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

Dr Rebecca McNaught

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Presented at the Iain McCalman Lecture

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The research, events and operations of the Sydney Environment Institute take place at the University of Sydney, on the Gadigal lands of the Eora Nation. We pay our deepest respects to Indigenous elders, caretakers and custodians past, present and emerging, here in Eora and beyond.

The Iain McCalman Lecture celebrates SEI co-founder and former co-director Iain McCalman's dedication to fostering and pioneering multidisciplinary environmental research.

The lectures aim to highlight the work of early to mid-career researchers working across disciplinary boundaries to impact both scholarship and public discourse.

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Front cover: A meeting of the Northern Rivers Community Resilience Alliance
Credit: Kathie Heyman

Introduction

Our family lives on the lands of the Minjungbal people of the Bundjalung nation in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. I acknowledge their ongoing custodianship of the lands that I call home and the enormous contributions of First Nations communities in response to the catastrophic 2022 floods in the Northern Rivers.

From Sydney, if you got in a car and drove 8 hours north, you would arrive in the region that I live and work in; we're perched in the far Northeastern corner of NSW. As the name suggests, there are a lot of very big rivers there - we have the Tweed, Brunswick, and Richmond Rivers, and the Clarence River is the largest on the East coast of Australia.

The Northern Rivers region is defined by its landscape - a giant extinct caldera in the north which created a mountainous hinterland and forms the headwaters of our large rivers. Despite the best attempts of First Nations people advising otherwise, Europeans settled along the rivers on the floodplains and used the rivers to transport cedar to river mouths. By the 1880s, much of the rainforest had been cleared and the river flats settled with dairy, cattle, and sugarcane.

I am a Research Fellow at the University Centre for Rural Health (UCRH) in Lismore. Our team focuses on applied and highly embedded multidisciplinary research under a wide definition of community health and wellbeing. Our research is the opposite to fly-in fly-out modes of rural research; it is informed by the communities, organisations, and governments we deal with on a daily basis, and we have opportunities to integrate our research findings into our daily interactions.

I am also a volunteer. I'm the President of the South Golden Beach, New Brighton and Ocean Shores Community Resilience Team. We set this team up with inspiration from the Red Cross in the aftermath of the 2022 floods, which affected over 1200 properties in our small area. We aim to improve the flow of disaster information from our community to authorities and vice versa, and to encourage a culture of kindness and care.

Since 2022, volunteer led community-resilience groups of different shapes and sizes have emerged in each of the seven local government area across the region. In my local government area, Byron Shire, there are 11 such groups.

I have never been one to fit neatly into a disciplinary box. My first qualification was in environmental science, and my PhD drew from public administration and development studies disciplines. But through all these disciplinary lenses, I have always looked at one thing: climate change and its impact on human and planetary health.

It is nice to feel supported by Youssef Nassef, Director of the Adaptation program at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat, who recently said we need to not only step outside the box that we are familiar with, but we need to remove the box entirely if we're going to address the climate crisis. He also called for a wellbeing revolution in the context of climate change, adding that we need to go beyond a problem-solution approach and create a vision of what we're working towards and collectively achieve it.

In this spirit, I have divided this lecture into four parts:

1. An introduction to the incredibly challenging climatic context that we're working in in the Northern Rivers.
2. How communities responded in the aftermath of the 2022 floods.
3. How the region is preparing for the future with the support of embedded researchers from UCRH; and
4. Some of my vision for how we could do things differently as policymakers, researchers, funders, and practitioners to support disaster affected communities.

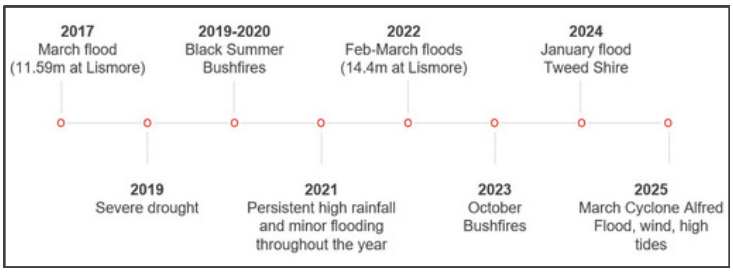
I will share insights from our research on the frontline, interspersed with my own perspectives, drawn from my lived experience as a community member impacted by floods and as a deeply concerned mother of two sons.

