

BUSHFIRE AT BINNA BURRA LODGE

A CASE STUDY

3 DECEMBER 2019

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Binna Burra Disaster Recovery Case Study

Located in South East Queensland - approximately 45 kilometres from the Gold Coast and 100 kilometres from Brisbane - is Binna Burra Lodge.

The lodge is situated on free-hold land inside the Lamington National Park part of the UNESCO World Heritage Listed Gondwana Rainforests of Australia. The area contains the world's most extensive subtropical rainforest and nearly all of the world's Antarctic beech cool temperature rainforest.

Binna Burra Lodge was founded in 1933 by Arthur Groom and Romeo Lahey. It is one of the first nature-based tourism business in Queensland and is an eco-certified tourism business.

The site included original heritage listed timber buildings, the Rainforest Campsite, and the Lamington Teahouse. Additional tourist accommodation Sky Lodges were opened in 2012. Annually, Binna Burra Lodge including its camp site and Sky Lodges accommodated some 25,000 to 30,000 overnight guests and is a well-known and much-loved as place to visit for holidays, educational school camps, outdoor activities, weddings and celebrations.

On the 8th September, 2019, a bushfire destroyed most of the heritage listed buildings at the lodge.

This case study was prepared by Griffith Institute for Tourism based on interviews with key stakeholders in November 2019. The case study aims to document the event to share with tourism and other businesses to inform their disaster preparedness and planning in responding to similar events.

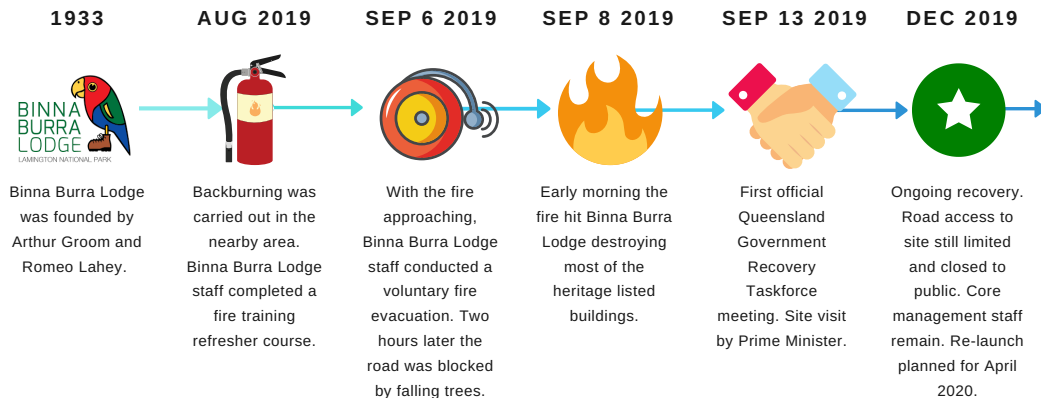


Photo courtesy of Tourism & Events Queensland.

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BINNA BURRA LODGE

A brief timeline of events



Preparation (before the event)

All disaster management policies and procedures were up to date, regular emergency drills conducted and three senior managers had recently completed a refresher training course in a fire safety program.

A 'cool burn' (an Aboriginal technique used for controlled burning) was conducted one month prior which helped to reduce the impact of the fire on surrounding national park areas approximately three kilometres away from the lodge.

Response (to the event)

On Friday 6th September 2019, Binna Burra Lodge was fully booked and they were expecting 100% occupancy with approximately 275 guests to be checked-in by that night. It was one the busiest weekend that year.

The morning started fairly normally, although staff were aware of a bushfire that started in the valley at Sarabah several days earlier. By mid-morning, smoke was bellowing across the hill, creating poor visibility.

Organisers of a forest-based running event that weekend discovered some of the running tracks were affected by the fire, and so cancelled the event.

By lunchtime, the fire status had changed to 'act and alert' so staff started the pre-evacuation procedures. Guests were advised to pack their bags and be ready to leave, if necessary. Reception provided regular updates to guests at reception and senior management controlled the messaging.

On the day of the event, the Sarabah fire was reported as travelling at 4 kilometres per 10 minutes due to the severe weather conditions, winds and very low humidity (approx. 8%), making it almost impossible to control. Local residents described the fire as "fireballs leapfrogging across valleys".

