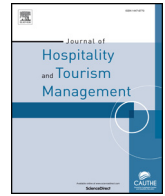




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‘Climate crisis’ and ‘bushfire disaster’: Implications for tourism from the involvement of social media in the 2019–2020 Australian bushfires

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ABSTRACT

This research note seeks to draw attention to the potential impact of social media climate change debates on the Australian tourism industry during and after the devastating 2019–2020 Australian bushfires. Whilst acknowledging the tremendous role of all media forms in the emergency management response, the present paper argues that the growing prevalence of climate change discourse in social media has precipitated a dilemma for communities and industries in fire affected regions. Can the tourism industry continue to always classify itself as a passive victim of catastrophic bushfire disasters? Or do we, as a collective tourism entity, need to embrace our culpability for helping cause a climate crisis that so many people in the community deem as being a contributing factor for the severity of the fire season? In this research note we will consider these issues in the context of literature on social licence to operate.

1. Introduction

“People aren't stupid: Bushfire crisis scorches Australia's image”
(Sydney Morning Herald - Taylor, 2020)

The 2019–2020 Australian bushfire season has been the most severe since the beginning of European settlement in 1788. Thirty three people have died at the time of writing and more than 2500 homes have been destroyed by a fire front that now covers over 6 million hectares across seven states and territories (Bunch, 2020; Henriques-Gomes, 2020). Along with the devastating human and environmental impacts of the fires, the effects on the Australian economy have also been severe. The head of economics at SGS Economics and Planning, Terry Rawnsley has estimated that the “direct costs to fire-affected regions from lost tourism, agricultural and retail income already lies between \$1.1 billion to \$1.9 billion this financial year” (Irvine, 2020). In recent years there has been a concerted effort by many in academia to research issues related to disaster recovery planning (e.g. Beirman, 2018; Mair, Ritchie, & Walters, 2016; Prideaux, 2004) in recognition of the industry's particular vulnerability to the effects of natural disasters (Jiang & Ritchie, 2017; Walters, Mair, & Lim, 2016). Destination marketing has formed an important theme in the refereed research on account of the recognised link between fire events (e.g. the 2008 and 2017 Californian wildfires), perceived risk to tourists (Thapa, Cahyanto, Holland, & Absher, 2013) and the empathy shown by tourists to local people and industries in fire affected regions (see Bauman, Yuan, & Williams,

2019).

Drawing on arguments previously outlined in Schweinsberg, Darcy, and Cheng (2017) we will argue in the present paper that the media have an important role to play in managing community perception of the spread and severity of fire events. During the Kincadee fire (Sonoma County, California), which burned some 31,468 ha of land in October/November 2019 a photograph of a wedding party wearing protective masks in a winery not far from the fire front was said to have gone ‘viral’ with the photographer wondering “is this the new normal?” (Levin, 2019). During the current fire season in Australia one can observe both the high levels of international media coverage of the fires (e.g. BBC, 2020; CNN, 2000), as well as criticism of the alleged partisan approach to reporting amongst news agencies (Kelly, 2020; Meade, 2020). In addition to the role of traditional media sources, social media has played a role in amplifying the passion of the community over issues like climate change during this fire season (Lewandowsky, Cook, Fay, & Gignac, 2019). While Australia is a country with a long history of catastrophic bushfire events – Ash Wednesday (1983), Black Saturday (2009) etc. the 2019–2020 fire season is unique in that it has come on the back of a period of prolonged drought (see Schweinsberg, McManus, Darcy, & Wearing, 2019) and a year of sustained and often effective global climate activism. With climate change part of the bushfire discourse in many regions, the challenge for the tourism industry is to work with authorities to ensure accurate reporting on the level of threat fires pose to destination infrastructure (Armstrong &

