

ARTS, HEALTH, COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND HEALING: RESPONDING TO NATURAL DISASTER

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a pilot study of a grass roots led community initiative set in motion to engender healing, resilience and regeneration through art and creativity in rural Tasmania. This was done as a response to a natural disaster and trauma after the East Coast Bushfire, 2006. It places the initiative in a broader context of rural community response to disaster and difficulty.

Rural communities such as in the Grampians in Victoria in 2007; on the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia, 2006; and from the East Coast, Tasmania in 2007, have responded to bushfire disaster using art and culture to engender healing and resilience. As well as contributing to community healing and regeneration, a common focus appearing in these responses is that of the importance of documenting local knowledge and the recording of history to inform in the event of future occurrences. These initiatives are seen to have a significant though relatively undocumented impact on their community's mental health and wellbeing. The importance of exploring community response to natural disaster, art, culture and creativity is that it provides vital insights into community resilience and community mental health issues, building on local knowledge and lifelong learning.



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INTRODUCTION

The Australian environment is acknowledged as *inherently* vulnerable to natural disasters (Maguire & Hagan, 2007). Drought and natural disasters, such as bushfire and flood, impact dramatically on rural communities affecting their economic, ecological, social and physical wellbeing. In what ways do communities respond to the social and mental health repercussions of a natural disaster? While globally and nationally a significant body of research examines the relationship between community celebration and community development, there appears very little research exploring the immediate or longer term health impacts of celebrations and festivals particularly related to community responses after natural disasters (Delamere 1997; Matrasso 1997; McQueen-Thomson, James & Ziguras 2004). More noticeably there appears scant research on the relationship between art, community resilience and healing pertaining to natural disaster and trauma.

This paper reports on a small study examining a grass roots led and community driven project set in motion to engender healing and regeneration through art and creativity in rural Tasmania, Australia, as a response to the Tasmanian East Coast bushfire 2006. The project's purpose was to use art, creativity and storytelling as a tool of regeneration and resilience to encourage and promote community healing. The publication of a book of community stories relating to the event from a wide number of perspectives had three aims: that of acknowledging loss and gratitude engendering healing; the retention of history pertaining to the event; and the sharing of local knowledge. The sharing of local knowledge was primary and critical in both contributing to the regenerative process and as evidence for ongoing practice and learning.

Regeneration as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Pearsall & Trumble 1996, p.1213) is to 'bring or come into renewed existence; generate again; to impart new and more vigorous life to a (person or institution, etc)'. This paper argues that while there is little research relating to art, health and community resilience after a natural disaster, a new field of social research could be considered as part of a significant community regenerative

process. It would be built on the evaluation of community led creative response to natural disasters and trauma, informing multidisciplinary fields of research, art, health, social science, disaster management and contribute to ongoing policy.

Literature outlining six areas of art, health and wellbeing, in clinical application, practitioner training and clinical settings found a number of areas demonstrating the impact the arts have on health that are in need of exploration. Staricoff (2004) suggests one of the major areas open to exploration is the emergence of the use of arts interventions in community setting to improve health. How might a small regional community regenerate from the effects of bushfire trauma using art and creativity? In what ways is it possible to evaluate community resilience, healing and growth from the outcomes of community projects, festivals and symbols of resilience showing regeneration? What is the long term significance in exploring community creative response to disaster?

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Tasmania contains a population of just on 500,000 and has the most regional population in Australia with 59 per cent of its population living outside of the capital city, compared with 37 per cent nationally (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2005). The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) rates regional Tasmania as having the second highest level of disadvantage in Australia (Vinson 2006). While Tasmania has suffered from the increasing effects of drought over the past seven years, areas are not as severely affected as other areas in Australia such as the North-West of Victoria and parts of South Australia. Tasmania however has the highest percentage of natural timbered and mountainous terrain of any state, prompting the most difficult access to, and areas for, bushfire.