By approximately 4pm on Friday 6th September, the fire status changed to 'emergency warning'. Senior Binna Burra Lodge staff made the decision to conduct a voluntary evacuation of the lodge.

Half of the staff working that day had already left as many of their own homes were at risk due to the fire. There were only seven staff remaining and, fortunately, this included managers who were very knowledgeable on fire evacuation.

Staff effectively followed their emergency plan. Some key evacuation actions that occurred include fire alarm and roof sprinklers activation, all doors were chalk-marked to ensure all rooms within the building were vacated, all doors and windows were locked, gas switched off and cash secured. Staff were positioned at strategic locations to ensure all guests were evacuated and no new visitors could enter the site. Everyone was safely evacuated.

Binna Burra Lodge has only one access road in and out and therefore potential closure of that road made the decision to evacuate crucial. Approximately two hours after the evacuation, the road was blocked due to falling trees in the fire. Therefore, if staff had waited any longer to evacuate the only way out would have been by helicopter and given the number of people to evacuate, the outcome would have been very different.

On Saturday 6th September, a temporary headquarters was set up at a nearby cafe and the Chairman, Steve Noakes, became the sole media and stakeholder communications spokesperson for Binna Burra Lodge.

In the early hours of Sunday morning, Binna Burra Lodge was hit by the fire, destroying most of the heritage listed buildings which housed the reception, original lodge accommodation and dining room, leaving only the Rainforest Campsite, the Lamington Teahouse and most of the newer self-contained Sky Lodges intact.



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Recovery (from the event)

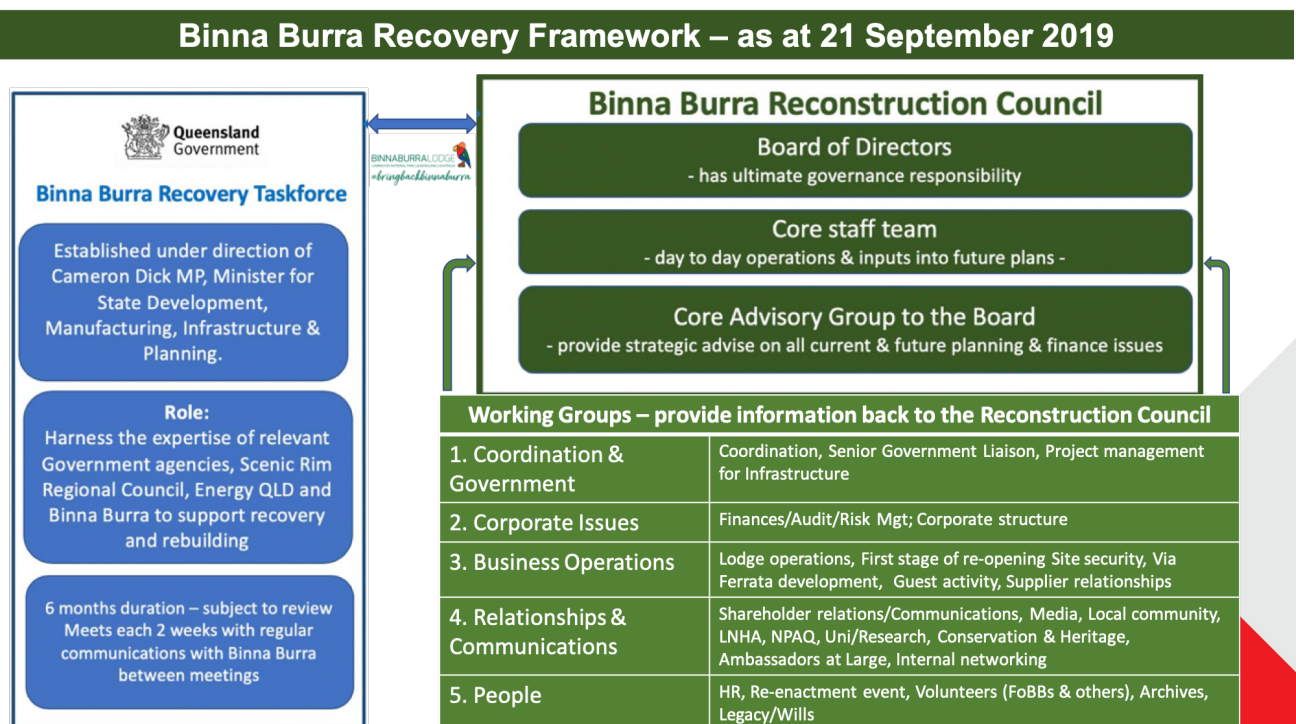
The helicopter vision from the media coverage at approximately 7am on Sunday morning was the first opportunity the Binna Burra Lodge staff and public could see the extent of the damage from the fire. This first Binna Burra Lodge Facebook post showing aerial views received 980,000 reactions, over 5,000 comments and 3,500 shares. Proactive messaging was then controlled through the media spokesperson, Steve Noakes, via their social media sites as well as via mail to the shareholders.

