



Submission to the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission

This submission is made on behalf of Blue Shield Australia (BSA).

What is Blue Shield Australia?

The Blue Shield is the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross. It is the symbol specified in the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict for marking cultural sites to give them protection from attack in the event of armed conflict. 'Blue Shield', is also the name of the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), set up in 1996 to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by wars and natural disasters. ICBS is based in Paris and works under the aegis of UNESCO which has specifically named it in the second protocol of the convention (<http://www.ifla.org/Vl/4/admin/icbs-contact.htm>).

Blue Shield Australia (BSA) is one of eighteen national committees, which ICBS has established throughout the world. The Australian Federal government is a signatory to the Hague Convention and BSA assists and advocates for Australia to meet its obligations under the convention. One of the ways it does this is via the promotion of disaster prevention and preparedness within the Australian cultural heritage sector as well as the wider community.

Membership of Blue Shield Australia

BSA is made up of the Australian equivalents of the same international pillar groups as ICBS:

- ICA - the International Council on Archives (Council of Australian Archives and Records Authorities - CAARA)
- ICOM - the International Council of Museums (ICOM Australia)
- ICOMOS - the International Council on Monuments and Sites (Australia ICOMOS)
- IFLA - the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (Australian Library and Information Association - ALIA).

Each of the BSA pillars is a peak cultural heritage industry organisation in its own right, which also has international back up and recognition. Each one of these pillar groups contains professionals with the highest skill levels in the relevant cultural heritage disciplines.

Why Protect Cultural Heritage?

While understanding that the highest priorities must be accorded to minimising the loss of life and to carrying out humanitarian activities following a disaster, of significant concern also is the fate of the cultural heritage in a disaster-affected area. Culture is both tangible and intangible and embodies the collective memories and beliefs, which underlie social systems and establish societal cohesion. A community's cultural heritage is a fundamental part of its way of life, history, traditions, civilisation and identity and provides a link between the past, present and the future. Cultural heritage contributes substantially to a community's long-term economic sustainability, stability and welfare and provides the strength of will for people to live, recover and grow after trauma. In the case of the February 2009



bushfires there were many accounts of people losing personal belongings. The Marysville Historical Society whose whole collection was lost exemplifies the loss to the community. Marysville's history is now only fragmentally documented by what survives in other repositories such as the State Library of Victoria and the Public Record Office. When individual places (buildings, cultural landscapes, areas etc.) and memorabilia (documents, photographs, books, objects, traditional items etc.) are lost, communities can begin to disintegrate and ultimately never recover as a group. Preservation of cultural heritage is a significant and tangible aspect of ensuring societal continuity by handing cultural identity on to future generations. Like a "sense of place" it is often only after it is lost that there is a conscious appreciation of the value of cultural heritage.

Why Cultural Heritage Needs a Rapid Response in Times of Disasters.

Cultural heritage is not just about grand art and monumental buildings, it is also very much about those things which have meaning to local communities, it is those things which demonstrate their past whether they be books and documents, buildings, cultural landscapes or museum objects. While most municipalities have identified heritage places within their boundaries and have the necessary planning tools to protect them, few, if any, municipalities in Victoria, have a section on cultural heritage in their disaster plans. Similarly, while many individual libraries, museums and the like have their own disaster plan, these are not co-ordinated with state and municipal disaster plans and hence there is a lack of co-ordination at the very time at which it is needed. Clearly a coordinated risk preparedness plan and recovery plan, which incorporates a section dealing with cultural heritage, is required for each community.

There is an urgent and compelling need to raise general community awareness and therefore preparedness for the protection of their cultural heritage collections movable or immovable. For example, there has been much discussion about refuges for people but nothing has been said regarding the inclusion in homes of a fire-proof/flood-proof "safe deposit", or treasure box, in which valuable items could be quickly and safely stored. As far as we are aware there is nothing in a bushfire plan which encourages people to remove their valuables to another location for safekeeping in preparation for seasonal disasters.

