News Corp has been frequently depicted as a generational and dynastic problem for News Corp, with Rupert Murdoch’s son, James Murdoch, resigning from News Corp in August 2020, stating that the mission of great news companies should be ‘to introduce fact to disperse doubt — not to sow doubt, to obscure fact’.⁶

In contrast to News Corp, published material within the local and regional-based newspapers gives insight into the very real and devastating impact of the bushfires (as well as voices on climate change) which are all too often overlooked by larger, national newspaper outlets. Newspapers such as the *Bay Post*, whose publishers and editors were living through the bushfire disaster and witnessing the traumatic events and losses of homes and lives firsthand, frequently speak with certainty, rather than denial or equivocation, about climate change being the main reason for the severity and scale of the Black Summer bushfires. These papers play an important role in providing firsthand media

⁵ Amanda Meade, ‘The Australian: Murdoch-owned newspaper accused of downplaying bushfires in favour of picnic races’, *The Guardian*, 4 January 2020.

⁶ Zoe Samios, ‘Hidden agendas: James Murdoch speaks on News Corp exit’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 October 2020.

coverage of the bushfire events which also gives voice to people in townships that were devastated by the impact of the bushfires. As the *Bay Post* reveals, many residents were actively demanding public debates about the issue of climate change and criticised governments on all levels for their delayed action towards dealing with the issue. In this sense, the local paper displayed more commonality with global debates and actions on climate change, than with the national newspapers such as *The Australian* and *Daily Telegraph*.

The *Bay Post* newspaper is an important source which turned individual experiences into a communal event. These news reports provide an enduring record of the immediacy, trauma and uncertainty of the bushfires as they were occurring. These experiences are crucial in highlighting the ground-level challenges we will inevitably face in the near future, not just as communities in the Eurobodalla Shire, but across the nation. As experts have warned, our changing climate will see us experiencing more severe weather events and disasters such as the bushfires, on a more frequent basis. The increasing threat of climate change, and severe bushfires, places more stress and emphasis on the quality of our relationships with non-human animals and how these animals are accounted for during bushfire events. This thesis uses firsthand experience of residents in the Eurobodalla Shire, as captured by the *Bay Post* newspaper, to demonstrate the impact that the topics of climate change and non-human animals has on humans during a bushfire crisis. The analysis of how the local media depicted the bushfires also points to the importance of media awareness and willingness to extend the discussion of the emergency into a longer conversation about climate change and its less immediate and visible effects.

[Firsthand Experience: Black Summer in the Eurobodalla](#)

As a resident who has lived through the bushfires while they were occurring in the Eurobodalla Shire, the experience is hard to describe and harder still to talk about due to the devastating impact of these events on our community. While I cannot speak on behalf of my whole community, especially as someone who was lucky enough not to have lost my home or loved ones, I recount my story here as a resident knowing that while our personal

situations varied, the hardships and trauma were shared by all, to one extent or another. Even now, nearly two years on from the event, many of us are still feeling the effects of what happened both during and after the bushfire season. I will give a quick overview of this experience in recognition that these bushfire events are personally significant with long term effects that should not be underestimated. They must be treated with care and consideration and valued for the insight they provide into the real impacts of bushfire disasters on both individuals and communities.

From late November, when the Currowan fire began, residents of the Eurobodalla Shire lived in a state of distress and anxiety until the bushfires finally ceased in February 2020. In this prolonged period of time, my partner and I found ourselves constantly checking the Rural Fire Service (RFS) 'Fires Near Me' app, listening to the radio, checking Facebook for updates on the latest news, including the *Bay Post's* page, local RFS pages, council pages and other authorities on Facebook who were issuing warnings and updates. We received SMS messages on our phones with warnings advising that we should evacuate and to find shelter immediately. For some residents these messages would appear as a warning that it was 'too late to leave'. Heeding RFS warnings, many of us evacuated from our homes multiple times in anticipation that the fires would destroy them. Many residents who had evacuated their homes were sleeping uncomfortably inside make-shift evacuation centres or outside these buildings in their cars, tents or caravans. My partner and I evacuated from our home multiple times to my family's home in a nearby suburb, which, despite also receiving RFS warnings to evacuate, felt much safer than our property surrounded by thick forests of trees (National Park).

Thick bushfire smoke was a constant and inescapable part of our everyday lives. On hot and windy days, sometimes as hot as 40 degrees Celsius, we frantically prepared our properties as best as we could for the day that the fires would come through, which felt inevitable. We could see the clouds of smoke and reddish-grey skies looming on the horizon as the bushfires approached our towns. When the fires started to come through nearby towns, we lost power, phone and internet reception, most of us for days at least, others for a week or even longer, depending on where you lived. We couldn't contact family or friends to check on their safety, nor could we reassure them of ours. Local roads and highways were closed

sometimes for weeks on end, including the one main artery between the Eurobodalla Shire and Canberra, the Kings Highway, which was patrolled by Police and local authorities. A mass exodus of both locals who were evacuating, and tourists, who were encouraged to return to their homes, resulted in people being stuck in lines of traffic for hours and hours just to get to the next town out of the Eurobodalla Shire.

At one stage in the Batemans Bay area, there was only one major supermarket operating with a generator and long lines of people were waiting to get into the shop to stock up on food and supplies. Stories swirled around us. We heard that looters were stealing from homes, especially in suburbs which had been evacuated. A firefighting vehicle was stolen from Long Beach when the RFS volunteer who owned it was sleeping in his family's home between shifts of fighting the fires. On New Year's Day, hundreds of people evacuated to beaches such as Malua Bay with their loved ones and many companion animals. On the most severe days, the entire sky was a mix of red and thick, dark grey smoke clouds. Helicopters and firefighting planes flying over our towns became a familiar sound, as on severe days they constantly refilled from the Clyde River and other nearby water supplies, attempting to help control the fires that were threatening homes and entire townships. Hundreds of homes were destroyed by the fires, and it seemed most of us knew someone – a friend, family member or colleague – who had lost their home.

After weeks and weeks of living in a state of anxiety and exhaustion, we were beyond relieved when the bushfires were finally out in early February 2020, thanks to a heavy downpour of rain along the South Coast. After evacuating on several occasions, not knowing whether or not we would have a home to return to, my partner and I were beyond grateful to be back in our home once the fires had passed. Returning home meant unpacking the possessions which we had evacuated with, and unscrewing sheets of steel from the windows of our home which we'd put up to try to help protect the house if the fires passed through. We were safe, at least for this fire season. Over the following summer of 2020-2021, we were fortunate to have received plenty of rain, which meant there were no major bushfires in the South Coast region. Nearly two years on, however, we are approaching the bushfire season again, with far less confidence, substantially less rainfall and much drier conditions. The threat of bushfires in regional areas like the Eurobodalla is a serious risk

over the summer months to both humans and non-human animals, and one we must be preparing for.

Methodology

The Eurobodalla Shire is an important case study as it was one of the worst affected areas of Australia during the 2019-2020 bushfire crisis. By analysing the local media, revisiting the stories, letters to the editors and editorials from local newspaper, the *Bay Post*, (published during the bushfire crisis), this thesis demonstrates key themes, experiences and values of the local community as these traumatic and chaotic events were unfolding. These local stories detail the first-hand experiences of the bushfire crisis, and were not often captured in larger, metropolitan newspapers which generally focused on the events more broadly, on a national scale. The local stories of the Eurobodalla are also important because they exemplify the challenges and devastation caused by climate change to both human and non-human animals and to both the cultural and natural worlds, which, for many residents, was an important issue that was being overlooked by local, state and national leaders during the bushfire crisis.

This thesis privileges primary materials in the form of local newspapers (principally the *Bay Post*) published during the 2019-2020 bushfire crisis that occurred over December, January and February. I have chosen this local news company because it is one of the most widely read newspapers in the Eurobodalla Shire and covers news from its largest city, Batemans Bay, as well as surrounding areas and other cities, including Narooma (with a population of approx. 2,600) and Moruya (with a population of approx. 3,900). For perspective, the resident population of the entire Eurobodalla Shire is approximately 37,232, with Batemans Bay accounting for around 11,924 of those residents.⁷

The *Bay Post* is printed twice weekly, every Wednesday and Friday, and it includes digital

⁷ Eurobodalla Shire Council, 'Eurobodalla Shire population and dwellings', *Eurobodalla Shire Council*, <https://profile.id.com.au/eurobodalla/population>, (accessed 12 February 2021).

versions of these papers which can be accessed online by their paid subscribers. According to Australian Community Media (ACM) who bought the local news company in July 2019, the *Bay Post* has an average issue readership of 5,096 for its printed weekly newspapers and an average monthly audience of 15,509 for its digital, online news content.⁸ The digital newspaper articles are identical to the hard copy papers but are published online and require readers to purchase a subscription to access them. The standard length of each of these printed newspapers is 16 pages long, although a few were longer editions, such as 26 February 2020 edition which was just over 20 pages long, seemingly to cover extra stories and photographs of the bushfire crisis, including community recovery efforts.

Some editions of the *Bay Post* were not able to be printed or delivered to the Eurobodalla Shire due to the road closures caused by the bushfires. Executive Editor of ACM, James Joyce, explains that hundreds of printed copies of Wednesday 1 January 2020 were unable to be delivered from Canberra where they are printed to the ‘loyal readers in the fire-ravaged towns of Batemans Bay and Moruya’.⁹ This prompted Joyce to also cancel the printed editions of Friday 3 January 2020, and instead offered the ‘published a digital replica of the paper and shared it free to audiences’ via the *Bay Post* website.¹⁰ This thesis utilises both the hard copy papers and the identical digital newspapers of the *Bay Post*. The Wednesday 1 January was also accessible online to *Bay Post* subscribers and remains accessible at the time of writing – as do all version of the newspaper editions from the period of the Black Summer bushfires.

The *Bay Post* was also chosen for the main focus of this thesis as it was the most accessible in terms of previous printed publications. I was able to find copies at the local Batemans Bay library, which had stored and made publicly available newspapers from the Black Summer bushfire period and the previous 12 months. It is worth noting that I was also unable to access hard copies of the local newspapers with publication dates beyond March 2020, as the local library stopped their purchasing and holding of these hard copies due to the Covid-

⁸ Australian Community Media, ‘Bay Post Overview’, *Australian Community Media*, <https://www.acmadcentre.com.au/brands/bay-post/>, (accessed 9 July 2021).

⁹ James Joyce, ‘Stop the press: the bushfire-edition newspapers that never reached their readers’, *The Canberra Times*, 6 January 2020.

¹⁰ Joyce, ‘Stop the press’, *The Canberra Times*, 6 January 2020.

19 pandemic. Although this was not a major issue for the focus of my thesis (especially as I was able to access the digital editions of the *Bay Post* newspapers) it provides a real example of how Covid-19 has proven to be problematic in disrupting focus on and, in this case, accessibility to newspaper records of the aftermath of the bushfire disaster. Until Covid-19, the local library had been making weekly issues of the *Bay Post* accessible to visitors, and then stored the most recent 12 months' worth of papers at a time as an archive of local information.

The local library stored 6 editions of the *Bay Post* newspapers from December 2019, 4 editions of the *Bay Post* newspapers from January 2020 and 8 editions of the *Bay Post* newspapers from February 2020. For the editions which were not held at the local library, I accessed these via the *Bay Post* website, which stores previous versions of the newspapers, including all of the newspapers from the Black Summer bushfire period. I have carefully selected *Bay Post* newspapers from the months of December 2019, January 2020 and February 2020 for this analysis of the Black Summer bushfires in the Eurobodalla Shire. These newspapers provide insight into of the crucial weeks before, during and after the most severe bushfires in the Eurobodalla Shire. The Currowan fire, which began burning on 26 November 2019, approximately 10 kms west of East Lynne and 10 kms south of Termeil indicated the start of the Black Summer bushfires in the Eurobodalla Shire.¹¹ The most devastating impact occurred in the area across December and January, especially New Year's Day. The fires ceased in early February, thanks to a significant downpour of rain, which then lead to flooding in the local area.

I photographed each page of each of the selected months of *Bay Post* newspapers and uploaded these to Adobe Acrobat to convert them to 'searchable' PDFs. The *Bay Post* digital editions were convenient to access online but could not be downloaded or made into a 'searchable' PDF. The PDF newspapers being 'searchable' was an important element for the newspaper analysis. It allowed me to search for key words and phrases, such as 'climate change' and 'climate crisis', and trace how often these words were used across the months

¹¹ Power FM Bega Bay, 'Currowan Bushfire Update', [Facebook post], (27 November 2019), <https://www.facebook.com/powerfmbegabay/posts/2434528913262392>, (accessed 11 January 2021).

of December 2019, January 2020 and February 2020. One of the limitations or problems with this search was that the search was not 100% accurate (possibly due to the quality of the photos uploaded, or of the hardcopy newspapers themselves) which is why manually reading and searching for key words was also a process I undertook in this analysis, rather than relying completely on the search results from Adobe. The combination of both manual and electronic searching of key words ensured much more accuracy as a combined measure.

The number of articles, letters to the editors and editorials which mention 'climate change' or 'climate crisis' is worth noting. Across all *Bay Post* newspapers published in December 2019, either term is recorded 6 times, once in an editorial and 5 times across 3 different letters to the editor (3 out of 18 letters to the editor in total mentioned either term). Across all *Bay Post* newspapers from January 2020, there are just 5 mentions of either term, across 2 out of 26 letters to the editor. In February 2020 *Bay Post* editions, there are 16 mentions in total of either term, substantially more than in the previous months of December and January. Of these, 9 mentions were recorded across 3 letters to the editor (out of a total of 22), 6 mentions in an article and 1 mention in an editorial. This suggests that as they were occurring, the Black Summer bushfires acted as a catalyst for conversation and debates around climate change, which is evident in both local and national newspaper reports.

The viewpoints of both local residents and local journalists/editors captured in *Bay Post* newspaper reports suggest that many people in the Eurobodalla Shire recognized that the Black Summer bushfires were unusually severe and were a result of climate change, and that the representation of this issue was gaining momentum during the crisis period. It is also significant to note that the large majority of the use of 'climate change' or 'climate crisis' occur in letters to the editor, showing that residents were concerned about the topic. Journalists also raised the issue on several occasions throughout the bushfire crisis. The editorial inclusion of letters that addressed climate change and climate crisis is significant, signalling an interest to include a discussion about climate change when politicians (as I will discuss) were preferring not to mention it.

The primary materials (the newspapers) make up the bulk of the materials analysed in this

thesis because I wanted to highlight the role and the significance of the local perspectives on the fires. Along the way, I have also made reference to media scholarship to help situate the pressures placed on local newspapers when it comes to representing 'natural' disasters.

Overview

Chapter One of this thesis is a literature review which provides an analysis of the key sources across the fields of media, sociology and history which were used to inform this thesis. The literature review also explains how this thesis contributes to the larger bodies of work previously published across these fields. Chapter Two explores the importance of local and regional newspaper, the *Bay Post*, in providing a perspective on the Black Summer bushfires from an area that was one of the worst affected across all of Australia. I argue the importance of local news such as the *Bay Post* in capturing the immediacy of the bushfires as they occurred and giving voice to local stories and concerns during the bushfire crisis, including the topic of climate change. In Chapters One and Two, I also recognize and discuss the complex nature of news outlets, such as the *Bay Post*, which has their own vested interests and obligations to their main stakeholders, which will inevitably affect what they choose to report on and how they choose to frame these topics.

Chapter Three explores how our treatment and valuing of certain animals became apparent during the bushfire crisis and demonstrates how the media and local residents framed discussions of animals in their stories of loss and survival throughout the disaster. Chapter Three also uses the concept of framing to explore how residents and journalists in the Eurobodalla Shire framed the experiences of non-human animals throughout the bushfire crisis, especially which animals were made visible and cared for, and which were not made visible, and excluded from bushfire stories and media coverage. Across both chapters Two and Three, the emotions and trauma of residents who experienced the bushfire crisis first-hand in the Eurobodalla Shire is prominent, and acts as an important example of the impact of disasters such as bushfires, as well as climate change more broadly.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Omnicide: The Murder of All Things

Danielle Celermajer's book, *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future* (2021) is a crucial touchpoint for this thesis because she raises questions about how responsibility and action can be meaningful in the face of enormous devastation caused by the same fires, and she also draws on the significance of rethinking our relationships to the environment and animals as a crucial step forward in taking stock of what the future holds for us all. Her work demonstrates the importance of first-person writing on the Black Summer bushfires, in expressing ideas and themes which were not focused on in mainstream media coverage of the bushfires. She describes feeling 'exhausted to the point of folding', but then struggling to sleep due to the anxious and restless state of mind that these situations create.¹² Both my own experiences, which are briefly covered at the beginning of this thesis, and the experiences of residents in the Eurobodalla Shire, as in the *Bay Post*, share the same sense of anxiousness, emotions and trauma which were common effects of the bushfire. Her account considers the immense loss and trauma caused by the bushfires, as she asks:

Who killed the 3 billion animals we estimate died as a result of these fires?
What about the trees, the grasses, the insects, the microbes, the fungi?
What about the people? What about our faith in the future? What about
summertime?¹³

Celermajer's work captures the lived experience of human individuals and non-human individuals, who were also impacted on such an incomprehensible scale by the bushfires. Celermajer is frustrated and concerned by the lack of action over climate change, which is sending us towards an incredibly challenging future will be increasingly difficult for humans,

¹² Danielle, Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections on a vanishing future* (Australia: Penguin Random House Australia, 2021), p. 75.

¹³ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, p. 121.

animals and all other life to survive in. These concerns are shared also by residents in the Eurobodalla Shire, who wrote lengthy letters to the editors, sharing their frustration with political leaders. Prime Minister (PM) Scott Morrison, who in the midst of the bushfire crisis, refused to debate or even acknowledge the issue of climate change, is mentioned frequently in these letters to the *Bay Post*.

Her work offers ideas and thoughts as to how we might better understand, accept and take responsibility for such an immense and complex issue. Celermajer's work reminds us that climate change is a global issue, which will be experienced by all humans, creatures and living things on Earth:

The ubiquity of the climate catastrophes unfolding – not only here, where I felt the fire, but across the planet – can perhaps give us some inkling of how deep we are all in this. The killing has no boundaries. Everything is within its sights. Perhaps the term could be omnicide. The killing of all. Not just all humans, as if humans were the only beings that could be murdered. All beings.¹⁴

Celermajer uses the term 'omnicide' to attempt to capture the enormity of climate change and its impacts not only on the human but the non-human world, but also to place responsibility for this act of 'killing' onto all of us. As she explains, 'omnicide' is not an 'event', rather it is a 'condition'; deeply ingrained in our political and economic paradigms, and into our everyday ways of life.¹⁵

In her article for the ABC, 'Omnicide: who is responsible for the gravest of crimes?', Celermajer reminds us that mainstream media outlets are one of the key bodies who should be held accountable for denying the impacts of climate change and for fostering awareness of it:

¹⁴ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, pp. 122-123.

¹⁵ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, p. 123.