The areas covered by the Tasmanian East Coast Break O' Day Council, the council affected by the 2006 bushfire, include the inland population centres of St Marys, Fingal, Mathinna, Mangana, Cornwall, Pyengana, Goshen and Weldborough. Its area covers 3,809 square kilometres and is one of the largest local government areas in the state. The population of 6,000 more than doubles each year during the summer holiday season. The principal industries in the areas are tourism, mining, forestry, agriculture, fishing and aquaculture.

On 10th December 2006 the fire was first reported in the East Coast Nicholas Range as intense, burning out of control and spotting rapidly. Flames were reaching the tops of the trees swiftly; their height exceeding 20 metres. The fire swept down towards the coast and within two days it engulfed the area of Scamander and Four Mile Creek destroying homes. The fire continued over three weeks. The town of St Marys experienced falling cinders throughout that period. The community was continually on alert to protect their properties. In the event of wind change, the townspeople were told continuously over the period that 'the fire might swing down later in the day'. Heat generated by the fire's intensity melted parts of the main road at St Marys Pass. Eighty nine Tasmanian Volunteer Bushfire Brigades were involved in fighting the fire, as well as a number of firefighting crews from mainland Australia. Shortly before the bushfire ceased, there was the loss of one life, a young man of 20 years. The area of 30,000 plus hectares burnt included areas of crown land, forestry cultivation, farms and private properties including 23 individual homes. Response to the fire was immediate and cross sector:

- Volunteer units of fire fighters provided,
- Volunteer emergency services activated,
- State Forestry workers enlisted as fire fighters,
- Community action and contributions – food, accommodation, assistance to victims,

- Local, state, and national government provision and welfare assistance,
- Local and affected families were give immediate, short- and long-term assistance,
- NGOs involvement, such as the Red Cross, St Vincent De Paul, Salvation Army,
- Personal contributions sent to the area from state and nationwide.

RESILIENCE

The concept of resilience is not new. It is evidenced in our ability to survive prehistory. As a virtue, it is scribed in early literature (Maginness 2007). A significant edict of Christianity is to 'turn the other cheek'. Confucius suggested that, 'Our greatest glory is in never falling, but in rising every time we fall'. Earvolino-Ramirez (2007) describes the origins of the concept of resilience stemming from the early psychiatric literature that examined children who appeared to be invulnerable to adverse life situations. Over time, the term 'invulnerable' was replaced by the term 'resilience' and a new area of theory and research was born. The use of the concept of resilience in research has grown over the past three to five years (Resilience Conference, 2008). In a global and ecological context, 'resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb insults or disturbances without fundamentally changing or flipping often into a different configuration or state. The system can be ecological or socio-economic or both (a linked socio- ecological system)' (Hughes et al. 2008). Maginness (2007) has developed a model of resilience from a dynamic system based on a neuro-biological base. The model had three major factors: (1) *equanimity in the face of adversity*, which was seen as recovery from stress more likely to reach the 'baseline' faster; (2) *capacity to be effective* such as practical wisdom showed people were more responsive; and (3) *the capacity to tolerate adversity* 'we can manage to get by'.

Where creativity is explored in research related to community resilience, termed *social resilience*, it is noted as part of three properties or aspects of how people respond to disasters: *resistance*, *recovery* and *creativity* (Kimhi & Shamai 2004; Maguire & Hagan 2007). Maguire and Hagan (2007, p.7) acknowledge that the more resilient a community is, the quicker it returns to its pre-disaster state. They find that 'a creative community may learn from the experience and teach its members how to better prepare for future disasters...so that higher levels of post-disaster resilience are attained'. The study notes the importance for future research to determine valid indicators of social resilience involving the identification of factors that there is as yet little research systematically setting out such indicators. Indicators arising from literature in their study follow as: trust; leadership; collective efficacy; social capital; social cohesion and sense of community; community involvement; existing norms/ attitudes/values; communication and information; resource dependency.