Compounding disasters in the Northern Rivers

First, some background on what I mean by the title, *Communities in the era of compounding disasters*. The increasing challenge that we are facing globally is that the fairytale idea of communities recovering after a disaster and reassuming their pre-disaster state is becoming unobtainable. Disasters are occurring at a frequency and intensity that means they are intersecting and connecting. Hazards also interact in complex ways on different timescales, creating compounding events. This is the reality that the Northern Rivers region is already experiencing.

Above: Murwillumbah in the Northern Rivers.
Credit: Olivia Katz Photography

Below: Timeline of disasters in the Northern Rivers, 2017-2025.



The 2022 Northern Rivers floods are an excellent yet tragic example of a compound disaster event[1]: a La Niña event in the Pacific region led to prolonged rainfall, while an East Coast low developed and became 'stuck' over the region. This led to floods and landslides with a wide range of direct and cascading impacts.

Here is a timeline of disasters that we have experienced in the past 8 years, demonstrating repeated floods, fires, and a cyclone – all magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic that decimated the arts and tourism industries in the region. These impacts sit within rural areas that are already challenged by distance, isolation, poor access to services, lower socio-economic status, and poorer health outcomes than our urban populations.

During cyclone Alfred in March 2025, our community group assisted SES with sandbagging for those unable to do it themselves. We arrived at one woman's house, who was still having the painting done on repairs from the 2022 flood. She said, despairingly: "I can't go through this again, I just can't".

We are living with the constant threat of disasters – what Schlosberg refers to as "living and breathing climate turbulence"[2] – in communities that are still highly traumatised and struggling to return to a pre-disaster state financially, emotionally, and physically.

I'll focus on the 2022 floods as an example of the scale of events we are experiencing in the Northern Rivers and why this is forcing shifts in how we think about and manage disasters. The 2022 floods in the Northern Rivers region surprised even the most prepared residents. The breadth and depth of these floods and the scale of the impacts is difficult to convey to those who weren't there.

Floodwaters in Lismore reached 2.4 metres higher than the previous record. Shocked residents were left clinging to their roofs. Businesses moved their stock to second storeys, but it was still destroyed. I interviewed someone recently who said they had been flooded in 2017 and, in response, had raised their house nearly 3 metres to get above the flood line. In 2022, the waters entered their raised house by 1.5 metres, again destroying everything inside.

But it wasn't just Lismore that was affected, and it wasn't just floods – the region also suffered hundreds of landslips, some of which were fatal. Roads were cut and in some cases are taking years to repair.

[1] Zscheischler, J., Martius, O., Westra, S., Bevacqua, E., Raymond, C., Horton, R. M., ... & Vignotto, E. (2020). A typology of compound weather and climate events. *Nature reviews earth & environment*, 1(7), 333-347.

[2] Schlosberg, D. (2023). Turbulence, converging crises, and environmental justice. In *Global Environmental Politics in a Turbulent Era*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

Left: Lismore flood levels display. The Rowing Club gauge stopped working after recording 14.36m on 28 Feb 2022. Credit: David Schlosberg

Above: Lismore city in flood at sunset. Credit: Cloudcatcher Media on Shutterstock

The numbers are horrifying. The East Coast floods were Australia's costliest flood on record, costing $3.3 billion in insurance payouts. The NSW and Federal governments spent over $3 billion in NSW on flood recovery. And at a local level, Byron Shire Council had the equivalent of 12 years' worth of its total infrastructure budget in road repairs alone.

The systemic failings linked with the 2022 flood are well documented: evacuation warnings were confused, with under-anticipation and lack of communication about the scale and timing of the unfolding event; the SES's Beacon system – used to log and respond to calls for assistance – failed.

The NSW Flood inquiry outlines that a reactive rather than proactive approach to resource deployments left local SES units on their own. Centralised decision-making at a State control centre, both during the emergency response and the subsequent recovery period, meant that local knowledge and input was often not considered.

"These failings challenge our notions of safety"

These failings challenge our notions of safety; of the misbelief that, when we call 000, someone will always come. The reality is that, even with the largest of investments, emergency services and government supports will never be able to be everywhere all at once in large scale events. This is especially the case in dispersed regional and rural areas, where government resources are stretched even at the best of times.