By Sunday afternoon, the Queensland Government had offered to set-up a Queensland Recovery Taskforce and the first official meeting was held that Friday. One of primary roles of the taskforce is to manage the infrastructure recovery. At the first meeting, a key focus was on restoring critical infrastructure, such as water, securing the site and telecommunications. Redeployment of approximately 60 Binna Burra Lodge staff was also discussed.

Binna Burra Lodge had over 4,000 individual forward bookings for leisure guests as well as group, weddings and conferences bookings.

Organising refunds, and in the case of group, wedding and conferences bookings, alternative venues was a key task during the days and weeks following the event. Working through bookings made through third party distribution channels was particularly challenging. Managing the financial issues associated with distribution channels also proved difficult.

Binna Burra Lodge created a recovery framework that outlined the internal reconstruction council which runs parallel to the Queensland Government Recovery Taskforce. The principles underpinning all of Binna Burra Lodge's recovery planning and draws upon the framework outlined in the Queensland State Disaster Plan and with guidance from the National Institute for Disaster Resilience.



Source: Binna Burra Lodge, 2019

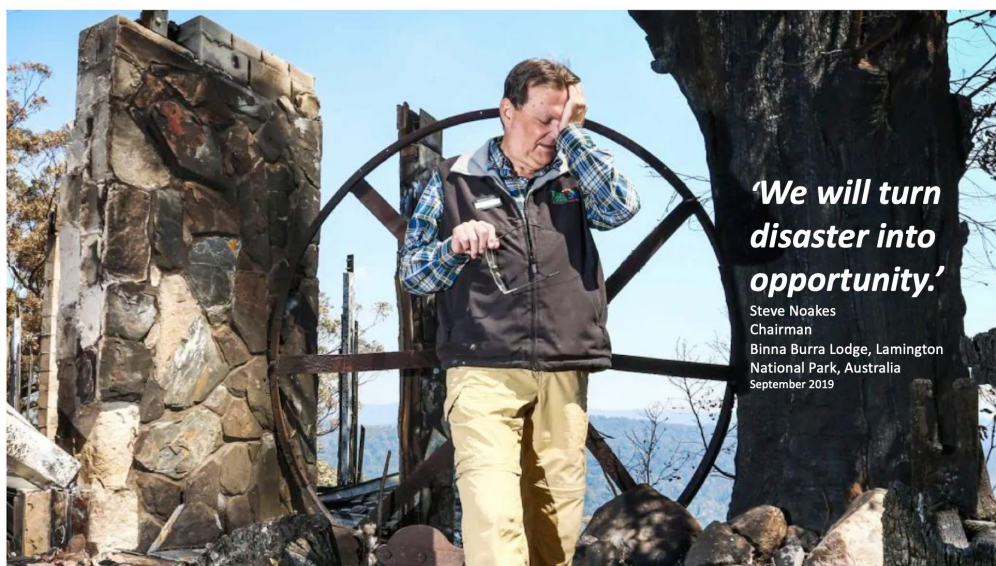
Following the event, Binna Burra Lodge acted quickly to convert their website into a 'Bring Back Binna Burra' messaging with information and updates on the recovery efforts and trading through an online shop with recovery supporter merchandise for sale. A Go-Fund-Me page was also set-up which has raised over \$100,000.

Staff management was a critical issue. A core management team of 6 managers and 3 grounds-staff/maintenance were retained. For the remaining 57 staff, Binna Burra Lodge organised a meeting to inform them of the situation. A 'Staff Transition' event was organised where 155 jobs or training opportunities were on offer to staff. Counselling services and financial advice was offered. All staff were able to find alternative jobs or training.