THE ROLE OF ART LINKED TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Art in this study is defined as creative endeavor giving expression to emotion and thought. 'The role of community art is seen as a process that has outcomes of improved relationships and communication building social capital' (Kigma 2002). Social capital in its simplest form can be seen as the benefits arising from social interaction and networks developing wellbeing. While the concept of social capital arises from a key number of theoretical and practical approaches in the twentieth century, the OECD report *Well-being of Nations: The role of human and social capital* stress that there is no single definition of social capital and outlines four approaches: anthropological, sociological, economic and political (OECD 2001). Although the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu is acknowledged as the first and most theoretically refined to expand the concept in the mid to late 1980s, perhaps

the two definitions and approach that contribute to defining social capital used in relation to arts health and natural disaster; are those of Halifan and Coleman. They arise from a sociological base. Halifan considered one of the earliest educationalists to use the concept (1916, p. 130) defined social capital as;

Those tangible substances that count for the most in the daily lives of people; namely good will, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among families and individuals and families who make up a social unit (Halifan 1916)

Halifan's definition, links the word 'sympathy' back to Hume's writings on human principles 'Sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature' (Hume 1739, pp. 667-668). It also links forward as Halifan's definition was noted by Putnam 'it contains all the crucial elements expounded in later interpretations' (Putnam 2000, p.19). Coleman defined social capital in terms of the ability of people to work together for the common purpose in groups and organisations. He considers social capital is created 'when the relations among persons change in ways that facilitate action' (Coleman 1990)1990, p. 304) .

Social capital's greatest benefit is that of allowing a common language across multi-discipline approaches to exchange and constructively debate ways of addressing major socio-political issues (Woolcock 1998). An example of art as contributing to community cohesion and social capital was the marking of an anniversary that engendered cultural and social tension in an appropriate context to build understanding. In marking the tercentenary of the Siege of Derry, in Londonderry, North-West Ireland, an event fundamental to Protestant identity was organised and the predominantly Catholic council faced a major challenge. The anniversary organised through a museum, included exhibitions, concerts and other cultural events, all of which were highly successful, peaceful and a triumphant for the organisers. The journalist Fintan O'Toole wrote in the *Irish Times*, 'the importance of art in the real world (is) its ability to articulate desires and despairs that cannot be expressed in language other than that of metaphor' (Matarasso 1997). In the context of this paper, the use of art as a community tool to express grief, trauma, resilience and triumph both arises from and builds social capital.

The World Health Organisation defines health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely, the absence of disease or infirmity'. However, this definition is qualified further and speaks of the 'highest attainable standard of health' as a fundamental human right, thus taking into account limiting circumstances such as congenital handicap, or the serious consequences of disease accident (Gigase 1987). Wellbeing in socio-economic terms is seen as an extended multidimensional concept focusing on three important dimensions of life: standard of living, health and education (Decancq, Decoster & Schokkaert 20008).The more accepted place of art related to health as arts-based activities in general literature is in its aim to improve individual and community health and wellbeing. The Victorian Government and RMIT University *Report on Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing through community and Cultural development* (McQueen-Thomson, James & Ziguras 2004) put forward the three determinants of mental health as: social inclusion, acceptance of diversity and economic participation.

GAPS IN RESEARCH

There are three areas that can be identified as showing significant research gaps related to art, health community resilience and healing: Firstly, as noted earlier, the lack of research into the use of arts interventions in community setting to improve health (Staricoff 2004); secondly, the need in producing rigorous demonstrations

on the ongoing impacts of festivals and commemorations through longitudinal studies pertaining to mental health (McQueen-Thomson, James & Ziguras 2004); finally, the difficulty in obtaining resources and feedback commonly used to encourage support to direct risk vulnerability and resilience assessment after a disaster (Buckle, Marsh & Smale 2003).

