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This is the Published version of the following publication

MacDonald, Fiona, Lanyon, Chris, Munnery, Leah, Ryan, Derm, Ellis, Katherine and Champion, Sam (2023) Agents of change in bushfire recovery: young people's acts of citizenship in a youth-focused, animal-welfare and environmental program. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 87. ISSN 2212-4209

The publisher's official version can be found at
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212420923000316?via%3Dihub>
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/46778/>

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijdr

Agents of change in bushfire recovery: Young people's acts of citizenship in a youth-focused, animal-welfare and environmental program

Fiona MacDonald^{a, b, *}, Chris Lanyon^b, Leah Munnerly^{b, c}, Derm Ryan^b, Katherine Ellis^b, Sam Champion^b

^a Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, VU Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, 8001, Victoria, Australia

^b Youth Affairs Council Victoria [YACVic], Level 2, 235 Queen Street, Melbourne, 3000, Victoria, Australia

^c RSPCA Victoria [Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals], 3 Burwood Highway, Burwood East, 3151, Victoria, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Youth participation
Animal welfare
Community
Acts of citizenship
Climate crisis
Environment
Young people
Agency
Disasters - prevention, preparedness, response, recovery

ABSTRACT

Bushfires and natural hazard disasters have a significant impact on young people and risk reduction strategies have largely focused on addressing their vulnerability and mitigating the effects of trauma. In the 21st century practitioners, researchers and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, are calling for young people to become ‘agents of change’ in disaster management. When young people are included in disaster management there are benefits for themselves, their peers, community and the environment at local, state and national levels. Our program, with young people affected by Australia's 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfires, highlighted their frustrations at the limited opportunities to be actively involved in relief and recovery, and their concerns about the combined impact of the climate crisis and bushfires. Their focus aligns with a shift in young people's acts of citizenship and community involvement as they seek opportunities to engage with issues that impact them and their future.

Young people's engagement in a youth-focused, empowerment-oriented, animal-welfare program in the Australian state of Victoria, The Activators, demonstrates how young people join the dots between bushfire recovery, the climate crisis and environmental issues to undertake local acts of citizenship. This article focuses on young people's experiences and a young person's powerful narrative of *Loss, urgency, grief and loneliness*. We draw on the challenges and opportunities of young people's individual and collective experience of the program. Our analysis investigates how a programmatic intervention empowered young people to become agents of change through acts of citizenship in their local communities. Adopting similar approaches would enable young people to be actively involved in disaster, prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, across all levels of planning and community engagement.

1. Introduction

The Black Summer bushfires of 2019–20 will long be remembered for their ferocity and the scale of devastation across Australia. With 24 million hectares of land burnt, the impact on our natural environment and wildlife was devastating. In the state of Victoria,

* Corresponding author. Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, VU Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, 8001, Victoria, Australia.

E-mail address: Fiona.macdonald@vu.edu.au (F. MacDonald).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2023.103551>

Received 14 January 2022; Received in revised form 22 December 2022; Accepted 18 January 2023

Available online 26 January 2023

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the focus of this paper, it was estimated that as much as 60% of the state's 50 national parks and nature reserves were affected. The wildlife and plant diversity in the affected areas is renowned for its global significance and 'there are 244 species with more than 50% of their modelled habitat within the burnt area' [1]; pp. 1–2). Regional and rural communities were heavily impacted and many were isolated or cut off, without power, water, internet access and communication. Many who evacuated were isolated from family and friends, unable to return for weeks, as towns were cut off and cleanup work was undertaken. The impact on young people was significant and they reported feeling disconnected from their friends and communities, frustrated too by an unfulfilled desire to take an active role in relief and recovery efforts ([2]).

Many young people were looking forward to reconnecting with friends as the school year commenced and workplaces reopened for business. The reconnection was short lived as the onset of COVID-19 in February 2020 brought with it further challenges for young people in Victoria's bushfire affected communities. Schools and education providers switched to online delivery, sport and social activities were cancelled in the face of the pandemic. Un[der] employment and financial insecurity followed as traditional employers of young people struggled to stay solvent. The combined impact of COVID-19, ongoing lockdowns, bushfires, isolation and limited access to mental health services was a heavy burden ([3–6]). Face-to-face social connection was replaced by an increased reliance on technology and online engagement ([5]). Without traditional supports or reliable technology, young people in bushfire affected communities found themselves seeking alternative ways to engage in relief and recovery efforts. Many were frustrated by the lack of opportunities for young people:

I hear a lot of adults saying "what young people need is", but there is not a lot of opportunities for young people to be involved or say what they want? (Young person, [6] p. 5).

