

A case study of a  
**strategic conversation**  
about fire in Victoria, Australia

Fire and adaptive management

report no. 79



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By Simone Blair, Claire Campbell and Matt Campbell





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# Summary

In August 2009, the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) commenced a pilot of a new approach to developing and sharing knowledge about fire through a fire learning network. The pilot was prompted by a desire to learn about, and put into action, new ways of working with the community to achieve better fire outcomes. In keeping with an adaptive management ethos – to learn from what we do – this case study describes what took place at one location during the first twelve months, and what was learned.

The fire learning network is made up of interconnected groups that have been brought together through a strategic conversation process. A strategic conversation is a facilitated dialogue within a group of people, for the purpose of pooling knowledge and experience about a topic or theme. A strategic conversation approach is simple, but the rationale is that it can lead to significant changes in the way people relate with one another and, as a result, develop new knowledge. This approach is quite different to the way DSE traditionally tends to work with the community.

The case study focuses on a conversation in a fire prone locality in Victoria. The conversation included residents, friends' groups, volunteer fire fighters from the Country Fire Authority (CFA), and staff from organisations such as DSE and Parks Victoria (PV). As people shared their different perspectives, a broader understanding of the land and fire

management 'picture' evolved. As understanding grew, participants' perspectives began to change. This led to better relationships and a more complex view of the world for all. Changing the way participants related to one another was critical to developing new knowledge and understanding. Ultimately, it was trust and care for each other that inspired people to keep returning to the conversation and listen to and learn from others.

The case study shows that the simple process of conversation, when facilitated well, can significantly change relationships, trust and knowledge, both within a community and between a community and an organisation.

# Acknowledgements

We'd like to acknowledge colleagues in Sri Lanka, India and Africa with whom we developed this approach, and adopted it to working with fire-prone communities in Victoria, Australia.

We would like to thank all those in the community (both fire agency staff and residents) who worked with us, and continue to work with us, in developing the fire learning network. We have learnt a lot from you.

We would also like to thank a number of people who were critical to the inception and development of this process and the report:

- Andy Musgrove (Parks Victoria), whose support was instrumental in enabling this idea to become a reality; and whose energy, insight, local knowledge and positive spirit helped it grow.
- Liam Fogarty, whose vision made this report, and the community capacity building processes it sparked, possible.

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**Australian Government**

**Attorney-General's Department**  
Emergency Management Australia

## About the Authors

### Simone Blair

Simone is an anthropologist who taught and undertook social research at the University of Melbourne. She has worked with Victorian commercial fishing communities to explore how they learn about, understand, use and pass on knowledge about the marine environment; and how their values and social relationships affect these processes of learning and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The common thread in all her work is an interest in the different ways groups of people come to know, value, care about and use the natural environment. These differences, in life ways, culture and ways of knowing, offer insights into how we can all better live in and adapt to our world.

### Claire Campbell

Claire is a clinical psychologist and has worked in the community development field for the last ten years. In that time, she has developed processes, tools, approaches and mechanisms to empower communities to respond to the issues they are facing (e.g. HIV/AIDS in Africa or the Asia Pacific), or the issues of loss and grief encountered after a natural disaster (e.g. the 2004 tsunami and 2005 earthquake in Pakistan).

Claire spent a number of years as the lead researcher in a cross-cultural participatory action-research project evaluating the impact of HIV/AIDS prevention approaches implemented by the Salvation Army. The research was undertaken in eight countries – Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, Uganda, PNG, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka – and the learnings shared with other organisations.

Claire believes that all people have the capacity to respond to the issues facing them in their own context. Further, dynamic change is possible, irrespective of culture or issue, by systematically applying core concepts related to building relationships through ongoing conversations.

### Matt Campbell

Matt Campbell is a public health professional and has worked on HIV-related community development initiatives in the Asia/Pacific region and southern Africa. His focus has been building community connectedness through strengths-based approaches, which recognise the inherent capacity of all individuals to respond to the concerns in their lives. Matt is passionate about discovering how social and environmental contexts affect communities – initially, across cultures and now through DSE Land and Fire Management.

Matt believes ongoing learning from local knowledge and experience is the greatest catalyst for generating sustained behaviour change. In his experience, genuine relationships enable all people to participate in this process.



## Foreword

We all live and work in a community and draw strength and knowledge from the different people around us. While growing up in Gippsland, I began to develop my knowledge about the Australian bush, fire and community from the people around me – knowledge that I now apply in my role as Chief Officer.

Sometimes, as an emergency service organisation and as communities, we are focused only on the time spent fighting fire, the immediate trauma and recovery. We forget to explore the long-term learnings from the experience, and how we can pass on that knowledge to future generations. One important way that we all pass on our knowledge is simply through talking with one another.

This case study looks at one approach that we've taken to facilitate people to share their knowledge within the community, and between communities and fire agencies. This approach is called a strategic conversation. A group of multiple strategic conversations creates a learning network.

A strategic conversation is not 'rocket science'. It is about bringing people together to share and pool their knowledge, discuss how fire affects the things they care about and what this means for them. It is also about discussing how they, as an individual, and as a community, can better understand and learn to live with these effects.

This document describes one 'strategic conversation' process in Victoria. It confirms that by creating a setting where trust exists and people feel at ease, fire knowledge will flow more readily between all people. Ultimately, knowledge and understanding of our environment and our community will help us to live more easily with fire.

Creating and supporting a learning network of strategic conversations across Victoria is an approach that has never been attempted before. This case study describes the first steps towards implementing a promising new way of working.



**Ewan Waller**  
Chief Officer, Fire and Emergency Management  
Department of Sustainability and Environment

# Introduction



Fire affects socio-ecological systems in complex and, at times, unexpected ways. It can, for example, both benefit the Australian environment and be catastrophic for individuals, communities and ecosystems.

For some time, land and fire agencies, such as DSE, have recognised that our ability to live with the positive and negative effects of fire partly depends on our capacity to know and understand the environment we live in. However, the effectiveness of traditional ways of working to foster fire knowledge has, to some extent, limited our potential to share and take on new knowledge. One reason for this is that DSE has often used a model of knowledge that treats knowledge as an object and people as receptacles of knowledge (see Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell 2010 for discussion). Knowledge, in this traditional model, is:

- an object that can be easily transferred between parties
- neutral or factual – something that all people view in the same way regardless of their background or culture

Also this model of knowledge has meant that DSE has sometimes acted as if:

- only community has a knowledge deficit, rather than there being different kinds of equally valid knowledge that is distributed differently across the community and organisations
- fear of fire rather than relationships will motivate people in the long term
- credibility and trust come only from uniforms and scientific explanations.

In response to these issues, DSE describes an alternative knowledge model (see Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell 2010), which in turn informed a new approach to working with people to develop and share knowledge about fire. To test this model, DSE started to pilot a fire learning network (see Campbell, Blair & Wilson 2010).

The first step was to pilot a 'strategic conversation' that would, if successful, be the first 'node' in this learning network. The pilot began in Greenfield,<sup>1</sup> Victoria.

This new approach addresses a number of aims outlined in *The Victorian Bushfire Strategy* (State Government of Victoria 2008) and *The Living with Fire Framework* (State Government of Victoria 2008). These aims highlight the role of managing fire adaptively and the importance of developing community resilience. An approach that focuses on sharing knowledge and building relationships within the community, and between the community and organisations, is fundamental to developing such resilience (Care for Community Enterprise 2000; Olsson et al. 2004; Goldstein 2008; Norris et al. 2008). Testing this new approach, in such a way as to learn from it, is itself part of an adaptive way of working.

This case study first briefly describes Greenfield – to place the participants and their motivations in context. It then describes the facilitation process used in the first and subsequent conversations, explores the content of those conversations and describes what the facilitators and the participants observed. Finally, it discusses changes that were observed in three key areas:

- relationships
- knowledge and systems thinking
- team.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Names of people and places have been changed.

# What is a strategic conversation?

Put simply, a strategic conversation is a conversation<sup>2</sup> that is facilitated. A conversation that is facilitated is by definition *strategic* because the person facilitating<sup>3</sup> the conversation, as a more neutral party, moves the group towards a synthesis of the groups' ideas. The facilitator<sup>4</sup> is responsible for the conversation process, e.g. ensuring that all participants can speak and the conversation remains on topic and productive.

The facilitator aims to create a constructive environment that allows people to respectfully share experiences and knowledge with one another. The aim is for all participants to build trust and understanding with others and develop a better understanding of an issue/concern or situation (in this case, land and fire management). Ultimately, the learning and relationship 'outcomes' of a strategic conversations are *emergent* – they cannot be predetermined and will depend on the unique strengths, interests and experiences of the group of people who form that dialogue.

A strategic conversation involves approximately 15 people and is an ongoing process (i.e. it occurs more than once to ensure cumulative learning). The focus is depth of understanding and relationship, rather than breadth. A quality conversation cannot occur with over 20 people, and so it is never an aim to have large numbers of people attend. A strategic conversation, then, involves a series of conversations, each of which may be thought of as a conversation event. Repeating conversations creates better opportunities for those involved to build relationships with one another, and reflect on, synthesise and apply new knowledge.

A strategic conversation approach is intended to achieve multiple aims, including:

- sharing knowledge and experience
- mutual understanding
- subject matter learning
- development of systems thinking
- reconciliation of ideas, people or groups
- conflict reduction
- relationship building within community and between agencies and community.

These conversations should lead to real change in individual, group and community understanding and relationships and, as a consequence, better emergency, environmental and social outcomes. Since the primary goal of a strategic conversation is learning and understanding, rather than policy change, conversations should also be less divisive.

