Tourism Recovery
THE IMPACT OF BUSHFIRES ON TOURISM AND VISITATION IN ALPINE NATIONAL PARKS
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the impact of bushfires on tourism and visitation in alpine national parks

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• the value of graduate researchers to Australia
• collaboration among researchers, between researchers and industry or other users
• efficiency in the use of intellectual and other research outcomes.

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Overview

About the research
In January 2003, lightning strikes ignited fires that burnt for more than 49 days through the Australian Alps, destroying farmland, houses, buildings, fences and livestock.

Just three years later another series of devastating fires burned for 69 days during the summer of 2006–07. They were some of the worst on record, burning more than 1.1 million hectares of land. The effect on tourism was equally devastating. Cancelled bookings and reduced visitation led to millions of dollars of revenue being lost, with a significant flow on effect of lost revenue to other businesses, particularly in the retail sector.

This project, facilitated by researchers from La Trobe and Monash Universities, explored the impact of these bushfires on tourism in Victoria’s Alpine National Parks and adjacent areas by interviewing actual tourists, potential tourists and tourism related business operators.

What the research covered
The study examined:
- the impact of bushfires on tourism in Victoria’s Alpine National Parks and adjacent areas
- the profiles and views of visitors choosing whether or not to visit these areas following the most recent period of wildfire
- the responses of selected tourism operators in reaction to the bushfires and if they implemented any crisis management strategies.

How to use the research
By exploring the impact of the fires on tourism, the recommendations can be used to plan for crises and disasters, particularly in terms of media and marketing. It looks at ways to manage the crisis and plan recovery afterwards. It is particularly useful for:
- managing communication during and after a crisis or disaster
- understanding the impacts that a crisis or disaster can have on tourism marketing
- planning marketing communication activities after a crisis or disaster.

The qualitative survey was supplemented by an analysis of literature, which also identified research gaps and was used to develop the interview questions. Finally, the researchers carried out a content analysis of the data, to uncover themes and meaning.

Who will be interested in the research
The research will be of interest to tourism operators and destinations and to government agencies that have a role to play in disasters and crises.

While the specific findings relate to the alpine areas of Victoria, the recommendations about dealing with crises and disasters are relevant for all tourism destinations.

Methodology
The researchers chose a qualitative approach as the best way of exploring the complex issues surrounding the impacts of bushfires. This involved conducting long, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 38 participants (13 operators, 15 actual tourists and 10 potential tourists) to explore some of the key issues relating to the impact of bushfires on these different stakeholders.
Snapshot of Key Findings

The findings
The tourism operators interviewed:
- experienced significant negative impacts
- believed media reporting was negative for too long
- were well informed about emergency response plans.

However:
- Only half were directly involved in marketing activity post-fire.
- Few received direct financial assistance from government.
- Most still paid little attention to forward recovery planning.

Post-fire visitors to the park:
- were regular travellers to the area
- had strong awareness of the bushfire events
- had high perception of the risk of bushfires
- did not see the bushfires as a barrier to visiting
- were highly satisfied with their visitation experience
- had a moderate recall of positive post-bushfire media coverage.

Potential visitors:
- were highly aware of the bushfires, but not the specific areas affected
- had a low perception of the risk of bushfires
- did not see the bushfires as a barrier to visiting
- had no recall of positive post-bushfire media coverage.

Future actions
The study produced a list of suggested future actions arising from the findings. They include:

On ground actions
- A dedicated ‘recovery officer’ should be appointed short term to advise operators and act as an interface to relevant organisations.
- Operators should carry out forward recovery planning as well as emergency planning.
- A portion of disaster recovery funding should be allocated to improving future seasons.

Media liaison
- Tourism operators and government agencies should communicate clearly with the public when closures of areas and roads are lifted.
- Operators and government agencies should be more proactive in media liaison for the first few months after the fire.
- Relevant government agencies should make more comprehensive and high-profile public declarations that the fires are out and it is safe to visit the regions, preferably using television and the Internet.