In accepting that community celebrations tend to have a deep contextual component requiring a broad cultural and historical engagement, studies show there is a need to provide rigorous demonstrations on the ongoing impacts of festivals and commemoration by developing longitudinal studies (McQueen-Thomson, James & Ziguras 2004). The function of post-disaster rituals is that they serve important and social functions for individual and communities (Johannes 2000).

Disaster anniversaries as an interactive process may be construed as both physical and social “time” enabling acknowledgement of the passing of a calendar year and the changes within, as well as ‘collective memory’ (1999). It has been suggested that researchers and practitioners may learn more about the longer term psycho-social and political significance of some disaster by examining the issues and expressions surrounding disaster commemoration after five, ten or twenty years. Points made in a report on community recovery after the Thredbo Landslide disaster supports longer term evaluation (Dawe 1999). The report noted:

Requirements for counselling services have diminished greatly since the first anniversary, which probably brought out most of the remaining latent problems (p.54).

It concluded:

Mood swings continued for some time but a renewed optimism prevails since the first anniversary... Spring is usually a period of depression, so the next summer season will be the next indicator of how well the long recovery process is succeeding (Dawe 1999).

Buckle, Marsh and Smale (2003 p.4) in examining linkages between local and municipal levels in management and community capacity, sought to probe why people did not frequently use documents, guidelines and resources commonly used to encourage support to direct risk vulnerability and resilience assessment after a disaster. The study showed that local interests were not in the potential of re-occurring hazards but rather the risk management of life. Managing the mortgage, education, sustaining health compared with the more ‘distant risks’.

NARRATIVES STORIES, EXPERIENCES AND EXHIBITIONS

In contrast to the paucity of interest related to post-disaster and risk assessment, community led festivals and anniversaries contribute records and experiences as evidence of regeneration through writings, artwork and poetry, aiding ongoing healing. For example, a common theme through community publications as a response to bushfire was the attention to the need and importance of producing stories to contribute to local knowledge (Lannen et al. 2007; McManamey 2007; Proule 2006). The stories and books were also seen as ‘champions for change and opportunities for improvement in the future’ (Lannen et al. 2007).

After the South Australian fire on the Eyre Peninsula, Proule (2006) found that many people had written down their experiences to put perspectives into events as they unfolded:

An event of this magnitude is important part of our heritage and should be learned from. Many wrote to reflect what they did and what they would do given more warning. Many wrote as a means of passing on to others what they did and their response (p.4).

BACKGROUND TO THE COMMUNITY REGENER8 PROJECT

St Marys is a small rural town with a population of 684. The town is en route to and within 50 kilometres of a number of major coastal tourist destinations on the East Coast. The bushfire was contained totally by mid January 2007 and the more visible environmental effects remained unchanged. While many had escaped the effects of the initial blaze, one of the major effects on the rural people, reminded day to day by unchanging appearances of the devastation and impact of the fires on their environment and ecological systems called for a need to recount and recall stories and experiences. While many positive events and generous actions and high commendations had occurred, the negative remained strong in the community psyche and storytelling and communication appeared to focus on and enforce a sense of decline. A need to assist community healing and social recovery was apparent.

In April 2007, the Regener8 Project was set in motion to address the sense of loss, suffering and negativity within the community. It was initiated by a highly regarded community member in a position to act on her concerns about the impacts of the bushfire. She was immediately supported by a core group from the local and broader Tasmanian community. The purpose of the Regener8 project was to mark the anniversary of the fire by displaying examples of growth and resilience after the fire in order to encourage greater community healing. The event would not be termed a 'celebration' as there were many within the community that had suffered great losses. While there was pain and anger over issues surrounding the fire, there were also positive outcomes and a need to acknowledge the many different forms of generosity. The anniversary was marked by an opening event to showcase two major areas of activities to show resilience and promote ongoing healing through art, creativity and self expression. The first was the gathering of local stories, impressions and images of those affected by the bushfire. The second activity was the bringing together of an exhibition of artefacts, images, paintings and textiles surrounding the event in 2006 to mark its first anniversary in December 2007. A volunteer committee supporting the project was assembled including local community, arts, health, and council as well as health promotion and academic sector members.