Conversation is an age old and natural way to share knowledge, grow understanding and build relationships. Many current community process for building capacity have 'conversation' or dialogue at their heart (see for example Born 2008; Everyday Democracy 2010; Open Space 2010). For example, a strategic conversation process is similar to so called "Open Space" approaches (Open Space 2010). The main difference is that the topic of a strategic conversation is limited to, in

this case, fire. Within this topic though participants are encouraged to discuss what is most important to them at the time. Another point of difference to Open Space facilitation is that a Strategic Conversation does not have a goal of finding a solution and occurs more than once.

## Who is involved?

A founding philosophy of the approach was the belief that all people have something to share with, and learn from, others. The approach also assumes that local and expert knowledge are needed to understand any situation.

The facilitation team, therefore, took the view that community was everyone and included fire agency staff (from DSE, CFA and PV) and all others who expressed an interest in land and fire management.

Starting with an expansive view of community is important. It allows the conversation to start with the definition that we are all 'in this together', that we are all human beings with personal histories, relationships, ideas, fears and knowledge etc. If the conversation starts with this assumption, then it is less likely to disintegrate into an us-and-them scenario, which would not be conducive to learning.

### Notes

- 2 Some people in other locations called strategic conversations 'community conversations' and 'fire conversations' – the name is not as important as the principles and intent of the process.
- 3 It is important to note that anyone with motivation can improve their ability to be a facilitator (see Campbell, Campbell & Blair, forthcoming).
- 4 At each conversation, there were almost always two facilitators - one leading and one supporting. A team approach is vital. A second facilitator is necessary to document, to observe, to ask strategic questions, and synthesise conceptual elements of the conversation (see Campbell, Campbell & Blair forthcoming).

### Why hold a strategic conversation?

There are many reasons to initiate a strategic conversation, for example:

- The relevant issues are complex, systemic and difficult for one person to comprehend.
- Keeping people with different values and beliefs<sup>5</sup> separate from each other and the community<sup>6</sup> increases conflict and misunderstandings, and does not facilitate learning.
- Bringing community together in a facilitated setting to share diverse views can lead to productive dialogue, increased rapport and creative reframing of problems.
- Learning and understanding is as important as input into policy change, and less divisive.
- Learning and understanding is as important for community safety and environmental sustainability, as technical or operational activities.
- People learn best when they are active participants in the learning process.
- People learn best about systems problems in collaborative groups.

The beginnings of the Greenfield strategic conversation were both conceptual and practical. For a more comprehensive explanation of the conceptual and practical underpinnings of the strategic conversations approach, refer to the reports outlined in Box 1. The reports explain why supporting learning is an important activity of adaptive managers and offer ways to improve knowledge sharing and learning, including the strategic conversations approach.

#### Notes

- 5 In general, a stakeholder is a person or a group of people who shares values, views and interests. In other words they are broadly of the same mind with regard to a particular subject. Generally, a stakeholder is an organised group with a political presence.
- 6 The community is everyone and not an organised body with a similar mind. Thus, the community acts differently to stakeholders.

#### Example

##### From consultation and conflict to learning

There are different ways of using, engaging with and thinking about the environment, which can lead to different views about how to solve problems. This can lead to conflict between groups within the same community.

Local, state and federal governments often attempt to mediate these differences by listening to each 'side' separately and reconciling those views in their own way. Often, the outcome is that all parties are unhappy as they were left out of the reconciliation process.

An alternative approach is to bring people together – through strategic conversations, for example – to listen to one another and learn from different ways of seeing and experiencing the same place. In taking this approach, participants may develop a new perspective on the issue and reconcile values. Bringing people who have different experiences and knowledge together in a facilitated conversation can increase the potential learning opportunities.

#### Further background reading

The literature and theoretical material that frames this case study is discussed in the first two documents outlined below. Another two documents provide further discussion and practical guidelines about developing a learning network of Strategic Conversations.

- *Adaptive management of fire: the role of a learning network*, Campbell, Blair and Wilson (2010a). This document explores how developing networked strategic conversation groups can enhance and complement DSE's adaptive management aims by facilitating the flow of knowledge and understanding about fire across Victoria. It discusses the pros and cons of three similar examples and their outcomes elsewhere in the world.
- *Understanding, creating and developing knowledge about fire in Victoria*, Blair, Campbell, Wilson and Campbell (2010). This document discusses the question 'what is knowledge?' and describes how organisations can better share knowledge with community, within community and with researchers.
- *Guidelines: facilitating strategic conversations as part of adaptive management*, Campbell, Campbell and Blair (forthcoming). This document provides discussion of, and some theoretical background to, conducting a strategic conversation.
- *Developing a learning network: a case study of a first year*, Campbell, Blair and Wilson (2010b). This case study identifies and discusses key learnings that emerged from the first year of scoping out and starting to develop a statewide fire learning network, based on the concepts outlined in the three documents listed above.

#### Box 1.0

## Greenfield and strategic conversations

Greenfield is a semi-rural forest interface settlement located approximately 100km from Melbourne. The locality is surrounded by a number of state parks and forest reserves, including the Koala State Park<sup>7</sup>. Many residents share a fence boundary with public land and live in densely forested areas, while others live in more open landscapes on farms and hobby farms.

The area is pleasantly forested and semi-rural and this landscape has drawn many residents to live there. Indeed, many of the residents that we spoke to named the environment as one of their key reasons for living there.

Significant wildfires have affected Greenfield, including large wildfires in 1898, 1939 and 1983. The Ash Wednesday bushfires of 1983 killed people in the region, destroyed homes and burnt over 10,000 hectares.

Like many semi-rural communities, Greenfield attracts residents who care about the natural environment. However, people express their love of place in many different ways. Some may express their care simply by loving where they live. Others express their care more actively, by joining a 'friends of' group, or Landcare<sup>8</sup>, or by taking out a covenant on their property (e.g. Land for Wildlife<sup>9</sup>). Others may express their love of place through more traditional rural pursuits, such as raising livestock, 'tidying up' their blocks (eg. removing trees, lighting bonfires), salvaging timber from parks, or hunting deer and rabbits. Still others may express their care of a place by

actively seeking ways to look after its residents, volunteering for the CFA, for example. Thus, people's affinity for a place and its environment can be expressed in very different ways.

In Greenfield, people were motivated to join the conversation because they cared about the place, in all these different ways. This, in turn, informed how they understood and felt about land and fire management activities in the Greenfield area.

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### Notes

- 7 Place names have been changed.
- 8 Landcare is an organisation formed through a partnership between volunteer community groups and government. Landcare works to restore and rehabilitate degraded lands across Australia.
- 9 Land for Wildlife is a network of landholders, supported by government, who voluntarily manage their properties in ways that promote biodiversity.





This case study draws on qualitative observations made throughout 2008–09, in a variety of contexts using two main methods<sup>10</sup>:

- Participant observation – the facilitation team (who are also participants) observe and document levels of understanding, expression of ideas and relationships and infer change.
- Appreciative inquiry – the facilitation team (informally) ask participants how the process has changed their understandings and practices.

The qualitative data was collated into a facilitators' journal.<sup>11</sup> As relationships are the key to building, a conversation process, the facilitators' experiences of almost all conversations and meetings about the Greenfield conversation were documented and reviewed by the facilitation team for lessons learned (see Appendix 1 for a mock example).

### Indicators of change

Differences in the way people relate with one another, take ownership of the conversation process, describe their motivations and reflect on what is happening may each indicate change. These social and behavioural indicators were divided into three categories: relationship, knowledge and systems thinking, and team - explained below. The facilitation team believed these indicator categories were important in understanding both the development of a strategic conversation process and the wider fire learning network (see Campbell, Blair and Wilson 2010b).

#### Notes

<sup>10</sup> Some quantitative data is presented here, e.g. how many participants came to conversations and their affiliations. The data can be used to infer interest and motivation.

<sup>11</sup> When journaling conversation processes guiding principles such as care and respect for others should be observed conscientiously. In Australia, these principles are enshrined by the *Privacy Act* (2010).

### Relationship

Changes in the way people relate with one another (including how facilitators relate with other participants) are all evidence of how a process is influencing the group. Improving relationships between all participants is crucial to developing new knowledge and incorporating that knowledge into our lives. The reason is that strong, trusting relationships are the channels through which knowledge flows, empathy is established and group ownership emerges. Without relationships a group is merely a collective of individuals who want different things.

Strategic conversations work to build relationships on many levels. Facilitation ensures that everyone is able to share and learn. Crucially, holding a formal process (such as a strategic conversation) creates the opportunity for informal time before and after, which allows people to be together on more intimate terms.

### Knowledge and systems thinking

Elsewhere, knowledge has been explained as being our mental models of the world (Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell 2010; Resilience Alliance 2007). A mental model is our model of the way the world works. A mental model 'tells' us how different objects, phenomena and people are related to each other or work. We can use our mental models to make predictions about what will happen next. These models are developed and refined by experience and by what other people tell us. Without our mental models of the world, we would be continuously re-learning how one thing relates to another in the world we live in. These

models are continually changing as we learn. Listening to others and sharing our knowledge and perspectives with the group builds new knowledge and understanding. People must first trust those they are listening to before they incorporate that knowledge into their lives. Thus, there is a fundamental connection between knowledge and relationship.

Systems thinking is related to knowledge because it is a practice that grows knowledge by connecting facts with context. Or, in other words growing and changing our mental model of a situation. When people develop this thinking skill they can rapidly develop their knowledge and understanding about something.