Marketing post-bushfire
- Satisfied post-bushfire visitors should be used in recovery marketing campaigns.
- Operators should leverage the enthusiasm of satisfied visitors.
- Bushfire recovery activities/awareness should be incorporated into regional summer event programs.
- More positive marketing communication messages need to be used after the fire.

General marketing
- Relevant government agencies should support a coordinated summer festival calendar of events, promoted to existing and potential visitors.
- More specific place marketing should be used to link particular destinations to activities or events.
Background

The Australian Alps
The Australian Alps stretch across parts of Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory and have biological and geological significance including the highest mountain in Australia (Mt Kosciuszko) as well as popularity as a tourist and recreation destination. More than 1.5 million people visit the Australian Alps National Parks annually and the region’s aggregate recreation use value has been estimated at approximately $40 billion.

The Victorian protected areas included within the Australian Alps National Parks cover 829,750 hectares. The economic impact of visitors to the Victorian Alps has been estimated at $145.02 million, with 29% ($42.06 million) occurring in summer. The Victorian Alps offer visitors a diversity of recreation activities depending on the season. Winter activities include skiing and snowboarding, while summer recreation includes bushwalking, fishing, camping, picnicking, horse riding, photography and mountain bike riding. People visit the Mt Buffalo region during summer largely to enjoy nature and for relaxation.

The level of snow cover in winter has been a concern for some years, potentially due to climate change. Over the past 20 years the tourism industry has placed a growing focus on summer tourism in the Australian Alps national parks. Over the past 20 years the tourism industry has placed a growing focus on summer tourism in the Australian Alps national parks.

Bushfires in the Australian Alps
In January 2003, lightning strikes ignited fires that burnt for more than 49 days across an estimated 1.73 million hectares through the Australian Alps. While no lives were lost in Victoria, around 75,000 hectares of farmland, 41 houses, 200 other buildings, 3,000km of fencing and 110,000 head of stock were destroyed.

Just four years later another series of equally devastating fires raged. They burned for 69 days during the summer of 2006–07 and were some of the worst on record, burning over 1.1 million hectares or almost 5% of Victoria, including 15% of the state’s total area of public land.

While bushfires in the Australian Alps are not a new phenomenon, in recent years major fires have been occurring more often. Prior to 2003 the last major fire in the Victorian alpine region occurred in 1939, whereas the 2006–07 fires occurred while vegetation and businesses were still recovering from the previous bushfires.

Climate change
Environmental crises, including natural disasters, are being increasingly blamed on or linked to climate change and there is a growing body of research examining the impact of climate change on tourism. One consequence of increasing temperatures, lack of rainfall and storm activity has been an increase in the occurrence and severity of wildfires. This increase appears to be having a negative effect on visitor levels to Australian protected areas in the wake of some of these fires, including the Alpine Regions.

Australia’s alpine areas have a lot to lose from a decline in tourism, not only in terms of the economic impact but also the loss for visitors of the environmental education and feeling of wellbeing that they experience when visiting natural areas.
The Impacts of Bushfires on Tourism

**Studies into impacts**
A number of studies around the world have examined the impacts of fire on tourism, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Economic impacts of fire on tourism arising from studies

- 2003—bushfires in northeast Victoria caused loss of business within the first month in excess of AU$20 million.
- 2003—bushfires in Canberra caused a 50% decline in visitation and damaged attractions such as nature reserves and Mount Stromlo Observatory.
- 1988—fires in Yellowstone National Park (USA) saw annual visits drop by 15% and a loss of US$60 million in tourism economic benefits.
- 1998—Florida wildfires saw an estimated loss of US$138.2 million (US$61 million lost in hotel revenues and US$77.2 million lost in other tourist spending).

The studies have tended to focus on the impacts on businesses rather than the impacts on visitors and potential visitors.