The purpose of publication of a community book *Regener8: Stories and Impressions of the Tasmanian East Coast Bushfire 2006* (McManamey 2007) was threefold: firstly, to engender healing through the expression of stories, poems, images and artworks; to keep/store local history and local knowledge; and finally to share local knowledge informing future firefighting. The spoken stories emerging from the community were of the serious challenges suffered along with many acts of individual and family heroism: humor; resilient home loss owners.

By recording the fire experiences, valuable local knowledge was gathered to inform future fire fighting in the area. Within the book, there were seven areas of contributors informing the sharing of local knowledge. They were from: chief officers, volunteer members of the Tasmanian Volunteer Firefighting brigades; households affected by the fire; community impacted on by the fire; NGOs' reports and observations; major services, both business and government, maintaining assistance under duress (e.g. Aurora Energy replacing burnt poles 100 metres behind, after fire had gone through); media reporters' independent observations (e.g. Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC] reporter's reflection on community spirit); and civic reporting such as from the mayor and

community development officers. Figure 1 gives the number and areas of direct contributors to the community *Regener8 Project*.

Volunteer Contributors	Number
Book – stories and poetry	60
Images and photography in book	29
Exhibition art works	38
Supporting project and book production	32
Song/music composer “Scamander Burns”	1
Total	160

Figure 1 Contributors to the *Regener8* book and its publication

METHOD APPLIED TO THE STUDY OF THE REGENER8 PROJECT

A small explorative research study *Art Health and Wellbeing: Regener8 Project* was commenced in May 2007 and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network. Its purpose was in documenting the experiences of people involved in fire fighting and directly or indirectly affected by the 2006 East Coast Fires was twofold. Firstly, it was to gather interview data and also contribute data towards a collection of narratives and images as a publication. The gathering and publication of stories and impressions was to provide insights into the experiences, emotions and effects of the East Coast fires from members of the local community and people taking part, involved in or affected by the fire. Secondly, the project studies the issues and resilience of a community regeneration process in relation to creative art practice.

Prior to holding the *Regener8* anniversary event and to inform the collection of narratives, nine (4 Female /5 Male) semi-structured interviews were carried out. Two months after the *Regener8* book had been published data gathering was undertaken in February - May 2008 from 18 individuals comprising 3 community members, 2 project organisers, 4 art and story contributors, 3 volunteer fire fighters, 2 service providers, 1 political leader, 1 council member, and 2 members of the public. Feedback provided data on five questions: major outcomes; negative outcomes; issues raised by the *regener8* project; issues solved by contributions or response to the project; economic development from the project. Survey data gathered at the exhibition sites contributed 173 responses from attendees and general public. Therefore the semi-structured interview results, feedback and survey data contribute to shaping the response.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Nature has created its own style of beauty out of the destruction of wild-fire. Ordinary everyday people have become heroes! (*Regener8*, Isabel Witten p. 64).

Interview data showed a consensus that the regeneration and resilience project did achieve its aims of acknowledging loss and gratitude engendering healing; the retention of history pertaining to the event; and the sharing of local knowledge both contributing to the regenerative process and as evidence for ongoing practice and learning. Interviewees felt the major outcomes from the project were that:

1. It brought the community together to mark an occasion, celebrate and give thanks one year on – leadership and cohesion (Ink 2006).
2. It engendered local pride through:
 - The number of people involved and their response contributing to stories, impressions, poetry, art exhibition, and music compositions (n=160);
 - Media coverage from a major regional newspaper marking the first anniversary, of the fire using stories and images from the book over five days;
 - *Regener8* Project and book nominated for two awards – local government and community media awards;
 - Broad media coverage interviews given on ABC state and national radio.
3. The sharing of stories was important because:
 - They showed areas of recovery, bravery, resilience and understanding of suffering.