We can identify the media owners who sponsor mass denial of the scientific evidence of the effects of a fossil fuel addicted economy on the climate. The same media owners who deploy the tools of mass manipulation to stoke fear, seed confusion, breed ignorance and create and then fuel hostile divisions within communities.¹⁶

We are reminded here not only of the selective nature of media content and how this content is represented, but the power of media in influencing public opinion on climate change. As Celermajer suggests, media producers are very selective about what they choose to include, and therefore exclude, in their content. They can manipulate the public through their content by spreading misinformation, hiding the facts and creating fear-fuelled debates about climate change. Alternatively, media producers also have the opportunity to inform the public of the facts, inspire productive public debates and give attention to the issue of climate change. The direction which they choose to take often depends on the media owners vested interests.

Media outlets have the power to direct public attention to a crisis instantaneously, as well as the power to take that attention away just as quickly. Celermajer reminds us of the national and international attention which the Black Summer bushfires received through images and articles which circulated across the media. Both during and after they occurred, media content was ‘saturated with the Australian fires’, as people both at home and afar tried to come to terms with the enormity of the damage and loss caused by the disaster.¹⁷ Emotive words and images were spread across news and social media platforms, such as ‘a kangaroo joey’s body soldered to a fence’ and ‘burnt-out gum forests stretching out beyond the reach of the camera’, and held a captive audience both at home and afar, at least for a while.¹⁸ As I hope to show in this thesis, the role of the local newspaper was also vital for holding this attention, framing the issues and maintaining a close eye on events. The role of the local media is therefore an important factor in determining how an issue like climate

¹⁶ Danielle Celermajer, ‘Omnicide: Who is responsible for the gravest of all crimes?’, *ABC Religion and Ethics* (3 January 2020), <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/danielle-celermajer-omnicide-gravest-of-all-crimes/11838534>, (accessed 3 January 2021).

¹⁷ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, p. 117.

¹⁸ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, p. 117.

crisis and the ‘omnicide’ that it involves, becomes an issue for public deliberation. In a crucial way, the local newspapers were providing a platform for the kinds of conversations about responsibility, action, and ethics that Celermajer was calling for at a philosophical (and also political) level.

As well as literature relating to media representations of natural disasters, I am also informed by historical analyses of bushfires and their cultural significance. The work of Tom Griffiths is crucial in considering where the Black Summer bushfires fit within the national history of Australia. Griffiths traces the history of bushfires back to the continent’s separation from the supercontinent of Gondwana, after which Australia over time developed into the ‘fire continent’.¹⁹ Native flora and fauna have adapted to living and surviving on a bushfire-prone landscape. As Griffiths explains, fire has also been a major cultural feature of this continent, with Indigenous Australians having lived with, and used fire for tens of thousands of years, through practices such as cooking, ceremonies, and fire-stick burning.

The work of Australian historian, Bill Gammage, is also important in explaining the significant impact of human cultures in shaping the Australian landscape. He acknowledges the skilful work of Indigenous Australians in having carefully and purposefully managed the landscape through their use of fire for so many thousands of years. He refers to the observations of Captain James Cook who, upon exploring the south-east coastlines of Australia, marvelled at how well managed the land was. Gammage describes how much these landscapes have changed since colonisation and the displacement of Indigenous Australians, which has led to these once very well managed landscapes having since become overgrown and neglected. As Gammage observes, this neglect contributed to more severe and more frequent bushfires, which lead to devastating consequences across the Nation on many occasions.²⁰

¹⁹ Tom Griffiths, ‘Savage Summer’, *Inside Story* (8 Jan 2020), <https://insidestory.org.au/savage-summer/>, (accessed 8 February 2021).

²⁰ Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Managed Australia*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011), p. 5.

Griffith's work is important in not only in providing historical context to bushfires in Australia, but also to contemporary debates about bushfires and climate change. As a historian who has studied bushfires in Australia for decades, Griffith notes the significance of the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires as comparison to any others in Australia's recorded history, even to the disastrous 1939 bushfires in Victoria:

The long, gruelling fire season of 2019–20 is something new in modern Australian experience, something we can indeed call unprecedented, and it is a product of climate change.²¹

Griffiths reflects on Australia's recent history of 'Black' bushfire events, and describes resisting the use of 'unprecedented', which others used to describe the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria.²² He argues that although the Black Saturday bushfires were severe, they were a frequently recurring feature in particular area and ecology, ingrained into the history of Victoria's landscape. The Black Summer bushfires, in comparison, were 'continental in scale' and demonstrated 'a whole new character' that had not been recorded in the history of colonial Australia. Griffiths' work is used to provide historical context to the Black Summer bushfires in Chapter Two.

Media in the Modern World

This thesis also uses previous research across fields such as media studies and sociology to explore the role of media in society broadly, in order to better understand the significance of media reporting on the Black Summer bushfires. The work of sociologist, Paul Hodkinson, provides an important understanding of the relationship between producers and consumers of media, and the broader social and cultural world in which they operate. Hodkinson suggests that because media is such an important aspect to our everyday lives and routines,

²¹ Griffiths, 'Savage Summer'.

²² Griffiths, 'Savage Summer'.

it has 'significant implications' in influencing the 'nature and character of the broader culture and society that surround us'.²³ On the one hand, media allows us to communicate with our friends and family instantaneously whether they are in the next room or on the other side of the world.²⁴ On the other, media can 'enable a relatively small number of professional media producers to transmit large volumes of content to audiences of millions.'²⁵

As Paul Hodkinson's work details, the interrelationship between media, culture and society is complex. Media can best be understood as something which both shapes and is shaped by the social and cultural context in which it is created and communicated, and vice versa. Media content is influenced in the sense that it will often 'relate closely to real events and to prevailing social trends and cultural values' of the context in which it is being created.²⁶ However, as Hodkinson firmly states, 'media does not reflect these perfectly or neutrally'.²⁷ Indeed, content is always framed. Media offers us a 'representation' of reality, as producers of media are 'highly selective' with respect to the content that they include, and therefore exclude, and communicate this content in 'very particular' and 'manufactured' ways.²⁸ As Hodkinson suggests, this may then 'have a bearing upon future attitudes, identities, behaviour and social patterns.'²⁹

Hodkinson's work on media is significant in considering what the *Bay Post* journalists selected to report on when covering the Black Summer bushfires and how they communicated this content to their main target audience – local residents and tourists. It is particularly the case that 'local' newspapers often perceive themselves as representative of their communities, and having the trust of local residents; an idea which is further explored in both this chapter and in Chapter Two of this thesis. It is important to understand that while the *Bay Post* newspaper reports provide useful insight into the lived experiences, emotions, and opinions of Eurobodalla residents throughout the bushfire crisis, the stories

²³ Paul Hodkinson, *Media, Society and Culture: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (London: Sage, 2017), p. 2.

²⁴ Hodkinson, *Media, Society and Culture*, p. 2.

²⁵ Hodkinson, *Media, Society and Culture*, p. 2.

²⁶ Hodkinson, *Media, Society and Culture*, p. 5.

²⁷ Hodkinson, *Media, Society and Culture*, p. 5.

²⁸ Hodkinson, *Media, Society and Culture*, p. 5.

²⁹ Hodkinson, *Media, Society and Culture*, p. 5.

selected for publication cannot be described as representing all or even the majority of people in the community. Both the journalists and editors at the *Bay Post* are making choices about what they select to report on and how they report on these topics.

In addition to Hodgkinson's research on media in the modern world, this thesis is informed by research further explores the relationship between media producers and consumers. Media Studies theorist, Susan Moeller, suggests that the complex and important relationship between mainstream media and the general public is often overlooked. Moeller explains that as consumers of media, we are often 'so fixated on what the media are telling us' that we don't often reflect critically on what it is exactly that they are reporting on, how they are communicating this and why.³⁰ Moeller also suggests:

The method and manner of the media's coverage are effectively invisible. The meaning of the media's coverage of crises is rarely examined, but its importance is incalculable— hence the imperativeness of studying and scrutinizing it.³¹

In considering the workings of mainstream media, Moeller finds that the answers to the questions of *what*, *how* and *why* of media reporting in modern Western society can be explained by 'compassion fatigue'. Moeller uses this term broadly to explain the media's continual focus and reporting on crises and the sensationalizing of these events in an attempt to maintain public attention. As she explains, 'compassion fatigue' is not an 'unavoidable consequence of covering the news', rather, an 'unavoidable consequence of the way the news is now covered.'³²

Moeller suggests that one cause of 'compassion fatigue' is the nature of the media industry in the modern world. As she explains, 'the print and broadcast media are part of the entertainment industry', which is 'an industry that knows how to capture and hold the

³⁰ Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sells Disease, Famine, War and Death*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 5.

³¹ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 5.

³² Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 3.

attention of its audience.³³ As Moeller suggests, with ‘few exceptions, the media pay their way through selling advertising, not selling the news.’³⁴ Therefore, Moeller argues, ‘the operating principle behind much of the news business is to appeal to an audience— especially a large audience— with attractive demographics for advertisers’.³⁵ This theory helps to explain the media’s preoccupation with covering disaster events, and quickly moving on to the next event, even if the previous issue has not been resolved.³⁶ As Moeller suggests, ‘compassion fatigue’ encourages journalists to consistently seek out events to report on that are ‘more lethal’ or ‘more dramatic’ than the previous event.³⁷ If the ‘newest event’ is not more intense, Moeller argues, then the journalists will carefully and strategically use ‘a choice of language and images’ to represent this event as ‘being more extreme or deadly or risky than a similar past situation’.³⁸

Moeller’s ‘compassion fatigue’ theory can be applied to the *Bay Post* newspaper, which we see moves quickly from the bushfires onto the flooding events which occurred in February 2019, as indicated by one of the frontpage headlines ‘Flame to Flooding’.³⁹ This is not to say that the bushfires are not given any further attention, but that floods become the focus for at least some of the February publications. It is also worth noting that the floods were significant local events which impacted on the lives and properties of many in the local area. While the downpour of rain was welcomed after such a long period of drought and such severe bushfires, these conditions meant the impact of the floods, particularly on local flora and fauna, was significant.

As Moeller suggests, media outlets are also selective in what they choose based on being financially driven and needing not only to sell news stories but to sell advertising space in their newspapers to third parties. The *Bay Post* is a business whose income is dependent not only on their audience but, perhaps even more so, on companies who pay to advertise through the newspapers. The paper therefore must maintain both its subscribing customer

³³ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 10.

³⁴ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 10.

³⁵ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 10.

³⁶ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 10.

³⁷ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 10.

³⁸ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 10.

³⁹ Claudia Ferguson, ‘Flame to flooding’, *Bay Post*, 12 February 2020, p. 1.

base and audience reach to appeal to advertisers to purchase advertisement spaces within the newspapers to promote their own business/agendas. This will inevitably mean journalists/editors choose to focus on stories which will 'sell', in order to maintain the popularity of their newspapers and keep in business.

Framing: Media Representations of Climate Crisis

The concept of 'framing' will be used in this thesis because it is a useful, multi-disciplinary concept which allows for a holistic analysis of newspaper stories about the Black Summer bushfires. Framing can be applied to any form of communication. For example, framing allows me to analyse not only the work of journalists/editors in the *Bay Post* articles, but also how local people 'framed' ideas and stories about the bushfire crisis, including topics such as climate change and animals. I have also utilized this tool for the analysis of images in *Bay Post* newspaper reports as it requires discussions about not only what is captured, but how it is portrayed as well as what is *not* being portrayed in these images. It is important to understand that the concept of 'framing' includes analyzing a text (whether it is an image or article, etc.) to explore not only what is represented and how, but also to ascertain what is not represented and why. Framing encourages a wider analysis of what is being communicated, how it is being communicated and why it is being communicated in this way. In the following section, I will outline how framing has been used to show how climate change debates are mediated, which is explored in detail in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Mathew Nisbet offers important insight into the concept of framing in mainstream media. Nisbet's work aims to understand how best to engage the public in the issue of climate change, firstly by researching the political standing of US citizens and secondly by assessing the previous assumptions which have shaped the way that climate change is 'framed' or communicated to the public. Nisbet reminds us that climate change policies will 'bear directly on the future of Americans' and are therefore 'too significant to leave to just

elected officials and experts'.⁴⁰ Climate change should be addressed with urgency, Nisbet suggests, and 'citizens need to be actively involved'.⁴¹ Nisbet's view is mirrored by residents who wrote to the *Bay Post*, demanding that local, state and national political leaders address the issue of climate change with urgency.

As Nisbet explains, the concept of framing has been used and explored more recently in fields such as media, politics and sociology. For example, framing can be used to explain 'how media portrayals in interaction with cultural forces shape public views of complex policy debates.'⁴² Nisbet offers the following definition of framing in this sense:

Frames are interpretive storylines that set a specific train of thought in motion, communicating why an issue might be a problem, who or what might be responsible for it, and what should be done about it. Framing is an unavoidable reality of the communication process, especially as applied to public affairs and policy.⁴³

Nisbet also suggests that 'unframed information' does not exist, and that 'most successful communicators are adept at framing, whether using frames intentionally or intuitively.'⁴⁴ Importantly, Nisbet reminds us that the concept of 'framing' is 'not synonymous with placing a false spin on an issue', although he acknowledges that 'some experts, advocates, journalists, and policymakers certainly spin evidence and facts'.⁴⁵ Nisbet suggests that the concept of 'framing' can be used to 'pare down information, giving greater weight to certain considerations and elements over others'.⁴⁶ Frames are indeed an essential part of how information is both communicated and interpreted, as he explains:

Audiences rely on frames to make sense of and discuss an issue;

⁴⁰ Mathew Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change: Why Frames Matter for Public Engagement', *Environment Magazine*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2 November 2009), p. 14.

⁴¹ Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 14.

⁴² Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 16.

⁴³ Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 15.

⁴⁴ Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 15.

⁴⁵ Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 16.

⁴⁶ Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 16.

journalists use frames to craft interesting and appealing news reports;
policymakers apply frames to define policy options and reach decisions;
and experts employ frames to simplify technical details and make
them persuasive.⁴⁷

The audience's interpretation of the specific idea is dependent not only on the types of frames used by the media to communicate the idea, but also on the audience's personal, social and cultural positioning. Audiences use media frames as 'interpretive shortcuts' to understand an idea, but also 'integrate' this information with their own 'pre-existing interpretations' of that idea, based on their 'personal experience, partisanship, ideology, social identity, or conversations with others'.⁴⁸ For this reason, Nisbet argues that a 'specific frame only is effective if it is relevant-or applicable-to the audience's pre-existing interpretations'.⁴⁹ Nisbet gives the example of influential biologist, naturalist and author, E.O Wilson, who used framing to emphasize the 'religious and moral dimensions of climate change' in order to 'convince many religious leaders that the issue is directly applicable to their faith and their respective communities'.⁵⁰ This exemplifies that framing, when used effectively and intentionally, can be very influential on the targeted audience's response to the idea or issue.

Local vs National Newspaper Reporting

The importance of local and regional newspapers, especially in comparison to bigger, metropolitan, or national newspapers is evident in studies which consider the benefits and role of these newspapers. Media studies expert Kathryn Bowd suggests that the role of regional newspapers in their communities makes them 'closer' to their audience than larger newspapers who report more widely and have a larger target audience. As Bowd notes, the concept of local journalists being 'closer' to their readers is partly due to the history of

⁴⁷ Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 16.

⁴⁸ Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 17.

⁴⁹ Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 17.

⁵⁰ Nisbet, 'Communicating Climate Change', p. 17.

colonial Australia in which local newspapers were essential element in the development of the regional areas. Bowd points to the work of Kirkpatrick, who argued that ‘early regional newspapers’ played a key role in ‘[promoting] vigorously the material and social advancement of their town and district’, which also added to the towns sense of community identity and connectedness.⁵¹

Importantly, as Bowd suggests, business owners in earlier colonial days recognised that ‘their fortunes could not be separated from those of their district’, which further prompted newspapers to promote the growth and development of these regional areas.⁵² Bowd also argues that one of the main differences between journalists employed by local newspapers compared to metropolitan is that:

journalists employed by such newspapers generally do not have the luxury of remaining detached from the news they report, as they may be directly affected by the outcomes of local issues and events.⁵³

The *Bay Post* provides insightful disaster reporting of the Black Summer bushfires, which national newspapers based in capital cities would not have been able to, given that they were distanced from the content, as further explored in Chapter Two.

Benedict Andersons’ work is also useful in explaining how the concept of community is portrayed by the media in relation to the Black Summer bushfires. While Anderson focuses his writing mostly on the ideology and definition of Nationalism, his work is directly relatable to smaller communities of people, such as townships and regions within a nation-state. Anderson argues that a Nation is an ‘imagined’ community because it’s members (even in Nations with lower populations) will never meet or even hear about each other, yet they share a perceived sense of union based on a particular set of values, ideologies, beliefs,

⁵¹ Kathryn Bowd, ‘A voice for the community: local newspaper as local campaigner’, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2007), p. 82.

⁵² Bowd, ‘A voice for the community’, p. 82.

⁵³ Bowd, ‘A voice for the community’, p. 82.

etc.⁵⁴ Anderson's concept can be applied to the Black Summer bushfires in the sense that while each person's experience of the bushfires within the Eurobodalla Shire was not the same, a strong sense of connection was felt during those times by the shared experiences, emotions, loss, and trauma as a result of having lived through the disaster 'together'. Local newspapers such as the *Bay Post* were able to closely connect with this sense of an 'imagined' community through retelling local stories and representing those shared, lived, local experiences of the bushfires in a way that the National newspapers could not, simply due to the wider scale of their audience and scope of their coverage.

Sociologist, Jacqui Ewart, and Communication studies expert, Brian Massey, explore the concept of local, regional newspapers being 'closer to their readers' than metropolitan, 'big city', newspapers.⁵⁵ Ewart and Malley's findings suggest that there are sound reasons why regional newspapers might still be 'closer' to their audience than metropolitan newspapers. They recognise that metropolitan newspapers are part of the 'elite media', and report on a mix of 'local, national and international news, and circulate widely to big-city readers and beyond', which makes them 'unlikely to accurately know — and hence, be close to — their audiences'.⁵⁶ In comparison, as Ewart and Malley suggest, regional newspapers are 'not elite media in that sense', as their target audience is far more targeted; they 'circulate to small, local audiences'.⁵⁷

However, Ewart and Malley's research also found that journalists, whether they report for either metropolitan or regional newspapers, tend to focus more of their reporting on 'elite' voices, rather than on the voices of 'everyday' citizens. They state that journalists in general are 'predisposed towards reporting the news primarily through the voices of such 'elite' sources as well-known politicians and civic and business leaders'.⁵⁸ As the authors argue, this is important because:

⁵⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism Revised* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 6.

⁵⁵ Jacqui Ewart and Brian Massey, "Local (people) mean the world to us': Australia's regional newspapers and the 'closer to reader' assumption", *Media International Australia*, vol. 115, no. 1 (2005), p. 95.

⁵⁶ Ewart and Brian Massey, 'Local (people) mean the world to us', p. 99.

⁵⁷ Ewart and Brian Massey, 'Local (people) mean the world to us', p. 99.

