HOTSPOTS FIRE PROJECT

Case Study:
Learning and living with fire - the Currawinya story

Thirty kilometres from the nearest highway, Currawinya is a haven for residents and for wildlife.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE…

Fire was never part of the plan for the residents of Currawinya. After 25 years of trying to exclude fire to protect their wildlife refuge property, residents are discovering that not all fire is bad.

Nestled in a picturesque valley of the upper Clarence high country in northern New South Wales (NSW) , adjoining national park and bordering the Clarence River, Currawinya is a refuge for wildlife and residents alike. The 2125 hectare property was established for multiple occupancy 30 years ago and is currently home to six families. Management always had a simple focus: the wildlife − and in 1984 the property became a nature refuge. Over the years, residents have worked towards restoring the former cattle property, dealing with ongoing issues from weeds to erosion. Until recently, however, fire simply had no place.

"A few years ago, fire was seen as the biggest threat to our flora and fauna," says Peter Stewart, resident and member of Friends of Currawinya Landcare Inc., "so we always thought that no fire was the best way to manage [Currawinya]." Currawinya had little or no communication with neighbouring properties, not much was known about the local fire history and practices such as burning off were frowned upon and seen as detrimental to the natural environment.

Confronting Fire

After 25 years of trying to keep fire out, extreme weather conditions combined with high fuel loads finally brought wildfire to Currawinya in October 2000. The fire was hot and extensive reaching even into creek lines, and burnt out seven kilometres of sensitive river frontage. This effectively opened up the canopy and promoted further growth of lantana, a major contributor to the spread of the wildfire in the first place. Disillusioned with the damage to this riparian area, usually a refuge for wildlife in times of fire, residents began to change their opinions. It was agreed the property must be managed for fire.

Without further knowledge and experience, the residents of Currawinya felt isolated in their quest to improve their management techniques and their own safety. Ironically, Currawinya wasn't the only property concerned about the fire threat in the valley. Independently, those on neighbouring properties, aware of fire history and the potential threat were also attempting to implement their own form of fire management. It wasn't until Currawinya hosted a Hotspots two-day workshop series, one day in August 2005 and one in March 2006, that they were able to realise common goals.

THE HOTSPOTS FIRE PROJECT

Hotspots is about taking fire management planning into the bush, onto the farm and into the community in a way that relates to local situations and needs.

Underpinned by science and practical knowledge, Hotspots assists private landholders and public agencies in managing fire for the protection of life and property while at the same time ensuring healthy, productive landscapes in which biodiversity is protected and maintained.

The Hotspots project builds partnerships with a diverse range of people and organisations that collectively benefit from fire management, and enhances their shared capacity to meet the challenges of sustainable fire management. The focus of Hotspots is on effective shared fire management planning and collaboration within communities, between agencies and across landscapes.

Hotspots has to date been a three year pilot project funded by the NSW Environmental Trust to January 2008.

Nature Conservation Council of NSW
NSW Environmental TRUST
FIREWISE
This project has been assisted by the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust.

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The Hotspots workshops provided the opportunity to acknowledge and tap into the experience of landholders who had been running fire through their properties for several generations, and combine this with professional knowledge and up to date science. With representatives from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW Rural Fire Service and Pretty Gully Rural Fire Brigade, Forests NSW and the local Landcare group, the Hotspots workshops covered essential information such as fire behaviour, vegetation types and plant and animal responses to fire. In a practical sense, workshop participants were taken through the steps in preparing a fire management plan and identified priorities with the assistance of key agencies.

For the residents of Currawinya this opportunity was just what they were looking for: it gave them the knowledge and tools to better manage the property for wildlife while enhancing the safety of residents. Peter Stewart echoes the thoughts of those present: "we realised that fire affects all our neighbours and the workshops gave us the perfect opportunity to view other fire plans and learn how to prepare one."

For neighbouring grazier Rod Ramsey, who met his Currawinyan neighbours for the first time at the Hotspots workshops, the event helped to restore a sense of community. "They [the Currawinyans] had been here for 20 years and I hadn't even paid them a visit. I don't think they thought very much of me beforehand as I was the one who was always burning. Now, I think they can appreciate what I do."

Many considered Rod to be a bit extreme in his historical methods of burning to replenish the grasses for his cattle. Through the workshops not only did Rod's neighbours realise that his burning was a part of his property management but Rod himself was able to strengthen his relationship with his Currawinyan neighbours, as well as with the NSW Rural Fire Service and National Parks and Wildlife Service. For the first time, all present could respect both the positive and negative impacts of fire; how too much fire or too little could affect their properties. For Rod, this meant an understanding amongst the community that all would be working with fire but with slightly different strategies: "we both have to burn, but for different outcomes."

SAVING THE LOCAL BRIGADE

"Now we've got a new fire truck and we're all having training. If we didn't have Hotspots we wouldn't have known." Christine Castrikum

Learning and living with fire is more than just a property issue for any one family or farm. Appropriate preparation and property management by landholders is important but wildfire can occur unexpectedly, and rarely respects property boundaries. For this reason adequate preparation and response to fire is a community concern. Local fire brigades have long been recognised for their role in combating wildfires, however their role extends far beyond this. Brigades also work to increase public awareness of fires, and encourage communities and individuals to plan and prepare well before a fire occurs.