Lil and I fought the spot fires around the house for as long as the water held out. At times the smoke was so thick and so little oxygen in the air we struggled to get enough air to breath. When it was at its worst I started to feel that we'd made the wrong call and now the family was going to die. The feeling of guilt and responsibility was terrible; somehow though we made it through till the fire front had passed.

... Our hair and eyebrows were burnt off, we couldn't blink or close our eyes because they hurt too much and we had no water left to put out the various spot fires still burning. Lil and I went over to an empty drum and sat down in shock.

*A little later we heard chainsaws down our drive and were so relieved to see a fire crew come up the drive. We later found out that they were expecting the worst and were overcome with relief when they saw the children's eyes peering out a window and found Lil and I still perched on the drum. It was an emotional scene. Nothing needed to be said; we all just hugged each other in relief (*Regener8* Michael, Lil Lizzie & Jaci Jones, p 27)*

- The giving of stories, interviews and experiences for publication, and exposing of self could be seen as examples of high levels of individual trust.

Later in the afternoon while on the phone we offered to help a friend in the fire danger zone, not thinking that we were threatened. Soon afterwards with no warning the alarm came as a rising roar, and smoke surrounded us. We tried to hose spot fires, now started on the property. And then the police car drove rapid up the driveway and told us that we had less than 10

minutes to gather our lives and those of our pets, 4 dogs and one cat (Regener8 Margot Mitchell, p. 33).

- There was a high degree of sharing information about defence and policy (Resource Dependency, Adger 2000).

Location and mapping: Talking about logistics, mapping was one of the biggest problems with people from out of the area. Even the locals say 'I'm up at such and such's house. I don't know the road name it's just Bogie's house'. The same happens if we go out of our area. It's not just this fire; it's everywhere. On something this big it is a problem (Regener8, *From Round the Table*, Jason McGiveron p. 40).

Fuel reduction: It may not be in this immediate area but it will happen again. It will happen within the state and the problem is the laws and regulations are actually getting tighter on fuel reduction. They are actually getting to the point now where they anticipate within five or ten years you may not be allowed to do burning off for fuel reduction purposes because of environmental problems. So it will have to be managed some other way well the problem is people haven't got the money on putting fire breaks in. It has to be a patchwork thing. You know little heaps of little ones are really good. If you burn them at the right time it'll burn round the trees and they still growing fine. It won't hurt them. It only burns the fine ground fuel basically (Regener8, *From Round the Table*, Michael Aulich p. 46).

- It showed what happens when 'we unite in our communities and across state sectors to combat natural disaster and regenerate'.

When we as Australians and more particularly as Tasmanians stand back and look at what happens in the face of devastating fires in other parts of the world we can hold our heads high. (Returning to Country, Jennifer Houston p 24)

4. Stories from the publication were used by ABC National Radio in developing early warning systems in South Australia to construct systems for 'getting information from local people and out to people' (Personal communications 3.2.08) (Communications and information 2006).
5. The *Regener8* book had brought about a realisation of the importance and examples of social capital in actions from smaller and less noticeable contributions, i.e. giving of time to do small things such as cleaning and maintaining fire engines, cooking food, sustaining volunteer fire fighters and community services. That is, they encouraged social cohesion and sense of community.
6. The community feels a tangible sense of pride since the anniversary. It is felt that the strong sense of identity and pride has contributed to the commencement of three new businesses and one expanded retail outlet. Pride was also apparent in the nomination of the project for two awards – Australia Day and an Examiner Newspaper Smart Community Award. Artworks have since been part of a travelling Art Exhibition and works have feature in two state exhibitions. Works have been included in a major art journal.



In the silence (Regener8, Rita Summers, p. 56).

7. It further encouraged social cohesion and working together for future self-reliance and beautification of the town and area. Groups and committees have been set up looking at the longer term actions to aid self-reliance and protection.
8. The project and the book have brought closure, and 'everyone together' – inclusivity (Existing norms, values/ attitudes/ Oxfam 2005).