⁵⁸ Ewart and Brian Massey, 'Local (people) mean the world to us', p. 100.

The voices that journalists choose to include in news stories are significant reflectors of how close they are to their readers. A regional newspaper can amplify its closeness to readers by telling the day's news through a wide range of voices from the community it serves.⁵⁹

It is also significant because when journalists choose to give voice to 'non-elite' sources, they are giving a 'noticeable' and important 'news voice' to the 'ordinary citizens' of the community.⁶⁰ This results in a more accurate representation of the diverse views, opinions and stories within local, regional communities. By contrast, when journalists give more reporting space or time to the 'elite' sources, these sources can become dominant voices, particularly in public debates, which also results in the voices of the 'non-elite' becoming less heard and less powerful.⁶¹ As Ewart and Malley show, a journalist can 'make a source more dominant' by allowing that source to 'speak more directly than indirectly to readers', for example by using more 'full quotations than partial quotes and paraphrases'.⁶²

The *Bay Post* is an important media source which communicated a range of different voices from within the community of the Eurobodalla during the Black Summer bushfires. However, it also appears that *Bay Post* journalists tend to focus on 'elite' sources, such as local Mayors and councillors, and in doing so, give less voice to minority groups within the local community, which is noted in Chapter Two. A pertinent example of this is the lack of discussion surrounding Australian Indigenous cultural fire practices throughout the *Bay Post* newspaper reports during the bushfire crisis, which is also discussed in Chapter Two.

Previous research suggests that when it comes to media reporting on bushfires in Australia, journalists appear to follow specific patterns, especially in the way they portray emotions and responsibility for these disaster events. Political Science scholar Alex Burns and Media and Communications scholar Ben Eltham's analysis of media reporting of the Black Saturday

⁵⁹ Ewart and Brian Massey, 'Local (people) mean the world to us', p. 100.

⁶⁰ Ewart and Brian Massey, 'Local (people) mean the world to us', p. 100.

⁶¹ Ewart and Brian Massey, 'Local (people) mean the world to us', p. 100.

⁶² Ewart and Brian Massey, 'Local (people) mean the world to us', p. 100.

Bushfires (Victoria 2009) explores what is known by sociologists about the nature of disasters and compares this with how journalists in mainstream media report on these events. Burns and Eltham analyze six prominent 'catastrophe failure' theories by scholars of journalism to explore what is known about disasters from a sociological perspective. They then apply these findings to a case study of the media reports on Black Saturday Bushfires of 2009. Burns and Eltham's findings are useful for understanding the patterns and trends evident in media reporting on bushfires more broadly, which is also relevant to newspaper coverage of the bushfires in the Bay Post reports of the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020.

Burns and Eltham's study explores some of the patterns or formulas used by the media when covering disasters such as bushfires. They identify four key elements from the secondary-analysis of media's reporting of the Black Saturday events; 'survivor accounts, critique of Country Fire Authority (CFA) leaders, historical analogies, and the perceived role of ecosystem and environmental factors'.⁶³ Burns and Eltham refer to Muller and Gawenda's in-depth analysis of bushfire reportage which provides evidence of how the media represented the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009:

Crisis-management routines, institutional practices and professional ethics helped journalists to frame their Black Saturday coverage, influenced how they conducted interviews and dealt with trauma and survivors, and affected what they decided to omit.⁶⁴

Expanding on this idea, Burns and Eltham state that journalists reporting on the Black Saturday bushfires were 'typically empathetic to bushfire victims and survivors, but adversarial to key decision-makers such as fire and police commissioners, whom the journalist or media institution deems to have made poor or negative decisions'.⁶⁵ Criticism from local residents, journalists and editors towards PM Morrison amongst other leaders

⁶³ Alex Burns and Ben Eltham, 'Catastrophic Failure' Theories and Disaster Journalism: Evaluating Media Explanations of the Black Saturday Bushfires', *Media International Australia*, vol. 137, no. 1 (2010), p. 96.

⁶⁴ Burns and Ben Eltham, 'Catastrophic Failure', p. 96.

⁶⁵ Burns and Ben Eltham, 'Catastrophic Failure', p. 96.

was a recurring theme in the *Bay Post's* reporting of the Black Summer bushfires, as detailed in Chapter Two.

Non-human Animals in the Bushfires

This thesis also explores the impact of the Black Summer bushfires beyond the human, with consideration to both the survival and loss of the non-human, natural world. I use the concept of framing to show how residents and journalists in the Eurobodalla variously represented animals. I argue that the framing of non-human animals throughout the bushfire stories reflects the broader hierarchical system in which humans place animals in categories according to their worth and value to us. For example, companion animals, such as dogs, featured in numerous evacuation stories covered in the *Bay Post* reporting of the Black Summer bushfires, highlighting the value placed on their lives. By contrast, animals such as livestock were not rescued, and a great number of them perished in the bushfires in the Eurobodalla Shire because they did not receive the same treatment as companion animals. Their deaths are highlighted as a financial rather than sentimental loss, which demonstrates that we place them far lower than companion animals on our hierarchical value system of non-human animals.

Celermajer's work points out that one way forward in rethinking our path to 'omnicide' includes challenging our anthropocentric views of non-human animals and the natural world. Animal Studies scholar, Professor Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, defines 'anthropocentrism' as the 'human centeredness' which perpetuates the dominant narrative that humans are more important than any other living beings.⁶⁶ Celermajer, Probyn-Rapsey and O'Sullivan (amongst other scholars) suggest our rethinking of this view of the world - including non-human animals and natural environment - is important not only for the benefit of animals, but for the sustainability of the planet which we depend on and share with these living

⁶⁶ Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, 'Anthropocentrism', in L. Gruen (ed.), *Critical Terms for Animal Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 47.

beings. In many ways, humans have a global responsibility to redefine our anthropocentric views and systems, especially as these have accelerated climate change and fuelled disaster events such as the bushfires.

These observations are also made, from a different angle, by animal welfare scientists who have analysed disaster management. Andreia De Paula Vieira and Raymond Anthony discuss the importance of animals being taken into account in disaster management plans, for the safety of both the animals and the humans responsible for them. The authors explain that people refusing to evacuate without their companion animals, or refusing to leave without being reassured that their animals will be rescued, is a common occurrence during disasters, which can result in increased risk of harm to both the humans and animals involved in these situations:

Owners who do not relinquish their animals during a disaster have made it harder for first responders to evacuate people—their target survivor group—which can also inadvertently sabotage rescue efforts to save animals, especially if the owners put themselves and the animals at risk when trying to save the latter.⁶⁷

This behaviour during emergencies shows the strong emotional connection that humans have with companion animals which places them at the top of the hierarchy as animals we value. These animals are so valued that humans will take risks to ensure they are evacuated safely during disasters, even if it puts human lives at risk in this process. As De Paula Vieira and Anthony explain, this can put both human and animal lives at a greater risk of not being able to evacuate in time, which is counterproductive to the intended aim of securing safety for these animals.

The work of political scientist and animal studies scholar Siobhan O’Sullivan is also crucial for the analysis on non-human animals and their treatment during the bushfires. O’Sullivan

⁶⁷ Andreia De Paula Vieira and Raymond Anthony, ‘Reimagining Human Responsibility Towards Animals for Disaster Management in the Anthropocene’, in Bernice Bovenkerk and Jozef Keulartz (eds), *Animals in Our Midst: The Challenges of Co-existing with Animals in the Anthropocene* (Cham: Springer, 2021), pp. 231-232.

suggests that the Black Summer bushfires made clear which animals we give priority to, as opposed to others, which she argues is evident of the broader societal valuing (and devaluing) of non-human animals, according to the purpose they serve for us (i.e., sentimental worth, companionship, financial gain, etc.). O’Sullivan notes that native animals received high levels of care and support throughout the bushfire crisis, as opposed to others, such as livestock. O’Sullivan argues that livestock are treated particularly poorly because even if they live through the bushfire disaster, they ‘will soon be killed anyway’ to ‘fill our supermarket shelves’.⁶⁸ In this case, it is evident that animals who are thought of as resources and means for profit are not given consideration and care which companion animals, for example, are afforded. As Chapter Three explores in detail, disaster events such as bushfires bring to the surface the different types of values and relationships humans have with non-human animals.

In the next chapter, I will be focusing on how local journalists, editors and residents in the Eurobodalla Shire framed the topic of climate change in the midst of the bushfire crisis. Climate change proved to be a controversial topic during the emergency, and many political leaders, including PM Morrison, avoided answering questions about whether climate change was a factor which contributed to the ferocity of the Black Summer bushfires, which was unlike any other bushfire season in Australia’s recorded history. Chapter Two cites letters to the editor from residents who wrote to the Bay Post during the fires, demanding that the government take immediate action on climate change, which they argued was undeniably a contributing factor to both the intensity and scale of the Black Summer bushfires.

⁶⁸ Siobhan O’Sullivan, ‘The animals we rescue, and the animals we don’t’, *ABC Religion and Ethics* (9 January 2020), <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/australia-fire-crisis-the-animals-we-save-and-those-we-dont/11856714>, (accessed 20 April 2021).

Chapter Two: Debating on Disasters

In this chapter I will explore the historical, cultural and ecological context of bushfires in Australia and the Eurobodalla Shire. This historical analysis will help to show where the Black Summer bushfires fit in both the local history of the Eurobodalla Shire and, more broadly, in Australia's national recorded history of bushfires. In this chapter I pay particular attention to how *Bay Post* articles and letters to the Editor framed the issue of climate change in relation to the bushfires and how they situated the political responses at the national and local level as inadequate to the scale of the disaster. I also note a significant omission from the local coverage, cultural burning or Indigenous fire management, a relationship to fire and land that gained media coverage via the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) but not in the local newspaper.

The Fire Continent

While bushfires have been a recurring and important natural feature of the landscape across the Australian continent, the Black Summer bushfires are historically significant as the most severe and widespread bushfires to occur in Australia's recorded history. They are a crucial event in Australia's long history of bushfires, but they also signify a concerning future for the nation with the acceleration of climate change meaning these types of disaster events are set to occur more frequently and intensely. As Environmental Historian, Tom Griffiths states, fires are 'integral to our ecology, culture and identity' and 'scripted into the deep biological and human history of the fire continent'.⁶⁹ Ever since the continent separated from Gondwana, its climate changed and developed over time, creating the perfect conditions for fire, in that it is 'wet enough for things to grow, dry enough for them to burn'.⁷⁰ Over millennia, flora and fauna have adapted to these conditions. Not only have

⁶⁹ Griffiths, 'Savage Summer'.

⁷⁰ Monique Ross and Annabelle Quince, 'The history of fire in Australia and how it can help us face the bushfires of the future', *ABC News* (10 February 2020), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-10/fires-bushfires-in-australia-history-lessons-for-future/11937652>, (accessed 29 May 2021).

most plant species adapted to survive, but in some cases, certain species of plants have evolved to thrive in these conditions. An example is the native Banksia plant, which grows its seeds inside hard, woody fruits that will open after the heat of the fire allows them to, releasing the seeds which will then spread new growth and flourish.

Fire has also always been at the heart of Indigenous cultures, living with fire for tens of thousands of years. Indigenous Australians both past and present have used fire as a means of survival through hunting, farming and cooking, but also as part of ceremonies and rituals. Indigenous cultures are well known for 'fire-stick farming', a technique which uses the 'cool burning' of fire in a controlled and intentional way to create open hunting grounds and help prevent the build-up of vegetation which would otherwise create a fuel load for uncontrollable fires to soar through. Fire stick farming, which is now more commonly known as 'cultural burning', helps to create a healthier environment for native plants and wildlife to survive in.

As Griffiths suggests, the well-managed landscape which Indigenous Australians had achieved through fire-stick burning was changed significantly with the arrival of the European colonists in 1788. When the colonists first arrived in Australia, they saw a 'cultivated landscape', which would have 'seemed like some piece of magic', as though it had been 'prepared for them and their stock'.⁷¹ Australian historian, Bill Gammage, writes about the 'detailed local knowledge' that Indigenous Australians used to intentionally and skilfully manage the Australian landscape, including the use of fire to 'replace one plant community with another'.⁷² Gammage remarks that areas which are now covered in dense forests were found to be well-managed areas upon the arrival of the British colonists. As Captain James Cook observed himself when exploring Australia's south-east coastline:

...into the country which we found diversified with woods, lawns and marshes; the woods are free from underwood of every kind and the trees are at such a distance from one another that the whole country

⁷¹ Ross and Annabelle Quince, 'The history of fire in Australia'.

⁷² Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Managed Australia*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011), p. 3.

or at least a great part of it might be cultivated without being obliged to cut down a single tree.⁷³

By displacing Indigenous peoples, who had been carefully managing the land for tens of thousands of years, the European colonists allowed vast areas of bushland to grow wild, with 'disastrous consequences'.⁷⁴ In doing so, they 'unleashed a whole new era of wilder fires', which were not only more intense but more frequent.⁷⁵ The European colonists, who had very limited understanding of local ecologies, faced many challenges, including these severe fires, in a land that was entirely different to any they had experienced before.

The work of Australian archaeologist, Rhys Jones, also supports the importance of the use of fire by Indigenous Australians culturally and historically. Jones gives detail of the many purposes and benefits of what he suggests should perhaps be called 'firestick farming' instead of firestick burning by local Indigenous peoples due to the benefit of this technique in providing sources of food through cultivating the land. The purposes included; clearing land for human habitat and making it easier to navigate through, regenerating native plant foods which thrive after fires and harvesting these vegetables whilst they are young and more palatable, hunting animals that came to forage on the new growth, foraging a burnt area after the fire to gather species such as lizards which could be found hiding in holes due to the fire.⁷⁶ Jones also suggests how 'ironical' it is that the policy of 'fire prevention' since European colonisation has caused the overgrowth of bushland that was once maintained, and that the discontinuity of Indigenous cultural burning has most likely been the cause of the 'series of catastrophic fires' that have since occurred.⁷⁷

Severe bushfires have reminded colonists many times of their lack of understanding and experience in the specific environmental conditions of the Australian continent. One of the gravest reminders was the Black Friday bushfires of 1939 in Victoria, which destroyed 650 buildings, claimed 71 human lives and burned across 2 million hectares of land. Judge

⁷³ Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Ross and Annabelle Quince, 'The history of fire in Australia'.

⁷⁵ Ross and Annabelle Quince, 'The history of fire in Australia'.

⁷⁶ Rhys Jones, 'Fire stick farming', *Fire Ecology*, vol. 8, no. 3, (2012), pp. 6-7.

⁷⁷ Rhys Jones, 'Fire stick farming', *Fire Ecology*, vol. 8, no. 3, (2012), p. 8.

Leonard Stretton, who ordered a Royal Commission into the Black Friday bushfires, struggled to put into words the tragedy of this event. While Judge Stretton could not put the blame of the bushfires onto any one person or cause, he did conclude that the fires had been started by 'the hand of man'.⁷⁸ He also commented that 'they had not lived long enough'. As Griffiths explains, Stretton was not commenting on the age of the victims, instead:

He was pitying the innocence of European immigrants in a land whose natural rhythms they did not yet understand. He was depicting the fragility and brevity of a human lifetime in forests where life cycles and fire regimes had the periodicity and ferocity of centuries. He was indicting a whole society.⁷⁹

Judge Stretton's words, as Griffiths demonstrates, can still be considered relevant to the Australians who have since encountered devastating bushfires that, surely by now, we should have been more prepared for. More recently, the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (2009) claimed the lives of 173 people, destroyed 2,029 homes, and burned across 450,000 hectares of land. Griffiths suggests that some of the 'ignorance and innocence' of the European colonists in 1939 could be forgiven, as the Black Friday bushfires acted as a 'rude awakening from the colonial era of forest exploitation and careless fire use'.⁸⁰ After 70 years and a scientific and technological revolution, Griffiths argues that we don't have the same excuses for our failures during the Black Saturday fires of 2009.⁸¹

Griffiths suggests that the Black Saturday bushfires, although devastating, exemplify what is a recurring and predictable event in the history of the fire continent, especially across Victoria. He notes that the phrase 'unprecedented' was used by media and commentators to describe the Black Saturday tragedy, and yet the events which unfolded had been predicted by the Bureau of Meteorology. The Victorian Premier at the time had issued

⁷⁸ Tom Griffiths, 'We have still not lived long enough', *Inside Story* (16 February 2009), <https://insidestory.org.au/we-have-still-not-lived-long-enough/>, (accessed 29 May 2020).

⁷⁹ Griffiths, 'We have still not lived long enough'.

⁸⁰ Griffiths, 'We have still not lived long enough'.

⁸¹ Griffiths, 'We have still not lived long enough'.

urgent warnings to residents across the state based on the expert advice and research. Griffith argues that while there appeared to be little to no doubt that climate change had worsened the severity of the fires, which occurred at the end of a record heatwave, the story of the 2009 bushfires is all too familiar. He describes Black Saturday as a 'recurrent nightmare' and states that 'the most haunting aspect of this tragedy is its familiarity'.⁸² Griffith elaborates:

The same images, the same stories, the same words and phrases,
and the same frightening and awesome natural force that we find
so hard to remember and perhaps unconsciously strive to forget.⁸³

Griffith suggests that even though Australians have experienced severe bushfires over and over in recorded history, our memory of them is short-lived, which is partially why we continually make the same failures in managing, preparing and responding to them. The 'short lived' memories based on the 'same stories, the same words and phrases' is a critique of the media and political messaging that focuses on the emergency rather than the longer and more complex meaning of how impacts on the land and climate have produced long term changes and death at a greater scale than previously imagined, as in Celermajer's term and concept, 'omnicide'.

Importantly, Griffith suggests that the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020 were unlike any in Australia's recorded history and are undeniably a 'product of climate change'.⁸⁴ The Black Summer bushfires, just like Black Saturday, were frequently labelled by media-reporters, journalists and politicians, as 'unprecedented', due to the scale, number and severity of the fires which burned all over Australia. However, unlike the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009, the Black Summer bushfires were unprecedented in their 'continental' scale and severity.⁸⁵ As Griffith reminds us, it is not surprising that Australians, who are living on the 'fire continent of the globe' should express concern about facing future

⁸² Griffiths, 'We have still not lived long enough'.

⁸³ Griffiths, 'We have still not lived long enough'.

⁸⁴ Griffiths, 'Savage Summer'.

⁸⁵ Griffiths, 'Savage Summer'.

bushfires in an increasingly warming climate.⁸⁶ For Griffiths, the answers to these questions will always be 'local, ecological and historical'.⁸⁷ On a local level, the Black Summer bushfires have been described by the Eurobodalla Bush Fire Management Committee as 'the most significant and devastating fires' in the history of the region.⁸⁸ The Black Summer bushfires in the Eurobodalla Shire highlight the very real and detrimental impacts of climate change on local communities, which is an important contribution to Australia's national understanding of both bushfires and climate change, especially as we head towards an increasingly uncertain future.