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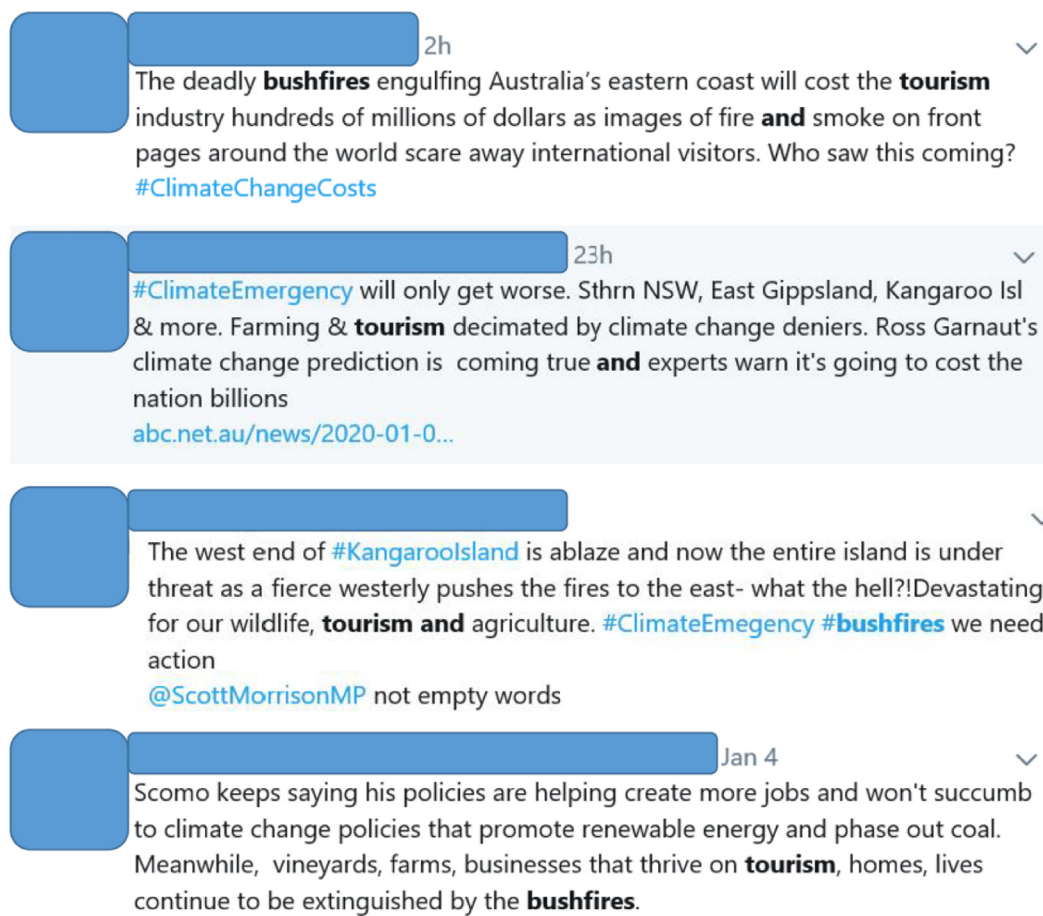


Fig. 1. Examples of Bushfires, tourism and climate change postings from twitter.

Ritchie, 2008) and to encourage a sectorial response that looks towards renewal and future growth in relation to a climate change issue that we are partly responsible for precipitating.

To do so effectively will require a fundamental re-appraisal of how we perceive tourism's role in the world. Sullivan once argued that the act of travelling and writing about travel can provoke "rising levels of cognitive dissonance and moral guilt being part of an industry that helps local economies, on the one hand, while effectively supporting environmental damage on the other" (Sullivan, 2020). If we embrace the inherent tensions in tourism's sustainable management we must also question whether we can continue to think about tourism's relationship to extreme natural events like bushfires solely as that of a passive victim. Schweinsberg, Heizmann, Darcy, Wearing, and Djolic (2018) have argued that effective leadership for sustainability is premised on both retrospective reflection and one's ability to promote collaborative agency amongst different stakeholder groups. To achieve such goals in relation to bushfires we must look beyond a narrow perspective whereby fire events are treated only as 'disasters'; 'disasters' that are outside of a destination or industry's control, and where research outcomes focus on equipping the industry with best practice insights regarding the timing and content of messages to attract tourists into the future (Walters & Mair, 2012). Whilst such research will remain relevant as part of recovery strategies, it is perhaps a misnomer to think that the industry can always expect to return to normalcy. Over the coming months and years fire affected tourism infrastructure including the Tahune Air Walk (Huon Valley, Tasmania), Southern Ocean Lodge (Kangaroo Island South Australia) and the Selwyn Snow Resort (Victoria) will likely be rebuilt as part of a concerted response by Commonwealth and State governments (ABC Online, 2020). However, has the positioning of the fires in relation to wider climate change discourse