When young people are included in disaster management there are benefits for themselves, their peers, community and the environment at local, state and national levels. We also know that young people are seeking new ways to participate in community and civic engagement [7]. As rates of traditional volunteering and engagement decline, young people are increasingly focusing on new acts of citizenship that enable them to take an agentic role in issues that impact them and their future [7–9]. They are searching for opportunities that recognise their motivation and acknowledge their capabilities, and are unconstrained by traditional volunteering expectations [8].

The Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) Rural Activators [the Program], <https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Documents/Activators-Report-YACVic-FINAL.pdf> is a youth-focused and empowerment-oriented program that engages young people in youth-led projects. In 2020, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Victoria (RSPCA Victoria) partnered with YACVic as the major sponsor, and the program focused on animal welfare initiatives following the Black Summer bushfires of 2019–2020. Part of a broader body of work in bushfire affected communities ([2,6]), the Program responded to young people's desire to be involved in locally focused relief and recovery efforts.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how a youth-focused intervention enabled young people to become agents of change in bushfire recovery. The paper does this by introducing Chris' powerful narrative of *Loss, urgency, grief and loneliness* that shares her lived experience of the bushfires and the climate crisis that motivated her to engage in the Program. Five key themes of youth citizenship from the young people's collective experience of the Program, (1) skills acquisition, (2) connections, (3) confidence, (4) flexibility, and (5) environmental focus, are introduced [7,9,10]. The paper then investigates how the program, aligned with young people's concerns for the climate crisis, empowered them to undertake locally focused, animal-welfare Programs in bushfire recovery. The approach, we argue, demonstrates how locally focused bushfire recovery programs empower young people to become agents of change across all levels of planning and community engagement in disaster recovery, prevention and response.

2. Background

2.1. Young people and bushfire recovery

We know that bushfires and disasters can have a significant and long-term impact on individuals and communities, affecting mental health, education, housing, employment, finances, familial relationships, community ties and the natural environment [11]. The impact can be disproportionate within communities, as risk factors are addressed for those considered to be more vulnerable and at risk, including children and young people. The impact of disasters on children and young people has focused largely on addressing their vulnerability and mitigating emotional trauma [12]. As a result, bushfire preparedness for children and young people has tended to focus on 'personal preparedness (as opposed to collective empowerment) and emergency planning and response (as opposed to the entire emergency management lifecycle)' [13]; p. 80).

There has been a shift towards learning from children and young people's lived experience of disaster [14,15]. Given the chance to reflect on, and share, their experiences, children and young people have thoughts and ideas they want to contribute and learn more about the impact of global disasters [16]. They consider global environmental issues with 'sophisticated perceptions of their own environments' [16]; p. 13). Young people want to 'act on environmental issues, even if in small ways' [14]; p. 28). They have negative expectations of the impact of the climate crisis experiencing disasters as 'deeply emotionally fraught events that provoke a bevy of feelings – sadness and anger' [14]; p. 28).

Children and young people want to take a more explicit role in recovery and preparedness, being strong advocates for risk mitigation, able to 'join the dots' across 'recovery, health and well-being; resilience' and disaster education [17]; p. 437). They want their thoughts, and ideas, informed by experience, across recovery, prevention and response to be taken seriously. Children have the right to be safe, to be heard and to participate under both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sendai Framework [18]. Yet, they

are often excluded from community initiatives or community level disaster planning and preparation. There is a need to create 'formal structures of opportunity that engage children and youth in designing their own paths to risk reduction' [13]; p. 83.

At the beginning of the 21st century there has been a significant shift to adopt a 'more people-centred preventative approach to disaster risk' [19]. The shift has driven international calls for young people to be more actively involved and become 'agents of change' in disaster management, with interventions, programs and approaches that enable them to take an active role in risk mitigation and reducing their own vulnerability [13,17,19]. There are major determinants that sit around children and young people's role in disasters, including the resilience of 'families, schools, communities and policy sectors' [20]; p. 1) but more evidence is needed. Importantly, the shift does not replace the risk management that necessarily sits around children and young people but is designed to introduce a capability narrative alongside the vulnerability discourse. A capability narrative breaks down the barriers that constrain adults' capacity to acknowledge young people's skills, attributes and capabilities as agentic, informed and creative thinkers who are capable of constructive and active participation in disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery [13].

