

The 2026 Iain McCalman Lecture

Monday 2 Mar, 6.00-8.00pm

Communities in an era of compounding
disasters: stories of hope from the Northern
Rivers

Presented by Dr Rebecca McNaught

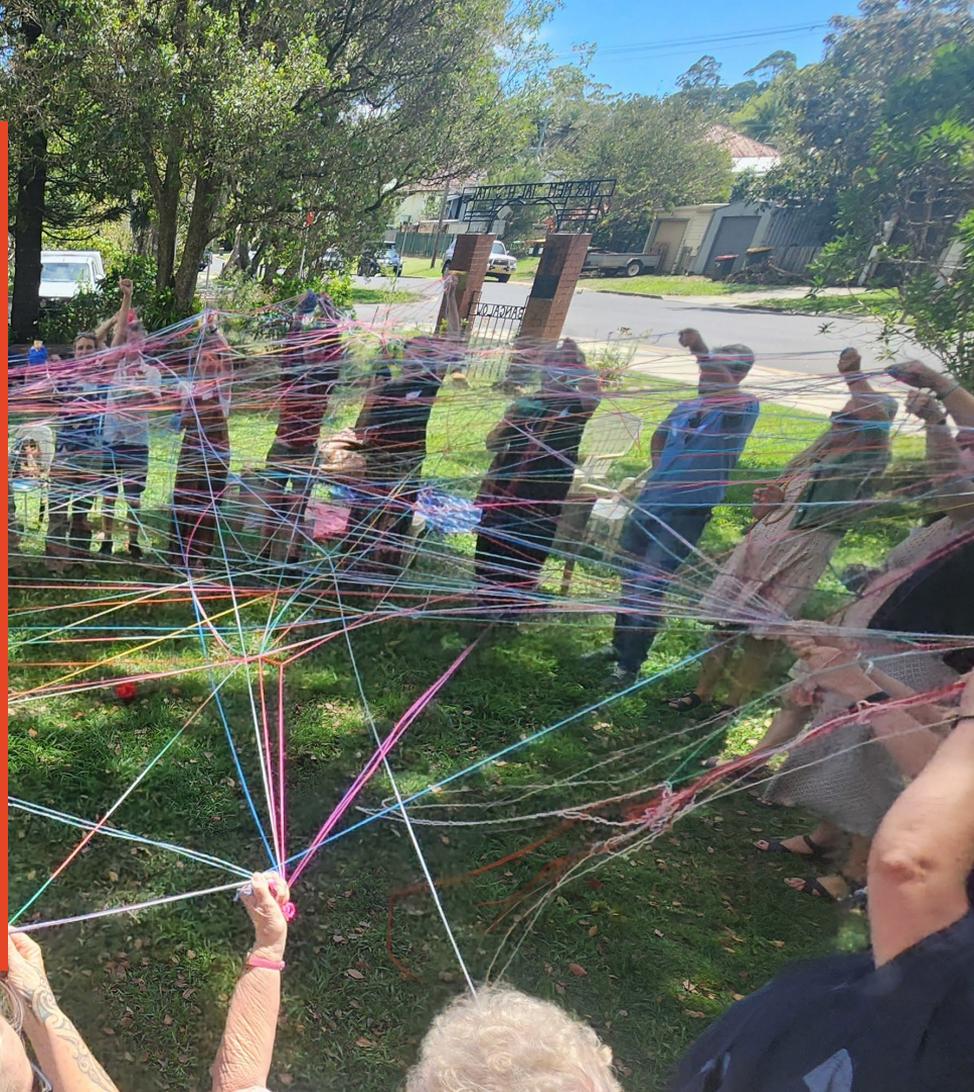


UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR
RURAL HEALTH
NORTHERN RIVERS



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY
—
Sydney
Environment
Institute