Given the fragility, unique and vulnerable nature and often-priceless value of cultural heritage places and objects, the initial disaster response should include a pro-active specialist team, which can focus on, and respond to threats to cultural heritage. At the outset, the survival, recovery and restoration of historic buildings and sites; museums, galleries, libraries and archival collections, needs appropriate expert care, which will lead into longer-term recovery strategies and ultimately preservation.

A delay in an appropriate emergency response inevitably leads to irreparable damage, diminished or complete loss of recovery capacity of cultural items, ongoing physical degradation and potential looting. For example, mould can break out on paper, textiles, leather etc. within the first 48 hours of exposure to moisture. Treatment after mould damage will take much longer and successful treatment may not be possible. The "first five minutes and the golden hour" principle applicable to saving lives is similarly applicable to cultural heritage, particularly to fragile items, and a rapid response can increase the chances of reversal of damage and long-term survival quite significantly. For example, after Cyclone Katrina specialist conservators were escorted onto various sites as a first response strategy with the long-term objective being saving cultural heritage.

In the case of buildings, there are often salvageable elements which can assist in rebuilding or which can be retained for their own intrinsic values such as technological value. Many such elements are often lost in mass site clearing after a disaster. Recently in response to the Haiti earthquake, a team of international cultural heritage experts, lead by ICOMOS, inspected the initial damage to structures with a view to an appropriate response and longer-term rehabilitation. The pre-salvage survey of heritage areas



was to set parameters for the future recovery of buildings and elements, such as the stained glass rose window of the damaged cathedral in Port-au-Prince.

While various surveys have been undertaken after the bushfires to document lost heritage buildings and objects, they appear to have been uncoordinated and very little information has been made available. The relevant agencies and cultural heritage experts should undertake a post-disaster systematic survey so that a record is made which could be used to assist further recovery. This, of course, would require specialist conservators to be trained to enter areas which are possible crime scenes or which have not been cleared of hazards and the like. We therefore suggest that a collaborative partnership is established between BSA and emergency services to facilitate this end.

The Need for Integrated Training and Disaster Response

BSA sees that the integration of a cultural heritage response into a broader Australian government response to national, state or regional disasters is a fundamental strategy in protecting cultural heritage. This would add another level of professional expertise in parallel to the other response targets e.g. human life, animals, economic recovery etc.

In various countries, local cultural heritage personnel undertake training alongside professional emergency responders and defence personnel to facilitate an integrated response in times of warfare and disaster. For example, in Japan local cultural heritage professionals may be the first responders when an earthquake or broad-based disaster occurs.

In almost every Victorian municipality there is a heritage advisor employed by the local council who deals with heritage planning applications (development consent). Some live in the municipality while others are on contract. The heritage advisors could play a vital role in a disaster response, particularly in rural and regional areas. Given that they typically have heritage architecture skills they should also be trained in emergency response training. Similarly there are many regional towns and cities, which have libraries, galleries and museums with professional staff who should be similarly trained in emergency procedures. The role of such cultural heritage professionals could be pivotal in the first response to a disaster by making an initial damage assessment and by providing a safe environment and appropriate facilities to initially relocate and treat items and to undertake emergency works to structures.

One model for non-disaster related personnel is that of the Victorian Department of Justice which developed specialised training in appropriate disaster response and safety procedures for media personnel to enable them to operate professionally in active disaster areas. This model is considered appropriate by BSA, as it would enable an early response, which may prove to be vital in relation to long-term recovery of cultural heritage places and collections.

The Need for Coordination of Disaster Response

While most cultural institutions have their own disaster plans, these are not necessarily integrated with any outside emergency response plans such as those of EMA, fire brigades, rural fire authorities, SES etc. Without coordination there is a risk that both sets of disaster plans and responses may be in conflict in times of emergency. There is also the risk that while cultural institutions have a properly prepared detailed plan they may not be able to activate it until the emergency responders declare that it is safe to return to the area. This might take days or weeks by which time secondary damage is most likely to have occurred, which rather negates the purpose and scope of the institutional plan.