2.2. Community involvement, volunteering and acts of citizenship

Australia is witnessing a shift in young people's participation and acts of citizenship, with a move towards 'cause- or issue-based politics' [7]; p. 219). Children and young people are demonstrating acts of citizenship, when given the opportunity, in disaster prevention following their own lived experience [17]. Australia has seen increased civic engagement and community involvement on social, environmental and political issues. Unsurprisingly, the focus of new acts of citizenship and community involvement mirrors young people's activism around global crises – climate, refugee, humanitarian, racial and gendered inequality.

Young people's new modes of citizenship reflect broader changes in the nature of volunteering in the 21st century that have been influenced by the 'growing mobility and diversity in forms of employment' and education [8]; p. 2033). While COVID-19 lockdowns restricted opportunity, young people were already re-considering acts of citizenship in a precarious labour market, juggling their educational commitments alongside insecure work and under employment [7]. Flexibility is a key pedagogy in schools' reengagement programmes but is less evident in volunteer programs that can be constrained by traditional expectations, operational structures and regulatory requirements [8,10,21,22]. Schools focused on reengaging disenfranchised young people address the 'inflexibility and rigidity' of 'structural obstacles' that impact negatively on student engagement and connectedness [21]; p. 439). There is limited evidence though of increasing flexibility around acts of citizenship for young people who are already juggling the many competing, and often changing, demands in their lives.

There is a risk in measuring young people's new acts of citizenship within a volunteer framework or 'conventional lenses' as they are engaging in ways that are considered to be "'off the radar" of conventional institutions and processes' [7]; p. 219). One way forward is to align young people's acts of citizenship with youth participation, where young people 'have agency to make decisions and take action on the issues that impact upon them' [9]; p. 6). This shifts the focus from outmoded or adult-centric perspectives of volunteering or citizenship. Alongside this shift in volunteering is the imperative to understand young people's motivation for acts of citizenship. Young people are motivated by social benefits, linking up friends and other young people, building and strengthening relationships, making a difference, and being socially engaged [7]; p. 221). We argue that this was clearly evident in the Activators program, where young people were looking for ways to engage with their peers while making a difference in their local community in the aftermath of the bushfires.

2.3. Victoria's Black Summer

Bushfires had already burnt across Australia's eastern states in 2019, when a total fire ban was declared across the state of Victoria on the 21st November. It was widely reported, via media and emergency channels, that as many as 150 fires started on 21st November, with 60 remaining active overnight [23]. An additional 110 fires broke out over the following days, and the intensity of some fires created their own thunder and lightning. As the New Year approached, smaller fires combined, threatening local environments, a number of communities and critical infrastructure across the state. Roads were closed and communities cut off as they lost power and mobile phone coverage. Emergency warnings were placed for more than 80 communities and a state of disaster was declared on the 21st November. Residents, holiday makers and animals were cut off from the outside world with bushfires raging around them. The bushfires burnt for three months, causing the loss of five lives, destroying 300 homes and over 6600 live stock. The fires destroyed and devastated nearly 1.5 million hectares of forests and plants across Victoria and the millions of native animals and species that lived within them ([1,23].

2.4. The Activators: a program of youth participation, empowerment and leadership

The YACVic Rural Activators [the Program] embodies YACVic's commitment to youth voice, youth participation and youth leadership. The program was first conducted in 2018–2019 with 18–25 year olds across rural and regional Victoria engaging in the initial pilot. The main objectives were to support and upskill young people while building their capabilities and confidence, through the development of locally focused, advocacy-based projects. The projects were driven and designed by the young people's interest and creativity.

