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

In relation to cultural heritage, some heritage sites were actively protected. Some cases include:
- The NSW Rural Fire Service actively defended Caves House, located at Jenolan Caves, within the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.
- In Snowy Mountains, some historic mountain huts were wrapped in foil by Parks staff to protect them from the fire. This innovative action saved those huts.
- The internationally significant Wollemi Pines, located within the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, were protected by significant wetting of the vegetation and ground in the area in which they grow prior to the fire passing through the area.
- Aboriginal management of the Budj Bim World Heritage site through cultural burning over the previous few years had reduced fuel loads in the area significantly and the fire was not as severe, leaving the site substantially intact and undamaged.

These successes were the exception rather than the norm. The value of cultural burning in maintaining landscapes and ecosystems so that they are in good condition with reduced fuel loads is beginning to be recognised more widely. The landscapes that have been managed by Aboriginal communities in recent years fared better during these fires than adjoining landscapes.

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

The loss of cultural heritage across south-eastern Australia was immense. Examples of lost cultural heritage include:
- severe damage to Aboriginal sites located in national parks, on public land and on privately owned land – Aboriginal people could not get access to sites to assess the damage or put in place mitigation measures to prevent further loss to damaged sites from storms and floods following the fires. Damage included loss of marked or scarred trees, fire damage to rock art sites and loss of plant and animal totems that had immense cultural value to local Aboriginal people.
- extensive loss of rural heritage, including historic homesteads, farm buildings and farm infrastructure (sheds, dairies, stockyards) – many of these were not heritage listed (ie listed in Local environmental plans or on state heritage registers), but were highly significant to their owners, families who had lived and worked on the properties for generations and recognised as heritage contributing to the cultural landscape of regional areas by local communities and visitors to the areas.
- loss of living heritage in rural areas, such as the loss of stud breeding stock, developed over generations for their specific characteristics; loss of historic orchards that were an important part of local economies, but also local identity, as they were strongly associated with particular areas (e.g. Batlow and Bilpin).
- severe damage to cultural landscapes.
- loss of heritage buildings and archaeological sites within national parks, including damage to heritage sites during the emergency response operations to create fire containment lines (through bulldozing).
- loss of historic town streetscapes, such as the main streets of Cobargo and Mogo, including shops and community buildings.
- loss of historic churches.
- loss of cultural tourism sites that promote local history experiences, such as the Original Gold Rush Colony at Mogo.
- loss of historic markers in the landscape, such as the boundary markers to the ACT; and many other types of heritage.

Emergency response deals with extreme conditions in the moment. Therefore, it can only be as good as the preparation that goes before. It is well understood that human safety is the highest priority at these times and all else is secondary. Except in the exceptional circumstances identified in response to question one, protection of heritage was not necessarily a high priority for fire fighters during the emergency response phase.

However, once the immediate emergency had passed, rapid assessment of the damage, the ongoing/new risks arising from the disaster and the impacts that these have on places and the people who are associated with them was required. The impact of the fires on cultural heritage should have been included in these assessments. However, it is not clear whether this was the case across all fire grounds. Nor is it clear how much cultural heritage has been discussed in regard to recovery. Cultural heritage is essential to human and community well-being and is often an important resource for rebuilding the future. Many country areas rely on their heritage to attract visitors and fuel their economies. But local heritage also contributes to the community’s sense of place and identity. Thus, it must be protected not only during such disasters, but also in the immediate aftermath and through recovery.

Although local government is responsible for protecting local heritage sites through implementation of its local environmental plan (NSW) or heritage overlay (Vic), many local government staff were poorly equipped or prepared to deal with a disaster of this scale. Indeed, in some case staff were victims of the fires themselves, reducing their capacity to respond efficiently and effectively on behalf of their communities. It
was reported that whilst some Councils were proactive in supporting their communities, others closed their doors, and yet others put up development application fees for those who wanted to rebuild (a particularly negative response).

Although heritage professionals offered their services to assist councils by undertaking rapid assessments of heritage properties, there was little opportunity for this in the immediate wake of the fires due to the lack of access to areas and lack of available accommodation. ICOMOS prepared a rapid assessment sheet that could be used by local heritage advisors or local heritage practitioners. This was made available on the ICOMOS website, through heritage advisor networks across NSW, Victoria and South Australia, and to NSW Public Works for use by clean up contractors. It is unknown how extensively this was used. Correspondence indicated that there was some interest from heritage advisors and practitioners. It was also reported to be used for assessing damage to heritage sites on Kangaroo Island.

Unfortunately, unless heritage is recognised as being significant by those responding to disaster, it can suffer further loss during the response and in its wake. Examples include:
- bulldozing of containment lines through heritage sites,
- removal of significant scarred trees during clean up,
- demolition rather than stabilisation of structures to make a site safe,
- decontamination of sites resulting in removal of just about everything including the top 300mm of soil complete with its archaeological remains).