Bushfires in the Eurobodalla

Despite a history of frequent bushfires in the area, the majority of residents of the Eurobodalla Shire live in urban areas and have been fortunate enough not to have felt the effects of an out-of-control bushfire first-hand prior to the Black Summer bushfires. Even for those who have lived in the area while the bushfires have occurred, public memory of these disasters seems to diminish over time. As Griffiths has suggested, it is possible that people who live through bushfires might unconsciously try to forget about these traumatic events after they occur as a way of moving forward.

Recognizing that many residents had not experienced previous severe bushfires in the area, experts warned of the high fire risk and historical behaviour of bushfires in the lead up to the summer of 2019. Just five days before the Currowan fire ignited, Rural Fire Service (RFS) Captain of Batemans Bay, Ian Aitken, warned about the changes that had occurred in the Eurobodalla since the last devastating bushfires in the area. In an interview with the *Bay Post* he explained that there had been a lot of housing development in the suburbs which the fire had burned through in 1994, and that 'many residents probably weren't around during the 1994 fire and might not know they were in a historical fire path'.⁸⁹ He explained

⁸⁶ Ross and Annabelle Quince, 'The history of fire in Australia'.

⁸⁷ Ross and Annabelle Quince, 'The history of fire in Australia'.

⁸⁸ Eurobodalla Bush Fire Management Committee, 'Bushfire Risk Management Plan', Eurobodalla Shire Council, (2019), p. 9.

⁸⁹ Andrea Cattle, 'Ian Aitken describes Eurobodalla Shire 1994 bushfire', *Bay Post*, 21 November 2019.

that in 1994, 'there was nothing there' in terms of houses and buildings, and that the area had since undergone vast amounts of development.⁹⁰ Aitken urged residents to prepare themselves for the possibility of the bushfires following the same path, commenting that 'history has a habit of repeating itself'.⁹¹

The Eurobodalla Shire, which is an area containing vast tracts of Eucalypt forests, has a long history of bushfires. The dominant tree species throughout the forests in the Eurobodalla are 'rough-barked apple, forest red gum and white stringybark, with black wattle and hickory wattle'.⁹² The Shire is located on the South Coast of NSW and is a largely mountainous and highly forested coastal area. Around 72% of the 342,173 hectares which make up the shire is managed by either National Parks & Wildlife Service or Forests NSW.⁹³ Bush Fire Management Committee (BFMC) figures on land tenures shows that less than 25% of the Eurobodalla Shire is privately owned and managed land (see table 1). On average, the shire experiences around 60 bushfires annually, 3-4 of which can be regarded as 'significant'.⁹⁴ Since the report was published in 2011, there had been 'at least' 11 bushfires in the last 50 years that have caused significant devastation in the area.⁹⁵ Prior to the Black Summer fires, the bushfires which occurred in the area in 1939 and 1952 were known to be the most widespread, whereas the bushfires of 1927-28, 1953 and 1968 caused more damage to local areas.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Cantle, 'Ian Aitken describes Eurobodalla Shire 1994 bushfire'.

⁹¹ Cantle, 'Ian Aitken describes Eurobodalla Shire 1994 bushfire'.

⁹² Jackie Miles, 'Recognition and Management of Endangered Ecological Communities in the South East Corner of NSW', Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority, (2006), p. 4.

⁹³ 'Bushfire Risk Management Plan', p. 8.

⁹⁴ 'Bushfire Risk Management Plan', p. 9.

⁹⁵ 'Bushfire Risk Management Plan', p. 9.

⁹⁶ 'Bushfire Risk Management Plan', p. 9.

Land Manager	% of BFMC area
National Parks & Wildlife Service	41.07
Forests NSW	30.9
Local Government	.98
Crown Land	5.26
All other	21.79

Table 1: 'Land Tenure of the Eurobodalla Shire'.⁹⁷

In more recent decades, bushfires in 1994 burnt 'urban interface areas' within the Eurobodalla region.⁹⁸ According to Aitken, the land which burned in the 1994 fires was mostly 'dense bushland belonging to Forestry, private owners or National Parks'.⁹⁹ More recently, bushfires in 2002 burnt 'a large portion of the more remote areas' around the Deua River in the Eurobodalla shire.¹⁰⁰

Following the start of Black Summer bushfires in the summer of 2019, the Eurobodalla Shire battled several major bushfire fronts and Aitken's warning proved correct. Most of the same areas which had burned in 1994 burned again over the summer of 2019/2020, destroying hundreds of homes which had since been developed in those suburbs. The *Bay Post* interviewed Aitken again in March 2021 after the fires had finally ceased. Aitken's wife had since nick-named him 'Nostradamus' after the French astrologist and physician who became famous for his ability to predict upcoming pivotal events.¹⁰¹ Reflecting on the events, Aitken stated that the 'fires were inevitable', but that 'some people walked around with their heads in the sand' and did not heed expert advice or attend community meetings held by the RFS.¹⁰²

Aitken also suggests 'now people here have experienced (the fires), it will change', in reference to public awareness and preparedness for bushfires.¹⁰³ However, he also suggests

⁹⁷ 'Bushfire Risk Management Plan', p. 8.

⁹⁸ 'Bushfire Risk Management Plan', p. 9.

⁹⁹ Cantle, 'Ian Aitken describes Eurobodalla Shire 1994 bushfire'.

¹⁰⁰ 'Bushfire Risk Management Plan', p. 9.

¹⁰¹ Andrea Cantle, 'Batemans Bay RFS captain who warned of 1994 fire path reflects on NYE blaze', *Bay Post*, 4 March 2020.

¹⁰² Cantle, 'Batemans Bay RFS captain'.

¹⁰³ Cantle, 'Batemans Bay RFS captain'.

that this change ‘will fade over time’.¹⁰⁴ While Aitken does not suggest what causes this fading, perhaps some explanation can be found in the nature of news media, which focuses on events only as they unfold, rather than following up on them, even when the event has not been ‘resolved’.¹⁰⁵ This results in less public and political attention towards an issue, which is diverted instead towards the next big event captured by the media. This was evident with the flood and then the Covid-19 Coronavirus, both of which shifted attention in the media cycle, driven as it is by a focus on disasters.¹⁰⁶

There is still much to be learned from the history of bushfires and the history of human behaviour and attitudes towards understanding, managing, and remembering bushfire events. As Aitken warns, it seems only a matter of time before the bushfires which have caused so much devastation in the Eurobodalla will fade from public memory and political priority. At the same time, it is also inevitable that this area will battle bushfires again, and with the acceleration of climate change, it is also likely that these will become more severe and more frequent. As Aitken warns, residents need to expel the myth that areas which have been burned out won’t burn again for years now. He warns us that, ‘just because this happened this year, it doesn't mean something won't happen next year’, because the bush which is the fuel load for fires ‘doesn't take that long to regenerate’.¹⁰⁷

Indigenous Fire Practices in the Eurobodalla

Discussions of local Indigenous knowledge were almost non-existent in the *Bay Post* reporting of the bushfires, which instead gave more voice to local authorities, such as local RFS and council representatives, when the topic of bushfire management and the local environment was discussed. This provides evidence that even local, regional newspapers do not fairly represent the people and communities they claim to represent, as they do not give equal voices to minority groups, such as Indigenous Australians, but instead tend to focus on

¹⁰⁴ Cantle, ‘Batemans Bay RFS captain’.

¹⁰⁵ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁶ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Cantle, ‘Batemans Bay RFS captain’.

larger demographics and give priority to local 'experts' in positions of power throughout the Eurobodalla Shire (such as RFS Captains, the Mayor, other local Councillors, business owners, etc). This is evident of Ewart and Malley's argument that journalists as a group have a tendency to give voice to the 'elite', rather than the 'non-elite' voices, whether they represent metropolitan or regional newspapers.¹⁰⁸ Ironically, local Indigenous knowledge and conversations surrounding the Black Summer bushfires are found instead in national newspapers, such as the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Company). This challenges the commonly accepted idea of journalists working for local, regional newspapers being representatives of *all* of their communities.

Local Indigenous practices of fire-stick burning, now more commonly referred to as 'cultural burning', are an important historical and cultural element within the Eurobodalla Shire. Although these practices were interrupted by colonisation, they remain a strong part of Indigenous cultures, both in the Eurobodalla Shire, and around Australia. Indigenous Walbanga Elder from the South Coast of NSW, Les Simon, explains that due to colonisation, the suburb of Meringo in the Eurobodalla Shire area 'hasn't been looked after for 250 years'.¹⁰⁹ Around one year after the devastating Black Summer bushfires in the Eurobodalla Shire, Simon was conducting the first 'proper cultural burn' known of in the local area, and explains the deep cultural significance of burning the land which 'brings the land back to life'.¹¹⁰ Indigenous groups both locally and across Australia continue to seek recognition of and further funding to practice cultural burning. Cultural burning is known to be important to Indigenous peoples/cultures, as well as hosting a range of environmental benefits by reducing fuel loads for bushfires, promoting new growth and increasing the overall health of the land and local ecosystems.

Indigenous leader, Andrew White, who leads the Local Aboriginal Land Council cultural burn crew in Batemans Bay, also discusses the importance of cultural burning. For five years prior to the Black Summer bushfires, White's team had been culturally burning land owned by the

¹⁰⁸ Ewart and Brian Massey, "Local (people) mean the world to us", p. 100.

¹⁰⁹ Vanessa Milton, 'Traditional fire management conducted in Bega Valley, Eurobodalla — hardest-hit by last season's bushfires', *ABC News*, 27 September 2020.

¹¹⁰ Milton, 'Traditional fire management'.

local Land Council, and had ‘documented the return of biodiversity and vulnerable species after the burns’.¹¹¹ The 2019-2020 bushfires ‘all but obliterated’ their hard work, although it appeared that the ‘successive years of traditional burns did prevent the bushfire from reaching the canopy — as it did in most of the surrounding forest’.¹¹² White’s example of prolonged cultural burning demonstrates not only the importance of this practice to local Indigenous people and culture, but speaks for the effectiveness of cultural burning in lessening the intensity of bushfires as the fires did not reach the canopy (the upper layer of the forest, formed by the crowns/tops of trees).

Local Indigenous Elder, Owen Carriage, also argues for the significance of cultural burning within the local areas. Carriage is one of the founders of ‘South Coast Aboriginal Elders’, a not-for-profit organisation who are working with private landholders to try to ‘extend the practice of Indigenous fire management’ as well as raise awareness of Indigenous cultural practices and knowledge amongst communities in the Eurobodalla Shire.¹¹³ Carriage speaks passionately about the practice of cultural burning and other forms of land management dating back 60,000 years, which are ‘designed to look after the land’:

It's reading Mother Nature, understanding the environment, understanding the animals that live in that area, understanding all aspects of the area that you're burning.¹¹⁴

Carriage reiterates the importance of understanding local ecologies, including flora and fauna, to best understand how to care for the land and all life in it – all crucial elements to the practice of Indigenous fire management. Carriage’s explanation also highlights Griffiths’ suggestion of the importance of understanding local ecologies, which varies significantly from place to place across the diverse landscape of Australia.

Adequate and ongoing funding appears to remain a major issue for Indigenous groups in

¹¹¹ Milton, ‘Traditional fire management’.

¹¹² Milton, ‘Traditional fire management’.

¹¹³ Milton, ‘Traditional fire management’.

¹¹⁴ Milton, ‘Traditional fire management’.

being able to practice cultural burning on a larger scale. In the Bega Valley (just next to the Eurobodalla Shire), the local Lands Council explained that most of their funding for cultural burning in 2020 was sourced from ‘private donations’ as the result of a ‘surge in interest in cultural burning’ which followed the Black Summer bushfires, and they also received ‘major support’ from World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Australia.¹¹⁵ In their submission to the Royal Commission into the Black Summer bushfires, an Indigenous cultural burning network, Firesticks Alliance, called on the Federal Government to commit to an annual investment of at least \$25 million specifically to support the growth of cultural burning by Indigenous custodians and ‘recognised cultural fire practitioners’ in Indigenous communities.¹¹⁶

An independent report into the bushfires, funded by the NSW Government in January 2020, included a recommendation that government should ‘make a commitment to pursuing a greater application of Aboriginal land management, including cultural burning’.¹¹⁷ This recommendation is noted in the final report of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangement (2020). The Royal Commission report also found that there was ‘growing recognition’ of the value of Indigenous land/fire management in reducing the effects of bushfires and recommended that all levels of government to ‘work with’ traditional custodians to explore the relationship between Indigenous land management and natural disaster resilience.¹¹⁸

Both the local examples of cultural burning, and the challenges faced by Indigenous groups and organisations, demonstrate a need for improved government support for the cultural practice of burning and land management, which would benefit not just Indigenous peoples but the natural ecosystems and decrease the risk of bushfire severity. Unclear government guidelines and policies, as listed in the Royal Commission’s report, as well as lack of adequate financial support, are issues which are currently impacting on the ability of Indigenous Australians, both in the Eurobodalla Shire and elsewhere, being able to effectively carry out land and water management practices, such as cultural burning.

¹¹⁵ Milton, ‘Traditional fire management’.

¹¹⁶ Milton, ‘Traditional fire management’.

¹¹⁷ Milton, ‘Traditional fire management’.

¹¹⁸ Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements - Report, ‘Chapter 18: Indigenous land and fire management’, Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, (28 October 2020), p. 387.

A crucial feature of Indigenous cultural burning practices is that they align with long-term thinking and management of the natural environment based on in-depth, local knowledge. As both Griffith and Gammage remind us, a lack of successful land management techniques since colonisation has worsened the severity of bushfire disasters and lead to catastrophic implications for both human and nonhuman lives. Indigenous burning is a reminder of the importance of respecting and managing the land, which is both a responsibility and a necessity that has been neglected for far too long. European colonists have also contributed to developing a way of life in Australia which is highly dependent, at least for now, on the burning of fossil fuels and non-renewable energy and resources, contributing greatly to the accelerating threat of human-induced climate change.

Politicians under fire

The Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020 elicited political debate and media focus on climate change as a contributing factor to the bushfire crisis. Despite the urgent warnings and pleas from experts to treat climate change with urgency, it was notable that political leaders across all levels avoided discussions about the topic during the Black Summer bushfires. PM Morrison dismissed the question of whether or not the bushfires were caused by climate change by stating, 'my only thoughts today are with those who have lost their lives and their families'.¹¹⁹ When asked the same question, NSW Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, replied, 'honestly, not today'.¹²⁰ NSW Emergency Services Minister, David Elliot, took this a step further by responding to concerns of climate change being related to the bushfires, by stating, 'I don't think it's appropriate to use a natural disaster of this size for political gain' and that he thought this suggestion was 'quite unpalatable'.¹²¹

On a more local level, Bega MP Andrew Constance provided some room for the topic, but

¹¹⁹ SBS News, 'NSW emergency services minister criticised for 'stifling' climate change debate', *SBS News*, 10 December 2019.

¹²⁰ BBC News, 'Is climate change to blame for Australia's bushfires?', *BBC News*, 11 November 2019.

¹²¹ SBS News, 'NSW emergency services minister criticised'.

reiterated that the timing was challenging. In response to Gladys Berejiklian's statement, Constance stated that 'yes it's time to have the debate' about climate change, but that 'it's very disappointing that in our region this next four days is going to be potentially like hell on earth'.¹²² He also stated that while the debate about climate change and the bushfires was important, there was 'a raft of factors' that needed to be considered also for holistic purposes.¹²³ Constance reiterated that the focus at the time should be on those who were fighting the fires on the frontline:

We've got volunteers working their guts out and any big debate that needs to happen from activists needs to be couched in the context that we have men and women in our community who are fighting very hard to protect us.¹²⁴

These responses from Federal and State leaders, which were given in the midst of the bushfire crisis, opposed the views of scientists, fire experts and bushfire effected communities who supported, and in many cases demanded, public and political debate on climate change and its impacts. Morrison, Berejiklian, Elliot and Constance all frame the topic of climate change as one that is insensitive and/or inappropriate to raise. Morrison and Constance divert attention away from the issue and by focusing the discussion instead onto bushfire victims and volunteers. These political leaders were attempting to reframe the narrative of the bushfires to centre around public emotions, rather than on the topic of climate change, which continues to be a subject of great divide amongst Australian political parties of all levels.

In the lead up to the bushfire season, climate change was a topic which had recently been debated about on a local level in the Eurobodalla Shire. On August 13, 2019, local Councillor Pat McGinlay put forward a motion which would have the Eurobodalla Shire council declare that we are living in a 'climate emergency' and therefore commit to taking serious action

¹²² Albert McKnight, 'Bega MP Andrew Constance says it is time for debate on climate change', *Bega District News*, 20 December 2019.

¹²³ McKnight, 'Bega MP Andrew Constance'.

¹²⁴ McKnight, 'Bega MP Andrew Constance'.

towards this issue as a local government. The statement that Councillors McGinlay and Thomson put forward was:

Council acknowledges and consequently declares that we are living in a time of climate emergency that requires focused and strategic actions at the local government level, for the benefit of our whole community, in both the immediate and longer term.¹²⁵

With the majority of councillors voting against this statement, the motion was lost. Several more amendments were put forward by both sides of the debate which used different wording. The final result did not include the phrase 'climate emergency' or even refer to 'climate change'. Instead, part of the final statement agreed upon was:

Acknowledge the proactive and strategic approach taken by this and previous Councils to address the variable changing climate, including through the Emissions Reduction Plan prepared and subsequently adopted by this Council on the 13 June 2017.¹²⁶

In comparison to McGinlay's original wording, the final statement strategically avoids using the terms 'climate emergency', 'climate change' or 'climate crisis' and instead uses 'variable changing climate'.¹²⁷ While McGinlay's former phrase was demanding that the climate crisis be taken seriously and treated with urgency by the local government, the latter phrase agreed upon does not directly acknowledge the climate emergency or the seriousness of this problem for both current and future generations. Instead, it frames the issue as one which is less than urgent; an inconvenient problem that has already been dealt with by the council's 'Emissions Reduction Plan' from 2017. Rather than acknowledging the need for long-term planning and management of climate change for the future, the council diverts

¹²⁵ Bega District News, 'McGinlay fails in bid for Council to declare climate emergency', *Bega District News*, 13 August 2019.

¹²⁶ Bega District News, 'McGinlay fails in bid'.

¹²⁷ Bega District News, 'McGinlay fails in bid'.

attention onto its short-term achievements, implying that these have been substantial enough to address the issue.

Amongst those who voted against Pat McGinlay's original motion and all proceeding amendments which included the term 'climate emergency', was the current Mayor of the Eurobodalla Shire, Liz Innes. Throughout the bushfire crisis, Innes also showed that she was more interested in economics than in emotions, as her focus during the bushfire emergency was on pleading with state and federal governments to allocate funding to help the community to tackle what she describes as an 'economic emergency' as a result of the bushfires.¹²⁸ Like many other political leaders, such as PM Morrison, Innes was not only dismissive of the topic of climate change, but also demonstrated a lack of understanding of the emotion and trauma faced by those experiencing the bushfires in small, regional towns such as Cobargo.