Following the devastating bushfires, the program was repurposed in 2020 to focus on bushfire affected communities and with the RSPCA Victoria coming on board as the major sponsor, targeted at young people passionate about animal welfare. This sponsorship was made possible by donations to the RSPCA Victoria's Bushfire Appeal, with 100% of funds being used to provide relief and care of animals, improve animal welfare, and prepare for future emergency response in bushfire affected communities. A dedicated project officer was employed to coordinate the program and connect with young people. Flexibility in program delivery, adaptation and communication were essential to accommodate COVID-19 restrictions, the varying schedules, commitments, and personal and health pri-

orities of the young people and the limitations of internet access in rural and regional areas. After the first virtual workshop, the participants requested shorter sessions, more sharing time and more 'real-life' project examples. Adjustments were made to the workshops and participants were encouraged to identify the training they required and recommend presenters to share their expertise. Representatives from RSPCA Victoria, Zoos Victoria, World Wildlife Funds bushfire response, a previous young Activator and a specialist in human centred design all shared their expertise and knowledge with the participants [24]. All reported learning new skills and gaining confidence in everything from public speaking, animal welfare and bushfire preparedness through to greater understanding of the work of YACVic and RSPCA Victoria. A full overview of the program and the animal-focused projects can be found at <https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Documents/Activators-Report-YACVic-FINAL.pdf>

3. Methodology

A key aim of empowerment-oriented youth programs is the active involvement of young people and the building of skills and capabilities, connections and confidence. Throughout 2020, the Activators program created the opportunity for young people to engage and lead community based projects through a period of significant disruption and upheaval. As the program came to an end, the young people's reflections in the evaluation of the program provided rich insights into their experience, the significance of their involvement in the program, and the effective engagement of young people in bushfire recovery. With calls for young people to become 'agents of change' [19] in disaster management, the experiences of young people in this youth participation and leadership program provides valuable evidence of what this can look like. With young people's lived experience of disasters an under researched area, the facilitators and authors of this article recognised the opportunity to expand knowledge by sharing insights from the program.

Young people, aged 16–25 years, who live, work or study in areas of Victoria impacted by the Black Summer bushfires were invited to participate in the 2020 program. The program was advertised in school newsletters, YACVic and RSPCA Facebook pages and other bushfire related organisations. Uptake was lower than expected so the age range was expanded to 14 year olds and school groups. Possible reasons for this include, the COVID-19 impact and dual trauma of bushfires, online delivery of the program and other education through lockdowns, gate keepers not passing on information to young people, and project requirements of geographic location, age, project and animal focus [24]. The expansion increased the level of engagement to nine individuals and eleven member of one class from a local secondary school. A total of sixteen young people completed their Activators project. Participants lived in locations across regional Victoria that are classified as outer regional Australia.¹ The participants lived in towns that varied in population from 1,500, to 30,000 and the smallest, our co-author Chris, from a community with 19 residents.² Consent to participate in the evaluation of program was obtained from the young people, and the parents or carers for those under 18. The project was conducted under the principles and practice responsibilities of the Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector.³

Participation in the program was predominantly online due to COVID-19 lockdowns, with participants attending four virtual workshops throughout 2020. A final face-to-face workshop was held at the end of 2020. Continuous improvement and participant-directed feedback were embedded into the program. Surveys and feedback were collected at key points after weekend intensive sessions using a structured interview guide that was reviewed and analysed by the facilitators. Questions posed to the participants included, why they chose to be involved in the program, what they expected, what new skills or knowledge they learnt, any changes to understanding animals or animal welfare, and their experience at the online/face-to-face workshops, and any other feedback. They were also asked to describe how their experience could have been better, and how they could be supported to stay engaged. The information was collected online and the participants were asked at each survey if they gave permission to publish the information they shared. Participants also engaged in regular one-on-one conversations with the program facilitators.

Explicit consent was obtained from the young participants to undertake this analysis and share their experiences in this article as it was considered additional to their original consent. Information about the analysis and focus of this scholarly dissemination was shared by the program facilitators who obtained verbal consent from the young participants. Staying true to the empowerment of young people and moving beyond an adult representation of lived experience, Chris, one of the young participants aged over 18, was invited to co-author this paper. While the specific expectations of academic writing were unfamiliar to Chris, she enthusiastically set about writing her story, *Loss, urgency, grief and loneliness*.