meant that tourism must be seen as part of the solution to climate change, if it is to retain its social licence to operate in an increasingly partisan and fractured world?

2. Media and the bushfire discourse

The media is recognised as being an important stakeholder in the development of effective tourism disaster response strategies. This is on account of its collective ability to place pressure on policy makers to deliver aid (Beirman, Upadhayaya, Pradhananga, & Darcy, 2018; Mair et al., 2016) and to work with destination management organisations to disseminate information on the scale of impacts to potential future visitors and the wider community (Muskat, Nakanishi, & Blackman, 2015; Zahra, Imran, & Ostermann, 2020). In relation to the 2019–2020 Australian bushfires, Tourism Australia (2020), Tourism Events Queensland (2020) and other destination marketing and management bodies have sought to use their own websites and social media platforms to disseminate information on both fire impacts and recovery strategies. They have used these to advise operators in both affected and unaffected regions, on approaches to marketing that will be both accurate and sensitive to the scale of impacts. While such engagement with media is positive, what can also be observed in relation to the ongoing fire events is the potentially subversive role that sections of the media can play in distorting community discourse over both the cause of fire and its impact (Bolger, 2020). Although the involvement of traditional news sources including newspaper and television in bushfire coverage is not new (see Burns & Eltham, 2010; Ewart & McLean, 2015), the growing market penetration of Twitter and other social media platforms has led to allegations of deliberate bias and misinformation campaigns by bots and trolls (Nguyen & Bogle, 2020).

The spread of either deliberate or inadvertent misinformation regarding the geographic spread of the fires was the impetus for Tourism Australia to release its own map of Australia's premier tourism destinations and their proximity to fire affected regions (see [Tourism Australia, 2020](#)). While such tools are welcome, what is interesting is the dovetailing of often inaccurate descriptions of the scale of bushfires with wider commentary on climate change ([Thiessen, 2020](#)). The Sky News host Paul Murray recently argued that there was evidence that social media had disproportionately linked the bushfires to climate change with a view to change the discourse of the debate “in a time of emergency to what people demand when it comes to politics” ([Sky News Australia, 2020](#)). Regardless of what an individual reader thinks of this observation, it is true that the impact of bushfires on tourism is increasingly being seen by social media users through a climate change lens (see e.g. in [Fig. 1.](#)). What this may mean for the sustainable management of the tourism industry in the future is the focus of the next section.

3. Tourism's response to bushfires in an age of climate change

The above twitter posts that are representative of many others that seek to frame tourism as a victim of climate change and the resulting bushfires. The portrayal of tourism as a passive victim is in line with much of the existing tourism disaster management literature where the industry is described as being ‘vulnerable’ to external shocks that have the potential to influence its long term viability ([Aliperti et al., 2019](#); [Espiner & Becken, 2014](#); [Pyke, De Lacy, Law, & Jiang, 2016](#)). However, is this a sufficiently nuanced interpretation of tourism's relationship to the unfolding bushfire event and to climate change? [Faulkner \(2001\)](#) argued that a ‘crisis’ (a common nomenclature used to describe climate change - [United Nations, 2019](#)) is distinct from a ‘disaster’ on account of the former being in some way “attributable to the organisation itself. Secondly, it is implied that the event must have detrimental or negative effects on the organisation as a whole, or individuals within it” (p. 136). While [Faulkner \(2001, p. 136\)](#) goes onto argue that events like “tornadoes, floods and earthquakes can hardly be regarded as self-induced”; recent academic and media commentary on climate change has ascertained what many characterise as a definite causative link between human induced climate change and the severity/frequency of extreme weather conditions ([Pickrell, 2019](#); [Sharples et al., 2016](#)). In the case of the bushfires, international media overtly connected the bushfires because of the Australian government's inaction on climate change inferring amongst other things a causal link between inaction and the increasing intensity and duration of the bushfire season ([Spence, 2020](#)).