CRICOS 00026A TEOSA PRV12057



Welcome to Country

Binowee Bayles

*Metropolitan Local Aboriginal
Land Council*



Welcome from the Sydney Environment Institute

Professor David Schlosberg

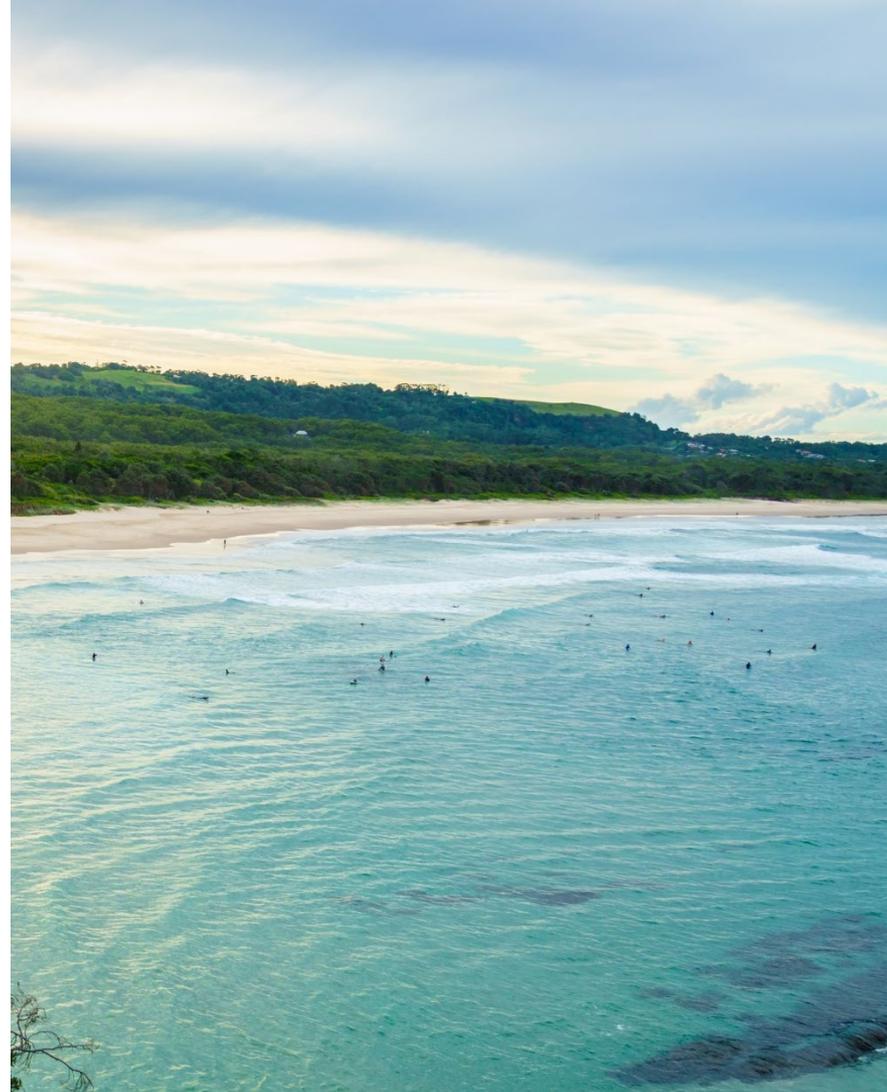
*Director
Sydney Environment Institute*



Introduction to the Lecture

Professor Vicki Flood

*Head of Rural Clinical School
University Centre for Rural Health*



The 2026 Iain McCalman Lecture

Monday 2 Mar, 6.00-8.00pm

Communities in an era of compounding
disasters: stories of hope from the Northern
Rivers

Presented by Dr Rebecca McNaught



UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR
RURAL HEALTH
NORTHERN RIVERS



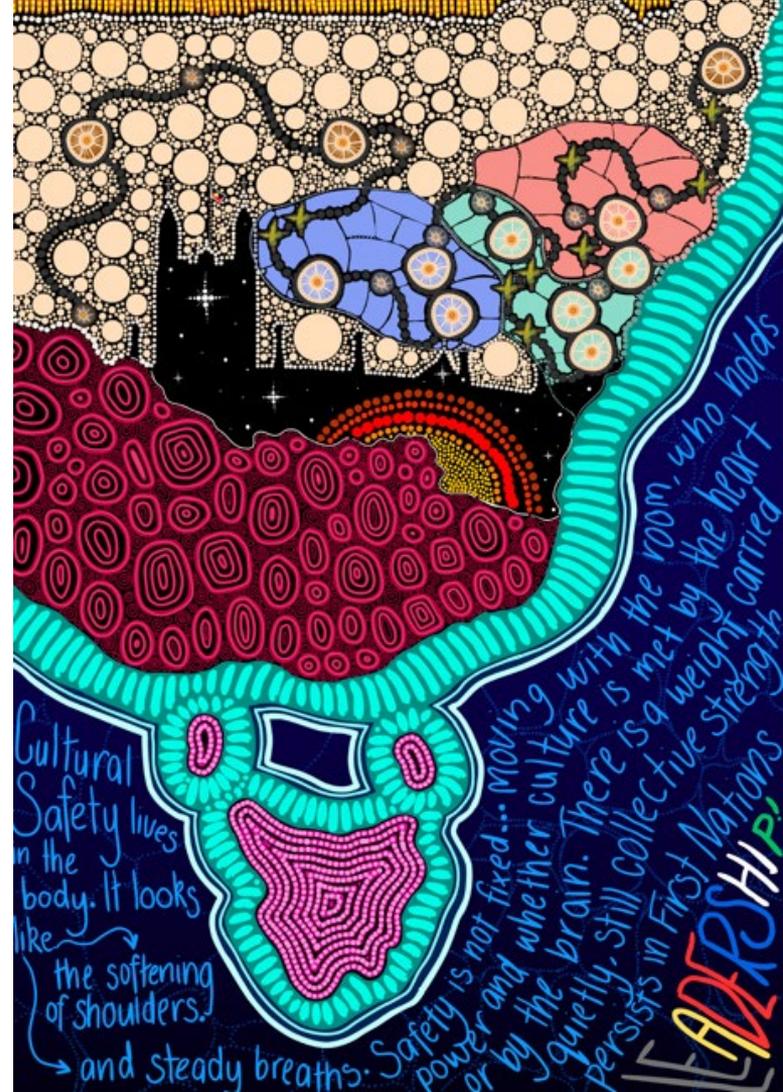
THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY
—
Sydney
Environment
Institute