**Positive impacts of bushfires on tourism**
Not all impacts of disasters are negative for a destination. Disasters may be a catalyst for innovation and creative solutions. They can lead to revaluation, revamping of approaches or policies, weeding out of unproductive businesses and encouraging community spirit or the development of partnerships between different parts of the tourism industry and government agents.

The destination’s image may actually be enhanced following media coverage of communities working together and the economic value of tourism. Attractions that were once taken for granted may be more valued. For example, the ACT bushfires in 2003 provided an opportunity for a significant rethink of product range and destination management and marketing.

‘The impact was on a positive note—the impact was very good for the community. It brought the community together—for Mt Buller I suppose it made them sharpen their tools a bit and get everything prepared. Because we were very well prepared—we were very well notified everyday of everything that was happening.’

**Areas of concern for visitors**
However, there were plenty of negative impacts identified. The literature review identified the following areas of concern for visitors after a fire that could impact on visitation:

**Safety and security**
There are specific safety issues connected with visiting areas after a fire, such as hazardous trees, risk of landslips, damaged road and trail surfaces, presence of hazardous materials and damaged or absent bridges. A primary concern for many visitors both during and after a bushfire is personal safety and security, depending on the visitor’s level of risk aversion.

**Health and aesthetic concerns**
The health affects of air pollution can impact on visitation and the impact of fire on the natural beauty of the landscape can also reduce visitation.

**Loss of attractions and reduced recreational opportunities**
Some fires destroy tourist attractions or infrastructure. Recreation opportunities may be reduced as a result of areas being closed, visitors being displaced, campfire bans or restricted activities.

**Decline in biodiversity and social values**
While fire is often a natural event in south-eastern Australia and most species eventually recover after fire, the short-term decline in flora and fauna may affect the visitor experience and encourage people to postpone visits. Bushfires can impact negatively on the social value people place on protected areas, given that an important feature for visitors is the perception of a healthy environment being protected in perpetuity.
Crisis communication plans

The literature review identified a five-point crisis communication plan that covers the immediate aftermath of a crisis when an organisation needs to make an initial response to stakeholders including staff, the media and possibly the local community.

The benefits of effective communication in building community engagement and greater understanding between the community and policymakers have also been noted by Parks Victoria and the Department of Sustainability and Environment. For example, provision of information at local meetings after the 2006–07 fires helped to involve the community in decisions and planning post-fire and built trust and a stronger relationship with parks and forests management agencies.

Figure 2 Five point crisis communication plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Respond quickly. Develop two-way communication with the media to provide accurate information to key stakeholders. This will reduce misinformation and help develop a consistent message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Give instructing information such as what happened, when it happened, where it took place, and how it occurred. Also discussion of the precautions stakeholders should take and what corrective action is being undertaken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Consistency in developing the communications plan and key messages including discouraging any unofficial spokespersons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Openness and accessibility including availability of spokespersons and generating a willingness to disclose information and being honest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Express sympathy to victims.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Experience of Tourism Operators
After the 2006–07 Fires

The researchers interviewed 13 tourism operators across the three mountains of Falls Creek, Mt Hotham/Dinner Plain and Mt Buller, who owned or managed a variety of business types, including accommodation, retail, tours, food and beverage and equipment hire outlets. The interviews covered the following areas:

**Impact of the fires**
Although none reported direct physical loss, all operators interviewed experienced significant negative impact on their operations.

The short-term effect was particular harsh for these businesses, with some experiencing complete loss of trade for almost the entire summer season, while others were affected by more ephemeral effects such as road closures, closures of the mountains during the fires and cancelled bookings.

’It took a long time to recover because the people who come up here want to travel into the mountains and because all the mountain tracks were closed there was no possibility to go into the mountains either to drive themselves or for any of the tour operators—like 4WD tours or horse riding tours—they were all cancelled—there was no activity in the mountains.’

A positive note was struck by those who indicated that they were well prepared for the event and felt that the fires actually contributed to the building of social capital and community camaraderie, as people were forced to cooperate to deal with the disaster.