What seems to a volunteer worker or contractor (often an outsider to the area) to be a burnt shell, may be to the property owner or local community a place of immense cultural significance. It may be a listed heritage item/place, but more often than not, not listed, but nevertheless recognised locally for its heritage value. Heritage can be diverse. It can include buildings, landscapes, objects and intangible heritage. There was a great loss of local heritage to the fires. Many farmers had lived and worked on the land affected by the fire for many generations. Although they may have saved their house, many lost their old family homesteads, historic outbuildings and farm infrastructure (old dairies, shearing sheds, cattle yards, windmills, fences, etc) and their breeding stock or orchards that had also been built up over generations. In the towns, such as Mogo, the historic streetscapes were decimated, with shops, churches, community buildings all being lost. The loss of these represents more than the loss of an asset or income. For many people they represent the loss of a dream or the heritage that drew the owner to the property in the first place. The surviving fabric, whether a lone chimney or an object, can hold important memories of places, activities, relationships or events. They gain a symbolic value of a life or past that has been suddenly taken away and cannot be restored. When volunteers rush in to help clean up, they are not necessarily aware of the impact but, they are removing, demolishing or bulldozing such items, compounding or exacerbating the losses already experienced. People must be given space/time to grieve and recover anything that they value prior to clean up. Even where hazardous materials are concerned, they could be given the opportunity the salvage things of value - possibly by providing appropriate PPE to enable owners to enter a site and bag objects in for future decontamination. Even though cleanup is essential to recovery, it cannot be rushed.

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

Cultural heritage needs to be embedded in emergency planning at national, state and regional and local level. It also needs to be actively integrated into bushfire response training scenarios undertaken by emergency services and local government.

Risk management planning for heritage sites is essential if heritage is to survive a similar fire event in the future. This includes:
- undertaking a comprehensive risk assessment for the property, its landscape, buildings and contents,
- actively putting protection and mitigation measures into place, including measures to reduce fuel loads in the landscape, mange waste, protect buildings and archaeological sites
- monitoring and managing bushfire risks in the day to day activities undertaken at the place,
- ensuring that emergency management and response training is undertaken by property owners and staff of heritage sites,
- practicing, through training scenarios, how to prepare for fires, protect significant buildings and evacuate people and precious objects,
- building awareness of cultural heritage places and values within the emergency management sector,
- building relationships between property owners and/or local communities and local emergency responders, and
- embedding cultural heritage in state emergency planning and local bushfire emergency training exercises

Without this our cultural heritage sites will remain vulnerable and exposed.

Local Government is normally responsible for planning and development, and for coordinating and facilitating recovery of their local government areas. Councils are also responsible for protecting their locally listed heritage sites. There is a need for Council staff to understand bushfire risk to heritage, including those sites located within townships as well as rural or bushland areas. There is also a need for council staff, including those responsible for heritage and for emergency planning to work collaboratively together to develop the most appropriate strategies for dealing with bushfire risk in their specific situations. There is also a need for state government to provide support to local councils immediately post disaster, to ensure they have access to the capacity, tools and expert backup needed to respond to damaged heritage in their local areas.

It is almost impossible for individual properties, especially properties with small areas of land within their boundaries, to protect themselves during large scale bushfires. It is essential that the surrounding landscape is managed as a whole to reduce the fire risk. This requires a whole of community response to identifying, developing and implementing risk mitigation strategies to reduce fuel loads and facilitate the emergency response and evacuation required. This includes planning for protection of heritage sites.

Where possible, landscape management should involve local Aboriginal community members with knowledge and expertise in fire, land and ecosystem management. Refer to Victor Steffensen's book, 'Fire Country' for more details. In many areas local Aboriginal communities are working with scientists, firefighters and farmers to revitalise damaged country, to reduce fuel loads in a way that is respectful and responsive to the local environment and reduce extreme fire risk.

As communities rebuild, they will be required to meet much more stringent building code requirements for places in fire prone areas. These requirements, which will most likely be fairly prescriptive, will most likely also apply to the recovery of heritage sites. Although heritage sites need to be better protected against future fire events, a performance based approach that respects the heritage values of the sites, will be required to ensure that the significant attributes of the heritage are retained and conserved.

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

Local heritage is protected by local government under local environmental legislation (NSW) and heritage overlays (Vic) and state listed heritage under the state heritage acts. National and world heritage areas are protected under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity
Conservation Act. In NSW it was reported that only two state heritage items were affected, but many local heritage items. World heritage areas were severely effected and their recovery and future resilience is being addressed by the Federal government in collaboration with local government and other stakeholders, including local Aboriginal communities.

During the fires Australia ICOMOS and Blue Shield Australia provided guidance on emergency response to cultural heritage and significant cultural collections, including emergency stabilisation, salvage and recovery. They also provided links to international sites (such as ICCROM) for guidance on disaster risk management planning for heritage. We are currently working to develop local guidelines to improve bushfire risk preparedness for heritage sites and to develop the capacity of heritage professionals to enable them to provide practical advice to heritage property owners to assist them in being better prepared in the future. Australia ICOMOS and ICOMOS New Zealand have a joint working group on cultural heritage risk preparedness, which has been in operation for over two years. Its focus is to improve the disaster risk management for cultural heritage so that it survives for future generations to also enjoy.

WE wish to acknowledge the perseverance of the fire fighters in each state’s rural fire service and the immense support given to them by local communities. The role of each person was critical to the resilience of the teams over such a protracted period and in most cases their efforts exemplary. The conditions were extreme and yet everyone held together and continued to support each other, including interstate and international volunteers who were serving in areas they didn't know for people they didn't know. They just kept going despite the risks and their exhaustion.

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name