CRICOS 00026A TEOSA PRV12057

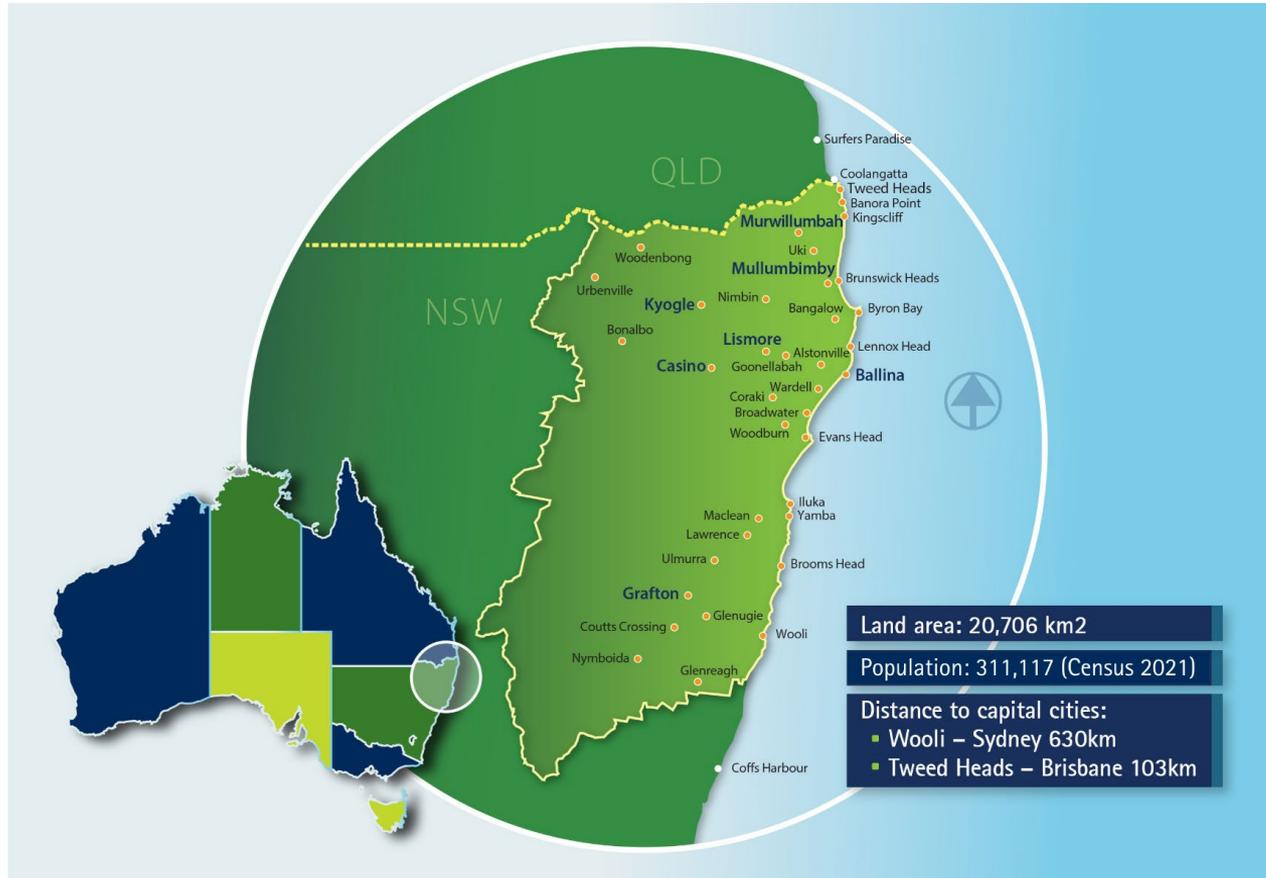


Acknowledging First Nations Country and Colleagues

Credit: Talah Laurie, UCRH



Northern Rivers region, New South Wales, Australia



*Credit: Regional
Development Australia*



Credit: Olivia Katz photography



Credit: Olivia Katz photography

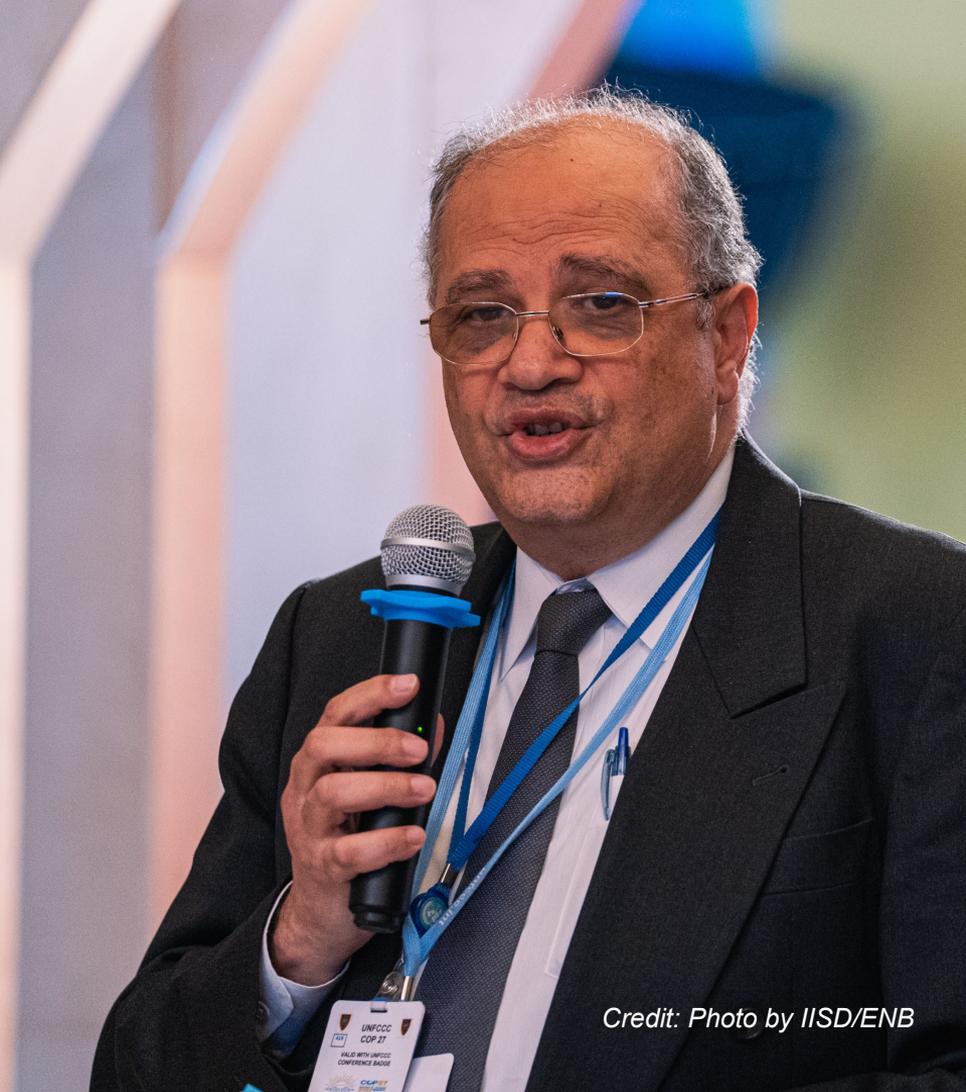