Drawing on citizenship and new ways of volunteering literature [7,9,10] the authors of this paper identified five key themes in the participants' experience, (1) skill acquisition, (2) connections, (3) confidence, (4) flexibility, and (5) environmental focus. The five themes are presented in the results section of this paper, following Chris' powerful narrative. We turn then, in the Discussion, to present our findings as a sequential qualitative case study of the program and young people's experience. The discussion demonstrates how an animal-welfare, locally focused, environmental, programmatic intervention responded to young people's frustrations around disasters and the climate crisis and their desire to take an active role through acts of citizenship and community involvement. The program demonstrates, individually through Chris' powerful narrative, and collectively through the feedback from participants, how young people can be empowered to address their own risk and vulnerability and become agents of change across all levels of planning and community engagement in disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

¹ The Australian Bureau of Statistics, <https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure>.

² Populations are estimated as at the 30th June 2021, on the website, <https://profile.id.com.au/>.

³ The Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector, <https://www.ywa.org.au/code-of-ethical-practice>, defines youth work principles and practice responsibilities for working with young people.

4. Results

In this section we present the individual and collective experiences of the young participants. The section begins with Chris' powerful narrative before moving to the collective experience of the young participants and the impact of the program on their skills, connections, confidence, flexibility, and environmental focus.

4.1. Chris' story: Loss, urgency, grief and loneliness

With a growing sense of anger and hopelessness on Australia's political inaction and integrity on our climate crisis, I reached out to the Red Cross⁴ and Bushfire Recovery Victoria, following the bushfires, anticipating a cure to alleviate the gaping hole fossil fuels had left in my hopes for a future.

Turbulent emotions forever ruling over my existence, I wanted to connect with other young people who share this uncertain future with me. I wondered if they too were mourning all that had happened over the short span of our lifetime; the mass extinction, plastic oceans, melting perma-frost, and now increasing yellowing skies from the world consuming bushfires and smog Were they too, anxious over what was yet to come?

"Is there anything out there for young people to do? Are there even people my age in East Gippsland?" I asked, almost as if the world outside the rural valley in which I lived was a foreign land.

Directed to both YACVic and Mallacoota Youth Group Sanctuary,⁵ a social enterprise founded by the local young people as a result of the Black Summer Bushfires, I was able to connect, but perhaps not in the way I originally intended.

The pandemic hit and we had to meet online, via Zoom. Online meetings drove home just how isolated I was in the valley, populated by 12 people full time, 66% of them over the age of 50.

With no mobile coverage or internet in the valley, I found it particularly challenging to keep up to date with events. I had to drive 2 hours to Mallacoota⁶ to use The Sanctuary's facilities, largely abandoned due to the statewide lockdown.

A 'thriving' township, significantly impacted by the bushfires, with a population of around one thousand, cafes at every corner, a pub and recreational clubs, mobile coverage and the world wide web at my fingertips. I still sat in a darkened room, alone.

To have such privileges and still be so deprived of the simple yet meaningful human connection and closeness of others was a tragic reminder of what we all needed and what really mattered. Community, solidarity and meaningful face to face interactions without a screen held up in-between.

When finally, ten months later, the restrictions eased and we Activators met in person for the first time face-to-face, I was instantly more invested in the whole experience and it was like I was meeting them for the first time.

When asked what we enjoyed most about the programme, each Activator, including myself, expressed their joy and enthusiasm at simply meeting new people from across the state in person. Young people who were just as concerned for the environment as I was. The projects being an added bonus to the whole experience.

The others hailed from locations across the state, Wangaratta and Beaconsfield, 6 hours drive or Bairnsdale, 2 and half, with access to services such as libraries, public transport, music events, art galleries, pubs and clubs ... I lamented on what hope dying fringe communities like my own, once built on logging, gold mining and dairy industries, had for meaningful social enterprises that focused on the regeneration of this precious land.

Meeting my social needs by relying on fossil fuels to get me to and from Mallacoota weighed heavily on my mind and challenged my sense of duty to the health of the planet which I sought to protect, preserve and regenerate.

Any conscious enterprise, whether it be social or not, should work hand in hand with the well-being of the planet. I don't think any initiative can be launched and be deemed sustainable without the careful consideration of our natural resources.

So my project has evolved from a solo endeavour of simply planting trees in my community, to wanting to create an integrated land regeneration and communal living set-up. Bring people of all walks of life to the valley to live long term and create a sort of village to meet both my environmental and social needs.