But the disaster itself is just the beginning. Disaster impacts are not only linked to the amount of water, soil, or sewage that went through your home; they are also linked to your capacity to engage – with formal disaster agencies, with recovery services, with online forms, with insurance assessors, with volunteers, and with fly-in fly-out disaster workers who talk of the holiday that they're going on after they've done 5 days on this hardship posting.

Our research at UCRH[3] has found that floods profoundly impact physical and mental health. Local health professionals were appalled to see cases of Rheumatic Fever in Lismore, due to children having to live in tents, with no toilets. A local study found a 23% increase in the number of psychiatric inpatient admissions at the Lismore Base Hospital following the floods.[4]

[3] Bailie, J., Matous, P., Apelt, B., Longman, J., McNaught, R., Morgan, G., ... & Bailie, R. (2024). Flooding and health in Australia: a scoping review and coauthorship analysis of published research. *BMJ open*, 14(12), e089039.

[4] O'Driscoll, B., Rahman, K. M., & Seamark, R. (2025). Changes in Admissions to the Adult Inpatient Mental Health Service of Lismore Base Hospital, Northern New South Wales, Following the 2022 Floods. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 33(6), e70114.

The cascading impacts of the floods are multipronged. Although I can't explore all of them here, it is worth highlighting that UCRH research has found[5,6] that flood insurance issues have been a major secondary stressor on mental health: access to insurance payouts was often linked to a household's ability to fight insurer decisions. Despite being designed as a protection mechanism, ironically insurance has become a source of harm.

Since the floods, there is a growing pool of people who are either severely underinsured or uninsured. Insurance companies refuse to renew policies, leaving the region more vulnerable to future disasters. This exemplifies the widening urban-rural divide linked with climate change: urban areas are less hazard-prone and have higher incomes, meaning insurance affordability issues aren't on the same scale.

Now that I've contextualised the complex and compounding impacts of these disasters and their implications for our region, I will turn my attention to what communities did in response to the chaos that unfolded in 2022.

Community response and strengths following the 2022 floods

We know that overall volunteerism is in decline in Australia, and that social cohesion is also declining – yet in disasters, communities step up. Communities is a term that can mean different things to different people, so in this lecture I refer to 'community' as a group of people with similar interests, cultures, or geographies who interact with each other on a repeated basis.

We found in our research[7] that communities across the Northern Rivers leapt into action and helped one another; relaying early warning messages, using social media and spreadsheets to log and direct assistance, distributing food, providing accommodation for friends, family and strangers evacuated from flood waters, and cleaning up afterwards. Elderly people who lost their usual at-home support services were supported directly by community members, in some cases for months afterwards. First Nations led organising was a vital support across the region, and the leadership of the Koori Mail stands out clearly. In rural areas, these post-disaster supports are built on existing social networks, linked with sports clubs, school P&Cs, community associations, friendship, and cultural groups. In the context of compounding disasters since 2017, these community networks have become stronger, more organised, and better connected with each event.

The aim here is not to advocate for replacing emergency services, but to demonstrate the value of community contributions. The community and emergency services have very distinct and important roles: one example that demonstrates these different roles is the different interpretations of the term 'welfare check'.[8] For emergency services, a welfare check takes place to determine whether someone is alive or needs hospitalisation or immediate rescuing. A welfare check in the eyes of a connected community is whether someone needs a casserole.

Maybe they have children who need minding, so that a disaster-affected parent can 'have a breather'; or maybe an elderly resident needs help having their precious china carefully wiped clean of mud. One does not negate the other – communities provide wide-ranging and ongoing support that outside assistance is unlikely to bring, or just like first aid, will fill gaps before outside support can provide relief. Given the climate is changing, we need to support communities to support each other.

Above: Flood Relief Fund Mental Health Support Group
Credit: Northern Rivers Community Foundation, Lisa Sorgini

[5] McKenzie, J. W., Longman, J. M., Bailie, R., Braddon, M., Morgan, G. G., Jegasothy, E., & Bennett-Levy, J. (2022). Insurance issues as secondary stressors following flooding in rural Australia—a mixed methods study. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 19(11), 6383.

[6] McNaught, R., Insurance is failing disaster hit communities – here's how it's deepening vulnerability in the Northern Rivers region of NSW, in Brady, K., Keen, L., Diane, N. (Eds) (2025) *Disaster Recovery Almanac* (Vol 2) HowWeSurvive, UNSW, Australia

[7] McNaught, R., Nalau, J., Hales, R., Pittaway, E., Handmer, J., & Renouf, J. (2024). Innovation and deadlock in governing disasters and climate change collaboratively-Lessons from the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Australia. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*.