Credit: Sarah Wood photography

“The mindset about climate adaptation needs to shift away from siloed views on climate change to overall wellbeing”

Youssef Nassef
UNFCCC



Credit: Photo by IISD/ENB

Overview

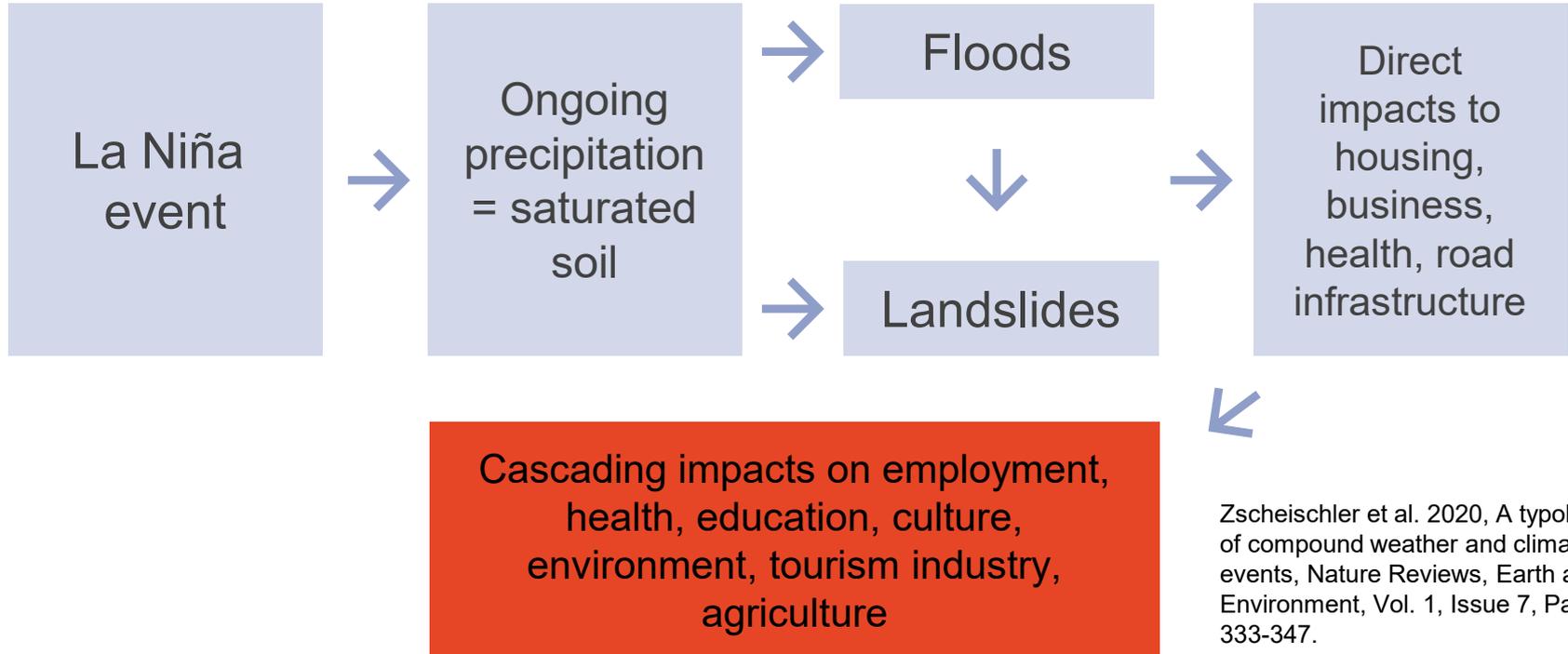
1. Compounding disasters context
2. Community action after floods
3. Our embedded research
4. Calls to action