**Emergency response**
Operators were well-informed about emergency response plans and were active in their local communities. All but one had previously prepared a formal emergency plan for their business. When it came to the role of the local shires, only four operators felt that they were good and effective.

‘Every household had private fire plans activated and then we had a phone tree where everyone was in contact with someone else in case of emergency ... We had practically daily meetings in the town hall ... It was a very good plan and coordination amongst people and authorities.’

**Assistance from government agencies**
Most were generally happy with the performance of government agencies across the board in the wake of the fire. Most felt that Parks Victoria had played an important role in the recovery effort.

’Parks Victoria was clear with the messages about which areas were open and closed. They also had a scheme where they employed tour operators in the recovery process. The shire was represented through the regional tourism association which Tourism Victoria funded. There were a number of different campaigns which regional businesses had the opportunity to participate in.’

When operators were asked if they thought that the recovery money was spent wisely and at the right time to encourage future bookings after the fire, only three provided positive responses. Only one indicated that they received direct financial assistance from government agencies or local government post-fire.

**The impact of media coverage**
Most operators felt that media reporting of fires was negative and did not turn around quickly enough. In particular, some operators recalled the perceived influence of the Minister and the Premier’s personal advice to stay away from the north-east Victorian region as particularly strong negative media messages.

’[The media impact was] negative as Steve Bracks publicly recommended staying away from the entire north-east after the fires had passed here and despite the fact that this area was beautiful.’

It was three to six months after the fire is when operators reported that they started to notice a change in the media coverage. They felt there was finally a realisation of the negative impacts and that some efforts were starting to be made to counteract the bad press of the
preceding months. After six months a good snow season turned media attention away from the fires. By the following summer the media was back to promoting the area as a summer tourism destination.

Most operators said the media initially had a significant negative impact on the post fire recovery stage.

‘Horrendously negative, even after the fires and they didn’t change the message from “Don’t come” to “Do come” when they could have.’

**Short term recovery**
None of the operators interviewed suffered any physical loss of property as a result of the fires. However, all experienced a down turn in business trade. Around half invested in some form of marketing after the fire, while the other half did nothing or relied on parent companies or the regional tourism association to market on their behalf.

‘We advertised rigorously and promoted the fact that we were still there. We sent newsletters to mail order customers reinforcing that we had no physical damage, our fruit was not lost and we were open for business. We notified them that our stocks were still of high quality but that we did not have a 2007 vintage due to smoke damage. We did this on our own.’

**Long term recovery**
Just over half the operators reported that the 2006–07 bushfires had resulted in long term or permanent changes to their business including a loss of bookings, a reduction in opening hours and in one case the business being put up for sale.

‘The cottage is now on the market as well because the business has not completely recovered. The tourism has suffered on a long-term basis so it is not working to the extent and people are not coming up as much. Not as much influx.’

Of those who reported no significant changes, some were quite optimistic.

‘In King Valley there has been a slight positive effect. No one knew where it was and now they do as a result of the national headlines and the visits by national and state leaders.’

**The future**
Despite two major fires in the region over the last five years, there is still little attention being paid to forward recovery planning. Only half of the operators saw more frequent bushfires as a strong possibility in the future.

‘No—major fires are very rare. The area needs burning off regularly.’
The Experience of Visitors After the 2006–07 Fires

The researchers interviewed 15 visitors to the Victorian Alps in or around the villages of Falls Creek, Mt Hotham/Dinner Plain and Mt Buller. The respondents were aged between 18 and 65+ and included five women and 10 men. All but one were from regional Victoria.

Bushfire awareness
All of the respondents were very well informed about the bushfires and could identify the names of towns and areas affected by the fires.

Impact of the bushfire on visitation
Only two respondents said the impacts of the 2006–07 bushfires had influenced their itinerary.

Visitors identified damage to property, burnt vegetation, erosion and closure of tracks, and some also noted danger, devastation, sadness and hardship for locals and concern for local businesses.

