Local history as a key to understanding disasters

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There is a widely held view that Australia has a very benign environment when it comes to major disasters. Whiet there is a lot of Australia in which hazard phenomena can rattle around without doing any significant harm, the 'disaster-free' perception is wrong. Indeed, natural disaster events, excluding drought, cost Australia, on average, $1.25 billion annually.

Following are descriptions of ten disasters that caused significant loss of life or economic harm — see if you can name the locality that bore the brunt:

1. Cyclone *Tracy* killed forty-nine people here on Christmas Day 1974.

2. A magnitude 5.6 earthquake killed thirteen people here on 28 December 1989.

3. A rockfall killed nine people here in September 1996.

4. A cyclonic storm tide drowned at least thirteen people here in January 1918.

5. A magnitude 6.9 earthquake destroyed this town in 1968.

6. The 'Black Friday' bushfires of January 1939 swept across much of this State.

7. Cyclone *Althea* did severe damage here in December 1971.

8. This Northern Territory town suffered severe flooding in February 1998.

9. A landslide killed eighteen people here in July 1997.

10. This city suffered severe flooding on Australia Day 1974.

If you scored less than six it proves my point about having a 'disaster-free' perception!

While this 'forgetfulness' enables us to expunge unpleasant experiences from our memories, it has an unfortunate consequence in that we very rapidly lose the knowledge of the disaster experience that will help us prevent, or at least reduce, the impact of a similar event in the future.

Not only is this historical material important to developing our understanding of the various hazard phenomena, it is essential to developing our understanding of the consequences of their impact. Many questions arise after disasters, such as: why and where were people killed or injured; why were some buildings destroyed or damaged and others left untouched; how did individuals and the community respond to the event; and why did it take some people longer to recover from the experience than others? If we have the answers to such questions we are much better placed to understand more about community vulnerability to the impact of a given hazard event.

The Australian Geological Survey Organisation initiated what is commonly known as the *Cities Project* in 1996 to improve our understanding of geohazards and the risks they pose to our existing and future urban communities. The *Cities Project* works closely with a similar research program co-ordinated by the Bureau of Meteorology. Both projects rely heavily on collaboration with emergency managers, State and Local Governments, universities, engineers, planners and the general public.

Most of the collections of historical disaster information I have found are maintained by national-level agencies with a focus on the hazard phenomena. Collections which contain detail on the consequences of the disaster at a local level are much harder to find. There are, however, a few outstanding examples such as the collection managed by the Newcastle Region Library relating to the 1989 quake.

Local libraries are an obvious and ideal collection point for information on the local experience of disaster events. Librarians are well equipped to seek, organise and maintain the eclectic range of material that is of value to a wide range of disaster researchers. The local library is also a social and cultural focus in the community. Where better to focus local studies, especially given that disasters are invariably defining moments in a community's history.

I am keen to establish a partnership between the *Cities Project* and the library community to both develop a stronger focus on the importance of historical information on the local disaster experience and to set in place some guidelines to follow when the next local disaster strikes so that the best and most useful collection possible can be established.

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8. Katherine, 9. Thredbo, 10. Brisbane
5. Meckering, 6. Victoria, 7. Townsville.
3. Gracemont (Waterfall River), 4. Mackay,
Answers: 1. Darwin, 2. Newcastle,