The attention given to Mayor Liz Innes, who was interviewed by the *Bay Post* multiple times throughout the bushfire crisis, is evident of the broader trend in media whereby journalists tend to focus on using 'elite' sources, rather than on 'non-elite', everyday sources and people.¹²⁹ This is important to reflect on, as it results in people who already hold positions of power and influence in the community receiving more media attention, and therefore more influence via media. Meanwhile, those who are not elite and not powerful, are not as frequently afforded the privilege of having a respectable 'news voice'.¹³⁰ The perspectives of the 'non-elite' are not captured and shared with the public as frequently as the perspectives of those in power, which demonstrates the way in which newspapers like the *Bay Post* are responsible for reinforcing, rather than challenging, the unequal representation of local people and communities in the media.

In an interview with the *Bay Post* newspaper, published 8 January 2020, Liz Innes comments that she was criticised for her apology to PM Morrison after Cobargo residents told him he was 'not welcome' in their town:

¹²⁸ Bay Post, 'Time to back our backyard', *Bay Post*, 13 December 2019, p. 1.

¹²⁹ Ewart and Brian Massey, "Local (people) mean the world to us", p. 100.

¹³⁰ Ewart and Brian Massey, "Local (people) mean the world to us", p. 100.

I copped a bit of flack...I'm not berating those people. I absolutely understand why they reacted the way they did. My heart breaks for them. But no one deserves to be abused in that way. We are all trying our very best.¹³¹

According to Innes, the PM 'probably had good intentions' and she was 'distressed' that this was the 'image that has been put out of my part of the world'.¹³² She says 'the stories that I want to go out to the world are of my beautiful community and the people who have stepped up'.¹³³ It is worth noting that Cobargo is not in the Eurobodalla Shire, but belongs to the neighbouring Bega Valley Shire, which is not Innes' council area. Innes' statement demonstrates that she is more concerned with upholding the perceived 'image' of the South Coast than in addressing the reality of the bushfire and climate crisis. Her lack of empathy towards the bushfire-affected residents of Cobargo mirrors the broader issue that politicians were downplaying the bushfire crisis and not addressing it with the urgency it demanded.

The criticism of political leaders, demonstrated by the *Bay Post* on multiple occasions, speaks to Burns and Eltham's research that media reporters tend to criticize leaders or experts for having 'made poor or negative decisions'.¹³⁴ While Burns and Eltham don't suggest why this might be the case, journalists, editors and residents made their perspectives very clear when their opinions were published in the *Bay Post* during the bushfire crisis. On a local level, a shared concern among both residents and journalists/editors was that the government and its leaders were disconnected from the reality of the bushfires, and of climate change more broadly. In some cases, such as with Innes and Morrison, these leaders also failed to show empathy and understanding at a critical time in Australia, when residents in bushfire affected areas were suffering through the crisis. When questioned at a press conference about RFS volunteers not being paid for

¹³¹ Andrea Cantle, 'Fire's fury was shocking', *Bay Post*, 8 Jan 2020, p. 8.

¹³² Cantle, 'Fire's fury was shocking', p. 8.

¹³³ Cantle, 'Fire's fury was shocking', p. 8.

¹³⁴ Burns and Ben Eltham, 'Catastrophic Failure', p. 96.

their work, the Prime Minister responded by stating, ‘the fact is these crews, yes they’re tired, but they also want to be out there defending their communities’.¹³⁵ This statement resulted in widespread criticism of PM Morrison, along with other actions and phrases which demonstrated his perceived lack of interest and understanding of the national bushfire emergency. An example of this was PM Morrison’s trip to Hawaii in the midst of the bushfire emergency, which he was widely criticized for across both local and national media.

The frustration of residents in regional, bushfire affected areas was evident on social media as well as in newspapers. An RFS volunteer, Chris Nicholls, from the neighbouring Bega Valley Shire, wrote a letter to the Prime Minister in early December 2019, pleading that he take the bushfires seriously and to provide much needed funds to RFS brigades. Shortly after he had published it on his personal Facebook page, Nicholls’ letter went viral and spread across social media, as well as local and national news outlets who re-shared his letter to PM Morrison. *Bay Post* journalist, Denise Dion, described Nicholls’ letter as ‘heartfelt’ and recites some of the key parts of the letter, including the urgency to address the bushfires as a national emergency. Nicholls argues that ‘we need to treat this as if it was a war, a climate war which will have bigger effects’ and suggests a ‘unified and structured approach’ to managing both the bushfires and climate change.¹³⁶ Nicholls’ letter, and the attention it received, is a powerful example of how many residents on the South Coast were feeling during the bushfire crisis. As other articles, editorials and letters to the editors revealed, residents wanted all levels of government to take action, not only towards the bushfires, but to the broader issue of climate change which they saw as a leading factor in the severity and spread of the bushfires in the summer of 2019-2020.

Demanding Debate: Now Is the Time

In contrast to many local, state and federal politicians, local residents in bushfire affected communities were demanding debate on the topic of climate change during the bushfire

¹³⁵ Bay Post, ‘Sorry, Prime Minister, you said what?’, *Bay Post*, 20 December 2019, p. 7.

¹³⁶ Denise Dion, ‘Plea to PM for national action’ *Bay Post*, 11 December 2019, p. 4.

season. They questioned what kind of future we would face in terms of severe climate events and natural disasters and how Australia would manage this. Residents wrote detailed letters to the editor about their climate concerns and the editors themselves also wrote several editorials in the *Bay Post* detailing their opinions about the issue. These editorials, articles and letters to the editor often refer to the disconnect between politicians and the reality of the bushfire crisis, which was especially felt in regional bushfire-affected communities. Letters to the editor reveal that unlike the Mayor of the Eurobodalla, many local residents were deeply concerned about the climate crisis, especially in light of such severe and devastating bushfires which they were experiencing firsthand. Locals wanted to see more debate and action on the topic, and many were critical of not only national leaders, such as PM Morrison, but of local leaders such as Mayor Innes, for their silencing of residents and of the broader issue of climate change.

This section of Chapter Two explores how *Bay Post* journalists and editors responded to the topics of climate change during the bushfire crisis, and how they selected and framed these discussions. Local journalists writing for the *Bay Post* describe the emotional burden which resulted from their position of having to experience, witness and write about the firsthand experience of the bushfires and report these stories to the public. They discuss how vulnerable and emotional they were during this time through their self-reflective writing, stating that despite trying to ‘retain our journalistic detachment’ from the events, the bushfires were a particularly emotional and traumatic event to report on and live through:

Local journalists have not only been reporting the story but at times have become part of it. Some have evacuated not once but several times, others have seen flames bear down on their own homes.¹³⁷

The journalists/editors explain that they ‘have a deeper investment in the story because we live here’, and while they were out conducting their work, found themselves ‘wondering if our homes will still be there in the afternoon’.¹³⁸ They recognise the bushfires as a traumatic

¹³⁷ *Bay Post*, ‘Hands up if you’ve shed a tear or two’, *Bay Post*, 10 January 2020, p. 7.

¹³⁸ *Bay Post*, ‘Hands up if you’ve shed a tear or two’, p. 7.

event for the entire country, both human and non-human, with our ‘beloved native animals decimated, our forests reduced to ashes, thousands of homes destroyed’.¹³⁹ Their personal connection to the community and area of the Eurobodalla Shire, which is their home, reflects Bowd’s suggestion that local newspapers and journalists are closer to their readers – in this case both geographically and emotionally.

A letter to the editor from local Moruya resident, Francis Ross, challenges Innes’ apology to Morrison, as well as her explanation and justification of this apology. He points out that Cobargo is not in the Eurobodalla Shire to begin with, and that the Mayor had no right or reason to apologise to the PM on their behalf:

If a community which is not in your shire has lost many houses, shops and lives, it is arrogant and patronizing to pretend you know what they are going through and to apologise for their behaviour.¹⁴⁰

Ross also suggests that Innes’ previous attitudes towards the issue of climate change reveal that she is not very invested in the issue or in the best interests of the residents in her area. Ross explains that Innes voted ‘against a motion declaring a climate emergency in the Eurobodalla Shire’.¹⁴¹ According to Ross, if the motion had been passed, it would have ‘assisted earlier recognition of the threat of firestorms’ which could have had implications for local residents in their preparedness for the bushfire season.¹⁴² Instead, Innes supported a countermotion which did not use the term ‘climate change’ and, according to Ross, referred to the ‘election of the Morrison Government’ to justify her position on this issue.¹⁴³ For these reasons, Ross argues that the Mayor is ‘more interested in being political than a rational, scientific or common-sense position’ towards the interests of local citizens of the Eurobodalla Shire.¹⁴⁴ His letter shows that some locals felt a serious lack of understanding of how bad the bushfires were, and how emotional, traumatic and devastating they were to

¹³⁹ Bay Post, ‘Hands up if you’ve shed a tear or two’, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰ Francis Ross, ‘Fire’s fury was shocking’, *Bay Post*, 10 Jan 2020, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ Ross, ‘Fire’s fury was shocking’, p. 7.

¹⁴² Ross, ‘Fire’s fury was shocking’, p. 7.

¹⁴³ Ross, ‘Fire’s fury was shocking’, p. 7.

¹⁴⁴ Ross, ‘Fire’s fury was shocking’, p. 7.

residents in villages such as Cobargo. Ross' letter provides evidence that not only federal and state, but also local leaders, were failing to address the issue of climate change with the urgency it deserves. The bushfires, for Ross and many other residents, were indisputable evidence of the devastating impact of climate change.

An editorial published in the *Bay Post* on 6 December 2019 also expressed deep concern for the bushfire disaster and changing climate both locally and nationally. The editorial, titled 'Hopefully this isn't a sign of things to come', adopts a communal stance as the pronoun 'we' is used to describe the shared experience of the bushfires so far. The editorial provides perspective of how quickly the fires spread, stating that 'from what started as a story we began covering a week ago, the Currowan fire has become part of the national fire event'.¹⁴⁵ The editors challenge both themselves and their readers to consider the issue of climate change in the midst of what was soon become both a local and national disaster emergency. They refer to the comments made by politicians that 'there has been comments that this is not the time to talk about changing climates', to which they respond 'if not now, when we face these fire emergencies, while they are still going on and fresh, then when?'.¹⁴⁶ They question whether these 'wild weather conditions' are 'going to be the new norm?'.¹⁴⁷ This editorial reveals that *Bay Post* journalists were recognizing and framing the local bushfires as part of something much larger – not only a 'national disaster emergency' – but as evidence of the broader global issue of climate change.

During the bushfires, some residents wrote to the *Bay Post* expressing their concern over Australia's lack of climate change policies and our preparedness for disasters such as the bushfires. Local resident, Gary Smith from Tuross Head, notes that, 'some MPs have said this is not the time to discuss climate change', while Australia was experiencing the Black Summer bushfires.¹⁴⁸ For Smith, however, 'the time is now'.¹⁴⁹ He argues that to 'continue with outdated political ideology' and continue not to take climate action will only 'damage

¹⁴⁵ Bay Post, 'Hopefully this isn't a sign of things to come', *Bay Post*, 6 December 2019, p. 8.

¹⁴⁶ Bay Post, 'Hopefully this isn't a sign', p. 8.

¹⁴⁷ Bay Post, 'Hopefully this isn't a sign', p. 8.

¹⁴⁸ Gary Smith, 'How Fragile's Australia?', *Bay Post*, 15 January 2020, p. 8.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, 'How Fragile's Australia?', p. 8.

Australia' further.¹⁵⁰ Smith is concerned that the Australian government has not taken climate change seriously:

Despite warnings, our government has done little to prepare Australia for climate change. It is an international problem, but we can't hide from our long drought and unprecedented bushfires. The government would be better respected on the world stage, and by younger generations, if we genuinely supported global actions.¹⁵¹

Smith's lengthy letter details what it was like as a local living through the bushfire season and what this experience revealed about Australia's preparedness for such disasters. He describes living on the South Coast during the 2019-2020 bushfire season as 'like living on the set of Mad Max'.¹⁵² He describes how local residents were constantly 'seeing and breathing smoke', and how ash and burnt leaves were falling 'like dirty snow', of extremely hot days, of blackouts, road closures and minimal communications.¹⁵³ Smith details the anxiety and uncertainty amongst the community, saying 'after only a few days, there was a feeling of how close we were to civil breakdown', especially with 'idiot looters' going around.¹⁵⁴ Smith suggests that 'a more widespread disaster or intentional sabotage lasting weeks or months' would leave Australia vulnerable in terms of its 'security, safety' and 'economy':

Hopefully this small example is a wake-up call for government to review infrastructure, especially back-up electricity, internet and phones; to train and deploy defence forces in homeland emergency support; provide fuel reserves (we only have about two weeks in reserves, another reason to support electric vehicles); and address climate change.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Smith, 'How Fragile's Australia?', p. 8.

¹⁵¹ Smith, 'How Fragile's Australia?', p. 8.

¹⁵² Smith, 'How Fragile's Australia?', p. 8.

¹⁵³ Smith, 'How Fragile's Australia?', p. 8.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, 'How Fragile's Australia?', p. 8.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, 'How Fragile's Australia?', p. 8.

Smith's letter details the very real impact of bushfire disasters on small communities and reminds us how dependent we are on systems which cannot operate without power, fuel and communications. He expresses the frustration that some locals were feeling during the bushfires, especially towards political leaders who were dismissing public debates about climate change, which Smith argues is a crucial factor in the bushfire crisis.

An anonymous letter to the editor (name and address supplied to the newspaper) expresses concern over the denial of climate change in areas such as the Eurobodalla Shire. The writer says that most people seem to be unanimous in criticising PM Morrison for his 'actions (or rather inaction)' during the bushfire crisis.¹⁵⁶ What is 'most concerning' to the writer is the 'strong opposition to climate change and climate change activists' and the number of people who continue to deny the 'empirical scientific proof' on which it is founded.¹⁵⁷ The writer suggests that climate change is undoubtedly a factor which is contributing to the severity of the bushfires, and it is therefore critical that discussions around climate change are prioritised:

The subject of climate change is a significant conversation that the Australian public needs to start having, and a serious look into future fire prevention and contingencies needs to take place. Australia needs all three levels of government, local, state and federal, to come together.¹⁵⁸

The anonymous letter suggests a united approach needs to be formed across all levels of politics to address the issue of climate change. The letter provides insight into various opinions held by residents of the Eurobodalla Shire, with the writer themselves being an advocate for climate action while also expressing that there was 'strong opposition' within the public to the issue of climate change. This letter also suggests that 'most people' blamed PM Morrison for bushfires for not taking urgent actions during the bushfire crisis.¹⁵⁹ It also reveals that, unlike federal and state political leaders who were avoiding climate change

¹⁵⁶ Bay Post, 'A time for unity', *Bay Post*, 8 January 2020, p. 8.

¹⁵⁷ Bay Post, 'A time for unity', p. 8.

¹⁵⁸ Bay Post, 'A time for unity', p. 8.

¹⁵⁹ Bay Post, 'A time for unity', p. 8.

debate, many residents in the Eurobodalla Shire recognised that now was a critical time in which the public actually ‘needed’ to have the ‘a significant conversation’ about climate change.¹⁶⁰

Editors also expressed their frustration towards the federal government’s lack of national action and inadequate response towards the bushfire crisis. Published on 11 December 2019, a *Bay Post* editorial criticises PM Morrison and his party for ‘not doing much at all’ to help those in the fire-affected areas of Australia.¹⁶¹ According to the editors, the Home Affairs Minister, Peter Dutton, had ‘dismissed’ the idea of making the defence force available, while those firefighting and emergency response teams on the ground were in need of urgent help:

In isolated villages on the coast that only narrowly avoided catastrophe because of air assets on the scene, exhausted volunteers talk as if they have been in combat, saved at the last minute by water bombers.¹⁶²

The ‘disconnect’ of politicians, especially Morrison, from the reality and severity of the bushfires is referred to often in *Bay Post* reports during the Black Summer bushfires. For people who were in these ‘isolated’ villages, who were ‘cut off for days’ at a time, without power and road access, ‘the silence from Canberra has been deafening’.¹⁶³ The editors are here referring to ‘Canberra’, meaning the Federal Government, for their lack of support and action taken to assist these bush-fire affected areas and criticizing PM Morrison for his lack of ‘true national leadership’ which they say Australians were in great need of during such desperate times.¹⁶⁴ They have framed the issue of the bushfires as a national failure, attributing blame especially towards PM Morrison. They also highlight the disconnect they see between regional, bush-fire effected communities with brave volunteers, and the out-of-touch politicians who don’t seem to understand the urgency of the bushfire emergency or climate crisis.

¹⁶⁰ Bay Post, ‘A time for unity’, p. 8.

¹⁶¹ Bay Post, ‘Lukewarm response to red hot fire crisis’, *Bay Post*, 11 December 2019, p. 10.

¹⁶² Bay Post, ‘Lukewarm response’, p. 10.

¹⁶³ Bay Post, ‘Lukewarm response’, p. 10.

¹⁶⁴ Bay Post, ‘Lukewarm response’, p. 10.

On 13 December 2019, the *Bay Post* editors again refer to the failures of the Government parties, both Liberal and Labour, to respond to the bushfire crisis and the issue of climate change with the urgency that these issues demanded. The editors comment that after ‘being largely absent during the national bushfire emergency’, PM Morrison had finally stepped forward and offered an extra \$11 million dollars towards aerial firefighting aid.¹⁶⁵ However, in their opinion, the funding was ‘too little too late’, especially considering PM Morrison’s ‘skirting of the key issue – climate change’.¹⁶⁶ The editors also criticise the actions of Opposition Leader, Anthony Albanese, who they say was ‘championing the cause of coal exports - one of the biggest contributors to the worsening crisis’ during the Black Summer bushfires in order to win back public support in coal-mining towns in Queensland.¹⁶⁷

Robert Shorrock, a local from Moruya in the Eurobodalla Shire, also wrote to express his frustration towards the federal government’s lack of action towards both the bushfires as well as climate change more broadly:

I have been living in bushfire smoke for a month now, our economy is not responding to conventional stimuli, we are causing mass extinctions, the Great Barrier Reef is dying, we are regularly setting high temperature records; I could go on.¹⁶⁸

Shorrock goes on to say that he is ‘ashamed of the actions of our Federal Government on climate change’, especially the use of ‘accounting tricks to achieve our emission targets’, rather than dealing with the issue and planning for a sustainable future.¹⁶⁹ As Shorrock puts it, political leaders were failing, and missing the opportunity to ‘demonstrate to the world that taking action to solve these problems is achievable’.¹⁷⁰ Just a week later, the *Bay Post*

¹⁶⁵ Bay Post, ‘ScoMo too SloMo dealing with the SmoKo’, *Bay Post*, 13 December 2019, p. 6.

¹⁶⁶ Bay Post, ‘ScoMo too SloMo’, p. 6.

¹⁶⁷ Bay Post, ‘ScoMo too SloMo’, p. 6.

¹⁶⁸ Robert Shorrock, ‘Who does not want a future?’, *Bay Post*, 20 December 2019, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ Shorrock, ‘Who does not want a future?’, p. 7.