‘Burnt out. Bush and property damaged by fire and smoke.’

‘Black. Dangerous. Sad for people who rely on the tourism dollar.’

Not all perceptions were negative; some were realistic and prepared for the changes to the landscape having witnessed the after effects of the 2003 fires. Others were quite upbeat.

‘Fascination—revisiting the trees and landscape.’

Thirteen of the respondents said their primary motivation was to visit friends and/or to take part in recreational activities such as festivals, mountain bike riding, hiking, camping, and kayaking. The majority said that bushfires had no significant impact on their satisfaction with their alpine experiences. Only one indicated a decrease in satisfaction due to a perceived loss in amenity. Some stated that the impacts of the bushfires had enhanced their experience.

Risk perception
Most respondents indicated that there would be some form of risk, identifying falling trees, landslides, contaminated water and unpalatable wine from the local vineyards. Some indicated they would wait for the advice of authorities before visiting. Many also acknowledged that the environment would be more sensitive and that bushwalkers would need to take more care due to the changed landscape.

‘Ecological because the ground will be less stable and more prone to human impact e.g. people walking off the tracks because the forest is more accessible.’

All the respondents said they would continue to visit the Alps in the summer time.

The impact of media campaigns
Only six of the visitors could recall any media campaigns encouraging people to revisit the Alpine Region after the 2006–07 bushfires. Of those who could recall a media campaign, only one identified television but could not provide any details and the remainder mostly remembered local radio and newspaper advertisements.

Most respondents said they looked for information about their future summer holidays on the Internet. Visit Victoria, Australia.com and Lonely Planet were nominated as useful Internet sites.
The Experience of Potential Visitors
After the 2006–07 Fires

The researchers interviewed 10 potential visitors to the Victorian Alps. Respondents were aged 18–65+, with an equal number of men and women. Interviews were done in the Melbourne CBD. None of the respondents had visited the Alps since the 2007 bushfires but all said they would like to.

Bushfire awareness
All 10 of the potential tourists interviewed indicated that they were aware of the most recent 2007 bushfires; however, none could correctly identify how long the fires lasted and few could name any towns or locations. The main source of information about the fires for all participants was the television news.

Impact of the fires on visitation
They were unanimous that information about the bushfires would not influence their decisions to travel to this region.

‘We would still go up if there was no fire. We drove through Omeo in October and saw the damage done. It’s still beautiful and no more dangerous than any other place.’

‘Visiting the region would be beneficial to the tourist operators. It may influence people to go and see the effects of the bushfire. It could affect my decision to hike there.’

Risk perception
Half the respondents said that they did not feel that there were any personal risks involved in visiting after a fire. Some did acknowledge that the environment might be more sensitive.

‘I don’t think there’s any personal risk. The environment might be more delicate and need time to recover. Perhaps the environment wouldn’t be as stable as it once was.’

The hazards they identified ranged from the fire reoccurring to falling trees and dead animals to increased sunburn due to less shade. Most indicated that they would go up to the mountains as soon as it was declared safe to do so and when the roads had been reopened.
Implications of the Findings

The key findings include the lack of forward recovery planning, the existence of prolonged negative media attention and the fact that all operators appeared to have experienced some impact on their business, albeit to different degrees. It appeared that there was a generally positive opinion of the constructive role of government agencies in ensuring visitor and community safety, and a confidence that these bodies would advise of any potential risks connected to the fires.

There is scope, however, for improving the media response and the introduction of a joint agency disaster recovery officer based on location in each of the affected mountain areas. This may be a more efficient use of resources than providing more direct financial assistance to operators.

Recommendations

The study produced a list of suggested future actions arising from the findings, in the areas of on ground actions, media liaison and marketing activities.

On ground actions

Appointing a recovery officer
A dedicated ‘recovery officer’ should be appointed short term to advise operators and act as an interface to relevant organisations. This person would provide an interface between agencies, including state and local government, and operators on the ground, providing personal assistance with business operations and marketing during the initial recovery period.