Hosting informative workshops and services from plant propagation and tree planting parties to backyard blitz that retrofit suburban dwellings in my local bio-region for a more resilient and sustainable future. These services would create a lifeline to keep this social and environmentally conscious enterprise alive and thriving, a different flavour of the often destructive capitalism, if you will.

Fifty years ago 150 people lived in this valley, as one old-timer put it, "no one was ever left wanting". Congregating at the community hall for regular shin-digs and desire for better living conditions. A desire for a 'brighter' future, kept everyone connected and better yet, working together.

Investing in support systems and programs would truly be something to strive for in all future initiatives. By empowering individuals to come together and create meaningful and tangible change in local communities we allow them to see the fruits of their labour flourish and experience the benefits of working together too ...

Chris' story shares her experience of frustration at inaction, and desire for connection and to take action. Her story is unique, as are the experiences of the other young Activators, but they are also shared and the collective experience of the young participants is presented under five key themes, (1) skills acquisition, (2) connections, (3) confidence, (4) flexibility, and (5) environmental focus.

⁴ Official name is Australian Red Cross

⁵ The Sanctuary, a safe haven that enables Mallacoota's young people to 'be together, support each other and develop our skill as leaders as we recover from the fire events of the summer of 2020' (The Sanctuary, <https://sanctuarymyg.org/>).

⁶ The township of Mallacoota is one of the most isolated towns in the state of Victoria It has a population of around 1000, but this increases by around 8000 at holiday times.

4.2. Skills acquisition

A key focus of the program was to build the skills of young people to enable them to each 'create and lead an impactful contribution to the development of their community' [24] p. 4). In the initial workshops, the training focused on two key areas, skills training in animal welfare awareness and project management. As the program progressed, the facilitators worked with the young people to build their skills in project planning, public speaking, and media communication. The young people, introduced here with pseudonyms, reflected on the benefits of the skills they learnt:

I've worked a lot on my social skills and interacting with new people, I've learnt a lot about advertising and marketing and I'm building a website! Something I never thought I'd be able to do (Michelle, aged 14, Wangaratta, 2020).

My experience has been exceptional. I have gained so many new skills. I have gained so much more confidence in myself and my social anxiety is almost non-existent anymore (Ruby, Aged 19, South East Victoria, 2020).

A number of the young participants reported that the program enhanced and built on existing skills:

I am part of the 2020 Wangaratta youth, more specifically the environmental group, and have been thoroughly enjoying the opportunity to expand my skills and broaden the impact I have on my community (Lisa, aged 16, Wangaratta, 2020).

As they turned ideas into innovative local projects, the participants put their newly acquired skills to use in practical ways.

4.3. Connections

There is evidence that suggests young people's motivation in acts of citizenship has shifted towards an individualised approach, where 'instead of behaving cooperatively, they behave more individually; chasing their own interests' [22], p. 8). For these young people, the desire to connect was a key motivator for their involvement and their reflections highlighted the importance of connecting with the facilitators, their peers and YACVic staff:

The Activators program has really helped me grow as a person and I could not be more thankful to all the lovely people I have met. I have really enjoyed getting to know new people with so much in common and working with them (Ruby, aged 16, Wangaratta, 2020).

I've learnt so many new things not only from [the facilitators] but from my fellow activators as well. It's adapted as I've learnt more about different parts of Victoria and what everyone else's lives is like (Pip, aged 19, Wangaratta, 2020).

I have definitely learnt that even if you do a project individually it doesn't mean you have to do it alone. There is always infinite support there to help you. I learnt interesting things about wildlife, project management and media (Lisa, aged 16, Wangaratta, 2020).

With COVID-19 lockdown extending across 2020, much of the program was delivered online but in November 2020, the young people and facilitators were able to come together face-to-face:

I did meet the other Activators online at the end of the year which was good as it inspired me to think about my own project, but meeting them in person at the Falls Creek Workshop weekend was truly inspiring as we were able to casually talk about our aspiration (Zoe, aged 18, South East Victoria, 2020).