## Team

One important goal of the strategic conversation pilot was investigating how to develop a group's capacity to continue the conversation process without the direct support or input from the learning network's facilitation team. The development of this potential in conversation groups can be understood as capacity building.

A long-term (three to five years) aim was to mentor some group members to become facilitators (whether they were from a land and fire agency or not). They would become, in effect, members of the wider learning network's facilitation team. Over time, these mentoree team members could gradually take responsibility for the ongoing life of the group's conversations or activities (see Campbell, Campbell & Blair, for more detail about the mentoring process).

Developing these kinds of skills is a crucial step in building social resilience. With these skills people can better organise themselves, and plan for, respond to and recover from many different perturbations, including fire.

The facilitation team made it clear that anyone willing to 'have a go' could develop facilitation skills in time and become part of the facilitation team (and that developing such skills didn't depend on money). Using the ways of working described below the facilitation team further encouraged participants to feel they could become part of the process rather than recipients of a service:

- Not overtly government-based (e.g. in the way of presenting, speaking or listening) but still honest about the organisation backing the project.
- Ensured the facilitation approach was not complicated by elaborate tools or training.
- Kept expenditure low and deliberately reduced dependence on technology or extravagant presentation.
- Always modelled behaviour that builds relationships to show that relationships and not money are the capital or asset of a learning network.

### Indicators of facilitation team development

One of the most reliable signs that a person is interested in becoming a facilitator is when they begin to reflect on and talk about the conversation process, rather than just the content. In this context, people focus less on fire and begin to think about how they and those around them are changing, growing and understanding as a result of the process. Participants' awareness of, or interest in, process is considered to be a growth in 'team'.

# Developing a strategic conversation at Greenfield



## Invitation

Working by invitation is a key principle of developing relationships and thus developing conversation processes. In early 2008, the facilitator<sup>12</sup> met with a Parks Victoria ranger, Ted<sup>13</sup>, who had lived in the Greenfield area for most of his life. A DSE colleague had referred the facilitator to another Parks Victoria ranger who then referred the facilitator to Ted. Ted listened to the concept of strategic conversations and identified with the approach and philosophy. He felt that community empowerment through knowledge was crucial to managing natural resources well, and to achieving good social outcomes.

The Parks Victoria ranger had four important characteristics that are typical of 'champions':

- enthusiasm
- respect and empathy for others
- identified with the concept
- prepared to prioritise the project in his work schedule and life
- strategic links with local networks

Ted, along with the facilitator, met several people he felt may want to participate. These personal meetings gave the facilitator an opportunity to gauge local interest, and gain advice

about what the local issues were and how various people felt about them.

Ted then personally invited people he thought would be interested to attend a conversation in August later that year.

## Key points

- **Finding the champion is like detective work. It is a matter of speaking to people and following up 'leads' and referrals. There is no database or ready made list.**
- **A strategic conversation must be invited but invitations can be stimulated by seeking people out, talking with them and building trust. This takes time and may involve talking to many different people.**
- **It is a local champion, with strategic links to local networks, who identifies and brings together strategic conversation participants.**
- **Meeting with some key participants before the group process starts is crucial to building trust in the process and confirming invitation to begin a process – especially where there is conflict.**

## Recognising existing relationships

Working with existing networks, and acknowledging existing relationships within community, within organisations and between organisations and community is crucial to developing strategic conversation groups. Building understanding and relationships with many different groups takes time and effort. For a process to be sustained in the long term it must have a solid basis. For this reason, the facilitation team put a lot of effort into discussing the idea with:

- individuals and groups who were especially concerned with land and fire management
- staff working within organisations affected by land and fire management (such as DSE field staff, CFA, PV and local government).

Significantly, the strategic conversations project developed at a time when strong relationships and mutual understanding had developed between the staff of the different fire agencies, as a result of working together on the *Living with Fire Framework* (2008). This meant that the initiative was well received beyond DSE – by Parks Victoria and CFA staff, for example. All fire agency staff saw themselves as potential process owners.

For the Parks Victoria ranger, both awareness and invitation from organisational staff and non-organisation members of the community were important prerequisites for becoming involved.

### Notes

<sup>12</sup> At this time, the facilitation team consisted of one person.

<sup>13</sup> Names have been changed.

## Key points

- Everyone is community.
- Champions hold important strategic relationships with people inside and outside of organisations.
- Respect and work with existing relationships – to enhance them and make new connections.
- No one exclusively owns a process. The process is simply a tool for the ongoing development of community relationships.

- When working with large organisations it is often unclear who needs to know what. It is therefore vital to continually send out updates and inform people, even when it seems they are not interested. They are likely to become interested as the process becomes more tangible.

In August 2008, the Parks Victoria ranger personally invited a diverse range of people to the Greenfield CFA hall to begin the first strategic conversation. He encouraged some of these people to invite others who they thought might be interested. Five subsequent conversations that occurred at intervals of approximately eight weeks are outlined in table 1.

Table 1.

Date	No. local participants	Degree of structure	Approach	Key knowledge to emerge	Overall tone
August 2008	16	Medium	Share personal motivations. Explore and vote on most important topics for discussion.	All participants care about Greenfield and express this in different ways. Community apathy and ignorance about fire risks in Greenfield has an impact on forest management.	Positive
October 2008	8	Low	Discuss topic of 'education and lack of motivation of residents to act'.	The group can take action by inviting more people to join.	Neutral
December 2008	20	Medium	Explore the topic of 'the role of science in management' by listening to a guest speaker, followed by a facilitated conversation.	Greenfield is part of a larger landscape for management and research purposes. Concept of mosaic burning better understood.	Positive
February 2009 (two weeks after the catastrophic fires on 7 February)	18	Low	Share personal reflections and stories about past and current fire experiences.	Six people in the group had had personal experience of 'surviving' fire in the past. Several people said that they had learned much from the comments of those who had had these fire experiences.	Positive
May 2009	18	High	Parks Victoria ranger shares his story about fighting the Koala State Park (February 2009)	Opportunity to discuss what happened to a place that everyone cared about –Koala State Park. Learning about how fires are fought. Learning that all stories are personal (even ones that come from within organisations).	Positive



### August 2008 – first conversation

The first strategic conversation was different to subsequent conversations as it was intended to:

- introduce the concept
- introduce participants to one another
- scope out topics for future discussion and learning
- seek an invitation for further conversations.

### Where, when and who

The first meeting was held at the Greenfield CFA hall between 9.30 and 11.00am in August 2008. Ted chose the venue because it was a central and informal meeting area with a kitchen and enough chairs for the group. The number of people who came was unexpectedly high - refer to table 2.

### How

Facilitation processes should be flexible and responsive to factors such as the number of participants, venue and tone. The process outlined here was used because of the number of people who attended, and because this conversation was intended to scope out the potential for future conversations (see Campbell, Campbell & Blair forthcoming, for more in-depth discussion).

**Table 2. Participants of the first strategic conversation**

Affiliation	Number	Local resident
Parks Victoria	8	Yes
Friends Group	3	Yes
Scout Association	1	Yes
CFA staff	1	Yes
CFA volunteer	6	Yes
Unaffiliated	3	Yes
Facilitation team (DSE + PV)	3	No (2) Yes (1)
<b>Total affiliations – 7</b>	<b>Total participants – 25</b>	<b>Total local residents – 23</b>

1. At 10am, after helping themselves to coffee and tea, participants came together around a table to start the strategic conversation.
2. The lead and support facilitator sat among the participants. Both facilitators took notes.
3. The conversation began with Ted welcoming everyone and thanking him or her for joining the conversation.
4. The lead facilitator began by describing the objective of the conversation – to learn and share with one another. She also emphasised that the conversations were not intended to change policy.
5. The facilitator invited participants to (in turn) introduce themselves and explain why they had wanted to come to the conversation.
6. As participants spoke of their motivations for joining the conversation some themes recurred and the support facilitator noted these down.
7. The participants broke into small groups of three or four to discuss themes that the group discussion had raised. They noted any new themes these small group discussions identified. The facilitators moved from group to group listening and asking questions.
8. The facilitators wrote on a whiteboard the major themes to arise during the different conversations.
9. Individuals were asked to vote on the issue that they thought was most important to learn more about. They did this by each placing a mark next to the issue they considered most important.
10. The lead facilitator asked the participants:
  - if they felt it was worthwhile to meet again – they responded with yes.
  - group notes can be drawn from group discussion and facilitator's journal notes and distributed to interested participants.
  - when they thought it appropriate to meet again.
11. The conversation was closed.
12. After the formal conversation the group shared in morning tea.
13. The participants left between 11.30am and 12.00pm.

The group decided to meet again in six weeks to discuss the highest priority topic.

### Key Points

- **Ask people if they would like to receive group notes from the conversation. Collect names and email addresses from interested people.**

### The conversation

The first Greenfield strategic conversation raised a number of significant environmental, scientific and social themes for discussion. Table 3 records how the group voted on these.





**Table 3. Topics of discussion identified at first meeting**

Theme	Votes
The impact of humanity on nature	
Fire history in the local landscape	
Fire regimes – how to decide on frequency and intensity	3
Geographical concerns of the area	
Fire as part of the wider socio-ecological system	
Role of science in land and fire management	5
Management techniques (what, why and how)	1
Apathy – how to get people interested – what can we do	
Why set fires as controlled burns	1
Political context	
More CFA resources versus planned burns to protect assets	3
Education and motivation of residents to act	6
Education of young people	2
Exploring what the community can do	
Local government planning	1
Public and private land interface – who is responsible for what?	
What are we aiming for in our park	2
Climate change and fire	1
Effect of all (types of) fire on catchments	

Some themes overlapped with others or were expressed in different ways. It was important to capture the different ways that participants expressed themes to ensure that participants voted on what *they* understood to be important.

