

Anakie Bushfire 2006 - Focus Group

What was your experience of the 2006 Bushfires?

From the day the fires started (Saturday afternoon) until the following Friday (when we had some heavy rain) we spent the whole week on high alert in full readiness. The road was closed to Anakie so we had no access to the community meetings in the township and Moorabool Shire in Ballan was offering nothing in the way of support during the actual fires (or none that we were aware of). We relied on the ABC radio and DSE website for information about the fires ... and anecdotal reports from neighbours who were traveling around the area during the fires. Our property was not touched by the bushfire but we had some pretty scary moments which caused us to evacuate all wildlife in our care at the time to nearby Shelters. It wasn't until the Wednesday that the CFA came to our property to offer "asset protection" but otherwise we felt pretty much that we had to battle it out on our own ... and were fully equipped and prepared to do so. The Police called several times when the bushfire appeared to be heading our way to advise evacuation or take the names of people who were staying and/or to find out which properties were unoccupied. The CFA were great and we understood that their main role was to control the bushfire and they have our full respect and admiration for the marvelous job they did. I guess that in the back of our minds we felt that if we did come under immediate threat that the CFA would be there to assist us ... but we never had to put that to the test.

What support did you receive after the bushfires? - was it what you expected?

I don't quite know what you mean by "support". The bushfires ended, the CFA and Police went home and that was an end to it. We were just left to carry on as normal. In all fairness, our property was untouched and we didn't lose any possessions, livestock or fences, so we didn't need any "support" as such. Not like other people who lost everything in the fires.

The other side of the coin however is that as a wildlife shelter operator (Beremboke Wildlife Shelter), we were inundated with wildlife from the fires (well those that survived anyway), mainly koalas and we were literally run off our feet in trying to care for them. We received very generous support (24/7) from Dr Anne Fowler, a wildlife veterinarian and from Wildlife Victoria (a volunteer group) with supplies and cages and reimbursement of all veterinary/medical expenses but it was the Anakie community who excelled with the "Back to the Bush" fundraiser and a donation to our Shelter of \$3,700 to assist us. This showed a community that cared about its wildlife and it was so gratifying to be recognized for the work we were doing in rehabbing the burnt wildlife. The support we received from the above mentioned exceeded any of our expectations.

The other support we received was from a dedicated group of people, who for weeks following the bushfire, on an unofficial level, had the gruesome task of locating severely burnt wildlife that needed euthanizing. A lot of calls came through from owners on private property but also involved the Park itself and water board property. We received no support from the DSE or Parks Victoria in this much needed action ... and in fact Parks Victoria objected to what we were doing. Interestingly no-one from DSE or Parks Victoria contacted me at all either during or after the fires and I must say that I felt decidedly invisible.

Also of note is that burnt wildlife was still coming into care some 5-6 weeks following the fires which shows a strong need for continuing surveillance/monitoring of the burnt areas for some time after a fire has gone through an area.

How well do you think that you and the community have recovered?

Some wildlife survived, the bush is starting to green up and some of the larger birds are returning so to the casual observer the Park appears to be returning to normal but for me personally, I feel a deep sense of sadness (even now) every time I drive down the Ballan-Geelong Road to Anakie Township. I know what we have lost and that it will take 5-6 years (maybe longer) for the full recovery process.

Recovery is a strange word. We lived through a bushfire and survived. Some people lost everything they own and others like myself came through it unscathed but we will all carry our own personal scars and memories of this bushfire with us until the day we die and I feel very sad knowing that the impact of the bushfire experience has left some people so severely traumatized that they are now selling up and leaving the area because they no longer feel safe.

Overall I think the community has recovered very well. Everyone appears to be picking up the pieces and getting on with their lives but I do sense that the bushfire has brought the community closer together and forged many new friendships.

How would you improve the recovery process?

My main aim would be to improve the recovery process for our native wildlife. Although everyone feels compassion for animals caught in bushfires, there appears to be no process or protocols in place for helping these animals. The Dept of Agriculture provides a Vet(s) for the destruction of burnt livestock ... but this is not extended to include burnt native wildlife. This led us into a lot of conflict with the DSE and Parks Victoria during the recent bushfires and the needless suffering of many native animals because legislation prohibits the use of guns in a National Park.

- I would like to see the Dept of Agriculture Vets authorized to euthanase badly burnt native wildlife, as with livestock, to end their suffering.
- I would like recognized wildlife groups (such as Wildlife Victoria for instance) present at all staging areas so that they can treat and transport burnt wildlife brought in by the fire trucks.
- These small groups would
 - comprise only members with 'minimal skills',
 - not go into the fire ground
 - be under the total control of the Fire Controller (as happened at the Stawell and Grampians fires).
 - either have a Vet with them or a Vet on-call to treat the animals as they were received into care.
- In an emergency situation such as this I would like to see special permits issued to wildlife carers who hold a gun licence to retrieve and/or euthanase badly burnt wildlife in National Parks once the fire ground is considered "safe" and in the weeks following the fires. ** This is even more necessary when you consider that Parks Victoria Rangers are no longer allowed firearms.**

This is a pet subject of mine after having attended many fire scenes over the years – always in the role of wildlife retrieval – and it is only in recent times that we have begun to make our presence felt and our worth recognized. I strongly feel that implementing some of my points as mentioned above would greatly improve the recovery process for our native wildlife.