In Victoria, at least, there appear to be few if any, municipal disaster plans, which mention cultural heritage. BSA sees that there is a great and immediate need to include sections on dealing with cultural



heritage, in a similar way to animals and the like, in these disaster plans especially given that most communities have a library, a gallery, museum and heritage buildings. We also note that the *Fire Ready Bushfire Survival Plan: Your leaving early template* advises people to list “irreplaceable family keepsakes and valuables to consider moving out of an area during summer” and encourages them to “identify a safe location to store valuables and arrange to move them”. We also note the advice to pre-pack items on the audio presentation Fire Ready Kit. BSA commends the CFA in providing this advice. However it focuses primarily on individuals rather than also addressing community cultural heritage assets. BSA sees that the Community Fireguard Groups (CFG) could be an appropriate vehicle to encourage active participation of cultural heritage professionals in community disaster preparation so as to increase the chances of survival of cultural heritage assets before or after a disaster. CFGs have shared community values, which could be extended to cultural heritage, if there is not awareness there already. By sharing ownership of the community’s cultural heritage, better pre-planning, preparation and participation would occur. Appropriate training could be provided by the CFG programme and could lead on to further CFA, SES or the like, training and participation of cultural heritage volunteers or professional responders. The approach to planned preparation to defend personal properties, animals and pets should actively be extended to the community’s cultural heritage assets.

In this regard BSA commends the Victorian Department of Justice for including a layer on their fire hazard maps, which identifies cultural heritage assets in various areas. We understand that identification of places was based on the *Register of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria)* but we note that places included in municipal heritage studies, or possibly places on the National and State heritage registers, would not be included automatically from this source. Therefore we urge the Department to further upgrade these maps together with the mapping prepared by the Department of Planning and Community Development for places protected in the Heritage Overlays so that all known heritage is mapped and factored into disaster preparation, response and recovery.

BSA Recommendations

To improve the integration of cultural heritage with the work of others involved in bushfire prevention, preparedness, response and recovery in Australia, Blue Shield Australia recommends that steps be taken in the following areas of activity:

Planning

- Further develop Blue Shield Australia’s role as the main national body promoting disaster preparedness among collecting institutions.
- Ensure that risks and hazards to cultural heritage are identified in an integrated manner in all conservation management, disaster and similar plans for individual heritage places and collections, and also in all national, state and municipal disaster plans and business recovery plans.
- Ensure that all cultural heritage organisations are appropriately prepared for emergencies such as through the preparation of a disaster plan, a disaster response kit and a communications plan.
- Ensure that disaster planning and response objectives are integrated into existing professional and organisational accreditation processes such as those run by Museums Australia in Victoria.



Training

- Ensure that cultural heritage is included in all procedural manuals for both the training of disaster response personnel and also for the management of disasters.
- Provide cultural heritage training to disaster response and defence personnel as part of an integrated response strategy.
- Provide disaster response training to cultural heritage professionals, preferably through an accredited national training program.

Funding

- Fund the further development of Blue Shield Australia's annual disaster preparedness campaign (MayDay) and regional workshops for local heritage teams.
- Encourage the development of grants and other funded protocols to support the prompt recovery of cultural heritage impacted by disasters.
- Fund the development and maintenance of a national disaster reporting database which captures where, what and how cultural heritage has been affected by disasters, so as to learn better prevention and or preparation practices for the cultural heritage sector.

Networks and information

- Support Blue Shield Australia as the main disseminator of information to Australian cultural institutions and heritage professionals about disaster preparedness and recovery activities in disaster zones (www.blueshieldaustralia.org.au and Facebook).
- Encourage the development of Mutual Aid Agreements between relevant organisations in identified regions, with a view to developing an integrated disaster planning and response regime for those organisations. A good example of this is the established MOU for the Ballarat Cultural Network and Disaster ACT (DISACT) network.

Subject to funding, Blue Shield Australia is keen to assist and or participate in the implementation of the above recommendations.

Blue Shield Australia will be pleased to discuss this submission further, if required.

Detlev Lueth
Chair Blue Shield Australia

8 April, 2010