The group voted for ‘education and motivation of residents to act’ as the most important issue for the next discussion. The initial conversation covered an enormous amount of conceptual territory. Three important themes continued to recur in different ways throughout the conversation – belonging, science and fire management, and the relationship between humans and nature.

The conversation that developed around each theme developed the participants’ mental models of land and fire management by adding new factual or contextual knowledge to their current models (see Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell 2010) for further discussion).

Several themes touched on mental models that frame a person’s values/ beliefs (see Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell 2010). These mental models are learned from others – such as our parents, society and community – and are not empirically verifiable. Examples of such models include, ‘God created heaven and earth’ and ‘we all have human rights’.



### Theme one

#### Belonging

At the opening of the conversation, participants invariably said that their motivation for being at the conversation was an expression of their care for, and love of, Greenfield – its environment and its people. Their actions were an expression of belonging.

One participant, a CFA volunteer, summarised this theme towards the end of the conversation (paraphrased): *We all care about Greenfield and we have all decided to express this in different ways. I joined the CFA but I could have just as easily joined the friends group.*

### Theme two

#### Science and fire management

This theme was somewhat linked to a notion of the precautionary principle<sup>14</sup>, although no one mentioned the principle by name. Some participants spoke of their concern that land management agencies did not know how their management interventions were affecting the environment. They felt there was not enough known about the Greenfield environment to be certain that techniques like planned burning were not having a deleterious impact on the environment.

One participant said: *We seem to be just doing trial and error ...*

Some felt that no management interventions should be made unless land managers knew the exact outcome of those interventions.

### Theme three

#### The relationship between humans and nature – an example of ‘values and beliefs’ mental model

Some group members questioned the proper relationship of people to nature or the environment – in this case, the Koala State Park and other local forested areas. Some felt that humans should not be interfering with natural processes. They distinguished between planned burns and fires ignited by lightning strike. They considered the latter to be un-natural and inherently wrong. The underlying mental model of values and beliefs was that human beings should not interfere with nature.

Participants reached interesting and perhaps unexpected conclusions in an effort to reconcile these themes. In doing this, they attempted to make sense of the situation that now appeared more complex than they had each initially understood.

It was through the process of creative integration by conversation that their knowledge developed. For example, they integrated themes one and three into the need for local residents to take more responsibility for living where they did. All agreed, which is why the related topic of education and motivation of residents to act was the most important to discuss at the next conversation.

The proposition that all residents need to take responsibility for where they live led to slightly different conclusions for different participants:

- Some felt that if people did take responsibility there would be no need for planned burning. However, they recognised that the wider community had a duty of care to educate people about fire risk in Greenfield. Only after such education would there be any political will to consider halting planned burning.

#### Notes

<sup>14</sup> The precautionary principle states that if an action might cause severe harm, the burden of proof that the action would not cause harm falls on those who would advocate taking the action.

- Others felt that while people did need to take more responsibility there would probably always need to be planned burns at forest edges.

Through conversation, participants' knowledge of the socio-ecological context of fire in Greenfield and beyond developed in complexity. The group came to feel that it was, in part, community apathy and ignorance that had led to more and more public expectation for government to intervene in and manage forests. The participants gradually realised that local people could take more responsibility for the welfare of both the forest and the community, by seeking ways to educate those around them (especially new residents) about fire risks and the forest.

Participants did not, however, change their 'values and beliefs' mental models (i.e. about whether humans should or should not intervene in nature) as a result of this conversation. Instead, their understanding of the reasons for particular management decisions was developed. With this new awareness they began to understand that it is the behaviour of wider society – the decisions of their neighbours, friends and family – that partly drives land management actions.

## Key points

- **Initial conversations cover a huge range of topics and issues.**
- **Participants are likely to want to integrate or synthesise this complexity.**
- **Integration does not mean all participants are in exact agreement.**
- **Integration leads to a more complex mental model of the situation being discussed.**

The mood of the first conversation was tense initially, without being openly hostile. There were two major reasons:

1. Some participants were concerned about how planned burns affected local flora and fauna, and the conversation was used as a forum to air these concerns as statements of fact.
2. Many of the other participants initially acted as if they were there to convince others to change their mind, rather than to listen and learn from them.

Strong facilitation was important in the initial stages of the conversation, to ensure that the atmosphere was one of learning and understanding, and not of convincing or 'grandstanding'. The facilitators did this by stressing, at times, that the conversation was about listening, learning and understanding; rather than changing peoples' minds. They also ensured that all people could speak and no individual dominated the conversation.

As participants were initially attempting to convince others that they were right, they tended to get bogged down in the detail of their argument. Again, strong facilitation was needed to ensure that the conversation kept moving and addressed different themes in turn.

People's behaviour towards one another changed as the conversation progressed:

- They began to listen to others and made fewer grandstanding statements. Instead, they spoke more often with, rather than at, each other.
- Others began to speak from personal experience, using "I", rather than the institutional "we" or "us".

These changes broke down barriers between people and created a context in which participants began to develop an understanding<sup>15</sup> of others' points of view. In doing so, participants began to re-envision their mental model of the situation.

The participants stayed for at least half an hour after the formal conversation ended to have morning tea. During this time, in small groups inside and outside the venue, they continued to discuss some of the topics raised in the formal conversation. Importantly, participants who had not seen 'eye to eye' during the formal conversation spoke casually, calmly and at times humorously to one another about such things as the:

- impact of climate change on natural fire ignition by lightning strike
- role of the Community Fireguard in the Greenfield community
- effect of drought on tree growth in the local area.

Participants clearly enjoyed this casual yet informative part of the process. They demonstrated this by both their willingness to stay, and the interested but light-hearted tone of their conversations.

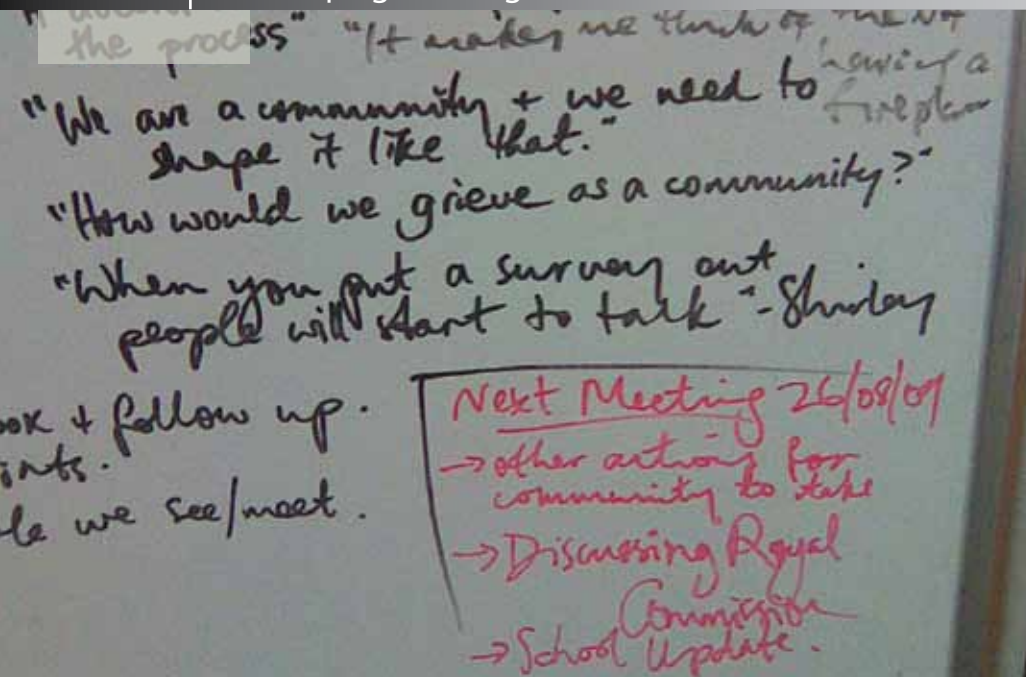
## Key points

- **Informal parts of the conversation process are as important – if not more important – than the formal conversation itself. At these times people develop trust and cement relationships.**
- **For this reason, simple additions like food and drink are very important for developing relationships and fostering learning.**

## Notes

<sup>15</sup> Understanding someone else is *not* the same as agreeing with them, but relates to one participant becoming aware of what leads others to feel, think and behave in the way they do. This can cause people to regard others in a more positive or fair manner and ultimately significantly change a situation.





3. Participants were asked strategic- or goal-orientated questions related to the topic, for example:
  - a. What are the issues with regard to apathy in the community? Why? What motivates us to come to the conversation? What are the behaviours that we see around us?
  - b. What is already being done to address this? Who? What? How? What is being missed? Do these actions address motivation and education?
  - c. Realistically how do things change? Realistically what kinds of things could we do as a group and as individuals? How might things change? What would it mean for things to change? How would we recognise change?

4. The facilitator congratulated the participants on the strategies they identified for increasing numbers at the next meeting.
5. Participants were asked if they would be interested in inviting a fire ecologist to the next conversation.
6. Participants made suggestions as to what kinds of activities they would like to do in the future, e.g. field trips to learn about fire behaviour.
7. The group had morning tea together.
8. People left between 11.30am and 12.00pm.