Credit: Kathie Heyman

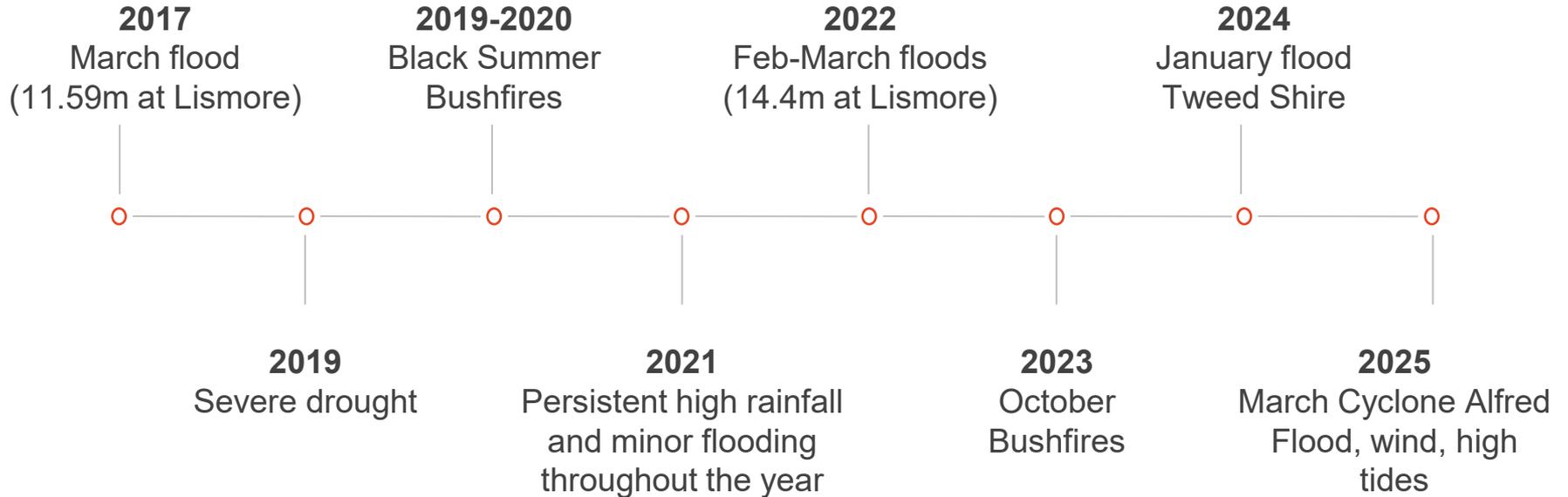
Compounding disasters context

Compound Disaster Event – Northern Rivers 2022



Zscheischler et al. 2020, A typology of compound weather and climate events, Nature Reviews, Earth and Environment, Vol. 1, Issue 7, Pages 333-347.

Compounding disasters - clear need for adaptation



Credit: Kathie Heyman



Credit: @gregoconnor



Credit image: Byron Council

Catastrophic flooding & landslips in Feb and March 2022

- Costliest flood in **Australia's history** (\$3.3 billion, 197,000 insurance claims)
- Rainfall was exceptional = highest **weekly total was 1346 mm** at Uki, Tweed Shire
- Approximately 11,000 homes flooded, **4000 uninhabitable**



Parliamentary flood report finds SES and Resilience NSW failed Lismore, northern NSW communities

By flood recovery reporter Bruce MacKenzie and Lauren Pezet

ABC North Coast

Floods

Tue 9 Aug 2022



▶ Watch 2m 8s

Walt Secord tables the parliamentary report into the flood response. (Supplied: NSW Parliament)

Credit image: ABC NEWS

Floods have significant impacts on physical and mental health

Open access

Original research

BMJ Open Flooding and health in Australia: a scoping review and coauthorship analysis of published research

Jodie Bailie ^{1,2} Petr Matous,³ Byron Apelt,^{1,4} Jo Longman,¹ Rebecca McNaught,^{1,5} Geoff Morgan,⁵ Kanchana Ekanayake,⁶ Ross Bailie ⁵

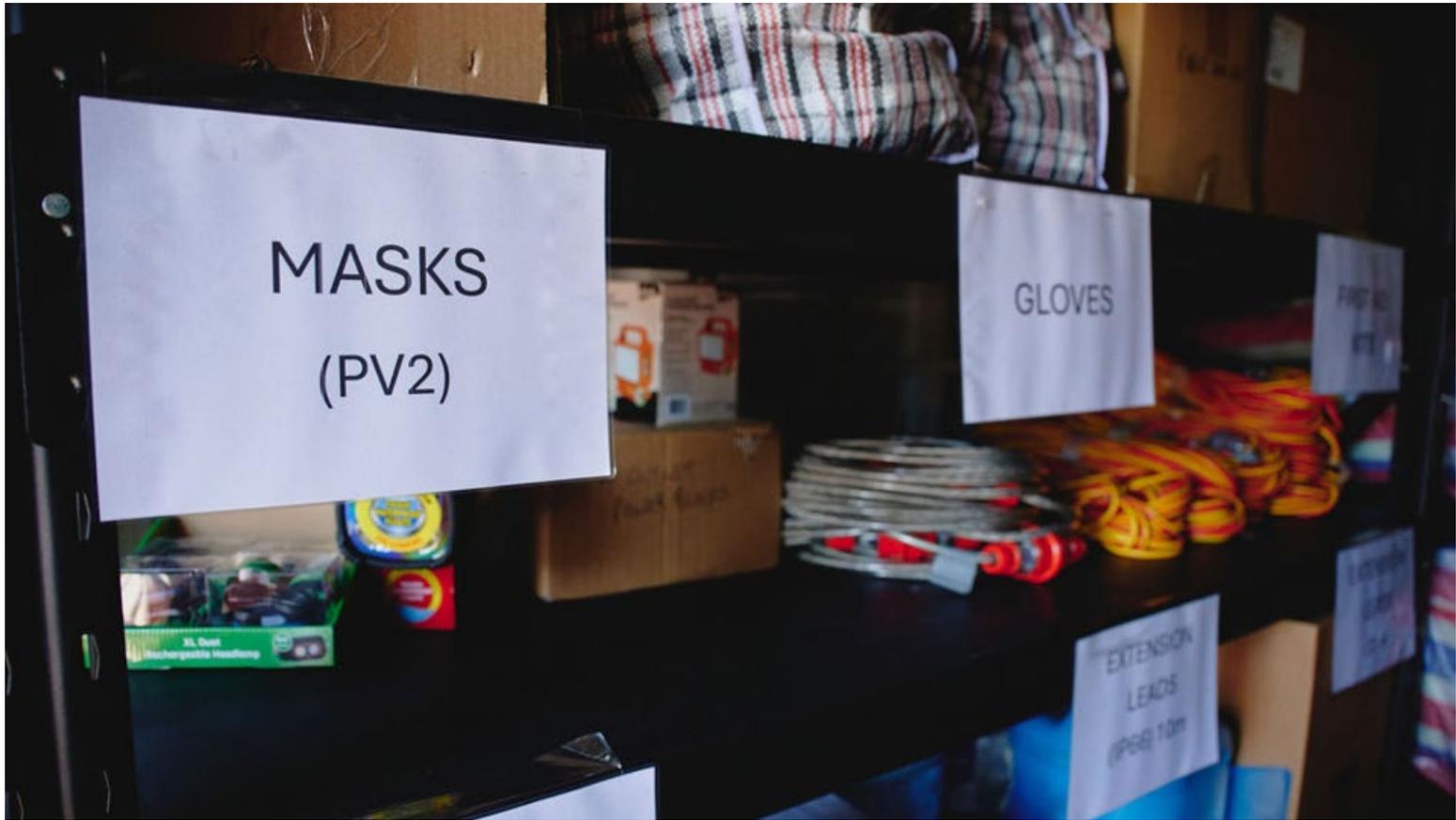
“They were quoted \$27,000 a year for flood insurance on their homes or told they were uninsurable” (pg. 71)