Implementing forward recovery planning
Operators should carry out forward recovery planning as well as emergency planning. The recovery officer could lay the groundwork for future recovery planning by running seminars and workshops and working one-to-one with local businesses.

Allocating funding to the future
While it is important to be seen to be assisting with initial disaster recovery, allocating some disaster recovery funding for improving future seasons and advising operators that this is to occur may alleviate community concern regarding this.

Media liaison

Communicating clearly to the public
Tourism operators and government agencies should communicate clearly with the public when closures of areas and roads are lifted, in order to maximise new bookings or entice those who have cancelled bookings back into the region as quickly as possible.

Liaising proactively with media
Negative and possibly sensationalist media reporting affected business during this initial period, given potential visitors were advised to keep away from the Alpine Region and there was a lack of emphasis about the recovery process being undertaken. Operators and government agencies should be more proactive in media liaison for the first few months after the fire, through more frequent and informative media releases, actively seeking visits by media agencies and arranging media events to facilitate more accurate and positive reporting about recovery post-fire.
Making government declarations about safety

Potential visitors expressed confidence that the relevant government agencies would advise the public when the area was safe to visit. Relevant government agencies should make more comprehensive and high-profile public declarations that the fires are out and it is safe to visit the regions, preferably using television and the Internet.

Marketing post-bushfire

Using satisfied post-bushfire visitors for marketing

All but one of the visitor respondents were regular visitors to the high country. The bushfires did not discourage them from visiting nor change their activities and the fires did not affect their satisfaction with their high country experiences. Satisfied post-bushfire visitors are a resource that should be used in recovery marketing campaigns.

Leveraging satisfied visitors

These satisfied visitors could provide an opportunity through word-of-mouth and Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) marketing to help with increasing post fire visitation. Other options to investigate may include product inducements such as ‘friends stay or eat for free’.

Incorporating fire awareness into programs

Festivals and events are extremely popular with visitors and provide an opportunity to promote bushfire recovery activities/awareness throughout regional summer event programs.

While potential visitors expressed considerable concern for the welfare of business operators in the bushfire affected regions it was not a strong enough push factor to make them visit. This indicates that marketing campaigns need to focus less on ‘hardship’ stories and pleading with visitors to help them recover and more on positive ‘open for business’, ‘new and refreshed’ and personal benefits that the visitor will attain by visiting after a bushfire.
Marketing post-bushfire (cont.)

General marketing

Supporting a coordinated summer festival calendar
Frequent visitors enthusiastically participated in festivals and events, even where the event was not the primary reason for their visit. There is significant potential to develop a coordinated summer festival season across the Alps with support from the relevant government agencies. Broader marketing of summer festivals and events could also target potential visitors. There would be significant opportunities for these agencies to promote their bushfire recovery activities at these gatherings.

More specific place marketing
Potential visitors could not identify details of the most recent bushfires, indicating they are not familiar with the high country’s geography or specific destinations. More specific place marketing could link particular destinations to activities or events to increase their profile as tourism destinations.

Suggestions for Further Study

The study found there is scope for further investigation of:

- the effectiveness of media campaigns post-fire
- the timeliness of post disaster recovery marketing campaigns to determine the most effective timeline for implementation
- other natural disasters affecting Australian national parks (such as flood affected areas in Gippsland or cyclone devastated regions in northern Australia)
- the role of festivals and events in disaster recovery programs in regional events, including guidelines for timing, frequency and theme
- the impact of climate change on the perception of bushfire risk in the Australian Alps amongst visitors and operators and its effect on patterns and frequency of visitation
- the most and least useful activities in the bushfire recovery process to assist in the delivery of tourism recovery.
About the Authors

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Further Information

The full report for this research project: Impact Of Bushfires On Tourism And Visitation In Alpine National Parks, containing references, methodology and detailed findings from the two phases of the project, is available for FREE download from the STCRC website www.crctourism.com.au/bookshop.
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