¹⁷⁰ Shorrock, ‘Who does not want a future?’, p. 7.

published another letter to the editor from Robert Shorrocks, highlighting his previous concerns about political leadership in tackling climate change. Shorrocks begins this letter by addressing the Prime Minister directly. He challenges PM Morrison to 'listen to your fire chiefs, scientists, engineers, experts in every field' and 'abandon your ideological policies that are not working and dividing the nation'.¹⁷¹ Shorrocks suggests that the 'toxic' nature of politics in Australia is preventing the nation from moving forward towards a 'low-carbon, sustainable economy for all' and he pleads for leadership that will overcome this.¹⁷² Again, Shorrocks is addressing the bushfires as a failure of the federal government, particularly leaders such as PM Morrison, for dismissing the urgency of the climate crisis and refusing to act accordingly.

South Durras resident, Marilyn Delrieux, also wrote to the *Bay Post* expressing urgency over the issue of climate change and concern over the issue being discounted or denied by some people. Delrieux is critical of 'climate change sceptics' for not believing the 'overriding majority of experts', including '98% of world scientists', firefighters, leading economists and global central banks, all of whom warn against the damage that climate change will have on the natural, social and cultural worlds in which we live.¹⁷³ She warns against the destructive and 'unsubstantiated' views which deny the evidence that suggests we are facing 'a very dire future for our planet and children'.¹⁷⁴ Delrieux's letter shows that there was real concern within the Eurobodalla Shire community of people denying climate change in the midst of the bushfire crisis by residents who felt that the bushfires were undeniable evidence of this. This suggests that there were also residents in the Eurobodalla Shire who were in 'denial' of climate change and the impacts it was having locally, as well as nationally, with the Black Summer bushfires spreading across the continent.

Another letter to the editor from Eurobodalla Shire resident, Allan Rees, discusses the irony of Australian politicians in making deals which will only accelerate climate change and worsen events such as the bushfires.¹⁷⁵ Rees is the co-ordinator of '350 Eurobodalla', the

¹⁷¹ Shorrocks, 'Who does not want a future?', p. 7.

¹⁷² Shorrocks, 'Who does not want a future?', p. 7.

¹⁷³ Marilyn Delrieux, 'Climate Change', *Bay Post*, 12 February 2020, p. 9.

¹⁷⁴ Delrieux, 'Climate Change', p. 9.

¹⁷⁵ Allan Rees, 'No Big P politics', *Bay Post*, 5 February 2020, p. 6.

local branch of the national 350 Australia campaign which aims to promote 100% renewable energy transition across the nation. According to Rees, the State and Federal governments had planned to ‘subsidise gas generation of electricity’ and ‘open up a huge new gas fracking field in Narrabri in north-western NSW’ in the midst of the bushfire crisis.¹⁷⁶ Allan asks:

Aren’t the bushfires bad enough? We don’t want to make them worse.

It is beyond stupid to increase emissions when we are suffering from the shocking effects of climate change.¹⁷⁷

Rees’ letter, like many others which were published in the *Bay Post*, shows that many residents in the Eurobodalla recognized that the bushfires were linked to climate change. Letter writers framed their own experiences of the bushfires not just a local issue, but as symptomatic of a local, state, national as well as global problem.

Letters to the editor show that many residents were passionate about action on climate change and had been taking action both prior to and during the Black Summer bushfires. A letter to the editor written by local Moruya student, Isabel, details a recent ‘School Strike 4 Climate’ which took place on 29 November 2019 just days after the bushfires had begun in the Eurobodalla Shire. This followed the same campaign as another school strike that had taken place in Moruya on 20 September 2019. In both of these events, protestors were demanding that no new coal, oil or gas projects be commenced in Australia, a transition to 100% renewable energy generation and exports by 2030, funding and new jobs to ensure all workers in fossil fuel industry are able to transition fairly and for recognition and empowerment of Indigenous Australians as the traditional custodians of the land. Young students at the strike expressed their concern for the future ahead and lack of significant climate change action and policies. One student, Jenna, says:

Icebergs are melting, schools are shutting down, animals are dying,

¹⁷⁶ Rees, ‘No Big P politics’, p. 6.

¹⁷⁷ Rees, ‘No Big P politics’, p. 6.

and what is our government doing about this? I will not stop fighting for what I know matters.¹⁷⁸

Isabel's letter demonstrates that residents of all ages were actively engaging in protests and campaigns which demanded climate action from the government, both before and after the Black Sumer bushfires had started in the local area. This is important because it reveals that while the bushfires appeared to be a catalyst for debate on climate change in the local area, many residents were already engaging in the topic and already arguing that the government was not doing enough to address the issue.

A letter to the editor from local Broulee resident, Kathryn McCarthy, recounts that more than 100 people from the Eurobodalla took part in a rally in Canberra for climate action in February 2020. Participants from Australian Parents for Climate Action Eurobodalla, 350 Eurobodalla, the Southcoast Health and Sustainability Alliance (SHASA) and Doctors for the Environment, which included 'students, farmers, doctors, fire-fighters, parents, Indigenous Australians and conservative voters', travelling by bus together from the Eurobodalla Shire to the rally.¹⁷⁹ Local Broulee residents, Luke and Michelle Hamrosi, speak about their concern over the health implications of climate change:

Extreme weather events, which climate change make more frequent and intense, have a direct impact on human health and wellbeing. We've seen the devastating effect from the mega fires on our own communities – from smoke-induced breathing problems and chest pain, burns, mental health trauma and deterioration of people's chronic health conditions.¹⁸⁰

GPs were urging all levels of government to 'take the advice of scientific and medical experts in this field' and treat climate change with a much greater level of urgency.¹⁸¹ This letter

¹⁷⁸ Isabel, 'Moruya Students Strike', *Bay Post*, 6 December 2019, p. 7.

¹⁷⁹ Kathryn McCarthy, 'Coast voices in Canberra', *Bay Post*, 7 February 2020, p. 7.

¹⁸⁰ McCarthy, 'Coast voices in Canberra', p. 7.

¹⁸¹ McCarthy, 'Coast voices in Canberra', p. 7.

reveals that large groups of residents from the Eurobodalla Shire were actively involved in campaigns and rallies in support of climate action. In this example, the rally was taking place in February, just after the Black Summer bushfires had ceased in the Eurobodalla Shire.

In this chapter I have shown that many local journalists, editors and residents in the Eurobodalla Shire attributed the severity and intensity of the Black Summer bushfires to the broader national and global issue of climate change. While political leaders of all levels were failing to address the topic, locals were demanding debate and climate action, not only before, but during and after the bushfires had passed through the Eurobodalla Shire. The *Bay Post* was a critical source of these stories and opinions, particularly through their editorials and letters to the editor, and in capturing and communicating the urgency of the bushfires, and of climate change. This chapter also showed that *Bay Post* journalists, while providing critical and immediate reporting on the bushfires, also tended to prioritise the voices of 'elites' as opposed to the everyday, 'non-elite' citizens.¹⁸² In the next chapter, I will also analyse the depiction of animal/human relations in the *Bay Post* and consider what those depictions tell us about the particular values placed on specific animals.

Chapter Three: Animals in Crisis

The damage caused by the bushfires is most often measured by how many human lives were lost, how many homes, businesses or buildings were burned down and how much land

¹⁸² Ewart and Brian Massey, 'Local (people) mean the world to us', p. 100.

the fires burned across. Outside of these numbers and figures, the reality of the devastation on the non-human, natural world is hard to conceive and almost impossible to measure. Scientists can only give estimates of the number of animals killed, and even still those figures do not translate the inconceivable reality of such immense loss. A report conducted by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) released in July 2020 revealed that around 3 billion animals, which included mammals, reptiles, birds, and frogs, were either killed or displaced as a result of the Black Summer bushfires.¹⁸³ This figure did not include insects, of which the loss is projected to be in the hundreds of billions.¹⁸⁴

In this chapter I will discuss the impact that the Black Summer bushfires had on non-human life within the Eurobodalla Shire, including the billions of animals that were displaced or killed due to the fires. I use the *Bay Post* newspapers from the months of December 2019 through to February 2020 to explore how local journalists and residents framed ideas and values of non-human animals. Articles and letters to the editor provide important insight into how local people were experiencing the bushfires, including the process of evacuating from their homes with their companion animals, or in some cases, having to leave domestic animals behind due to the urgency of these situations. I refer to previous academic research on disaster management in discussions about how the bushfires revealed the broader hierarchical value system in which humans value some animals over others. This was made evident during the bushfire crisis through the animals we rescued, the ones we left behind, the ones we mourned and others whose experiences and deaths are not mentioned in stories of loss or survival surrounding the Black Summer bushfires.

Celermajer reflects on the impact of Australia's Black Summer, suggesting that the scale and reality of human and nonhuman lives lost in the bushfires is hard to conceive. She argues that humans don't have the capacity to handle so much loss, 'not only to humans, but to other wild and domesticated animals' and to the natural world in which they live.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ World Wildlife Fund, 'New WWF report: 3 billion animals impacted by Australia's bushfire crisis', (28 July 2020), <https://www.wwf.org.au/news/news/2020/3-billion-animals-impacted-by-australia-bushfire-crisis#gs.66rt01>, (accessed 5 May 2021).

¹⁸⁴ Parliament of Australia, '2019–20 Australian bushfires - frequently asked questions: a quick guide', (12 March 2020), https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1920/Quick_Guides/AustralianBushfires, (accessed 10 October 2020).

¹⁸⁵ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, p. 16.

Celermajer uses the term ‘omnicide’, which she defines as ‘the killing of all’ - human and nonhuman life – and encourages us all to take accountability for our contribution to the climate crisis, which fuelled the severity of the Black Summer bushfires.¹⁸⁶ While Celermajer recognises that this is no easy task, she challenges her readers to consider this:

How do we learn to understand ourselves and everyone else, human and other-than-human, in ways that will help us extricate ourselves and those who will come after us from omnicidal ways of being human?¹⁸⁷

In response to the question Celermajer poses, her work suggests that we might start deepening this understanding by reflecting on our relationship as humans to the non-human world and to other living beings around us. This chapter reveals that while human and non-human connections are vital and significant, they are also riven with power relations and hierarchies, which has the effect of compartmentalising how humans care for particular animals and are affected differently by their suffering.

Disasters such as the bushfires provide evidence of the broader cultural hierarchy of animal life, which is revealed by the way that different species or categories of animals were treated by humans throughout the bushfire crisis. This is exemplified by domestic animals and pets (often situated at the top of the hierarchy as part of the ‘family’) who were evacuated to safety, kept close to their humans, photographed, named as individuals, and mourned. In contrast, livestock animals, at the bottom of the hierarchy, were less likely to be evacuated to safety, not named - but instead counted as a number - and not mourned in their death. The juxtaposition of these two types of animals, domestic pets and livestock, shows that the more individualised an animal is, the greater the moral significance afforded to their life is.

The *Bay Post* newspaper coverage of the Black Summer bushfires provides insight into how local journalists and residents framed discussions of animals and of the broader natural

¹⁸⁶ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, p. 224.

¹⁸⁷ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, p. 225.

world through their own experiences and perspectives. Letters to the editors, editorials and articles from the *Bay Post* provide a rich source of information for how some animals experienced, survived, suffered and in many cases, died, in the Eurobodalla Shire throughout the 2019-2020 bushfire season, as well as how residents responded to this loss. Importantly, this chapter discusses which kinds of animals are excluded by this process of framing within the *Bay Post* and how this exclusion or ‘silencing’ of some animals fits into the broader, hierarchical value system in which, as O’Sullivan writes, ‘humans like some animals and dislike others, depending on how the animals serve us’.¹⁸⁸ Native animals and insects are also framed as emblematic of survival, renewal, and regeneration of life. They are photographed amongst blackened firegrounds, with the ruins of destroyed human infrastructure around them, as a beacon of hope that life of all forms will thrive again. However, this framing of native animals distracts from the reality of the devastation that the bushfires caused to them, especially to insects, billions of which were killed by the fires. The mass death of these animals and insects is not discussed or photographed within *Bay Post* newspaper reports. While several animals – birds, lizards, marsupials – are photographed as signs of life, the billions of native animals across Australia that were killed by the fires are nowhere to be *seen* – their deaths are not photographed, except for one native fish.

It is important to consider that the human, cultural world and the non-human, natural world are not distinctly separate, as there are interactions and philosophical overlap between the two. Celermajer’s analysis is one recent example of this, where it is impossible to separate the ‘man made’ disaster that is climate change, from the effects on the ‘natural world’. The two are inextricably intertwined. Throughout the *Bay Post* newspaper reports, this overlap between culture and nature is visible particularly with domestic animals, who belong to both worlds as a result of centuries of domestication, breeding, property status and human ownership and responsibility for them as part of our communities and often families.

We also see a connection between humans and native or wild animals through the emotions local people expressed in response to these animals and in the active attempts to care for, rescue and save these animals throughout the crisis. While this connection and

¹⁸⁸ O’Sullivan, ‘The animals we rescue, and the animals we don’t’.

care for native animals is important, especially for individual native animals who are rescued, it also reiterates the broader hierarchy in which some types of animals are prioritised and valued over others. The division of animal life according to their status as either domestic or 'wild' maps onto the culture/nature divide to some extent. The proximity of domesticated animals to 'us' can also mean that their loss is measured differently to the loss of 'wild' animals who are less likely to be counted. In what follows, I will focus on how particular groups of animals (domesticated pets, livestock and native animals) were depicted in the *Bay Post* from December 2019 through to February 2020.

Man's Best Friend

Disasters and emergencies such as bushfires often bring to light what is most important to us, especially as we are faced with prospect of what we might lose because of these events, including our own lives and the lives of those we love, both human and non-human. As the *Bay Post* newspaper reports from December 2019 through to February 2020 demonstrate, the bushfires created a situation in which residents were faced with difficult decisions, including whether or not to evacuate their homes, and what and even who they would take with them. For many residents in the Eurobodalla Shire, animals were a crucial part of this decision-making process.

Domestic animals, and specifically pets, appear to be the most common type of animal involved in the evacuation process in which people sought safer places for themselves, families and animals during the bushfires. Out of all the domestic animals, dogs featured most frequently in photographs and articles within the *Bay Post* newspaper reports from December 2019 through to February 2020. They are photographed often with their owners at evacuation centres, which demonstrates that dogs were indeed one of the main priorities of residents in the Eurobodalla Shire who were evacuating to safety.

Dogs have been an important part of human life for thousands of years. Research suggests that dogs were first domesticated by humans around 11,000 years ago, to the end of the

last Ice Age period.¹⁸⁹ Dogs are thought to have derived from wolves who would have entered into the human sphere in search of food, and eventually became companions which hunted with humans, and offered protection. Dogs continue to be a huge part of everyday life for many humans and are often affectionately and colloquially referred to as 'man's best friend' because of the endearing companionship they provide to humans. Dogs are also frequently referred to and considered 'members' of human families in modern society.

The strength of this bond and value of dogs is exhibited throughout stories of the Black Summer bushfires. Dogs are featured in photographs with their owners who have evacuated to safer places. A good example of this is a photograph taken of Michelle and Brett Cuthbert who with their small dog, which was published in the *Bay Post* on 11 December 2019. The composition of the photograph of the Cuthbert couple and their dog suggests a shared experience of the bushfires (see image 2). The dog's head is at much the same height as the humans', he is placed between them and his expression and gaze seems to mirror theirs. The dog is also centred in the photograph, nestled between the safety of owners, Michelle, who holds the dog in one arm, and Brett, who holds the dog's lead in both his hands. This demonstrates the importance and value of domestic animals to their owners who have secured the animal's life along with their own, by evacuating together to the safety of the headland at Bawley Point.

¹⁸⁹ Paul Rincon, 'Dogs are humans' oldest companions, DNA shows', *BBC News* (20 October 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-54690458> (accessed 12 January 2021).



Image 2: Man's Best Friend.¹⁹⁰

Although the caption does not individualise the dog by providing their name, photographs like these make companion animals visible in our stories of the bushfire crisis, reminding us that it's not just humans who suffered through this local and national emergency. These photographs also reflect the broader societal trend in which 'man's best friends' is such a valuable animal that they are treated as members of the family and evacuated to safety with their humans.

Dogs also feature in a photograph published in the *Bay Post* on 6 December 2019, where a group of women stand at the Milton evacuation centre. Again, although the dogs aren't mentioned or named in the caption, photographs such as these frames the animals as highly important and shows that they were often prioritised in evacuation plan. They are visible alongside humans, sharing the experience of the bushfire disaster together, including the shared safety of the evacuation centre – which many other types of animals were not so fortunate to receive. The article with which the photograph was published also mentions that people donated 'animal feed, tick prevention and water' to the Milton showground to

¹⁹⁰ Bay Post, 'Coast in Crisis', *Bay Post*, 11 December 2019, p. 16.

help those who had brought their animals and pets to the showground. This suggests that dogs and pets were considered not only by their owners but by the wider community who were keeping them in mind and donating goods to help.

Another photograph published in the *Bay Post* on 8 January 2020, includes 3 dogs who are the main feature and are also named in the caption. The photograph, which shows 3 dogs either chained or tied to a post is captioned 'Uncertain future: Ruby, Thea and Precious at the Hanging Rock evacuation centre on January 6' (see Image 3). The naming of the dogs in the caption is significant as it individualises the animals and heightens their sense of importance and value. The article published with the photograph is titled 'Family, 13 dogs homeless', and tells the story of how Glenn Gardner and his family 'escaped the flames with the dogs – including four ten-week-old puppies'.¹⁹¹

The Gardner's home was lost in the bushfires, and they were camping temporarily at the main evacuation centre in Batemans Bay. The importance of the dogs is evident in the fact that they have been evacuated/rescued from the bushfires, along with the rest of the Gardner family, who are not photographed. Both the article, which describes the dogs as 'friendly', and the photograph evoke sympathy for the pets and frames the bushfire crisis as a shared experience between humans and nonhumans.¹⁹² We are reminded that alongside humans, animals too were displaced from their homes as a result of the Black Summer bushfires and suffered the impacts of this catastrophic event.

¹⁹¹ Andrea Cante, 'Family, 13 Dogs Left Homeless', *Bay Post*, 8 January 2020, p. 5.

¹⁹² Cante, 'Family, 13 Dogs Left Homeless', p. 5.



Image 3: Dogs Left Homeless.¹⁹³

The *Bay Post* also featured an article on 10 January 2020 which was written by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), instructing pet owners on how to care for their animals, specifically dogs and cats, throughout hot summers. The article lists some of the effects felt by dogs and cats who are not properly cared for during hotter days, which included dehydration, overheating, heat stress or heat stroke, all of which can result in death. It also mentions the risk of dogs getting burnt paws if they are exposed to a surface, such as pavement, which is too hot. The RSPCA's article reminds us that we are solely responsible for the wellbeing of these animals and take extra measures ensure that our dogs and cats are kept cool, hydrated and healthy throughout extremely hot summer days. Especially as 'summers become hotter across the country' this article suggests that it isn't just humans but animals also who will suffer as a result of these hotter temperatures and more extreme weather events.