[8] idem.

Women's efforts, the hidden backbone of flood recovery

Many of you will remember images of the 'Tinny Army' in the media. Images of many men performing heroic dinghy rescues in swollen rivers filled our screens, but women also rose to leadership roles and filled critical gaps. Our research[9], undertaken in partnership with Gender and Disaster Australia, has found that women's efforts were the hidden backbone of flood recovery; long after the disaster had passed and the media had moved on, women were still there, quietly leading sustained recovery efforts.

They coordinated food relief, managed donation hubs, created healing hubs, washed precious sentimental items, organised volunteers, and provided emotional support to neighbours and strangers. As one female interviewee told us:

> *It was more than about food ... people would just come and then we'd just hug them and they'd just cry ... the food relief turned into something deeper.*

Women's roles were not limited to unskilled tasks and care work. Women also brought professional skills to the recovery effort, such as event management, IT, nursing, communications, clinical psychology, and business management.

We found while men's involvement in disaster recovery tended to be concentrated on specific short-term rescue response and rebuilding, women tended to remain active for months or even years. For example, at a gathering of grassroots community-disaster organisers from across the region two years after the disaster, 87% of names on the contact list were female.

Our research confirms women's contributions are consistently overlooked and remain invisible during and after a disaster. It reflects a broader reality in Australia, where women's labour is historically undervalued. Women's efforts are invisible because it is undertaken outside of formal workplaces in garages, community halls and homes. It is invisible because their labour occurs in organisations that are emergent, rapidly evolving and often not yet incorporated. And it is invisible because of assumptions that community responses are chaotic and disorganised. This invisibility can lead to women's exclusion from formal disaster decision-making structures.

Yet its agility is what makes women's place-based community support so impactful, drawing upon social networks and a deep understanding of place and context to provide support to affected communities in ways that the broader system can't.

Although providing 'a seat at the table' for women organisers can be important, it is not just about 'adding women and stirring'. We need to reimagine what disaster leadership looks like. The strengths and attributes of women's community leadership – co-leading and collaborative approaches – are to be celebrated. Additionally, recognising affected communities beyond a 'victim' narrative is linked with psychological well-being and recovery.

Local research has found[10] that in order to overcome significant barriers to cooperation in disasters, there needs to be recognition of the sophisticated and essential contributions of women and community-led groups in disasters. Successful collaboration is based on trust, respect, and sustained relationships between disaster management agencies and community organisers, *especially outside of disasters.*[8]

Our institutions and governance systems are based on a stable climate and now need to be reimagined for ongoing turbulence. Neither fully centralised nor fully local governance of disasters will suffice; an interplay between formal and informal, and between scales, is required.

> "In my mind, we don't have a policy problem, we have a culture problem"

The good news is that this shared responsibility is already in global, national, state, and sometimes local disasters policies – albeit underdeveloped. In my mind, we don't have a policy problem, we have a culture problem.

But this culture is shifting at local and state levels. Cyclone Alfred – three years after the 2022 floods - demonstrated that positive changes are being made in the Northern Rivers. From here on in, we need to focus on how we take

[9] McNaught R, Pittaway E, Bethune L, Meade D, Longman J. 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. *Women's Health*. 2025;21.

[10] Pittaway, E., Longman, J., Webster, S., Howard, A., Rawsthorne, M., Matous, P., ... & Braddon, M. (2025). Recognition and relationship-building: key ingredients for effective collaboration between disaster management agencies and community. International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, 105858.

these policies out of the drawer and bring them to life, in ways that are respectful of the value-add that different organisations and actors present, and that enable communities to participate in the decisions that affect them deeply. A democratisation of disasters.

In the Byron Shire, we've been very fortunate to have a Council that values community's role in disasters. Our 11 resilience groups are included in the Council's Community Resilience Network and have been formally recognised by the Tweed Byron Local Emergency Management Committee – the lights and sirens of emergency management. Our groups meet quarterly with the Council, advocate for joint issues, and work closely with Council in preparedness.