## October 2008 – second conversation

The second conversation followed a different structure. Its intention was to more thoroughly explore the theme of education and motivation of residents to act.

### Where, when and who

The second conversation was held at the Greenfield CFA hall in October 2008 between 9.30 and 11.30am. The table lists who came to the second conversation. Attendance had dropped-off noticeably, particularly people associated with fire agencies.

### How

Significantly, this conversation was less structured. The group did not move through different stages – breaking into groups, for example. Instead, the facilitator engaged the participants in a series of strategic questions. At this conversation there was only one facilitator who was less experienced than the previous facilitator.

1. The facilitator recapped the previous conversation.
2. Participants were asked if the previous conversation had changed what people had been thinking during in the interim, and how.

Table 4.

Affiliation	Number	Local resident
Parks Victoria	3	Yes
Friends Group	3	Yes
Scout Association	1	Yes
CFA volunteer	1	Yes
Unaffiliated	1	Yes
Facilitator (DSE)	1	No
Total affiliations – 6	Total participants – 10 (all return participants)	Total local residents – 9

### The conversation

The second conversation focused on the topic of education and motivation of residents to act. This conversation roamed widely. Strong facilitation was required to keep the conversation on track. This was not surprising given the group had formed only recently.

## Theme one

### Blaming others

Initially, participants spoke about the many different education initiatives and ways of attracting people to meetings about fire safety. Participants felt that if people didn't want to listen then there was nothing more that could be done.

As one participant said, 'you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink'.

People discussed the issue of dependency on government and saw this as a major problem.

Participants differentiated between apathy (an unwillingness to learn) and ignorance (a lack of understanding) about how important personal safety is in Greenfield in relation to fire.

## Theme two

### Action

An unspoken question lay at the heart of the discussion: "is this group willing and able to take action?" One participant captured the sentiment when they articulated that although the group was meant to be about learning, 'there is a point where you need to take action'.

The desire to blame others could be attributed to the group feeling that it was not able to do anything further about the problem, because:

- they did not feel strongly united at that time
- the strategic conversation format did not seem to allow for action.

As the group struggled with this dilemma, some found a way forward by looking at how they could take action simply by inviting more participants into the third conversation.

The second conversation did not work as well as the first. However, this led to some unexpected positive integration and change towards the end of the conversation. There were a few likely reasons why this conversation was not as successful as the first and the third ones. These are important to note and learn from.

1. The conversation theme came out of the integration work undertaken by the group in the first conversation. As a result, the participants did not feel they needed to know more about community apathy; rather, they wanted to do something about it. This made the facilitation process more difficult, given the approach is premised on learning not action.
2. There was no new source of knowledge or information feeding into the conversation, e.g. no new members, presenters or research to discuss.
3. There was only one facilitator, which meant that the conversation was more difficult to keep on track and synthesise.

Integration came from the group itself, towards the conversation's end. The group realised that the decline in numbers was itself a symptom of the problem being discussed. This presented a way for the group to take realistic and constructive action – make a concerted effort to invite more Greenfield people to join the third conversation. In addition, the group decided that the conversations should take place in the evening, to allow people who worked during the day to attend.

In this way, the group took positive control of the conversation. The group's desire to make things work resulted in the group beginning to function somewhat independently, and take some ownership of the conversation process.

The second conversation was at times tense, other times confused. Towards the end it was enthusiastic and more empowered. The initial mood reflected the group's deflated feeling that the process was not a vehicle for action. Yet, the conversation topic did develop a sense of unity – they began to see themselves as united by the common principle of caring about Greenfield.

After this conversation, people spoke enthusiastically to one another in and around the CFA Hall about many issues related to Greenfield, fire and the environment.

## Key points

- **More than one facilitator is important to an effective strategic conversation process.**
- **May take time for people to value reflection and learning as much as action (this is also a learning process).**
- **Participants, much like land and fire agencies, may initially want to prioritise number of people over quality of conversation.**
- **May be worthwhile distinguishing between topics that are 'learning' focused and those that are 'action' focused.**
- **Discuss and act on 'action' topics once the group is more fully formed.**
- **Introducing new sources of information into the conversation (e.g. a guest participant with specialised knowledge) will aid in developing new understandings.**



## December 2008 – third conversation

The third conversation was moderately structured and had a clear learning goal.

The facilitation team asked a fire ecologist to speak at the third conversation. The group had decided that input from an ecologist would be beneficial. The facilitation team briefed the ecologist about the role of a guest with specialised knowledge in a strategic conversation. It was emphasised that the conversation was the most important part of the evening. They made clear that reflective conversation on the content of the presentation was essential in generating learning.

## Where, when and who

One third (three) of the participants from the previous conversation invited new participants to the conversation by:

- placing flyers in the letter boxes of 100 residents
- personally inviting neighbours
- sending out an email about the event through the CFA network.

The facilitation team made no efforts to invite more participants, as this was part of the process of developing group ownership. The method of personally inviting neighbours into the conversation was most successful. The flyers had no effect, emphasising the importance of personal invitation. Several people who attended the first conversation, but not the second, returned to the third.

The third conversation took place at the Greenfield CFA hall between 6.00 and 9.00pm, and was preceded by a BBQ.

Some participants (organisational staff) expressed disappointment in the numbers of people attending. However, holding a meaningful strategic conversation with any more than 20 people is less effective.

## How

The format of this conversation was quite different. It started with a BBQ and then participants moved into the hall to listen to a presentation by a fire ecologist of 30 years. He spoke on the subject of how science informed DSEs fire management strategies.

1. The participants sat facing the speaker who used PowerPoint as part of his delivery. The presentation lasted for almost an hour.
2. Following the presentation, the group formed a circle and was lead in a reflective conversation about the presentation for about 30 minutes.
3. The conversation concluded around 8.45pm and most participants had left by 9.00pm.

## The conversation

The third conversation was extremely positive. The participants clearly found it interesting, challenging and, ultimately, satisfying.

The themes discussed built on ideas developed in the first conversation. In this way, the conversation worked well to develop new factual and contextual knowledge about some of the issues and ideas that the first conversation had raised.

**Table 5.**

Affiliation	Number	Local resident
Parks Victoria	2	Yes
Friends group	3	Yes
Scout association	1	Yes
CFA volunteer	5	Yes
Unaffiliated	6	Yes
DSE	4	Yes (2) No (2)
Facilitation team	3	Yes (1) No (2)
Unidentified – CFA, PV, Friends group etc.	4	Yes
<b>Total affiliations – 7</b>	<b>Total participants – 28</b>	<b>Total local residents – 24</b>

Note: Return participants from both conversations one and two – 10.

### Theme one

#### Scale

Scale emerged as a major theme in conversations about:

- landscape mosaic burning
- research initiatives
- fire severity mapping.

Participants raised questions and together developed group understanding of how scale affected:

- planning new scientific research
- risk management
- our understanding of landscape
- our understanding of what is local.

## Theme two

### What are we managing for

This question had been raised in the first conversation but had remained relatively unexplored. The content of the presentation and the reflective conversation that ensued provided the content and scope for the group to explore this question in more depth.

The group considered whether we should be attempting to go back to the pre-European era and try to recreate a former ecological system.

As the conversation progressed, the group overturned this notion and concluded that no one (including contemporary indigenous people) really knows what this past entailed.

The fire ecologist said that the basic premise, as he understood it, was 'what we have now we don't want less of'. This statement finished the evening on a very positive note and all agreed with this basic ambition.

The conversation about landscape mosaic burning and research strategies led to a deeper understanding of where Greenfield sits in relation to other places. This developed perspective among participants – in relation to their needs versus those of other places – and gave them more insight into the management decisions being made.

The discussion relating to mosaic burning led to discussion about the notion of 'patchiness' or heterogeneity. In this discussion, participants learned that Greenfield was already considered patchy: that it was broken up into a mosaic of farms and forest. Mosaic burning was best applied to places like Gippsland, where vast tracts of forest remain intact.

At another point, the conversation turned to whether or not research was being done on the effects of fire on the local environment. The participants agreed that much more research was needed, and discussed the potential for four more research projects. The fire ecologist explained that Greenfield would not get its own study, but a study to be conducted at another ecologically similar location could be used to infer how to better manage Greenfield's forests. Both these conversations gently prompted participants, in different ways, to re-imagine Greenfield as but one place (albeit important) in the huge and varied landscape of Victoria.

Generally, the mood throughout the evening was extremely positive, even though the presentation part of the evening was a little too long – the audience became restless after 40 minutes.

The mood during the discussion was very thoughtful, considered and personable. There was no trace of the tension or emotional grandstanding that had existed in the previous conversations. Participants consistently spoke *with* one another (rather than at one another). The ethos of the evening was attentiveness to others rather than to one's own interests.

There were possibly too many people at the conversation as facilitators had to invite quiet participants to contribute, when in other circumstances they normally spoke. Unfortunately, there were too many people for facilitators to be able to invite all the quiet people to speak.

Importantly, the presenter's style was approachable without dumbing down the content. In this way, he was able to present quite complex ideas to an audience with very different levels of familiarity with fire ecology concepts.

## Key points

- **Organisational staff (and even community members) will often focus on the quantity of people who attend as a measure of an event's success, rather than the quality of the dialogue.**
- **Presentations within facilitated conversations should aim to:**
  - **ensure the conversation component is given the most time**
  - **be accessible to a diverse audience**
  - **not speak down to the audience or be condescending.**

The BBQ that took place beforehand was enjoyed by all and provided a common point of interest for participants. It also allowed people to pitch in and help with cooking and serving food.