NSW Government Inquiry into the response to major flooding across NSW in 2022 - Select Committee Goonellebah hearing transcript

Community action after floods



Credit: Maythee Voran via Shutterstock



Credit: Olivia Katz photography

How Lismore locals became flood rescue heroes when emergency services were swamped



By Tim Swanston

By Paige Cockburn

Floods

Tue 1 Mar 2022



Watch 1m 19s

Lismore Mayor Steve Krieg speaks about the scale of the floods and rescue calls received by the SES.

Credit: ABC NEWS

Women's flood recovery efforts



Extended opening!
FLOOD HUB: SGB / NB / OS



Need Help ? Want to volunteer ?
Visit the Flood Hub @ SGB Hall
14-20 March 9am-1pm



Credit: Olivia Katz photography

Women's informal
disaster work is
invisible



Credit: Rebecca McNaught



Vulnerability assessment and empowering solutions for women's health in the face of climate change - Research article

Governance, collaboration and community organising in rural Australia: A case study of women's experiences and contributions to community health and well-being in the Northern Rivers, Australia floods

Rebecca McNaught^{1,2,3}  ID, Emma Pittaway¹, Loriana Bethune⁴,
Dominica Meade⁵  ID and Jo Longman^{1,2}  ID **[AQ: 2]**

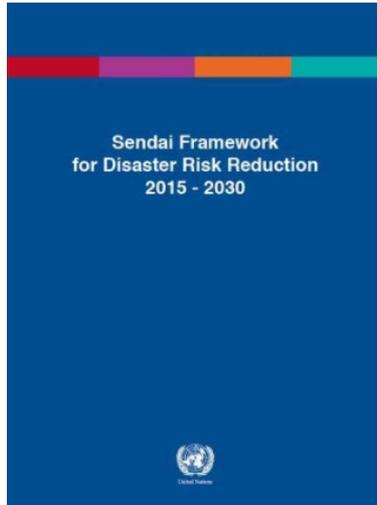
**WOMEN'S
HEALTH**

Women's Health
Volume 21: 1–14
© The Author(s) 2025
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: [10.1177/17455057251345938](https://doi.org/10.1177/17455057251345938)
journals.sagepub.com/home/whe

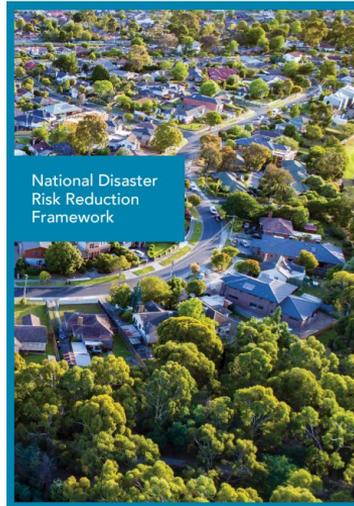


Credit: Olivia Katz photography

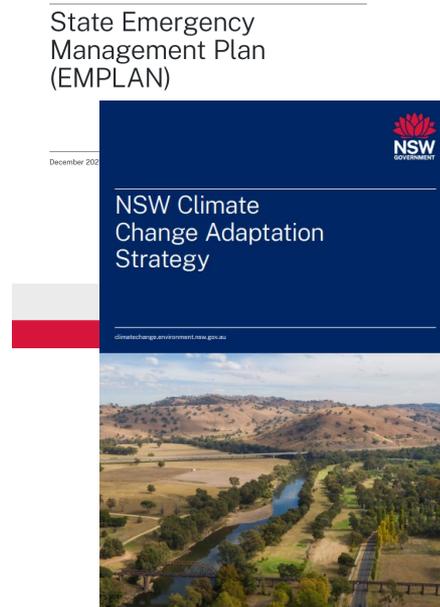
“Partnerships between all agencies, organisations and communities help build engaged and resilient communities”