Council has provided Starlinks to our groups which are set up in halls and used when communications are down in disasters for extended periods. During Cyclone Alfred, things worked differently and better than in 2022. We met daily with Council's Community Resilience Network and fed situation updates from our communities straight to the Council representative at the Emergency Operations Centre. Feedback in the Council's Cyclone Alfred debrief was that information flowed quickly this way, and feedback from our community was that having regular updates from authorities appeased anxiety.

We don't need to direct and engage communities – we need to mobilise and enable communities. This requires a shift in framing of how we think and act, moving from a focus on individual and household planning for emergencies in Australia to investing in place-based collective action and seeing communities as resources, with local knowledge and skills that are essential to effective response and recovery. Our work as embedded researchers in the Northern Rivers aims to assist in this transition from a reactive to a proactive approach to disasters.

Left: Dr Rebecca McNaught at an Alliance Training Day
Credit: Olivia Katz Photography

Our embedded research

Our previous research, supported by the Sydney Environment Institute, found that there was a strong desire from community resilience groups across the region to convene in a regional network to enable peer support and advocate jointly for common needs.

Local groups sat around the table at UCRH in December 2023 and decided to explore whether an alliance was feasible. After a gruelling couple of years since the 2022 disaster, the organisations agreed to bring together as many groups as possible from across the region to connect and reflect on what had been achieved, as well as identify what the groups needed.

In March 2024, 72 people from 50 grassroots groups and NGOs met in Lismore for the first time since the 2022 floods. The extent of the work that had occurred across the region was palpable. People were exhausted but buoyed by the opportunity to connect, and realised that many groups had been working at the coalface simultaneously. Agreement emerged that an alliance was something the region needed.

The Northern Rivers Community Resilience Alliance ('the Alliance') has now been in operation for 2 years. During its initial development in 2024, a vision was created: to be a self-sustaining, trusted alliance of place-based, community-led resilience groups and organisations. Early outcomes included the creation of a code of conduct, decision-making structures, and action planning. UCRH, in addition to providing the initial research that identified the need for an alliance, offered note-taking and guidance during its formation and contributed some funds towards catering the initial event.

The objectives of the Alliance are fourfold: first, to share knowledge and resources across the region; second, to provide mutual support and well-being, including peer support; third, to take collective action and seek collective funding; and fourth, to identify joint needs across the region and advocate for them collectively.

In collaboration with the Alliance, UCRH developed a research proposal to support its emergence, document its progress, and feed into further development. We obtained a small collaborative grant from the Sydney Environment Institute and an Innovations grant from the Healthy Environments and Lives National Network, which supported a part-time research assistant and contributed to funding an Alliance coordinator position. UCRH has provided ongoing support through literature reviews on alliance building, document analysis, interviews with Alliance members and learning events. We have also linked with researchers in Sydney focusing on disaster resilience policy and community organising.

Our research grants have also enabled exchange visits for communities and organisations from other disaster-affected areas such as Kempsey and Southeast Queensland to attend Alliance gatherings to share approaches and lessons learned. And we contributed to the development of a monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) plan. This plan outlines how the Alliance will track activities for donors, uses outcome harvesting to capture stories of impact, and monitors the health of the Alliance to ensure ongoing feedback and improvement. We are in the process of documenting the Alliance and have created its first health check.

Our collaborative work aims to document this innovative approach to community resilience building so it can be shared widely. This has already occurred through podcasts, pieces for The Conversation, and submissions to government inquiries. The Alliance is proving its strength in numbers and leveraging skills and auspice support from larger local groups, such as Resilient Lismore, Plan C, and the Northern Rivers Community Foundation, to access larger scale funding for community groups. It currently has significant momentum, having secured over $2.5 million in funding including from NRMA Help Fund, Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal, and state and federal governments. I can't thank these donors enough for investing in the future of our region.

Following Cyclone Alfred, the Alliance hosted a debrief where local groups could share their experiences. Identifying common challenges in communities across the region helps groups advocate collectively for changes in formal disaster governance systems. The difference in the weight of the voice of one small community group vs. 50 community groups is enormous and we have work to do on harnessing this power for positive change.

Above: Dr Rebecca McNaught at a meeting in Murwillumbah
Credit: Olivia Katz Photography

Our key findings so far are that the Alliance is the first of its kind in Australia, with little to no literature on similar community-led initiatives in disaster resilience. We have found benefits in having a parallel system for innovation, a place to gather and mobilise outside formal government led disaster arrangements.