4.4. Confidence

We know that young people have a vested interest in speaking about issues that directly affect them and their lives. Yet, doing so requires the confidence to believe they will be heard, their unique perspectives valued, and ultimately, acted upon. This is particularly relevant in the disaster management space, where young people feel excluded or their desire to be actively involved misunderstood by the adult-centric, operational structures and regulatory requirements of disaster focused organisations [2,24]. This works to undermine their confidence that their voices will be heard in disaster management. A key focus of youth participation is to break down the barriers and create environments where young people can build their confidence [9,10]. Chris describes her growth through the program, and a similar increase in confidence was evident for the other young participants:

The unique projects can help communities have more knowledge and confidence. It also helps individuals gain confidence in themselves which can help their mental health (Ruby, aged 19, South East Victoria, 2020).

I think Activators is a very empowering program and allows young people to feel more confident in themselves and their ability to create change in the world, even if it is just in their local community (Zoe, aged 18, South East Victoria, 2020).

4.5. Flexibility

Understandings of youth participation in the 21st century reflect a more critical engagement with hierarchical or linear models of youth participation and an acknowledgement of young people's desire for shared power and control to make decisions around their involvement [25]. Personal challenges, and juggling the multiple trauma of bushfires and COVID-19, could have restricted young people's involvement and negatively impacted their capacity to engage. However, power to control their engagement was given to the young people through the Program. The facilitators made the sagacious decision that the 2020 program would offer young people the flexibility to step in and out of the program as they needed, without expectation or judgement. In response, the young Activators embraced the opportunity and the agency to respond to changing circumstances and priorities in their lives:

I've really appreciated your messages. It's really unlike me not to reply, I am just trying to work out what's best. Thanks for keeping my options open (Mandy, aged 18, South East Victoria, 2020).

I was unable to fully dedicate my time to the first part of the Activators due to Year 12 and I missed out on some training and planning. However, after the Falls Creek Workshop, I had a clearer idea of what my project was going to be about which was really good. Now I am back at it and very excited to get it going (Zoe, aged 18, South East Victoria, 2020).

4.6. Environmentally focused

The changing nature of young people's acts of citizenship in the 21st century reflects a desire to be involved in environmental and climate crisis issues [12,14,16]. The animal-welfare, environmental focus of the program provided an ideal platform for young people to focus on their local environment:

I became involved with the Activators program because I loved the purpose of helping and making a change in the bush fire affected areas and our wildlife and domestic pets (Pip, aged 19, South East Victoria, 2020).

I chose to become involved in Activators because it offered an opportunity to make a change and help my community and the environment in a tangible way (Lisa, aged 16, Wangaratta, 2020).

5. Discussion

New modes of citizenship by young people have been explored in a number of spaces, including the changing nature of volunteering, student voice, and social enterprise [7,8,26]. The disaster management space offers us an alternate space to understand young people's acts of citizenship and how they align with their desire to focus on social, environmental and political issues. The analysis of young people's experiences on the Program, demonstrates how young people 'contemplate environmental issues' in contrast to adult-centric views 'in a post-disaster context' [14]; p. 28). In this discussion we investigate the intersection of disaster recovery, local environments, the climate crisis and acts of citizenship for young people. We do this through the individual and collective experiences of young people on the Program, led by Chris' powerful narrative. In this way, we 'join the dots' from young people's experiences and contribute to understandings of how young people can be empowered as agents of change in disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

5.1. A desire for a better future, keeping everyone connected and working together

Frustration about inaction is clearly evident in Chris' narrative. It is clear that the social benefits of working collectively on bush-fire recovery had a positive impact on these young people. Inspired by the ideas and approaches of others, we saw that the connections they made with other young people, the facilitators and broader YACVic community was an integral part of their growth on the program. As Lisa indicated, having a great idea no longer 'means you have to do it alone'. Moving forward, as these young people look for ways to be involved in their local communities, the program has better equipped them to work with others as they collaborate on, or lead, disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

5.2. Empowering individuals to come together and create meaningful and tangible change in local communities

Chris takes a broader, global focus as she reflects on the benefits of greater investment in support systems and programs that would support her 'solo endeavour of simply planting trees in my community' to become a future initiative of 'integrated land regeneration and communal living set-up'. Firstly, there is nothing simple about her current project, as she aims to create a 'sustainable abundant environment' which begins by creating 'swales – level ditches on contoured land that hold water in the landscape'. Planting trees and other vegetation in the swales will 'create food and habitat for humans and animals' ([24] p. 19). Clearly engaged in, and knowledgeable about her local bio-environment and permaculture principles, Chris demonstrates the sophisticated understandings and knowledge that young people can contribute to disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery when given the chance to share their ideas.

