

# MANAGING BUSHFIRE: DIVERSE VALUES, SHARED VISION? AN EVALUATION OF A HOTSPOTS FIRE TRAINING WORKSHOP

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In a world in which scientific knowledge claims are routinely contested, there is increasing recognition of the need to involve communities in controversial areas of natural resource management (NRM)<sup>1</sup>. The Hotspots Fire Training Project is an initiative that aims to do just this by giving “landholders and land managers (the) knowledge and skills to engage in practical and sustainable fire management, and plan and implement together strategies across landscapes”<sup>2</sup>.

A recent 2012 Hotspots workshop in a rural area of New South Wales showed that this is not always straight-forward however, and dramatically divided opinion as shown by the statements below.

I'd give it pretty high marks, straight off, I thought it was really well organised... It helped me think a bit more about how all the plants interact and how everything does go together and what plants occur... I think the presentation on the ecological role of fire and how it relates to vegetation types was well pitched for the audience and for the workshop... I think it was good because it's not just everyone toeing the line and saying, "They know best" and sort of following... People were saying that discussion between us afterwards and in between was the most important, that people learned about each other and what they wanted... I am very happy to see that the program exists... On the first day there were different people to talk to, like the CMA, and I found that quite interesting... I think it's really great that the Rural Fire Service is playing an integral role in the Hotspots program, and I think it's great that they're working closely with the Nature Conservation Council... I thought it was useful and it was fun to do... I enjoyed it, it was a way to get people together to talk about the way they feel... The various discussions an



It's been a dog's breakfast... I just thought there was this God-complex... My worry is that we're playing with something we don't really understand... A bit of information and knowledge is a dangerous thing... I think there were fixed opinions being presented – it's my way or no way... It never became completely clear to me what the aims of the Hotspots were... It was a bad site, that was the problem. Choosing that site was the worst decision... That's what's breaking the community: "You're not looking after your land if you don't burn"... The way in which those messages are being conveyed isn't underpinned by the depth of understanding which is needed... I was quite disappointed by the second day's workshop... I think it's created quite a divide and there's quite hard feeling between the two sides... It was all a bit waffly... It would be good to have some more sort of hands-on and in the end I felt that it was mostly theory... There was not time to give (landholders) the the context they need... The way in which the ecological role of fire was conveyed as "Vegetation needs this" concerned me... I think it was all these value judgements that were being pres

This study explores how such different views arise and seeks to understand more broadly the complexities of community engagement in NRM. This is achieved by shifting the focus between “domains of entanglement”<sup>3</sup>, including areas of native vegetation on landholdings, the wider landholdings (including homes), the work-sites of agency staff, Hotspots workshops and demonstration burn-sites. At all times, more-than-human relational agency remains at the fore, drawing weather, fire and plants into the range of influences on NRM initiatives, alongside human social, cultural and historical factors. The study aims to make explicit the uncertainties, complexities, knowledge gaps and assumptions inherent in the production, implementation and acceptance of knowledge-claims about “sustainable fire management”, and to describe Hotspots philosophy and practice in sharing these claims.

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, [http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/factsh/fs06\\_4.php](http://www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/factsh/fs06_4.php)

<sup>2</sup>Objectives, Hotspots Fire Project (undated)

<sup>3</sup>Ingold, T. (2006) Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought. *Ethnos*, 71, 9-20.