In another story within the *Bay Post*, the language used to describe a man's deceased dog is also very telling of the emotional value and importance of dogs as companion animals and the priority they are given throughout emergencies. Roger tells the story of how lucky he was that the fire burned around his property. Roger recounts with great relief that the fire

¹⁹³ Cantle, 'Family, 13 Dogs Left Homeless', p. 5.

'even went around' the grave of his 'beloved police dog, Jeff'.¹⁹⁴ The naming of 'Jeff' and the positive connotations invoked by 'beloved' show us just how much Roger cared for his dog, which he clearly had a very strong emotional connection to. In this story, Jeff is so highly regarded that the urn containing the ashes of Roger's mother were placed on the log above his final resting place. Roger humours the *Bay Post* with his story about this:

'I did give the firies a bit of a moment when I said I had to go up and get my mum...I told them she was watching my dog - well, she was in her urn on the log above him. I got her home safe, and although the fire burnt the log it went around Jeff'.¹⁹⁵

In this instance, the dog is shown to be so loved and respected that Roger's own mother's urn had been placed at his dog's grave. This story reiterates the importance of these companion animals at the top of our hierarchy of value, as 'man's best friend'. Even in his death, Jeff is remembered and Roger worries about the fire burning his gravesite, which reflects that Jeff received a level of care far greater than most other animals are afforded by humans. In comparison to Jeff, the billions of animals who were killed in the bushfires across Australia are not remembered or mourned as individuals, and their deaths are not marked by gravesites to ensure that they are not forgotten.

Left Behind

It has not been lost on us that we are among the very few who have the luxury of a few days' warning to save what is most precious. Leaving aside, of course, that you cannot take the trees, the native animals, the grass, the soil, the river and the relationships that sustain us all.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Zoe Cartwright, 'Roger sleeping with his boots on', *The Bay Post*, 6 December 2019, p. 3.

¹⁹⁵ Cartwright, 'Roger sleeping with his boots on', p. 3.

¹⁹⁶ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, p. 16.

As Celermajer notes, for many Australians, the imminent threat of the bushfires left very little time for residents to pack everything, or everyone, as they fled to safety. This meant that sometimes domestic animals were left behind to either flee for themselves if they were able to, or were held captive within fences, cages, homes or other human-made confines as the fires approached. Celermajer also writes about the struggle she and her partner faced when trying to evacuate their animals from the property without the ‘means to evacuate all of the animals...we had no truck, no float, and, more importantly, no ability to get the donkeys onto a truck’.¹⁹⁷ Luckily, their calls for help to evacuate their animals to safety were answered by strangers in their local community who worked together with one common goal; to ‘protect each other and the animals we live with from the fire’.¹⁹⁸ Articles from the *Bay Post* reflect similar experiences taking place across the Eurobodalla Shire as people evacuated either with or without their animals, for various reasons.

De Paula Vieira and Anthony remind us that animals are ‘disproportionately prone to risk and adversely affected by disasters’ and therefore ‘require humane and respectful care when disasters strike due to socially situated vulnerabilities’, which are a result of the values and purposes humans attribute to them.¹⁹⁹ The authors argue that ‘our continued domestication of animals in the modern age’ also requires us to take responsibility for their lives when an emergency situation does unfold. As they note, there are many ‘anthropocentric reasons’ why we should be accountable for animals during a disaster:

humans have an acquired responsibility due to animals’ membership in our homes, the human-animal bond, their health and welfare, psychosocial and emotional trauma, the potential for environmental degradation, and savings in time, labor and financial expense if animals are neglected during an emergency.²⁰⁰

De Paula Vieira and Anthony suggest, ‘the trauma of abandoning them can haunt both rescuers and owners’ who are involved in these situations, and it therefore benefits both

¹⁹⁷ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, pp. 43-44.

¹⁹⁸ Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections*, p. 86.

¹⁹⁹ De Paula Vieira and Raymond Anthony, ‘Reimagining Human Responsibility’, p. 223.

²⁰⁰ De Paula Vieira and Raymond Anthony, ‘Reimagining Human Responsibility’, p. 232.

the animals and humans to carefully consider and account for animals in our disaster planning, including evacuation plans.²⁰¹

While companion animals such as dogs received a lot of attention and care throughout the bushfire crisis, other domestic animals were not so fortunate and in some cases were left behind by their owners who were fleeing to safety. The *Bay Post* recorded multiple stories of people who were evacuating their homes and properties at the last minute being unable to leave in time with their animals, or unable to access the resources or land needed for their larger animals, such as horses. It is evident from stories published in the *Bay Post* that this could result in feelings of anxiety and guilt for the animal owners who had been forced to leave their animals behind. These stories are suggestive of the emotional impact and trauma cited by De Paul Vieira and Anthony that emergency bushfire situations can cause to animal owners, and the serious risk posed to animals who are left behind in bushfire emergency situations.

Local resident and teacher, Jenny Borthwick, initially had to leave her horse behind at her property at Moruya to flee from approaching fires. While Borthwick was able to find a vacant house for her ill husband John and their dogs to evacuate to, she had to leave her behind her 'much loved mare' named Missy.²⁰² Borthwick used waterproof marker to write Missy's name and her own phone number on the horse, 'in case fire reached her North Moruya home' and they became separated from each other.²⁰³ Much to Borthwick's relief, local 'horseman', Adrian Feirer, volunteered to move Missy to safety at the Moruya Showground. Borthwick was overwhelmed by Adrian's kindness, saying 'we were rescued'.²⁰⁴ While Borthwick and Missy's story thankfully did not end in disaster, it exemplifies the serious risk posed to animals who are unable to be quickly or easily moved out of the fire paths and the emotional strain this situation can cause on both the owners of the animals. The photograph of Missy frames the bushfires experience as a shared one, including the evacuation process, rather than just something which affected humans alone. Both Borthwick and Feirer's care for Missy demonstrates that horses are high up on the

²⁰¹ De Paula Vieira and Raymond Anthony, 'Reimagining Human Responsibility', p. 232.

²⁰² Bay Post, 'Written defence', *Bay Post*, 10 January 2020, p. 3.

²⁰³ Bay Post, 'Written defence', p. 3.

²⁰⁴ Bay Post, 'Written defence', p. 3.

hierarchy of animals that both individuals, communities and our broader society cares about.

Ms V Allen's evacuation story in the *Bay Post* also describes the emotional difficulties and feelings of guilt of having to leave animals behind during the bushfire crisis. Ms Allen was advised to leave her home by another local resident in Moruya as the bushfires approached:

I got a bit teary when I told him we would leave, but that I had to leave my seven birds in a big aviary. It was too difficult to catch them. It broke my heart. I felt so guilty, but we just didn't have time.²⁰⁵

Instead, Ms Allen quickly packed her bags and 'rallied ourselves, our dogs and our 82-year-old mum', fleeing to the safety of a friend's house in another suburb in the Eurobodalla Shire.²⁰⁶ Ms Allen describes her dogs being 'very stressed', along with herself and her family, who waited anxiously to hear if their home and budgies were going to survive the fires.²⁰⁷ This is important insight, as the emotions and behaviour of Ms Allen's dog's, just like her own, provide evidence of the impact of these events, not only on humans, but on our companion animals.

Other members of the public demonstrated sympathy and care for these animals and their owner, as a stranger attempted to inform her that the birds were safe:

At about 10.30pm we saw a post: "If you live at the end of Riverwood Place, your budgies are okay". To that kind person, I don't know who you are, but thank you. That was a wonderful gesture. I thought they would definitely die, even just from the smoke.²⁰⁸

Both Ms Allen's guilt in having to leave the budgies and her relief in knowing that they were

²⁰⁵ Ms V Allen, 'A Moruya Family's Fire Story', *Bay Post*, 21 February 2020, p. 5.

²⁰⁶ Allen, 'A Moruya Family's Fire Story', p. 5.

²⁰⁷ Allen, 'A Moruya Family's Fire Story', p. 5.

²⁰⁸ Allen, 'A Moruya Family's Fire Story', p. 5.

safe, demonstrates some of the emotions that local residents experienced through their traumatic experiences of evacuating from their homes during the bushfire crisis without their animals. Her story also shows that while some animals, such as her dogs, are easily transported, others are harder to catch and transport in time for a hasty evacuation, which puts them at higher risk of being left behind and potentially killed by the smoke, heat or flames of the bushfires. We are reminded also that animals which are kept in cages and other confines by humans are even more vulnerable and dependent on humans for safety, as they are further limited by these confines and unable to free themselves to flee to safety if a fire was approaching.

The Lives and Deaths of Livestock

In comparison to companion animals, livestock are a category of animal who proved to be highly vulnerable and suffered greatly through the bushfire crisis. This is reflected in how they are framed within bushfire stories and the kinds of language used to describe them. As O'Sullivan suggests, livestock are by definition thought of in terms of their monetary value, rather than as individual living creatures:

You are born to make money and often that profit is only realised once you are dead. During a fire emergency, you are no longer “livestock” — you are just “stock.” You are the things we fill our supermarket shelves with. You will not be shuttled to safety. Your image will not be used to solicit donations.²⁰⁹

Bushfire stories in the *Bay Post* emphasize the treatment of livestock as animals which are valued first and foremost for their monetary value. Local Belowra farmer, Mr Dance, retells his own story of survival after deciding to ‘leave his home and his livestock behind’ as he realized he did not have enough water to stay and defend the property.²¹⁰ He describes the aftermath of the bushfire upon his return to his farm and surrounding properties, noting the

²⁰⁹ O'Sullivan, ‘The animals we rescue, and the animals we don’t’.

²¹⁰ Claudia Ferguson, ‘Fire storm took life of farmer’s neighbour’, *Bay Post*, 10 January 2020, pp. 6-8.

‘black pastures scattered with dead livestock’. Mr Dance explains to the *Bay Post*:

There’s a whack of dead cattle out there...My neighbour had five cows left out of 60. I found 40 of my cows, 30 calves and four horses dead. It was painful financially, physically and mentally.²¹¹

He goes on to explain that ‘at about \$1000 a throw’ the loss of these animals was ‘an emotional hit’, not only for himself but for his family and his neighbours who had also lost a significant number of livestock to the fires.²¹² Unlike companion animals, Mr Dance’s livestock are not named or mourned as individuals in this story. They are listed instead as numbers, ‘60’, ‘40’ and ‘30’. The dead bodies of the livestock are counted, and the financial loss is then estimated. For Mr Dance and his family, the ‘emotional’ impact caused by the loss of livestock is intrinsically linked to the financial, physical and mental burden which results from it.

Another story published in the *Bay Post* reveals the lived experiences of both farmers and their livestock who survived the bushfires in the Eurobodalla Shire. The Shephard family describes the process of having to defend their property at Currowan from the Currowan fire on multiple occasions. Protecting and keeping their cattle alive was one of the greatest tasks that they faced. When the fires first approached their property, one of the priorities was moving 150 cattle into a paddock central to the property for their best chance of survival.²¹³ Mrs Shephard describes getting up early one morning to ensure that their ‘drought-stricken cattle’ would have enough feed to survive a few days as ‘we knew we may not get any for a few days’ due to the bushfires approaching.²¹⁴ After a long drought and increased risk posed by the bushfires, Mrs Shephard explains that as primary producers, ‘the drought’s killing us’ and that it was ‘costing us thousands and thousands of dollars every week trying to keep the cattle alive’.²¹⁵

²¹¹ Ferguson, ‘Fire storm took life of farmer’s neighbour’, pp. 6-8.

²¹² Ferguson, ‘Fire storm took life of farmer’s neighbour’, pp. 6-8.

²¹³ Andrea Cantle, Claudia Ferguson and Kerrie O’Connor, ‘A battle for paradise: Family and Forestry unite against fire’, *Bay Post*, 8 January 2020, p.9.

²¹⁴ Cantle, Claudia Ferguson and Kerrie O’Connor, ‘A battle for paradise’, p.9.

²¹⁵ Cantle, Claudia Ferguson and Kerrie O’Connor, ‘A battle for paradise’, p.9.

In comparison to her livestock, Mrs Shephard describes being 'proud' of her Arabian horses for the way they behaved while the fire was approaching. She describes the horses as proving to be 'so clever' and boasts that they did not panic as the fire approached, but calmly moved themselves into a different paddock.²¹⁶ The horses took themselves to a paddock on the west side of the property, 'the last place the fire would get to', as Mrs Shephard explains to the *Bay Post*.²¹⁷ She then compares the behaviour of her horses to that of the cattle:

I can't say the same thing for the cattle. They came over to the east side where we were fighting the fire and a couple of them even went into the bush. I don't know how they didn't get cooked. None of them have died.²¹⁸

The language used by Mrs Shephard suggests that she does not have as much respect for as great an emotional connection with the cattle like she does with her Arabian horses. While the horses are regarded as intelligent animals to be proud of, the cattle are represented as having lower intelligence and therefore aren't afforded the same considerations as the horses. The term 'cooked' and Mrs Shephard's lack of demonstrated relief for none of the cattle having 'died' frames the cattle as an animal whose worth to humans is intrinsically financial rather than sentimental or emotional.

Fight or Flight: The Plight of Native Animals

Native animals are a category of non-human animals which feature in various stories throughout the *Bay Post* in the immediacy of the bushfire disaster. This next section examines how both journalists and residents reported on, or told stories about, the experiences of native animals during the bushfires. It considers what this framing says about

²¹⁶ Cantle, Claudia Ferguson and Kerrie O'Connor, 'A battle for paradise', p.9.

²¹⁷ Cantle, Claudia Ferguson and Kerrie O'Connor, 'A battle for paradise', p.9.

²¹⁸ Cantle, Claudia Ferguson and Kerrie O'Connor, 'A battle for paradise', p.9.

our relationship and valuing of these animals, and where they fit in the broader value system that humans use to categorise non-human animals. The work of O’Sullivan is important in this analysis, as she reflects directly on the Black Summer bushfires and how humans treated native animals, for example, in comparison to livestock. Her work emphasises how emotional and sentimental attitudes towards animals during the bushfires are underscored by political and cultural practices of care:

Native Australian wildlife also appear to have done well. Their death, trauma and suffering has been immense. But as a category of animal that we care about, they are right up there. The images, the donations, the effort — if you are an animal who was here prior to colonisation we appear to care deeply about your wellbeing.²¹⁹

As O’Sullivan suggests in this statement, Australians appear to care more about these native animals than others, and they are therefore far more likely to receive support throughout the disaster, in comparison to animals such as livestock or ‘feral’ animals. As a result of our care for these native animals, the trauma and emotional impact of their loss and suffering was felt not just by locals in bushfire affected communities, but across the nation.

The *Bay Post’s* coverage on the Black Summer bushfires reflects that local residents demonstrated care for native animals and were highly sympathetic to their plight. In these stories, residents express their emotional distress due to the impact of the bushfires on both the native flora and fauna. As local Moruya resident Ms Allen identifies, native marsupials such as kangaroos, wallabies and possums were severely impacted by the bushfires:

I am saddened seeing kangaroos emerging from what's left of the bush. The poor things were standing on smouldering ground, dazed. Only three resident possums returned. I can't imagine what they went through. A wallaby comes on dusk and was clearly starving. They know

²¹⁹ O’Sullivan, ‘The animals we rescue, and the animals we don’t’.

to come to our place. They will always get some assistance with food and water.²²⁰

Ms Allen's sympathy for these native animals also encourages us to 'imagine' their lived experiences of surviving the bushfires, only to find that their local habitat had been destroyed, leaving them 'starving', vulnerable and 'dazed'.²²¹ This demonstrates the impact that the bushfires had on these native animals, and the emotional impact that their suffering in turn has on local residents such as Ms Allen. This story is evidence of the inconsistent nature of human value systems in which some animals are cared for and others are not. Native animals, despite suffering so significantly, appear to be cared for at least to the extent that locals were emotional and expressed deep concerns about their suffering and loss.

As other reports suggest, it was also the case that many native animals were injured in the process of fleeing from the bushfires. In a *Bay Post* article published 13 December 2019, Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc. (WIRES) volunteers, Kevin and Lorita Clapson, describe their experience of rescuing and raising orphaned joeys, and helping kangaroos who were injured by the bushfires. The couple describe kangaroos 'crashing into fences and hopping as fast as they could to avoid flames and embers' because their 'fight or flight response is in overdrive'.²²² Kevin and Lorita observed that many kangaroos had 'serious smoke inhalation and burnt feet' and would 'just collapse'.²²³ They explain that out of the 10 joeys which they had released back into the bush last year, 7 had returned to them during the bushfires with 'quite badly burnt feet'.²²⁴

Their observation reminds us that human structures and confines such as fences create a serious risk to native animals during disasters such as these, as it limits their ability to move freely and quickly when necessary. In this instance, fences are a real example of the overlaps between the human/cultural world and the nonhuman/natural world. While fences

²²⁰ Allen, 'A Moruya Family's Fire Story', p. 5.

²²¹ Allen, 'A Moruya Family's Fire Story', p. 5.

²²² Bay Post, 'Water for wildlife: don't forget exit plan', *Bay Post*, 13 December 2019, p. 4.

²²³ Bay Post, 'Water for wildlife: don't forget exit plan', p. 4.

²²⁴ Bay Post, 'Water for wildlife: don't forget exit plan', p. 4.

on properties are often designed to keep domestic animals in (such as dogs, cattle, pigs, sheep, etc.), they can also act as a barrier which prevents native or 'wild' animals from moving freely, and in some instances, being physically trapped within the human/cultural sphere. This suggests the increased risk caused by humans is not only applicable to domestic animals, who might be fenced in or caged up, but to 'wild' or native animals who are also put at a greater level of risk due to human structures preventing them from freely fleeing to safety.

Mr Clapson describes having to euthanize the kangaroos that were in pain and could not be saved. He says 'when I see them in that much agony, it's a kind act'.²²⁵ The couple urged locals to put water and food out for 'any wild animals that come to your place regularly' because there was 'no water in the creeks or dams' due to the drought and 'no bush anymore for them to eat' after the bushfires.²²⁶ The Clapson's story frames the suffering and loss of native species as significant, not only to the animals themselves, but to the people who cared about them. The plight of these native animals throughout the bushfires had a strong emotional and real impact on local residents like the Clapsons who were volunteering their own time to help them recover or, when this wasn't possible, ease their pain through euthanizing them.

²²⁵ Bay Post, 'Water for wildlife: don't forget exit plan', p. 4.

²²⁶ Bay Post, 'Water for wildlife: don't forget exit plan', p. 4.