With some encouragement from the facilitation team, three participants took the initiative to invite others to the conversation. In this way, people began to take responsibility for the group and became less reliant on the organisers. These participants also learned what invitation strategies worked in their community.



### February 2009 – fourth conversation

The fourth conversation was significant for a number of reasons:

1. The conversation took place after the 7<sup>th</sup> of February fires (considered to be the most catastrophic in Australia's history, in terms of loss of life and property).
2. It was rescheduled twice because of the ongoing fires, and the desire to include Parks Victoria staff and CFA staff and volunteers that were attending the fires. In the end, members of the group decided that the gathering should go ahead. Also, the conversation topic was changed to "reflections on the fires of 7<sup>th</sup> of February and how people were feeling and thinking since then".
3. The conversation was hosted at the home of one conversation participant.
4. A fire was still 'going' in the Koala State Park at the time.
5. People from organisations were unable to attend because they were fighting fires.
6. The host personally invited neighbours and friends to the conversation – many had not attended before.

### Where, when and who

The facilitation team had asked if a participant could host the next conversation at their home. This person agreed and they were excited. This was a deliberate strategy to spread ownership of the conversation. The hosts had seating for up to 30 people, which also made it possible for them to host a conversation.

With prompting from the facilitators, the hosts personally invited people in their networks – both neighbours and community groups. This was another significant step in the development of ownership and devolving dependency from the facilitation team.

**Table 6.**

Affiliation	Number	Local resident
Friends group	3	Yes
CFA volunteer	1	Yes
Other group	3	Yes
Neighbouring residents	10	Yes
DSE	3	No
Facilitation team (DSE)	2	No
<b>Total affiliations –</b>	<b>Total participants – 22</b>	<b>Total local residents – 17</b>

Note: Return participants from all conversations one, two and three – 6.

The facilitation team also sent emails to the participants of prior conversations. Many of these were involved in firefighting for DSE, PV or CFA and were unable to attend.

This conversation took place in late February 2009. It was followed by tea and cakes that the hosts and the facilitation team had contributed.

### How

1. The participants sat in a circle, introduced themselves and explained what had brought them to the conversation. This was an important activity as the group was largely composed of new people.
2. The lead facilitator invited a DSE attendee to share a story about what it was like working in the fire role of 'Strategic Planning' during the recent fires.
3. The story set the scene for others to discuss what their experiences, actions and thoughts in relation to the summer fires.
4. The facilitators encouraged participants to share their stories of past and current fires.
5. The facilitators concluded the conversation at 9.00pm. Participants stayed and chatted until 10.00 pm.

## The conversation

This conversation was about sharing thoughts and experiences about fire and so it roamed widely. Some significant issues and themes that arose where:

1. choices – what it really means to stay or go
2. building codes – what did we learn from Ash Wednesday
3. new residents and their preparedness for fire
4. memories of past fires and how these memories diminish over time
5. arson – psychology and prosecution
6. dry lightening – what is it
7. experiences of Ash Wednesday
8. planned burns, fire regimes and how they affect fire-spread behaviour and plant regeneration.

In general, the conversation naturally *integrated* as participants mainly reflected on how the different things they did, or wanted, in life affected their choices in responding to fire – as the box explains.

This conversation was friendly and light. The fact that the hosts (and not DSE) had invited the participants to the conversation is likely to have contributed to this atmosphere. The room where the conversation was held had a beautiful view and was filled with light. This had quite an impact on the mood of conversations as well.

Significantly, anger, blame and fear were not part of this conversation and it is likely that this positive mood differed from many ‘fire meetings’ that were taking place at the time in Victoria. The good mood of the conversation was most likely because the hosts (and others who had been a part of the conversation for a while) set a positive tone.

Participants commented that they wanted the Parks Victoria rangers and CFA ‘to keep fighting the fires’, and it was OK that they couldn’t make it to that conversation.

### Theme

#### Choices

This was the most significant theme, with participants consistently returning to the idea in different ways. The discussion centred on how different lifestyles, housing designs, job situations and so on led them to make different decisions around fire preparedness and response. Further, these things changed from year to year, meaning that a fire plan from last year might be different to this year. Other things considered important, such as animals, may also compromise a fire plan. The discussion was a reminder and caution to all participants that they really needed to work through many contingencies and factors to figure out what their real choices were in terms of leaving early or staying and defending.

One participant shared the story of defending his home during Ash Wednesday. He said that he understood why so many had made the choice to depart on the roads on Saturday 7, even though that may not be the best thing to do. He said that when the fire passes over it is very scary and it takes a lot of courage to stay (even though he felt it was safer) because it doesn’t feel safe.

Some participants commented that it was helpful to hear a first-hand account as it is hard to imagine what defending your home during a fire is like.

The hosts had been instrumental in gathering participants together. They personally spoke with friends, neighbours and acquaintances from other networks and invited them to the conversation. One of the hosts commented that, ‘It was great to be able to have a reason to call neighbours to invite them – it’s good to keep in touch with them’. She saw the process as contributing to neighbourhood relationships.

### Key points

- **Personal invitations from participants are much more likely to result in attendance.**
- **Networking through participants is likely to attract a broader range of people.**
- **Fires can occur at any time and will affect who can participate, topic of conversation and so on, but if it is safe to go ahead it is very worthwhile.**
- **A group that has shared conversations in the past is likely to respond to a ‘crisis’ in a more constructive manner, e.g. not seeking to blame or scare.**
- **People come and go from conversations. Facilitators need to ensure that the purpose behind conversations is always introduced.**



## May 2009 – fifth conversation

The hosts of the fourth conversation offered to host the May conversation at their home once again. They personally invited people to the conversation, while the facilitation team emailed invites to other participants and people they had met who were interested in attending.

The fifth conversation focused on what had happened during the fires of 2009. A Parks Victoria ranger who had taken part in the firefighting effort informed this conversation.

The topic emerged from the previous conversation, whereby people had expressed interest in knowing more about what was happening.

The facilitation team spoke with the ranger who was going to present. They suggested a relaxed presentation with photos and personal accounts, rather than one that was heavy on scientific or operational detail. They also suggested a presentation in which people could ask questions for more detail.

## Where, when, and who

**Table 7.**

Affiliation	Number	Local resident
Friends group	5	Yes
Parks Victoria	3	Yes
Family members of presenter	3	Yes
Other group	4	Yes
Neighbouring residents	3	Yes
DSE	1	No
Facilitation team (DSE)	2	No
<b>Total affiliations – 7</b>	<b>Total participants – 21</b>	<b>Total local residents – 18</b>

Note: Return participants from conversation four - 10, including six participants from conversations one to three.

## The conversation

Most of the 'formal' part of the evening was relaxed and convivial, with participants asking questions throughout the presentation. It was clear that the participants were very interested in the topic. There was a lot of interest in finding out what the park now looked like – since the park was closed. This interest presented a potential sixth conversation topic – a walk to see how the fire had affected nearby forest.

No new participants – that were contacted by email – came to the conversation. All said they were interested in hearing about the next conversation.

### Theme one

#### Different park uses and values

During and after the presentation, different participants asked questions and discussed how the fire had affected the different ways that they used the park. Some participants wondered if a stand of rare fire-sensitive plant had been destroyed during the fire. Others, on the other hand, discussed how the trail-bike tracks had been affected and how long it would take for those tracks to reopen. During the 'informal' part of the evening, one participant who had talked about the trail-bike tracks initiated a discussion with another (who had spoken about the plant), about plants and animals in the area.

Later, in the same conversation, the man who had first spoken of the plants commented that he had invited someone to the conversation (who had been quoted in the paper discussing track closures in the park). The man commented, 'That's what these conversations are for aren't they? To come and talk about these things.'



## Theme two

### Place and loss

Throughout the discussion about the Koala State Park fire and its effect on the park, people – both agency staff and others – voiced their concerns as ‘our park’. Speaking in this way, participants expressed what tied them all together, despite their different values. The facilitators reiterated this theme at the close of the evening – that the group was expressing concern for a place that they all cared for in different ways had changed. Moreover, the question on people’s minds was whether they had lost ‘our place’.

These two themes almost mirror the themes of the first conversation – different values encompassed by a universal care for place. The way in which participants accommodated the views of others, though, had changed significantly. In this conversation, the mood in the room was vastly different as different views and values were expressed. People were carefully listening to one another with interest. There was no tension when hearing the views of people ‘who were of a different mind’, as there had been in the first conversation. When Parks Victoria rangers spoke on various issues, people again listened carefully and respectfully. This time there was an implicit understanding within the group that there was something that tied them together.

Had this same presentation been attempted in the first conversation, participants would almost certainly have experienced it as something being done to them – and as propaganda

– rather than a legitimate chance to share with Parks Victoria rangers and others. Changes in participants’ willingness to support the conversation in different ways also signalled the development of the group’s capacity. Towards the end of the night, one participant reflected on the fact that people in a nearby locality should be invited into the next conversation as they were at very high fire risk. In addition, as was mentioned above, one participant explained that they had personally invited another who had been ‘airing their differences about park management in the paper’. This participant made a clear connection between how this achieves nothing while coming to a conversation can achieve much more.

All these behaviours demonstrated a significant development in relationships between participants, and the ability to share new knowledge that came from those improved relationships.

### Key points

- **The location of the conversation can affect who is able, and feels comfortable, to attend.**
- **Personal invitations work better than emails and flyers.**
- **Changes in people’s ability to relate to one another, in an environment of values conflicts, may be a more profound change than that of attaining new factual knowledge.**

## The Future of fire conversations in Greenfield

The conversations have taken relationships within the community and between community and agencies to a new and refreshing place. Throughout the process we have heard stories of why people feel the way they do about fire in the landscape, of how relationships have been built within communities, and of how knowledge has been shared within communities and between communities and fire agencies.