GLOBAL



NATIONAL



STATE



LOCAL



Credit: Bronwyn Elliott

Formal recognition of and support for community contributions



Our embedded research

Empowering Communities, Harnessing Local Knowledges:

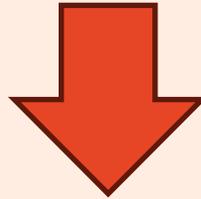
Self-Organising Systems for Disaster
Risk Reduction

Findings Report (April 2024)



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Sydney Environment Institute



- *Informal community networks stepped up in extraordinary ways
- *Calls for a regional voice and peer network

An alliance is born – December 2023



UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR
RURAL HEALTH
N O R T H E R N R I V E R S



March 2024

72 people from 50 grass roots groups & NGOs met for the first time since the floods

“You’re building the plane while you’re flying it and the plane’s got some holes in it, so today is like, ‘have you got a bit of sheet metal I can borrow please?’”

(March 6th participant)



Vision:

to be a self-sustaining,
trusted alliance of place-
based, community-led
resilience groups and
organisations

Northern Rivers
Community
Resilience Alliance
is 87% female

Objectives:

Sharing
knowledge
and
resources

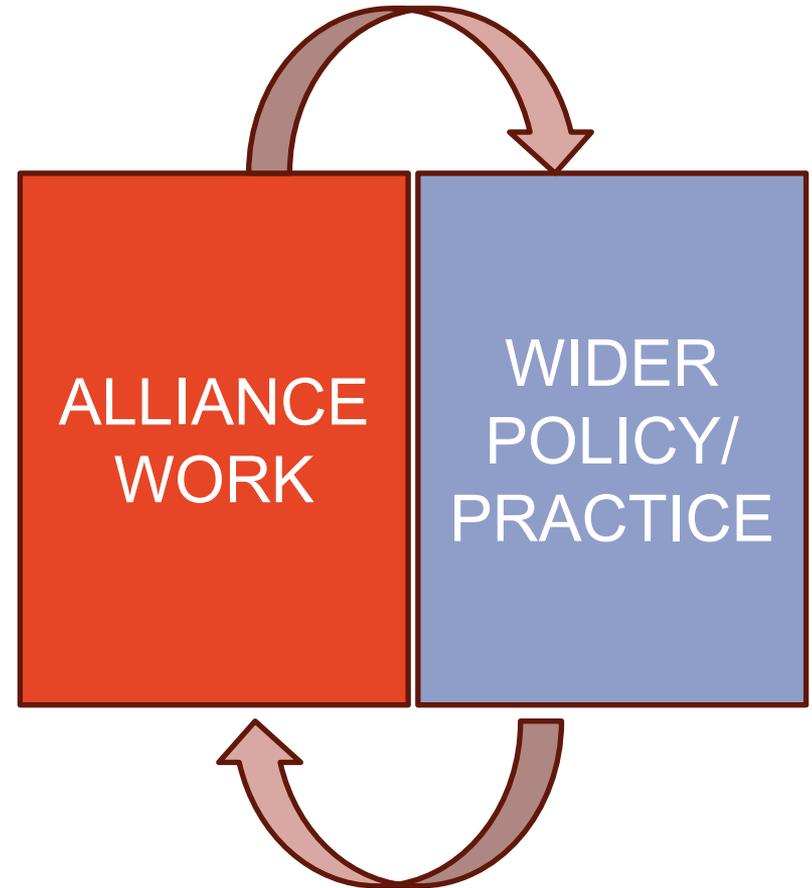
Providing
mutual
support and
wellbeing

Taking
collective
action

Advocating
for identified
community
needs

What we do to support the alliance:

1. Research support
2. Support to NRCRA coordinator
3. Exchange visits
4. Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning plan



Sydney Environment Institute



Credit: Kathie Heyman

Gathering of the Alliance – July 2025 Murwillumbah



Credit: Kathie Heyman, NRCRA

Alliance funders:

- Northern Rivers Community Foundation
- Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal
- NSW Reconstruction Authority
- Australian Government
- NRMA Help Fund
- Countless in-kind contributions

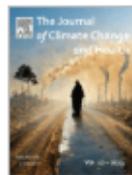




Credit: Olivia Katz photography



Credit: Northern Rivers Community Foundation, Lisa Sorgini



Research article

Building resilience to the mental health impacts of climate change in rural Australia

Jo Longman^a  , Maddy Braddon^a, Blanche Verlie^b, David Schlosberg^b,
Lisa Hampshire^c, Catherine Hawke^c, Anna Noonan^c, Emily Saurman^d

Show more 

 Outline |  Add to Mendeley  Share  Cite

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2023.100240> ↗

[Get rights and content](#) ↗

[Under a Creative Commons license](#) ↗

 [Open access](#)



Credit: Northern Rivers Community Foundation, Nat McComas



Calls to action

Calls to action – Policy makers



Credit: Olivia Katz photography

1. Anticipate community mutual support in rural and regional communities
2. Support a paradigm shift in decentralisation and inclusion in disaster decisions
3. Recognition of communities through formal linkages

Calls to action - Donors



1. Fund a national community resilience fund, not fossil fuels
2. Distribute the resilience fund through ongoing small granting cycles
3. Support place based rurally led research

Credit: Petr Matous

Calls to action - Universities



Credit: Georgina Inwood UCRH

1. Research should do no harm – no survey without service
2. Provide in person and remote opportunities for rural HDR & ECRs
3. Always provide feedback to rural participants (in novel formats)

Calls to action – Practitioners



Credit: Olivia Katz photography

1. Invest in disaster practitioners at the local level
2. Support skills development in practitioners and volunteers
3. Support the supporters

“Reliance on volunteer labour for recovery will likely reach its limit unless community efforts, care work and equity are better supported”.....