The World Tourism Organisation and the United Nations Environment Program have estimated that the “tourism sector contributed approximately 5% of all man-made CO2 emissions in 2005, with transport representing the largest component, i.e. 75% of the overall emissions of the sector” ([World Tourism Organization and International Transport Forum, 2019, p. 12](#)). With this in mind and with social media users attempting to construct new narratives to influence policy makers on climate change management issues ([Crow & Jones, 2018](#)); the question for tourism going forwards will be to assess whether it is simply enough to rebuild local infrastructure, promote affected regions to core markets and return to the status-quo? With extractive industries like woodchip exports in fire affected regions being dragged into the maelstrom of the climate change debate (see [JoNova, 2020](#); [Lewis, 2020](#)), the tourism industry must consider how it will maintain a social licence to operate during the recovery. Social licence represents a “general management perspective on the socio-political rights and responsibilities of the corporation” ([Boutillier, Black, & Thomson, 2012, p. 227](#)). What those rights and responsibilities might be has been defined by [Baumber, Scerri, and Schweinsberg \(2019\)](#) in terms of a range of independent variables including levels of trust, adaptability, procedural fairness and distributional fairness. [Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, and Gursoy \(2012\)](#) have argued that public trust in

tourism is underpinned by the sector's economic performance, as well by their ability to empower local residents and fostering of stronger bonds between community members. The SME nature of much of the tourism industry in Australia has meant that recovery strategies are often driven by local communities and their associated local and regional policy bodies (see [Beirman, 2019](#) for a discussion of bushfire responses in Tathra in 2018). However, what of wider national and international considerations that are at the core of climate change policy and international conventions?

4. Conclusions

[Smits, Justinussen, and Bertelsen \(2016\)](#) have suggested that one of the principal challenges for any debate over social license to operate is to determine who's views matter. At the time of writing, the bushfire threat has only recently been brought under control in Queensland, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. Because the focus of responding agencies (RFS – Rural Fire Service, government and defence etc.) has only recently shifted from the protection of life and property to recovery, it is perhaps not surprising that calls to critically consider the relationship between bushfires and climate change has been lambasted by some commentators. We wish to suggest, however, that into the future there is a need to consider ways that the cultural framing of bushfires may influence future preparedness. [Reid, Beilin, and McLennan \(2020\)](#) have recently examined such issues from the perspective of the local community, arguing that historically informed notions of ‘place’ must be a part of discussions over responsibility for future fire mitigation and management. Indigenous groups and others have noted the role that traditional land management practices can play moving forward into the future as a way of drawing on the knowledge of traditional owners and at the same time providing indigenous employment ([Higgins, 2020](#)). In the present paper we have sought to extend such local analysis and argue that the ability of social media to subvert the complex relationship between tourism and climate change can have the effect of masking the need for more nuanced response strategies. At the time of writing some of Australia's largest source markets are actively encouraging their citizens to reconsider their travel to Australia (see [Snape, 2020](#)). Outside of disaster affected regions social media has been identified as being an important conduit for information to tourists on the risks of travelling ([Mizrachi & Fuchs, 2016](#)). We must therefore seek to make social media platforms and their users a key component of efforts “to strengthen dialogue surrounding climate change to aid the implementation of sustainable [response] practices” in the tourism industry ([Moyle et al., 2018, p. 703](#)).

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2020.03.006>.

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