ISSUES RAISED AND ADDRESSED BY MARKING THE BUSHFIRE ANNIVERSARY

That's what the key to it is; it's being prepared (Regener8, p. 41).

A major concern with the marking of an anniversary particularly one focused to engender healing is that of the experience of the 'anniversary' reaction and the coping with possible reawakening grief. Counsellors were provided and also mingled with guests at the exhibition and book launch. No feedback is currently available from those sources, however literature suggests the ' "anniversary" event can trigger both negative and positive responses and vary widely in individuals' (Coombs 1999; Johannes 2000). Issues that the interviewees felt were addressed by the book:

- **Appropriate means of paying tribute** to a young life lost, and ongoing losses suffered by the community members;
- **Isolation** – social inclusion – means of drawing affected community members closer together as part of a healing process;
- **Acceptance of diversity** – forestry workers' contributions not valued or initially acknowledged; tension in the area between environmentalists, volunteer fire fighters, and forestry;
- **Greater understanding of others' experiences and volunteers' contributions** by unaffected individuals stating – 'all was media hype';
- **Greater understanding of physical issues volunteer fire fighters face** and logistics associated with overall organisation, e.g. initial food provision for volunteer fire fighters; map reading and difficulties in firefighting out of local area;
- **Strengthening successful policy** – stories showed strong support for success of the stay and defend policy along with support of members who did choose to leave early;
- **Support for future preparedness** – overall discussion and examples within the publication supported preparedness and enabled community members– empowering the community;
- **Increased learning through the sharing of local knowledge** – shared stories inform individuals, community and policy;
- **Attention drawn to 'non preparedness'** – and preparing for the future. Non-preparedness related to a lack of awareness /compliance of community members to general local regulation related to safety e.g. two entrances/exits to properties, safe pipes and adequate water to maintain a defence;
- **Reduced negativity** – through inclusion of stories containing experiences from contributors with a broad range of demographic, social and economic backgrounds, many felt their perspectives and understanding of what others had experienced, suffered and contributed had broadened.

RESILIENCE AND REGENERATION

*It's amazing how quickly fear can change into determination.
(Regener8, Esther Rubenach p. 48)*

There are eight areas of resilience that can be drawn from community response to participate in the project as individual indicators for evaluation and the resultant factors. These areas should be seen as multi-layered and include the indicators of mental health – participation and community engagement; acceptance of diversity; and economic engagement. Although McQueen-Thompson et al. (2004) noted ten indicators arising from a theoretical base that could be used in for future research, resilience related to this project could be explored in the future through:

- **Community leadership** - *The Regener8* project was set in motion by a community member bringing in others. The response to the bringing together of stories, art works and photographs was totally grounded on *trust* for that community member. It would be quite possible that external requests for stories would perhaps have not obtained the number, insights and openness given.
- **Participation and community engagement** within the project: a) integrated art forms and humanities engendering healing, community cultural understanding, and regeneration; b) assistance developing and supporting ongoing action and production of anniversary event (McQueen-Thomson, James &

Ziguras 2004). This was exemplified by 160 participants contributing to the Regener8 Project approximately

- **Individual works** - individual stories and art works as models of resilience. Interaction between individuals and community acts to inform as a collective resilience (Rolfe 2006);
- **Acceptance of diversity** – acceptance of stories. Works revealed great vulnerability and bravery in making ‘public’ certain feelings and emotions (McQueen-Thomson, James & Ziguras 2004).
- **Education** – sharing experiences by capturing history and sharing local knowledge: support and praise for the ‘stay and defend or leave early’ policy present in writings (Macguire & Hagan 2007).
- **Attitude** - humorous content and stories, humility, gratitude (Maginness 2007).
- **Social inclusion** means to support and build others through openness (Matarasso 1997). All but one family rebuilt after the fire; two interviewees and stories noted it was due to community response and inclusiveness.
- **Social capital** – cross-sector partnerships and social capital at the bonding, bridging and linking levels (Woolcock 1998) both within the stories related to the events and the development and outcomes of the project (Kigma 2002).