Monitoring the health and impact of the Alliance along the journey is essential for its future success, and UCRH will continue its embedded work in the coming years with support from the Disaster Ready Fund. What we're illustrating here is that disaster resilience isn't just about new technologies and hard infrastructure, but about investing in and supporting local connection, knowledges and efforts - a type of social infrastructure.

In another example of our work at UCRH, funded by the Peregrine Centre for Rural Mental Health, we are collaborating with the Northern NSW Local Health District, Plan C, and the Northern Rivers Community Foundation to investigate the role of place-based community groups in supporting mental health and wellbeing outside of clinical settings since the 2022 floods.

Community response and strengths following the 2022 floods

Past research by my UCRH colleagues[11] following the 2017 Lismore floods found that the majority of flood affected people are unlikely to use formal mental health supports and UCRH research has also shown that many people in communities facing disasters prefer participation in community-led collective action to a clinical approach to mental health. We also know that community groups providing direct or indirect mental health and wellbeing support in the aftermath of disasters are far less likely to document and evaluate their work because they are so busy responding to such acute community needs.

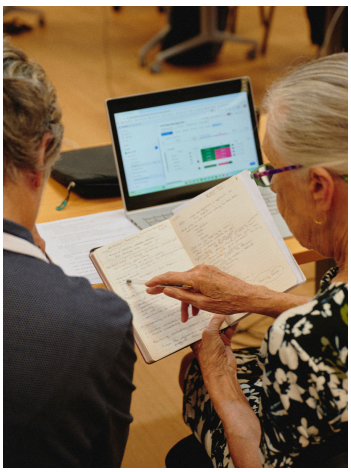
Adopting approaches used by the First Nations research team at UCRH[12], we are undertaking a co-autoethnographic approach to this research, where our partners are part of our research team; we meet monthly and use our experience of the flood recovery to input into the design, implementation and analysis of the research. We learn collectively from each other as we analyse the results and leverage our collective extensive networks.

In this project we are also working with four place-based community groups in the Northern Rivers to create case studies of their work in providing innovative approaches to supporting community mental health and wellbeing. In addition to standard academic outputs, we will provide each of these groups with a 2-page case study that they can use in their advocacy and funding applications based on the findings. This approach of providing a tailor-made deliverable for each group meant that we had 100% uptake from the groups we approached to be involved. This has been a great learning for us and an example of our reciprocal research practices at UCRH.

Our research is finding that having people in community groups – whether that is Indigenous led groups, neighbourhood centres, community led flood response hubs, or local charities – reach out and provide safe spaces, a 'cuppa', or providing items like furniture or clothing in a non-judgemental way enables access to support that people might not otherwise reach. It becomes a social and psychological safety net and sometimes a link to broader support services. One community group run by women who were themselves flooded in 2022 highlighted that people appreciated the understanding that fellow 'floodies' gave. These women offered an understanding ear when the rest of the town that hadn't been flood affected went on with life as usual while the flood affected waded through years of insurance, rebuilding and processed traumatic experiences. Through this project we are demonstrating the expansion of mental health and wellbeing support – documenting and legitimising community-led healing.

In 2026 we are turning our attention to include not only communities, but on the structural and system-wide adaptations necessary to improve both individual and community wellbeing in disasters. We have partnered with Healthy North Coast, the Primary Healthcare network in the Northern Rivers to document how the network of pharmacists, GPs, psychologists and allied health professionals are evolving in response to floods, incorporating responses to the 2022 event and Cyclone Alfred in 2025.

We are sitting around the table with an elite group of health practitioners and leaders to undertake this research together. Not only so we can improve our own practices in the region, but so we can build the evidence base in Australia on how health systems can adapt to catastrophic and compounding climatic events.



Left: Dr Rebecca McNaught at an Alliance Training Day
Credit: Olivia Katz Photography

[11] Longman, J., Braddon, M., Verlie, B., Schlosberg, D., Hampshire, L., Hawke, C., ... & Saurman, E. (2023). Building resilience to the mental health impacts of climate change in rural Australia. *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, 12, 100240.

[12] Bailie, J., Matthews, V., Laycock, A. F., Conte, K., Feeney, L., & Bainbridge, R. (2024). Reflecting on the quality of a methodologically pluralist evaluation of a large-scale Indigenous health research collaboration in Australia. *BMJ global health*, 9(8).

