

# Fire, Families and Decisions

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Project C6 'Evaluation of the Stay or Go policy'



This project focuses on the bushfire experience from a domestic perspective.

## Wangary Fire Case Study:

Wangary is located on the Lower Eyre Peninsula, 645 kilometres west of Adelaide, South Australia. On this isolated coast a bushfire started on the afternoon of 10 January 2005. It broke containment lines the following morning. The scale of devastation in the region was unprecedented. Of the 9 fatalities, 6 were women and children fleeing the fire in vehicles. The primary aim of this case study is to gain a deeper understanding of families and, particularly, the role of women in bushfire.

*That's where it's just heart breaking. That took 40 years to get to that and I've run out of lifetimes. I love my environment and we've lost all our big trees. They're gone.*

Male farmer, Age: in his late 60s.

*I remember the house started to fill up with smoke and I could see it was near. It jumped all the fire breaks. I really just prayed and I said 'Lord just save my house and me,' and I just covered my face and from that point onwards I just had this amazing calmness and I just believe that is a strength from God so that's where I'm coming from.*

Female, Age: in her early 60s.



St Matthews Anglican Mission Church. Built: 1854. An interviewee defended this church during the Wangary fire.

*We had 7 big old rams. Round barrels. Big old gentlemen. They'd plod. Could hardly move. It was sad. Two that survived. All burnt. Had come back to the shearing shed. He was just standing there.*

Female, Age: in her 40s.

*We hit something and I thought 'this is it, I'm going to die in the car with my kids' kind of thing 'cos everything was hanging over the car on fire.*

Female, Age: in her mid 30s.

## Approach:

Semi structured interviews were conducted across the fire affected region nearly two years after the event. All of the bushfire narratives covered two clear time frames: the days or day of the fire (depending on the residential location) and the aftermath. Participants talked at length about what was important to them. The exploratory nature of this project is reflected by the number of themes that consistently emerged across the bushfire narratives.

## Findings:

Seven themes (which intersect and influence each other), emerged consistently across the bushfire narratives:

- **The shared and individual experience of bushfire** - bushfire is predominantly an individual experience.
- **Decision making and the presence of children** - the desire to flee is hard to resist and is frequently associated with safety.
- **Packing the car** - for those who lost their homes what they managed to retain from their previous life, a link to their own history, was of great importance. This act, of gathering valuable and sentimental belongings tended to be a woman's task.
- **The role of pets and stock in decision making** - farming and non farming families displayed a deep connection to their pets and stock. For many, the welfare of their pets and stock played a key role in the decision making process. Farmers, who rely on their stock for income, took great risks to influence the rate of stock survival. This was an emotional theme for the male farmers.
- **Impacts of the bushfire** - encompassing immediate and medium to long term impacts on: friendships, relationships, community and the mental health of children and volunteer fire fighters (and their families). Positives arising from the event also feature in this theme.
- **Sense of place and connectedness to the landscape** - was powerfully articulated particularly by the older interviewees.
- **Spirituality** - as a source of strength at the time of being under threat from the bushfire and throughout the recovery process.

This project emphasises the role of family dynamics in decision making (and survival) during a bushfire. The Wangary fire narratives demonstrate a clear link between families and community resilience. How families function and the changing social demographics are complex factors that community education programs need to recognise and address.



Remains of the heritage listed Georgian Greenpatch Homestead.