



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL (INC)

## **Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements**

28 April 2020

### **In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?**

This submission to the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements will start with a definition of the AICCM, outline the organisation's actions taken during the Bushfire Crisis in January 2020, and argue for changes to enable best practice in the future. Importantly, a coordinated approach with the government would increase the outcomes of all these efforts.

#### **About the AICCM**

The AICCM is a not-for-profit organisation concerned with the conservation, preservation, research of, and access to Australia's tangible and intangible cultural, historical and scientific heritage. Since 1973, the AICCM has actively worked to promote the long-term care of Australia's heritage in recognition of the role that it plays in developing and enhancing our national, community and familial identities.

The AICCM is committed to preserving Australia's heritage as a resource for present and future generations. We recognise the knowledge, skills and stories that our heritage embodies, and its role in creating a vibrant, rich and resilient society. We research and care for objects, artworks, documents and digital media of cultural, social, scientific and personal significance from the past and present and acknowledge these as agents of memory, inspiration, information, evidence and discovery through which personal and collective stories are told through time.

#### **AICCM response**

The AICCM worked swiftly to respond to the bushfire emergency in January 2020. The following responses worked well, however, their reach and outcome would be amplified with more resourcing.

1. Volunteer Register / Requests for Assistance

Expressions of interest received from conservators to volunteer their time and /or services were collated by the AICCM Secretariat in a register.

2. Professional conservator directory

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The Disaster Preparedness Committee contacted local councils and the public were referred to the AICCM directory of Professional Conservators available on its website: <https://aiccm.org.au/need-a-conservator>

### 3. Website Resources

The AICCM has a range of disaster resources available, including a brochure on fire. Please see our website for details <https://aiccm.org.au/disaster>. A flyer regarding smoke damage is currently being written in response to the issues of institutions closing due to smoke in the galleries.

### 4. 2020 Bushfire Response Fund

All donations to the AICCM were directed towards conservation efforts related to the bushfire crisis. The AICCM did not ask for donations as emergency services were seen as the priority, however, we put in place a project fund for donations we did receive until the end of March 2020. Please check the [donations web page](#) for updates. These donations are contributing to Disaster Preparedness workshops as part of Blue Shield Australia May Day Campaign.

### 5. Blue Shield Australia

As an associated member of [Blue Shield Australia](#) (BSA), AICCM worked closely with BSA and other organisations on sharing resources and distributing information. This included providing feedback on and disseminating the Blue Shield Australia Survey <http://blueshieldaustralia.org.au/news/impact-of-fire-and-storm-events-on-glam-institutions-2020/>

6. AICCM joined AMaGA's Bushfires / Climate Change Cultural Response Roundtable – National Organisations. The Roundtable meets via teleconference every three weeks to discuss the response and coordinate efforts.

## **In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?**

In 2013, the AICCM made a submission to the '[Recent trends in and preparedness for extreme weather events](#)'. In Submission 87, we argued that;

Weather conditions have a profound impact on the long-term preservation of cultural and heritage materials. As weather events become more extreme, the impacts become more devastating on cultural collections.

Cultural materials are extremely important to communities - artefacts embody memory and cultural knowledge. Local, state and national institutions as well as private collections serve as repositories of these cumulative memories and provide a tangible connection to the past. AICCM is committed to ensuring that



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these collections are prepared to negotiate an increase in extreme weather events and support those affected after such an event.

In our experience, what hasn't worked well, is that the proposals made in 2013 have not fully come to fruition. The AICCM has worked to put more resources online, to increase advocacy for the sector, but still more needs to be done.

For instance, we had many volunteers register to assist, however, we did not have the resources to coordinate a large scale salvaging response. AICCM members regularly host conservation clinics to educate the public in how to handle and care for salvaged items. These, however, are not coordinated on a national level. Conservation services in times of disaster are not necessarily known or understood. For instance, many people discard valuable possessions that can be recovered. As an organisation, the AICCM is conscious of timing and being respectful of communities experiencing extreme hardship. This is where coordinating efforts within the wider government response would be helpful so that we could offer support in an appropriate manner.

### **In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?**

Action in times of crisis has to come from policy - it has to be built into the response from a government level. Unfortunately as a peak body for conservators, we are often not part of this equation. Therefore making strong alliances and building our response into broader picture is essential for us to be able to take action. This is where the AMaGA Roundtable initiative has been very useful in terms of being part of the wider sector response.

The changes needed by AICCM to respond to extreme weather events include, but are not limited to:

1. **Preparation** - Access to a linked network of government, commercial and community support groups (e.g. Council Cultural Officers) in preparation months to disseminate information about conservation.
2. **Mitigation** - Each property or facility containing important items of cultural heritage should have a site specific natural disaster risk assessment carried out to determine how properties/facilities need to be modified to better withstand a disaster, or whether the items should be relocated to a more appropriate facility.



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3. **Response** - The provision of ample space and financial support to undertake required conservation work, workshops, information sessions and clinics in the event of such disasters.
4. **Recovery** - Access to material clean-up organisations (such as Grocon) after the event in order to salvage cultural heritage in a timely manner.

### **Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?**

In 2018, [AICCM made a submission](#) to the Senate inquiry into Canberra's national institutions. In April this year, the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories released its findings and recommendations in the report [Telling Australia's Story —and why it's important: Report on the inquiry into Canberra's national institutions](#) (Commonwealth of Australia 2019).

There were a number of recommendations relating to a joint approach by the Australian Government to resolve certain issues. One area of concern is the need for digitisation of collections, such as analogue audio-visual items by 2025, and the need for an overarching government strategy to complete this. This would certainly assist with safe keeping of our cultural heritage in times of disaster.

Furthermore, raised in the submissions were the challenges national institutions are facing in regards to collection storage. It is difficult to find cost effective solutions that also meet best practice as institutions' collections continuously grow. It was recommended that the Australian Government coordinate the development of a permanent shared collection storage facility. The recommendation includes that storage 'should be developed and implemented in close consultation with relevant institutions to ensure it is fit-for-purpose to meet their current and future needs' (Commonwealth of Australia 2019, p. 123). This initiative would assist greatly with disaster planning and responding to emergencies.

Coordinated efforts to preserve Australia's cultural heritage through digitisation, shared storage facilities, disaster preparedness and support of the conservation sector will put us in a stronger and robust position during natural disasters.