Publicity generated through mainstream media and social media brought national and international attention to the Binna Burra Lodge fire event. For instance, the story was reported in the New York Times. The connection between bushfires and climate change also heightened public concern.

Stakeholders felt that the emotional connection to Binna Burra Lodge boosted public interest in the aftermath of this event. The fire event generated significant media interest. Key political figures including the Australian Prime Minister, the Governor General, the Queensland Premier, a State Minister, the local Scenic Rim Regional Council Mayor, Federal and State Government elected representatives visited the site. Greenpeace were also present to draw attention to a connection between the 'climate emergency' and bushfires.

Binna Burra Lodge, and the surrounding Lamington National Park, was a key drawcard to visitors to this part of the Scenic Rim region. Three months after the fire, the road to these attractions via Binna Burra remains closed and is not expected to open until April 2020. Many local small businesses that rely on the through traffic are continuing to suffer from the lack of visitors to this area and this fire event continues to have an ongoing impact on the local businesses and community. The reopening of the road and Binna Burra is seen as a major step in rebuilding this community. Destination marketing efforts to encourage visitors to return to this region are critical. Ongoing fire events and the lack of forecasted rainfall are also concerning.



Binna Burra Lodge's Steve Noakes Picture: NIGEL HALLETT

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Key insights

- Have multiple trained fire wardens, particularly given varying shift patterns and high-risk and/or remote locations. Define precise roles prior to the emergency and during the event.
- Have multi-skilled, cross-trained staff that are able to deal with complex and variable situations, and transferable skills. This is particularly relevant during the recovery process when staff may have to undertake roles outside of their normal duties. Conduct regular crisis scenario training.
- Have a go-kit that is easily accessible and contains information required to keep business trading and/or be able to respond to insurers and banks etc., as well as spare building and vehicle keys. Store important archive documents off-site, and store cash and valuable items in a way that is easy to move. Stationing staff to avoid more visitors to the disaster zone.
- The decision not to let business get in the way of early evacuation.
- Pre-determine the most senior person in the organisation as a single spokesperson to communicate and liaise with stakeholders and media.
- Ability to operate remotely and set-up temporary headquarters. Portable technology infrastructure and telecommunications and cloud-based computing is important.
- Pivot your communications and website in response to the event.
- Consider forward bookings and distribution channel partners. Managing cashflow in the event of a disaster to account for operations and staffing.
- Build relationships with key stakeholders and partners prior to the event such as destination marketing organisations, the media, emergency services and government.
- Understand your staffing responsibilities and have a staff management plan in the event of a disaster with particular consideration to the post-disaster staff management strategy e.g. business disruption insurance. Review of insurance policies with an experienced insurance broker (at least once a year).

Future vision for Binna Burra Lodge

“Reset. Reimagine. Recreate”. Binna Burra Lodge now need to change fear and devastation into a new narrative. The fires will create new views, new tracks, attract new people and therefore lends a need for its future to be reimaged and recreated. Binna Burra Lodge hope to have the Rainforest Campsite, the Lamington Teahouse and Sky Lodges operational by April 2020. There are plans underway for a new government-funded cliff-side climbing track to be built known as a ‘Via Ferrata’. The original timber lodge site will also be cleared, and a master plan completed with stakeholder consultation. Suggestions have been made for an interpretative, educational site and preservation of the damaged historical site.

Considerations for Queensland tourism moving forward

A collaborative approach is now needed to bring tourism back to the region. Going forward, tourism businesses need to be creative in their vision to stay resilient in areas prone to natural disasters. Are Traditional Owners involved in the dialogue? How will businesses protect themselves in light of the insurance issues in high risk areas repeatedly affected by natural disasters? What can destinations and businesses do to be better prepared? What can the tourism industry do to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change as incidences become more frequent and intense? Is your business ready and prepared to respond and recover in the event of a future crisis?

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Disclaimer: This Report was prepared by Griffith University's Griffith Institute for Tourism and received ethics review approval (GU Ref: 2019/882). Information contained in the Report is current as at the date of the Report, and may not reflect any event or circumstances which occur after the date of the Report. All queries related to the content, or to any use of this report must be addressed to Associate Professor Sarah Gardiner (s.gardiner@griffith.edu.au).

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