“The key challenge is to foster community driven adaptation within broader government efforts that better address interdependencies and escalating climate risks”

In honour of
Jenny McNaught

1953-2025



Thank you!

For more information please contact:

rebecca.mcnaught@sydney.edu.au

**Empowering Communities,
Harnessing Local Knowledges:**
Self-Organising Systems for Disaster
Risk Reduction

Findings Report (April 2024)



International Journal of Disaster Risk
Reduction
Volume 105, 15 April 2024, 104366



Innovation and deadlock in governing disasters and climate change collaboratively - Lessons from the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Australia

Rebecca McNaught^{a, c, g}  · Johanna Nalau^{b, g}  · Rob Hales^c  ·
Emma Pittaway^d  · John Handmer^e  · Jean Renouf^f 

Vulnerability assessment and empowering solutions for women's health in the face of climate change - Research article

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Women's Health
Volume 21: 1-14
© The Author(s) 2025
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/17455057251345938
journals.sagepub.com/home/whh



Governance, collaboration and community organising in rural Australia: A case study of women's experiences and contributions to community health and well-being in the Northern Rivers, Australia floods

Rebecca McNaught^{1,2,3} , Emma Pittaway¹, Lorian Bethune⁴,
Dominica Meade⁵  and Jo Longman^{1,2}  **[AQ: 2]**

Respondent

Beck Dawson

*Practitioner-in-residence
Henry Halloran Urban & Regional
Research Initiative*



Ask a question:



Connect with us

 sydney.edu.au/sei

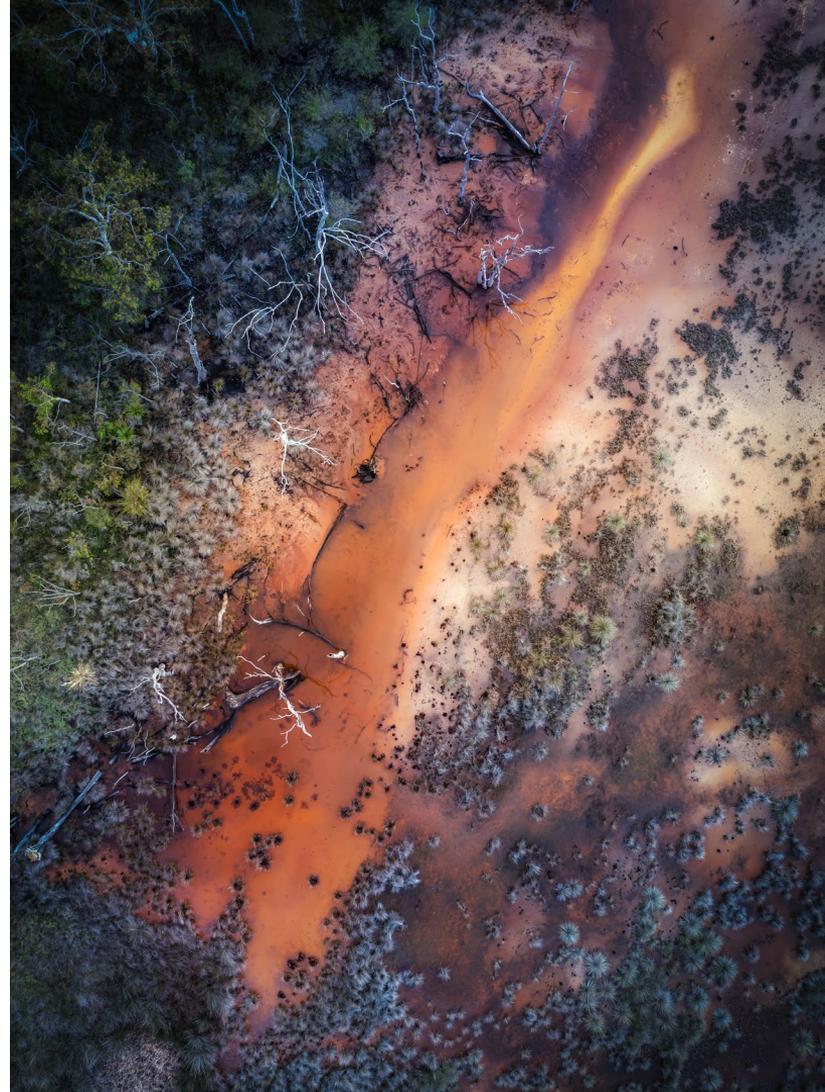
 sei.info@sydney.edu.au

 seisydney.bsky.social

 [Sydney Environment Institute](#)



*Subscribe to
our newsletter*



Register now!



Storytelling for Earthy Survival- Celebrating Thom van Dooren, recipient of the BBVA Foundation's Biophilia Award

Thur 19 Mar, 5:30-7:15pm
The University of Sydney



Climate Futures: Indigenous Knowledge & Student Action

Fri 13 Mar, 3:30-6:30pm
The University of Sydney