ON-GOING LEARNING

In the heat of the fire, we unite in its face, communities are forged, common bonds develop, stories are shaped and history moulded (Regener8, p.24).

The impact of changing climatic conditions on our environment and ecological systems can have dramatic outcomes for rural Australians. This paper draws attention to the fact that community led creative response after natural disasters appear to be relatively unexamined interactions. These creative initiatives, narratives and works are compiled and organised by volunteer contributors and supporters. A significant factor that arises from the community publications that is not well documented is the importance, need and focus of these community projects to inform through the sharing of local knowledge. The importance of publishing local knowledge is that in times of natural disasters, that retention and advice should be mindfully considered and documented – both as a contribution to community health and safety as well as a resource. It also holds great value in maintaining local history and identity.

Within the Tasmanian *Regener8* project the sharing of local knowledge appears to supports five area of ongoing learning:

- **Policy** - strong support and acclaim in the published stories for ‘stay and defend or leave early’ policy (McManamey 2007, p. 42). Both stories supporting ‘leave early’ and ‘stay and defend’ which gives context and understanding to decisions.
- **Defence mechanisms** – information taken from stories informed Early Warning Systems that have been acted upon by the ABC national radio network in South Australia.
- **General Bushfire information** on the nature and shape, size, movement of bushfires i.e. fire storms, spotting, wind action carrying embers and leaves can start fires four plus kilometres away. Examples in stories ‘a bushfire will burn past your house in a couple of minutes. You have ten minutes before you have to get out even if it is on fire’ (McManamey 2007, p.42).

- **Actioning safety** - courage, bravery in the face of traumatic situations and the heroic actions of 'ordinary people' (p. 27).
- **Future preparedness** - ongoing motivation and interest in communities to attend further learning.

CONCLUSION

People who actually lost everything were the first to respond to our call for help, offering to buy feed and look after the wildlife (Regener8, Peter Powers p.38).

The collection of personal experiences, stories and expression of emotion from a broad range of individuals from affected communities, NGOs, local government officers, media reporters, provides a window into areas of natural disaster response, recovery and future preparedness. It offers valuable qualitative data and insight into community action, reaction and cross sectoral support. It holds up acts of great heroism as a quality of 'ordinary people'. The community led creative events associated with natural disaster recovery however act to empower, not only aiding community healing but also contributing to ongoing learning for local communities as well as the broader state and national sectors.

The indicators of resilience based on a theoretical structure are supported strongly by examples from stories and the broader community benefits seen in the results from publishing community stories and impressions, and are for future consideration in research. The publication and ongoing recorded knowledge and history contribute to increasing community identity mirroring community cohesion. It allows for ongoing community healing through understanding of diverse nature of response using modes of creative expression.

Outcomes from the Regener8 project from a small rural Tasmanian town of 684 people, gives rise to a remarkable example of community led regional regeneration and resilience. While St Marys is classified as one of Australia's most disadvantaged areas (Vinson 2006), its response to natural disaster in carrying out this project is an example of both the use of and the building of social capital.

While the paper has touched on literature related to a number of areas that arise in considering data gathering from community led initiatives, celebrations, rituals and anniversaries engendering healing and regeneration after trauma or natural disaster, it also draws attention to gaps in research focus. The significance of exploring community cohesive action and resilience through creativity, is in its potential to inform multidisciplinary fields and policy not only in areas associated with art, health, wellbeing and community development but also its potential to contribute knowledge and learning to the greater global community on issues of community safety, resilience and regional regeneration.

*St Marys community, you make me feel very proud to be an Australian.
Such a fighting spirit (Survey comment, 2008).*

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