Vision for the future and calls to action

Disasters provide a window of opportunity and insights into advancing our approaches. They lay bare the cracks and deficiencies of our systems. They set the challenge for building a better outcome in the next disaster. Directing our focus on outcomes that not only enhance community wellbeing, but also the agency of communities must be at the centre of how we tackle disasters, especially in rural areas where resources are stretched. I'll now focus on three calls to action each for policy makers, donors, universities, and practitioners. These are supported by the desires of communities and the multidisciplinary research I've been a part of.

Calls to action for policymakers

- **Anticipate community mutual support in rural and regional communities:** In a large-scale disaster, where rural and regional communities are cut off from emergency services, government agencies can and should anticipate that community-led welfare initiatives will occur and policies need to reflect that. The SES's new Strategic Plan is demonstrating this shift.

- **Support a paradigm shift towards decentralisation and inclusion in disaster decisions:** A paradigm shift in localisation and shared responsibility is already evidenced in disaster policies. But the culture shift has to happen within an acceptance of the scale and frequency of disasters that we are facing and with an acceptance from the public that the cavalry won't always come.

- **Recognise communities through formal linkages:** By connecting communities with emergency, social and community development services and investing in these networks between disasters, relationships can be built, and trust established. Byron Council is demonstrating how this can be done.

Calls to action for funders

- **Fund a national community resilience fund, not fossil fuels:** As I walked along the streets of our local neighbourhood in 2022, through street after street of putrid rotting flood debris, I kept thinking over and over again – what if we invested in community resilience measures instead of fossil fuel subsidies – how different would our world look in the future? The elephant in the room here is Australia's addiction to fossil fuels.

  The Australia Institute estimates that in 2024/25 Australians subsidised fossil fuel producers and users to the tune of $14.9 billion, while we also continued to pour billions into disaster response. In order to put out the fire we need to stop throwing petrol on it. The Pacific region has set up the Pacific Resilience Facility, a community centred grant investment facility to help vulnerable Pacific people exposed to climate and disaster risks and is a self-sustaining financial model. Australia has committed $100 million to the facility as part of its international aid program. Let's do the same for Australia.

- **Distribute the resilience fund through ongoing small grant cycles:** Funding the types of proactive, place based, community led approaches to disaster resilience that I've described in this lecture need to be scaled up. There are some great examples of this, philanthropic granters such as the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal and Northern Rivers Community Foundation are the lifeline of many of our community efforts. I commend the bravery of the NRMA Help Fund to invest in innovation in the Northern Rivers. We need to get better at funding and scaling this work in Australia. We've done it with farmers and Landcare, so we can do it with disaster resilience. Even better – try granting differently rather than pitting communities against each other.

- **Support place based rurally led research:** We had another large research grant rejected the other day. It is a cracking project focusing on the mental health implications of disaster displacement journeys and importantly, co-designing interventions to enhance community Mental Health and Wellbeing outcomes in the context of prolonged displacement. We have a large number of keen partners, including the Local Health District, and I can't stress how much this research is needed in our region. We need special calls for rurally led research because place-based research enables findings to be integrated locally in disaster affected regions.

Call to action for universities

- **No survey without service:** research should do no harm. At UCRH we have a 'no survey without service' reciprocity-based approach. If you're interested in rural research, come and visit us, have a 'cuppa', hear what our challenges are and let's work together to build research capacity in the regions. But this isn't just an academic exercise, this is an opportunity to make a real impact.

Be prepared to establish long term relationships, to listen, to let locals lead and to make friends. Our collaboration with the Sydney Environment Institute is a great example of this. We need to do this to implement the University's strategy of addressing grand challenges for public good. If you're not prepared to make that investment, then I humbly suggest you look elsewhere. Our communities are tired, over researched and feeling extracted.

- **Provide opportunities to build the skills of Higher-Degree Researcher and Early Career Researcher colleagues.** Our Higher Degree Researcher and Early Career rural colleagues in Lismore, Broken Hill, Orange and Dubbo experience isolation and have a desire for networking, peer-support and in-person opportunities. To enable this, rural research centres should be given a weblink to attend events that occur in Sydney. Likewise, when putting in grants to hold events in Sydney, consider making it standard practice to include funding a rural researcher to attend in person. The Sydney Environment Institute has excelled at providing such linkages to Sydney and beyond.

