

Notes from the Field

The Australian Disaster Forum, October 2013

‘Stories capture hearts and minds, hold valuable lessons and also save lives.’

This message was the driving force of the inaugural Australian Disaster Forum held at Questacon in Canberra on 14 October 2013. Surf Life Saving Australia, in association with the Attorney-General’s Department, presented the forum which explored key themes of:

- Disasters will happen.
- Disaster resilience is your business.
- Connected communities are resilient communities.
- Know your risk.
- Get ready – then act.
- Learn from experience.

The forum brought together 11 experts and eyewitnesses from across Australia who related stories, lessons and ideas from several hazards including tsunami, bushfire, severe storm and flood.

Following the contemporary philosophy of TED conferences, the forum was fast-paced and ran without an emcee. The presentations were succinct, personal and highly visual and featured compelling ideas that are worth sharing. They were designed to work equally as live presentations as well as videos.

Speakers were encouraged to share what they had learned from their personal experience of disasters. Emergency management professionals and students considered aspects of disaster resilience and built a better understanding of disasters through the experience of others.

The speakers included representatives from government, emergency management sectors, science organisations, as well as volunteer surf lifesavers and survivors of disaster events. The keynote speaker was Anna Bligh, former Premier of Queensland, who spoke about her experience in the Queensland floods and severe storms of 2011. One thing she particularly emphasised was the importance of building resilient communities. Other presenters told inspiring stories of survival, community unity and recovery from the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2011 Japanese tsunami, and the 2013 Bundaberg floods.

Presentations also included stories from school children and firefighters who experienced the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in 2009 and the Lennox Head tornado in 2010. The stories were digitally produced by the Attorney-General’s Department and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image as part

of the *Living with Disaster* series¹ to promote learning about disasters through the experiences of others.

More than 120 people attended the forum—predominantly high-school students and emergency management professionals. The feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive.

Mr Cameron Foster, a teacher from Alfred Deakin High School in Canberra, said his students responded particularly strongly to the moving story told by 15-year-old Matilda Heselev. Matilda survived the Indian Ocean tsunami in Sri Lanka and her family has established a charity to assist with the recovery. She described the tsunami as the best worst thing that ever happened to her. She says ‘It taught me lessons no teacher could have ... how rewarding it can be to help others.’

The Australian Disaster Forum promoted ideas and provided the emergency management community with a face-to-face opportunity for dialogue. Attendees made new connections and deeper understandings of the devastation that natural disasters can wreck and how important it is to be prepared. The stories of the destruction caused by the Indian Ocean tsunami compounded by the lack of a warning system highlighted this point most strongly. Out of such adversity, however, came good will and spirited international collaboration that ultimately lead to the establishment of the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System².

The forum was produced as part of the *National Tsunami Community Education Strategy*³ under the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*. The presentations were filmed and are available on the Australian Emergency Management Institute’s Knowledge Hub at www.emknowledge.gov.au.

Acknowledgement

Article supplied by Sarah Anderson, Public Safety Project Coordinator, Surf Life Saving Australia.

- 1 Living with Disaster series. At: www.em.gov.au/sites/schools/Teach/Resources/Livingwithdisasterdigitalstories/Pages/default.aspx.
- 2 Intergovernmental Coordination Group for the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System. At: www.ioc-tsunami.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8&Itemid=13&lang=en
- 3 National Tsunami Community Education Strategy. At: www.em.gov.au/Fundinginitiatives/NationalEmergencyManagementProjects/NationalEmergencyManagementProjects20102011/Pages/NationalTsunamiCommunityEducationStrategy.aspx