One of her concerns, and that of other participants, was whether the innovative and creative ideas that they imagined could become a workable project. Several questioned if they even had the capacity and confidence to bring an idea to life, but they appreciated the opportunity and acknowledged the value of working together to make them happen. For Chris, the program enabled her to expand her thinking beyond the immediate project to what could be possible in the future. For others though, like Ruby and Zoe, their involvement in the program gave them the confidence to believe in their ideas, the support to make it happen, and the confidence that they could 'create change in the word' even if it is in their local community. Through the program, the participants recognised the value of their individual projects and the immediate benefits for their local community and environment. They recognised, through their experience on the Program and expertise shared by invited presenters outlined earlier, that their locally focused acts of citizenship had a valuable and tangible impact on environmental issues, disaster recovery and the climate crisis.

5.3. Any conscious enterprise, social or not should work hand in hand with the wellbeing of the planet

Care for the health and wellbeing of the planet is integral to Chris' story. Her commitment to making a difference extended to her doing no further harm. This was clearly evident as she reflected on the guilt she felt about her need for connection and the closeness of others. Guilt 'weighed heavily on her mind' as her reliance on fossil fuels to travel to other regional locations, sat in tension with her sense of duty to the planet that she seeks to 'protect, preserve and regenerate'. Lisa and Pip also demonstrated the importance of pur-

poseful change for these young people and their desire to make a difference for the wellbeing of the bushfire affected areas and local wildlife. A local focus but one that ultimately benefits the overall wellbeing of our planet.

Chris is dreaming large and planning for a future social enterprise in her local community, but respect and consideration for the impact, sustainability for her local community and the planet is ever constant in her thinking.

6. Conclusion

The Activators program created the opportunity for young people to actively engage in bushfire recovery on environmentally and locally focused initiatives and projects. The evaluation clearly demonstrated the benefits of the program, and we have shared the young people's experience as a narrative of young people's active role in bushfire recovery. It would have been great to capture the combined impact of animal and human wellbeing, which we know can be part of the healing process from bushfires (Dr Liz Walker, CEO RSPCA Victoria in [24]). We were also keen to investigate young people's involvement in community resilience building, a key aspect of disaster management, but we only had one comment, from Chris to understand this:

'Everyone's really concerned about drought and fire. If the water is held in the landscape for longer periods of time, I think that could really help with our preparedness and resilience in our changing climate' [24], p. 20). Our aim, in the future, would be to investigate these and other aspects of the Activators program to capture evidence of the true value of the Program.

Chris' powerful story of *Loss, urgency, grief and loneliness* set the context for this paper as she shared her motivation to move from desire to action in bushfire recovery and to seek out others who shared her passion for the planet and the future. We are left with the sense that hers is a story with much more to come:

I've been born with a sense of urgency. I don't want to live in a future that is desolate, dry, volatile. I want to live in a lush, abundant, fair, ecologically sound future. And young people can do that. Especially through support systems like YACVic Activators ([24], p. 19).

The intervention program, following the devastating Victorian Black Summer bushfires, supported and empowered young people to engage in locally focused, environmental issues in regional communities. Bringing their innovative and creative projects to life enabled the young people to acknowledge the strength of their individual and collective engagement and growth in the Program.

Of global significance, the program demonstrates how young people can become agents of change in disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Furthermore, the Program provides valuable evidence of how young people join the dots between disasters, the climate crisis and environmental issues as they consider new acts of citizenship that impact them and their future. Empowered and equipped with new skills, confidence, and recognition, the young participants acknowledged that a collective approach to bushfire prevention, preparedness, response and recovery enables their innovative and creative ideas to make a difference and create impactful, tangible change, even in small ways. In conclusion, we argue that adopting similar programmatic interventions for other disasters and local contexts would resonate with young people and motivate them to engage in acts of citizenship and across all levels of planning and community engagement in disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data is available from YACVic, <https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Documents/Activators-Report-YACVic-FINAL.pdf>

Acknowledgment

The Activators program was delivered by Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic), with funding provided by the Victorian Government and RSPCA Victoria (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Victoria).

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