- **Always follow up with providing feedback to rural participants and collaborators.** There are many times in recent years where our rural community members, NGOs and researchers have had their hard-earned knowledge and experience extracted, never to hear again of what became of it. We need to ask the people we are researching what purpose our research can serve for them and be open to novel ways of packaging it.

Calls to action for disaster practitioners

- **Invest in ongoing disaster practitioners in our regions at the local level.** Councils have biodiversity, waste and coastal management officers yet they don't have ongoing funding for resilience officers. In disaster prone local government areas this is essential – to build relationships in between disasters with community groups across local government areas so that when all hell breaks loose no one has to scramble to know who to contact. Resources, connections and trust are essential in disasters and we need investment in all of these in the Northern Rivers.

- **Support the development of soft skills in practitioners and volunteers.** I can't overstate the importance of moving beyond supporting the development of technical disaster skills to improving skills in community organising, volunteer management, leadership and conflict management skills.

  For NGOs, please go beyond the cookie cutter approach, each community and context is different, find ways to enable agility in your programming so that your supports can be flexible and responsive to needs.

- **Support the supporters:** Given women tend to volunteer on an ongoing basis, by including community groups in disaster governance arrangements, we by default also include more women, we recognise their contributions and leadership and listen to what they have to say. Funnily enough, they are more likely to pick up on the needs of breastfeeding and menstruating women, of women fleeing violence and the needs of young children. We need to invest in the development and promotion of women's grassroots leadership, and provide opportunities for self-care and regeneration. An important consideration is how can we best support the supporters?

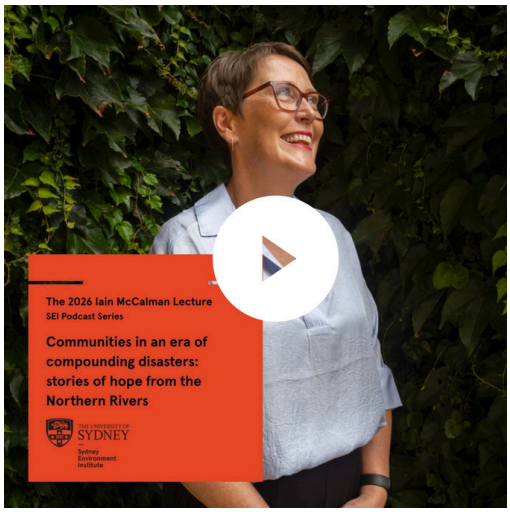
Final words

In closing, I'd like to reinforce one key message – that resilience is built by and with communities, not for them. The National Climate Risk Assessment launched last year is a warning bell for our future. There is a growing injustice in Australia: rural communities are bearing the brunt of climate disasters, in the insurance they can no longer afford, the volunteer hours they donate, and the quiet prolonged suffering they endure while the rest of Australia moves on from the headlines. Moving from a reactive to proactive approach to tackling disaster risks at a local level is a matter of survival. I hope I've outlined for you some ideas for how we might do this, combining collaborative research with community recognition and support, and how the Northern Rivers is leading the way.

This lecture is dedicated to my mother, Jenny McNaught, who passed away suddenly in 2025 in rural Victoria. She was a life member of the Bright Chamber of Commerce, a founding member of the Alpine Women's Group – 'Women with Altitude' – founder of the Bright Spring Festival, and was involved in the Bright Art Gallery committee. She exemplified the agency of rural women in problem-solving and supporting community building and wellbeing. Through this lecture, I wanted to honour her influence on me in ways I didn't get to before she passed away.

In honour of Jenny McNaught
1953-2025

Listen to the Lecture recording



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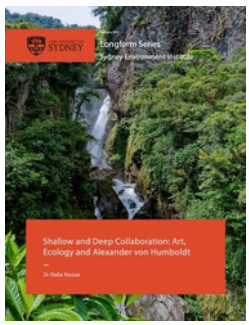

2021 Lecture

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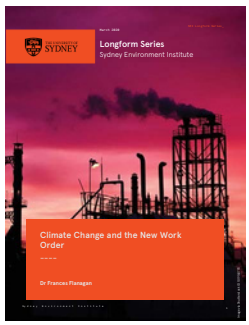

2019 Lecture

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Dr Frances Flanagan

Dr Rebecca McNaught
Credit: Christopher Wright (Instagram @chriswrightau)

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