The Greenfield community continues to invite conversations, reflecting that there continues to be a lot to reflect on, to learn from each other, and to look forward to in the future.

# What changed



In this document we deliberately use the term change, rather than outcome, to stress that learning, like our relationships with one another, is never complete. It is always changing or building. Indeed, being adaptive necessitates the ability to live within an ever-changing social and ecological environment.

Change is discussed in relation to the following themes:

- relationship
- knowledge and systems thinking
- team.

The importance of changes in these areas, for land and fire agencies, is then discussed.

## Relationship

As the conversations progressed, people got to know and understand one another better. They heard about different life histories and relationships with Greenfield. They listened to people they had not met before. As they listened, their trust in each other grew or diminished.

As a consequence, their opinion of each other's credibility as a source of knowledge also changed. In general, participants' trust in each other grew. As one person said to another during morning tea, 'I am in total agreement with you on that observation'.

The rationale of the strategic conversations process is that trusting relationships are the cornerstone of knowledge sharing, creation and transfer (Campbell, Blair & Wilson 2010a, Blair, Campbell, Wilson &

Campbell 2010). Empathy and trust are built through ongoing face-to-face relationships. Knowledge emerges from, or is transferred in, such relationships because people listen to and take on new knowledge only from sources they trust (Blair, Campbell, Wilson & Campbell 2010). When people relate with each other better, knowledge also starts to flow better.

Even though the composition of the group varied between conversations, the core group of about six people stayed the same. In effect, then, the core group was able to model the positive learning and listening behaviours to other group members. On multiple occasions, people from this core group personally invited others into the conversation. In doing so, the core group started to become part of the facilitation team (see Campbell, Blair & Wilson 2010b), and the group's impact on the wider community snowballed.

For the strategic conversations process to build knowledge through trust, it is not essential that every person return on an ongoing basis. It is necessary only that some members return more frequently.

Bringing people together to hold conversations and to form new social relationships and networks led to unpredictable positive benefits. For example, two relationships (which were known of) that emerged from the first conversation had quite tangible benefits for the community and land and fire management agencies.

- Members of the friends group made a time to meet with a Parks Victoria staff member to discuss and learn more about the Fire Operations Plan (FOP) process.

- A local resident learned about Community Fireguard from a member of the CFA. She discussed the possibility of establishing a group in her street.

Further, it was important that:

- People who had not known each other before developed relationships with each other.
- Staff who did not often work together shared knowledge with each other under circumstances that made that new knowledge more meaningful. For example, landscape mosaic burning was discussed in the company of people who were very keen to see new approaches to planned burns developed.

### Key comments<sup>16</sup>

- *Has it changed the way you boys do business? No, but opened up opportunities with a couple of key individuals rather than hammering stuff down their throats.*
- *Everyone in this community contributes in different ways – whether it is a friends group or CFA.*
- *It is really great to gather your neighbours together to talk, this [strategic conversation] gives me a chance to catch up with them.*
- *Oh, so the worst thing that can happen is that it [strategic conversations] won't take off.*

#### Notes

<sup>16</sup> These are paraphrased from facilitators' impressions of discussions. Conversations are not recorded.

### Key learnings

- What divides people in one way (e.g. different ideas about fire management) may unite them in another way (e.g. commitment to community and place).
- The facilitation team must find a point of connection to the issue and start from there.
- Establishing a conversation requires building relationships with some prospective participants one on one, before bringing people together.
- Community is everyone – residents, friends groups, CFA and organisational staff are all affected by fire. Therefore, a conversation needs support from a range of people to go ahead.
- Building relationships and trust within the organisation is just as important as building trust beyond the organisation, but may be more difficult because the way of working is unfamiliar to fire response organisations. A champion from within a fire agency is likely to be particularly concerned about this point.
- Informal conversation time is just as important as formal (facilitated) conversation time, for both sharing knowledge and building trust.
- Where there are more than 20 people at a conversation, dialogue is more difficult to facilitate as there is less 'space' for all people to share.

### Knowledge and systems thinking

All participants of the Greenfield conversations developed a more complex and holistic mental model of land and fire management in Victoria. That is, the facts that they learned through conversation, or brought to the conversation, were put into wider environmental, social, historical, political, economic or organisational context. Through the conversation process, they developed a deeper and richer picture of a socioecological system of which land and fire management is a part. In this sense, then, they developed practical skills in *systems thinking* (Campbell, Blair & Wilson 2010b) as they connected parts of the system through conversation. The way that participants built the contextual connections around facts would not have been possible by just making a presentation. No presenter could have foreseen what people wanted to talk about, what they knew and what they didn't know and then created a presentation based on this.

Some examples of new understandings or revised mental models that emerged during the conversations are summarised in table 8.

**Table 8. Examples of new knowledge that was developed through conversation**

Key issues	Contextual knowledge	Shift in understanding – by whom, to what
Many in the community are apathetic about fire	Conversation enabled participants to realise the connection between community apathy and increasing public expectation for more government intervention in the forest.	Non-government participants – connected public behaviour to government policy.
Explanation of mosaic burning	Participants (including DSE staff, Parks Victoria staff and CFA volunteers) learned about mosaic burning alongside members of the wider community, which reinforced the significance of this new approach to fire agency staff.	Organisational staff – made their work relevant and important.
There will be less emphasis on Landscape Mosaic Burns in the Greenfield region.	Participants' awareness of Greenfield's relationship to the wider landscape, and an awareness of scale were developed.	People with environmental concerns – Greenfield is part of an interconnected landscape and is managed with this in mind.
Fire affects certain plant species	Explored what we are managing for, and do we want to return to a pre-European ecology. Attention focused on question of why are we doing what we're doing. As important as a discussion of prevalence of specific species.	Everyone – stopped and reflected on the question 'what kind of environment do we want'.
At least three new (fire effects) research projects to be commissioned in Victoria	For many reasons, there is a limit to how many research projects can be commissioned at any one time. What is learned from one study can be used to understand other areas.	Everyone – there are many places to take care of and conduct research in.
DSE and Parks Victoria staff undertake a range of fire planning and operational roles	Staff's commitment to the area, and their interest in and passion for their work, became clear. Other participants became aware that management decisions were made by real people who carefully and diligently made decisions.	Non-government participants – put a face and story to an organisation that had previously seemed faceless.
CFA volunteers and friends group' members were local to Greenfield	Participants learned that what united them – their care for Greenfield – was far greater than what separated them.	Everyone – we are not as different as we had thought.
Ash Wednesday fires (1983) affected many people	As people told their stories of Ash Wednesday, it became clear that they had experienced it in many different ways.	Everyone – fire can lead some people to want to leave and others to become even more committed to a place.
Fire will burn landscape at different severities.	Participants were shown a fire severity map of the Koala State Park bushfire, which inspired discussion about how the fire may have affected different plants in the forest.	Non-fire agency participants – fire is not homogeneous (e.g. can be cool or hot) and affects the environment differently. Re-emphasises the point that planned fire has a different quality to bushfire.
Dry lightning is a lightning strike without any accompanying rain to extinguish the fire it starts	Explaining dry lightning led to a wider discussion on how lightning is a big cause of fires.	Non-fire agency participants – weather and changes in the climate impact on fire ignition. Climate changes may be impacting on ignition and severity patterns.



## Key Comments

*A community member took back a FOPs comment because they understood more about land and fire management. They felt they didn't need to make it any more.*

*Climate change could be affecting the whole system, so talking about planned burns or natural fire may not be the point.*

*Fire management is just one part of the entire system, and I'm interested in the whole.*

*We're talking about this small patch now but management plans think about environmental effects on a bigger scale ... so we've been talking about two different things.*

*Fires from lightning strikes are not being pulled up in the gullies anymore... can no longer rely on nature to take its course and pull-up fires.*

## Key learnings

- Reframing facts (i.e. placing them in a wider or different context) changes our understanding – even if our values stay the same.
- Being able to reflect on our own ideas in relation to those around us is a crucial aspect of learning.
- Everyone has something to learn; however, sometimes fire agency staff do not easily see themselves as part of the learning process.
- Participants often expect 'expert' input to their conversations and expect to learn passively. Part of the conversation process is supporting people to seek useful and relevant knowledge from within themselves and their community.
- Part of the conversation purpose is improving everyone's awareness of the helpfulness and limitations of different kinds of knowledge.

- An enormous amount of learning is about other people. This is the kind of learning that changes people's relationships towards others who they once thought of as different or not worth listening to.

## Team

The Greenfield conversation process showed how a team builds naturally, if slowly, when the focus is relationships. As relationships developed – and people became more familiar with the conversation vision and process – they started to take ownership and articulate what the process was and why it was important. They invited others in, reflected on who else should attend, identified what could be done better, and hosted conversations and offered other support. They started to see themselves as part of a process or social movement, rather than the object of an intervention.

All conversation groups, however, will have their own life span and people may use the process of conversation to address other issues. Some will wind up after one conversation, while others may last for many years. This will depend on group dynamics, perceived need and interest. Facilitation team members are most likely to come from longer lasting groups (see Campbell, Blair & Wilson 2010; Campbell, Campbell & Blair forthcoming), for further predictions and explanations on this point), and so team will not form in all groups.