In 2005, the Pretty Gully Rural Fire Brigade had ten members, only three of whom were adequately trained for active response. Without more commitment from the community, the brigade looked set to close. It was only during the Hotspots workshops that the real benefits of having and retaining the local brigade became acutely apparent for resident Christine Castrikum:

> *"without further members, we would have lost it, and then our closest [brigade] would have been 40kms away."*

As a result of the Hotspots workshops, brigade membership more than doubled and now 50% of the shareholders in Currawinya are in the brigade and undertaking ongoing training. With this increase in numbers and an injection of enthusiasm, the brigade and the local community are reaping the benefits. The brigade now has a new $130 000 vehicle and will see a new fire station in the next few years.

Since the Hotspots workshops, the Currawinyans have been keen advocates for a community approach to fire management. For Peter Stewart the workshop was the critical driver:

> *"Hotspots gave us a workshop that brought all our neighbours together so we can understand what happens when fire moves across the landscape."*

Currawinya continues to work with the NSW Rural Fire Service on their fire management planning and encourages new membership and interest in their local brigade.

"Before Hotspots, we were an isolated community; we felt we had to fight fire by ourselves, that we were alone. But since the workshops, we feel part of a larger community now that we manage for fire as a community."

Peter Stewart

Fire as a management tool

Many now realise that it isn't just a matter of putting a match to the back paddock every year, or excluding fire completely. By taking a careful look at where residences are located, and considering the ecology of the many different plants and animals, a scientifically sound and responsible approach can be taken. For much of the property at Currawinya, this means a mosaic approach to burning with some areas needing more attention than others.

By burning in a mosaic across the property at different times, residents hope to minimise the risk of a wildfire and provide refuges for the animals that live there. "If a fire does roll across the property," says Peter, "then there will be areas that have already been burned and will have less fuel built up, so the intensity of the fire should be reduced." It's hoped that this will help to slow the next wildfire, making it easier to contain rather than having it take off and burn the whole property out, leaving no habitat or refuge for the animals, the way the 2000 wildfire did.

There is also now a growing understanding that different burning practices have different outcomes for the bush. For example, by burning regularly in, say, boundary areas to protect the property from wildfire, it is recognised that this will ultimately change the make-up of the plant species that grow there and as such, the habitat available for wildlife. However in the bigger picture of the property, the role of these boundary areas will be to protect the larger and more complex habitat areas.

A Fresh Future

Following the Hotspots workshops, Currawinya embraced their new found knowledge and direction and have since engaged in a course with the Department of Primary Industries to develop a full property management plan. For resident Bob Dunn, the change has been a real turn-around: "For the first time, Currawinya is presenting a positive image in the community."

In July 2006, Currawinya undertook its first controlled burn with assistance from the Pretty Gully Rural Fire Brigade – a small fire of two and a half hectares targeting the habitat of the brush-tailed rock wallaby. A second, larger property boundary burn with National Parks and Wildlife Service was later implemented. As part of their new property management plan, the intention was to reduce the risk of wildfire in the area and promote the grassy understorey as forage habitat for the wallabies.

Times are changing for this community. Far from feeling isolated, with the help of Hotspots, the Currawinyans have now forged relationships with key agencies and their neighbours, who are all working together to implement their fire plans. They know and understand that planning for fire is unlikely to stop a wildfire if it comes through, but the residents hope that because of their planning and preparation, the next wildfire won't be as devastating or extensive as the last.

This sensitive riparian area often becomes a refuge for wildlife in times of fire

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"Hotspots brought us together and gave us the tools and the insight of what was required under the law and helped us keep our brigade together and get to know our neighbours"

Christine Castrikum

MANAGING FOR THE BRUSH-TAILED ROCK WALLABY

The endangered brush-tailed rock wallaby.

The tall timbers, steep slopes and running creeks of Currawinya provide habitat for abundant and diverse wildlife. Over 100 species of fauna have been recorded and the property is even known to provide habitat for some of the more unusual and habitat specific mammals like the rufous bettong and spotted-tailed quoll.

One very special resident that finds refuge at Currawinya is the endangered brush-tailed rock wallaby (*Petrogale penicillata)*. In decline throughout most of its original range and with remaining populations mostly small and isolated, this elusive macropod has a very limited territory with unique habitat requirements. While spending their day mostly hidden among the crevices of rocky outcrops and gorges, they will venture out in the early mornings and late evenings to forage on nearby grasses – though usually only a short distance (up to a kilometre) from the shelter of their rocky homes.

The re-introduction of fire to Currawinya has been part of a larger management strategy to protect the brush-tailed rock wallaby. By implementing mosaic or patch burning that rotates areas burnt over the years, foraging areas can be enhanced while also allowing for unburnt refuges. Periodic burning is also helping to control the encroaching lantana, thus encouraging the grassy understorey necessary for the wallabies' survival. The use of fire in a mosaic pattern will also help to keep fuel loads down thus reducing the threat of a major wildfire reaching the colony.

Time to get practical as the Hotspots workshop heads into the field to discuss issues and strategies.

Acknowledgements

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Further Information

The Hotspots Fire Project is managed by the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, and has been funded by the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust.

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Credits

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