Image 4: Rescue Roo.²²⁷

Images and stories throughout the *Bay Post* demonstrate that both residents and journalists in the Eurobodalla framed the experience and suffering of some native animals through the bushfires as highly important. One kangaroo that the Clapsons had previously rescued featured on the front page of the *Bay Post* published on 13 December 2019. The title reads ‘Return of bandaged Baldwin’ and features the kangaroo with bandaged feet, being affectionately petted by a WIRES volunteer (see image 4).²²⁸ The placement of this photograph and story on the front page reveals that journalists and editors of the *Bay Post* considered the topic to be important and engaging to their target audience, which is predominantly local residents but also tourists visiting the area. It exemplifies the shared interest that not only locals, but Australians in general, have towards native animals. Both the article and letter to the editor which accompany Baldwin’s story encourages readers to donate to WIRES and gives instructions on how to do so. This provides evidence towards O’Sullivan’s suggestion that native animals are a category of living beings which Australians ‘appear to care deeply about’, especially compared to animals such as livestock.²²⁹

²²⁷ Bay Post, ‘Return of bandaged Baldwin’, *Bay Post*, 13 December 2019, p. 1.

²²⁸ Bay Post, ‘Return of bandaged Baldwin’, p. 1.

²²⁹ O’Sullivan, ‘The animals we rescue, and the animals we don’t’.

Native animals, and in some cases, insects, are framed throughout *Bay Post* newspaper reports of the Black Summer bushfires as a symbol of hope and regeneration of new life. Photographs of birds, such as magpies and lyre birds, featured in photographs of bushfire affected areas throughout the newspapers. While the lyre bird is not an everyday sight for most residents in the Eurobodalla, magpies are, which suggests that newly gained appreciation for these birds as a sign of life and therefore hope that the Australian fauna has survived. A local resident at Nerrigundah, which was one of the hardest hit villages in NSW, holds up a native gum moth in her hand as she stands amongst burned down buildings and fences. The photograph is captioned 'Hope to start new: life captured among the rubble at Nerrigundah' (see image 5).²³⁰

This is significant, firstly because insects do not usually feature in the *Bay Post's* stories or photographs during the bushfire crisis, despite hundreds of billions estimated to perished in the bushfires across the nation. The moth is literally and metaphorically upheld as a symbol of hope; a small living creature that had somehow survived the bushfires which had devastated the village of Nerrigundah and many others. The framing of the moth as a symbol of life and renewal is important also as it makes visible what is, across *Bay Post* articles, usually an invisible creature in bushfire stories. The photograph evokes a shared experience between the human and non-human, of two worlds and two species as survivors of one of the most devastating bushfire events in Australia's recorded history.

²³⁰ Claudia Ferguson, 'Let the healing begin: rising from rubbles after fires', *Bay Post*, 14 February 2020, p. 2.

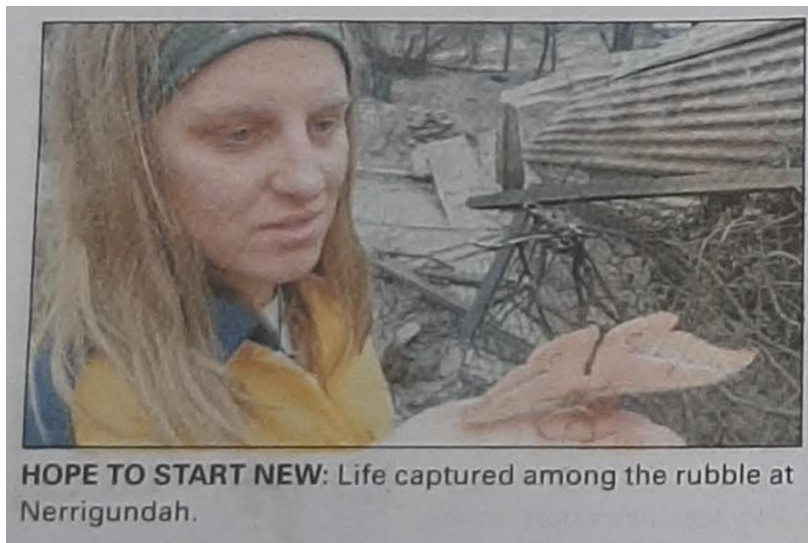


Image 5: Life After the Fires.²³¹

Less common throughout the Bay Post newspaper coverage are stories of native animals, such as fish, who were highly impacted by the bushfires but did not receive the same amount of attention and sympathy that animals such as marsupials were shown. Native fish feature in an article which describes the impact that the prolonged drought, bushfires and floods had caused to fish in the Eurobodalla Shire. The council surveyed local rivers, including the Deua River, which is one of the largest river systems in the Eurobodalla Shire, providing water to the main water supply, stored at Deep Creek Dam. Their survey discovered ‘fish kills’, which are the ‘mass mortality of fish’, in the Deua River, Tilba Lake and Whitaker’s Creek.²³² The article explains that reduced river flow due to drought, reduced oxygen in the water due to hotter days, and significantly increased water temperature (due to the bushfires) were all factors which resulted in the mass death of these native fish.²³³

The article is accompanied by a photograph of a ‘full size Australian bass’ which was one of many found dead during the council’s survey. Images of dead animals are rare throughout

²³¹ Ferguson, ‘Let the healing begin’, p. 2.

²³² Bay Post, ‘Native fish hit hard’, *Bay Post*, 7 February 2020, p. 13.

²³³ Bay Post, ‘Native fish hit hard’, p. 13.

the bushfire coverage in the *Bay Post*, with local journalists tending to capture animals who had survived the bushfires, especially if they had been rescued or saved by humans. This photograph makes visible the suffering and ‘mass mortality’ of native fish and demonstrates the real impact that climate change is having on local natural environments.



Image 6: Fish Killed by Bushfires.²³⁴

Manager of environmental services, Deb Lenson, explained that the health of local river systems in the Eurobodalla Shire was of great concern and priority, and that the council was seeking ‘technical and financial support’ from the NSW Government to assist with the implementation of both immediate and longer-term measures designed to ‘help protect water quality and coastal ecosystems’.²³⁵ Lenson states that ‘our native flora and fauna will need a lot of help’, while also indicating the importance of this recovery effort to ‘our tourism and aquaculture industries’.²³⁶ We are reminded of the overlap of the human/cultural world and the non-human/natural world, in this case, with humans being dependent on healthy rivers and ecosystems for financial prosperity. Lenson highlights both the non-anthropocentric and anthropocentric impacts which relate to the devastation and loss of life within local rivers as a result of the climate crisis we are in.

²³⁴ Bay Post, ‘Native fish hit hard’, p. 13.

²³⁵ Bay Post, ‘Native fish hit hard’, *Bay Post*, 7 February 2020, p. 13.

²³⁶ Bay Post, ‘Native fish hit hard’, *Bay Post*, 7 February 2020, p. 13.

'Unframed' Animals

There are many other animals which are not framed in discussions and stories of the Black Summer bushfires, either locally or nationally. These 'other' animals are not named, not photographed, and not made visible throughout discussions of the bushfire crisis. As O'Sullivan suggests, across Australia, 'pests' or 'feral' animals are given 'an even lowlier status than stock', hence the naming of these animals suggesting that they are 'despicable'.²³⁷ For O'Sullivan, the exclusion of these animals and treatment during the bushfires is indicative again of the broader hierarchal value system evident throughout our society, which sees some animals prioritised and cared for, while others are neglected or mistreated. She uses the following example to highlight this:

While one pure-bred Labrador is airlifted to safety, another dog is poisoned to death in order to protect the stock who are given water privileges ahead of feral donkeys or even kangaroos.²³⁸

O'Sullivan suggests that future discussions around animal ethics and our treatment of animals should encompass and critique these inconsistencies, which became prevalent during the bushfire crisis. The invisibility or exclusion of these animals in the *Bay Post's* bushfire coverage, especially in comparison to the certain types of animals who were included, speaks to the prioritisation and valuing of some animals over others that O'Sullivan explores.

While residents and journalists throughout the *Bay Post* demonstrated care towards companion and native animals, 'pest' or 'feral' animals are excluded from these frames, and their suffering and loss as a result of the bushfire crisis is therefore silenced. This highlights the broader, anthropocentric value system into which non-human animals are categorised depending on their worth/lack of worth to us. It also demonstrates the ways in which news

²³⁷ O'Sullivan, 'The animals we rescue, and the animals we don't'.

²³⁸ O'Sullivan, 'The animals we rescue, and the animals we don't'.

media, including the *Bay Post*, reinforce these systems through their selective framing of non-human animals. The *Bay Post* gives far more attention and consideration to some animals (companion and native animals especially) than it does to others (such as livestock and non-native, 'feral' animals). Their exclusion of 'feral' animals throughout newspaper reports during the disaster results in them being 'written out' of the Black Summer bushfire stories. It also denies our responsibility for these animals and therefore distances us from their lived experiences and mass deaths. As O'Sullivan writes, this is particularly problematic as, 'in many cases, we are the ones who put the animals there in the first place'.²³⁹

In conclusion, this chapter has shown how the depiction of animals in the bushfires follows established human-imposed hierarchies of animal life, where those closest to us ('members of the family') are granted the most protection and care, while those destined to be killed are offered least protection and care – usually only just enough to ensure their survival as they are a commodity of financial, not emotional, value. Companion animals, such as dogs and horses, are framed as valuable and their experience (or at least their 'shared' experience of the bushfires with humans) is made visible. Native animals, such as kangaroos, magpies, and lyrebirds, are framed in stories of survival, loss and hope for regeneration and renewal of life, both human and non-human, after the bushfires. Livestock are also framed in bushfire stories, not as sentient, individual beings but as numbers of 'stock'. They are not mourned, and their deaths are deemed to be a financial loss, rather than an emotional loss, to the humans responsible for them. 'Pests' or 'feral' animals are not mentioned in discussions of the bushfire crisis, framing them as insignificant and not of value.

This framing of animals, both those included and excluded, throughout Black Summer stories affirms observations made by O'Sullivan, who points to the 'inconsistencies that underlie our treatment of animals'.²⁴⁰ Celermajer's work points to the enormity of the devastation caused by the bushfires, while the cultural sorting of animals into those we care for and those we exclude suggests that this compartmentalisation is one way of coping with

²³⁹ O'Sullivan, 'The animals we rescue, and the animals we don't'.

²⁴⁰ O'Sullivan, 'The animals we rescue, and the animals we don't'.

the ‘enormity’ of the loss. For example, the focus on companion animals in *Bay Post* news stories, including them being evacuated with their humans during the bushfires, helps focus on the themes of survival of the animals that are closest to us. This diverts attention away from the grim reality that other animals faced, including livestock (many of which were left stranded and killed) whose death was only counted in financial losses, and ‘feral’ animals, whose deaths weren’t reported on at all.

De Paula Vieira and Anthony suggest for the benefit both humans and animals, we need to ‘reimagine human responsibility towards animals for disaster management’, taking careful consideration of their needs and how we might best meet them while still ensuring our own safety and wellbeing in an emergency situation.²⁴¹ The stories in the *Bay Post* of people having to leave their companion animals behind also speaks to the trauma which De Paula Vieira and Anthony warn is symptomatic of these events, and therefore another reason why animals need to be accounted for in disaster planning. I have also touched on the importance of factoring in animal life into disaster planning and management into the future – as animals provide not just companionable life but also become, in the case of native animals, figures of hope for future regeneration.

²⁴¹ De Paula Vieira and Raymond Anthony, ‘Reimagining Human Responsibility’, p. 223.

Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020 in the Eurobodalla Shire. The Black Summer bushfires were a historical event, both locally and nationally, as the worst bushfires to occur in Australia's recorded history. They also signify a frightening future for Australians, as climate change experts and scientists continue to warn us that disaster events such as bushfires will occur more frequently and more severely. I have focused on the stories of residents, journalists and editors in the Eurobodalla, as published in letters to the editor, articles and editorials in the local *Bay Post* newspapers from December 2019, through to January and February 2020. These stories are particularly significant as they capture the immediacy of the bushfires, and the concerns, values and opinions of people in the Eurobodalla towards important issues such as climate change and how we live with the environment and other animals. The newspapers reveal our relationships with and values attached to non-human animals, which are placed under greater stress during disasters like the bushfires.

As Hodgkinson and Moeller suggest, the influence of media is significant in the modern world, which depends on these sources to provide us (the general public) with constantly updated information, ideas and news. Both authors encourage us to critically evaluate the information we receive from these sources, suggesting that these are highly selective and manipulated forms of communication. Moeller suggests that the nature of media, and the high demand for it, results in news stories moving abruptly from one topic to another, even if the previous topic is still ongoing and unresolved. This was evident in the *Bay Post* which, despite being a local, regional newspaper, moved from the topic of bushfires onto flooding, despite the ongoing impact of the bushfires in the local community. In Australia more broadly, national news outlets focused momentarily on the bushfires, before quickly turning the majority of their focus onto the Covid-19 pandemic, in an ongoing disaster news cycle.

Local, regional newspapers provide important insight into the values and experiences of residents in these communities, including revealing whose stories get framed out. As Bowd suggests, journalists writing for regional newspapers are often unable to ‘detach’ themselves from the stories they are reporting on, in the way that journalists writing for larger, metropolitan newspapers can.²⁴² Rather, these journalists are often invested in their communities and can be personally and directly impacted on by the events which they are tasked with reporting on. The bushfires were a critical example of this, as the self-reflective writing of journalists/editors in the *Bay Post* revealed. These local reporters discussed the emotional and traumatic impact of the bushfires, not only in their jobs as journalists/editors having to hear and witness stories of loss, but also having experienced the fires firsthand, and in some cases, even lost their own homes during the crisis.

The *Bay Post* newspapers proved to be an invaluable source in capturing the immediacy of the events and the emotions and concerns of local people in the Eurobodalla Shire as the bushfires were occurring. These newspaper reports revealed that while local, state and national political leaders were avoiding the topic of climate change during the bushfire crisis, many residents in the Eurobodalla were demanding climate action and debate. The papers also show that while the bushfires acted as a catalyst for public and political debate on the topic, groups of residents of all ages had been actively engaging in climate change protests prior to the bushfires and continued to do so when the bushfires had passed. This reveals that there is significant concern over the topic of climate change, and that residents recognized the severity of the bushfires being a result of human-induced climate crisis.

Newspaper reporting is also highly selective, with journalists/editors prioritising certain people and opinions over others. As Ewart and Malley suggested, journalists as a group (whether reporting for regional or metropolitan newspapers) tend to focus their reporting on the ‘elite’, powerful, authoritative sources in a community, rather than on the ‘non-elite’, everyday resident. This was demonstrated in *Bay Post* newspaper reports which focused on ‘experts’ such as the RFS and on people in positions of influence, such as the local Mayor and councillors. Simultaneously, the voices of local Indigenous people/communities were

²⁴² Bowd, ‘A voice for the community’, p. 82.

not given attention during the bushfire crisis, particularly in relation to their knowledge of cultural burning practices, which were instead featured in the national ABC online news outlet. This demonstrates one of the limitations of newspapers/media as a source of information, showing that regional, local journalists/editors do not give equal or fair representation to all people/groups in their own communities.

As Celermajer reminds us, it is not only humans who are being severely impacted on by climate change, but also non-human animals who are continuously threatened by climate change, and the unsustainable 'everyday' human practices which accelerate this issue. As shown throughout Chapter Three, the bushfires brought to light the broader, hierarchical system in which human society categorizes non-human animals according to the purpose they serve in our society. For example, companion animals such as dogs were given far greater levels of care than most other animals, and appeared to be prioritised during evacuation processes, with many dogs being photographed alongside their owners in places of safety and refuge during the crisis. In contrast, animals such as livestock were very rarely evacuated, and as local stories suggest, many perished in the bushfires as a result. Unlike native or companion animals, the death of livestock or 'feral' animals was not notable – and in the case of livestock, their loss only resulted in a financial, rather than emotion burden, to the humans responsible for them. 'Pest' or 'feral' animals were 'framed out' – not receiving mention in the *Bay Post* newspaper reports covering the Black Summer bushfires.

As De Paula Vieira and Anthony suggest, the importance of animals during disasters such as bushfires is important not only for the wellbeing of the animal, but also of the human 'owners'. They warn that previous research into disasters shows that in these extreme circumstances, some owners will refuse to evacuate themselves to safety if their animals (especially companion animals) are unable to be rescued. This puts both the animal and owner at risk, and also potentially endangers rescuers who are then tasked with having to evacuate both of them at the same time, in urgent and extreme conditions. Furthermore, De Paula Vieira and Anthony's work also shows that having to abandon animals to evacuate during a disaster can cause serious emotional impact and trauma to the humans who were connected to the animal left behind. Stories in the *Bay Post* support this claim, with multiple residents discussing feelings of distress, anxiety, guilt and sadness over having to have left

their animals behind during the bushfire emergency.

More consideration also needs to be given to all types of animals (not just companion animals) in terms of local, state and national disaster/emergency planning. This was recognized by the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements' report which followed the Black Summer bushfires. Suggestions made within the report included that all state and territory governments across Australia should 'integrate wildlife rescue functions into their general disaster planning frameworks' to prevent delayed responses in rescue efforts of wildlife.²⁴³ The commission also recognized issues with unclear information about evacuation centres and whether or not animals could be taken to these, and suggested that as a result 'plans should clearly identify whether or not evacuation centres can accommodate people with animals'.²⁴⁴ Animal advocates and Environmental Law experts are calling for further action to be taken to help animals beyond what the Royal Commission has suggested. Ashleigh Best, Christine Parker and Lee Godden argue that more needs to be done to account for animals during bushfires, including access to wildlife corridors to 'allow wild animals the best possible chances of escaping and recovering on their own'.²⁴⁵

Not surprisingly, a thesis like this often comes across more themes in the primary materials than can be analysed fully in a thesis of this length. One of the themes that I would have liked to have spent more time examining was the role and significance of the emotional landscape, the range of experiences that the newspapers depicted and how these played out in often gendered ways. It was noticeable, for example, that photographs of action (firefighting) and photographs of emotions (depicting loss and grief) were frequently gendered, with men and women taking up particular roles. There is also an ongoing question, for me, about *why* cultural burning was not given more space in the newspapers as a topic, as part of local knowledge of bushfires and land management. While this could

²⁴³ Ashleigh Best, Christine Parker and Lee Godden, '3 billion animals were in the bushfires' path. Here's what the royal commission said (and should've said) about them', *The Conversation* (9 November 2020), <https://theconversation.com/3-billion-animals-were-in-the-bushfires-path-heres-what-the-royal-commission-said-and-shouldve-said-about-them-149429>, (accessed 22 July 2021).

²⁴⁴ Best, Christine Parker and Lee Godden, '3 billion animals were in the bushfires' path'.

²⁴⁵ Best, Christine Parker and Lee Godden, '3 billion animals were in the bushfires' path'.

not necessarily be answered by these primary materials alone, they suggest a framing out, but do not necessarily provide enough data on the *reasons* for this framing.

I would also like to thank the community of the Eurobodalla; the residents, journalists and editors who shared their stories of survival, strength, loss, emotion, and trauma in the *Bay Post* newspaper publications during the bushfire crisis. These perspectives are insightful and valuable in capturing what was a very challenging time for our community, and for many other communities affected by the Black Summer bushfires across Australia. They are also important in signifying the kinds of disaster events which we might expect to face again both locally and nationally, as we head towards an increasingly uncertain and dangerous future for both humans and non-humans living in the fire continent.

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