## Key comments

*We need to invite diverse kinds of people into the conversation to make it better.*

*How about I distribute some flyers, say 100, to some people in the neighbourhood.*

*The way you facilitated as a team was awesome.*

*I was speaking to a guy the other day and suggested he come along to the conversation – it's about talking and learning isn't it?*

## Key learnings

- Strategic conversation works best with more than one facilitator.
- Team builds as relationships become strong.
- Team builds as people become concerned about process as well as content.
- It can take time for people to feel they are part of a process (i.e. team), rather than just being the receivers of information or services.
- Team can be anyone who shares the same vision.

### Why these changes are important

Facilitated conversations can bring about change. The issue is whether land and fire management agencies should invest in the process. There are some compelling reasons why they should consider doing so, including:

1. Developing participants' understanding of the context of land and fire management decisions is important as it develops awareness of:
  - difficulty of managing land to suit everyone's needs and desires
  - complexity of managing for ecological stability
  - substantial thought and consideration staff undertake in making decisions
  - difficulty of balancing considerations of environmental outcomes versus those of protecting lives and property
  - very real connection between community ignorance and intolerance of risk and the decisions that managers of public land make.
2. As the conversation progresses, rapport develops between *all* participants (including fire agency staff), which leads to more constructive dialogue with fire agencies in the future.
3. By participating, staff demonstrate that their organisation has a culture of active learning and valuing knowledge sharing. The other participants are likely to accept that knowledge is incomplete if they see a culture of deliberate learning in practice.
4. Staff can develop themselves professionally and personally.
5. Staff can share their knowledge in a supportive environment in which they can also learn from others in their community.
6. People can participate in decision-making processes beyond the conversation in a more informed way.
7. The process reduces job stress. Many in the community perceive that fire management staff do not really care about what they are doing – that they are just bureaucrats. At times, this can result in staff being poorly treated by members of the community which adds to an already stressful job. A strategic conversation provides a place where staff can express their care and consideration about their work in a personal way.
8. The Victorian community, and the many parts of government not directly involved in fire, benefit from the strong relationships, credibility and trust that is developed as a result of conversations.
9. Staff can learn from locals about what is important in that community.

# Conclusion



The Greenfield conversation represents a modest, but significant, step towards developing a fire learning network – a network of interlinked strategic conversations. Largely, the observations described in this document closely follow the expected changes outlined in Campbell, Blair & Wilson (2010:26).

For example, after five conversations:

- people's knowledge (mental models) of land and fire management developed
- emotional responses to issues and concerns changed
- people began to take ownership of the conversation process
- the ways that people related to one another shifted from conflict to understanding
- people began to share the knowledge they had learned in conversation beyond the conversation
- organisational staff began to see the benefits of working on relationships and sharing knowledge through conversation.

The number of people to receive a message is often a measure or indicator of success, when working with community. Less often, do we ask:

- How many people understand and demonstrate this by incorporating new knowledge into their lives?
- How many people discuss new knowledge with others?
- Is our relationship good enough to enable us to constructively share what we know?

By pursuing answers to these questions, we begin to focus on community resilience –sustained, long-term changes to the way people deploy their social relationships and knowledge to adapt to social and environmental change.

In Greenfield, the process of strategic conversation presents a way to learn, and also provides a vehicle through which different values can be aired and potentially reconciled. The case study shows how community resilience builds as relationships, which developed in the conversation, start to affect relationships beyond the conversation. This illustrates how a relational way of working can begin to influence and change a large number of people. This influence occurs because participants direct their learning, making it meaningful to them and thus making them far more likely to share it with others they know. In addition, this demonstrates how the growth and improvement of relationships cannot be separated from the development of a person's knowledge, since one of the major ways we learn and develop our understanding of the world is through other people.

The case study also shows the importance of allowing people to explore the context of facts. Secondly, to allow them to explore how their interpretations of the facts fit with the interpretations of others.

Investing in conversation can improve long-term (i.e. beyond the conversation or meeting event itself) relationships between the community and an organisation, within the community and within the organisation. When sustained, conversations should lead to welcome changes, in relation to our ability to apply, prepare for, respond to, and recover from fire.

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# Appendix 1

A fictional example of how facilitation processes can be documented is provided below<sup>18</sup>. The documentation can be as generic or as rich as you require. The facilitators' journal takes an after-action review structure so that 'unexpected' outcomes or changes are captured and analysed. The report structure may provide space to document quotes and stories, that provide richer context and can be used to infer qualitative change. Reports should focus on the strengths of people and communities, as well as issues. A facilitators' journal can document the history of a process.

Articulating what has taken place, why that might be and what can be learned are also all important steps in the facilitator debriefing process (for more discussion on the importance of facilitator debriefing see Campbell, Campbell & Blair, forthcoming).

## Facilitators' Journal

**Table 9.**

Meeting	Strategic Conversation
Venue	Brookside Neighbourhood House
Date	Thursday 25 June 2009
Topic	Scoping conversation: what are we interested in discussing; what does fire mean to me and to this community.

### Context

This is the first strategic conversation in Brookside. We met with a volunteer at the neighbourhood house twice before the formal conversation, to discuss how he envisaged the process taking place, and so we could better understand the Brookside community and environment.

#### 1. What was supposed to happen

- Facilitators to meet "champion" prior to conversation to discuss aims and process.
- Lead and support facilitator to work together to support a discussion around why Brookside wants to have this discussion, how it currently feels about land and fire management, what it currently does, what it knows and how ...
- Support facilitator to document discussion and draw out key themes/concerns/ areas for future discussion.

#### 2. What actually happened

- We opened the conversation by asking people to introduce themselves and explain what they loved about living in Brookside.

- Many more organisation staff came than expected.
- The conversation touched on many different aspects of land and fire management.
- Several people made strong comments such as "You don't care about animals! Why are you BBQing them?" We interpreted this to mean that they had strongly negative feelings about how fire agencies manage the effect of fire on fauna.
- There were a number of people who remained quiet but listened intently.
- Some participants made very strong demands on fire agency staff, to change this or that policy and provide money for activities. We interpreted this to mean that there was a relationship of dependence between the community and fire agencies.
- Facilitators were honest about what the process was for –learning and sharing knowledge, and that it may not be for everyone.
- Major themes, points of discussion and key quotes can be found in appendix of report.

#### 3. Why was there a difference

- Meeting as a facilitation team before the conversation allowed an unrushed opportunity to talk through the process and how we could each contribute to the conversation.
- Often, agency staff want to know what is going on so they participate in the first conversation.
- Fire can be an emotional subject matter, so sometimes non-rhetorical or calm conversation is not possible the first time as people need to share their feelings.

#### 4. What can we learn from that

- Meeting with the local champion prior to formal conversation is crucial to build team, build rapport and build the facilitators' understanding of the place and people they are working with.
- People often want to see how something works before they feel comfortable with it.
- The first conversation can be emotional. As relationships build the emotions in the room are likely to change and become more constructive.
- When the community meets with government agency staff they often assume that they are participating in a consultation process. This is a 'habit of mind' caused by traditional ways of working with community.

## 5. How did this make you feel?"

- Initially we were a bit anxious about the aggressive way that participants were speaking to us. We had to consciously maintain our calm and ensure that we didn't become defensive.
- Towards the end of the evening some words of friendly thanks really lifted our spirits.

**Table 10.**

<b>Concerns</b>	<b>Hopes</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Ways of working</b>
(What concerns did people name)	(What hopes were expressed)	(What strengths did people name for response)	(How did you behave as a facilitation team)
We are anxious about the upcoming fire season We care about our environment but do not see it as dangerous fuel.	We can learn from the people around us who have previously experienced fire. The forest can regenerate after fire.	People said they did hold local knowledge that could help them. People said they were a caring community.	Adapting to the situation at hand. Documenting in front of the group on flipchart paper. Pursuing the interests of the group, rather than our own. Hearing from as many people as possible. The facilitation team spoke at length with each other about the stressful parts of the night to debrief and put some of the things that were said and done in context.

## Key learnings

People and circumstances change, so don't be anxious about anything. Instead, be confident in the way of working and the strengths people demonstrate.

Asking what someone loves about a place is different from asking what he or she likes about a place – you get a deeper and more personal response.

Any one strategic conversation will never be completely representative of a community voice – each is unique, with a different dynamic.

## Quotes

'I think we should invite some people from Lyndale; they should be a part of this conversation as well.'

'I love living in Brookside because the trees are so big and beautiful.'

## Reflective story

A woman told of how she and her sister had survived the Ash Wednesday fires by hiding in the dam with their mother. The woman explained that this experience had brought her somehow closer to the environment, but her sister would never live in Brookside now because of that same experience.

## Contacts

Jen O'Mara – Local history society president  
Gavin Hall – Brookside council

## Reporter

Name: Jane Bloggs  
Date: 28 June 2009

## Notes

<sup>18</sup> There is no correct format for documenting conversation processes. This format enables facilitators to document change over time and understand how context is affecting facilitation and the conversation process.

## List of Reports in this Series

1. 1977. A Study of the distribution of aerially applied fire retardant in softwood plantations. R. Rawson.
2. 1978. Low intensity prescribed burning in three *Pinus radiata* stand types. D. S. Thomson.
3. 1978. Fuel properties before and after thinning in young Radiata Pine plantations. D. F. Williams.
4. 1979. Using fire to reduce fuel accumulations after first thinning in Radiata Pine plantations. P. R. Billing.
5. 1979. Some of the effects of low intensity burning on Radiata Pine. P. R. Billing.
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10. 1981. The effectiveness of fuel-reduction burning: five case histories. P. Billing.
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