



## Background to the Conjola Connected Communities Project

The villages of the Conjola area were very badly impacted by the New Year's Eve bushfires. 3 lives were lost, 122 homes totally destroyed, another 10 deemed uninhabitable and many more sustaining major damage to sheds, loss of livestock and equipment. All of our forests were burnt out and a countless number of wildlife destroyed. It was a terrifying experience with fire fronts from three directions hitting our area. The one from the west arrived so fast and was so hot that no fire tankers were on hand to help and no water bombing helicopters could remain above Conjola Park. Helicopters redeployed just in time to save the village of Lake Conjola as the fires burned on all sides.



After the fires impacted the Conjola area, emergency relief supplies, some of which came in over the beach, were collected and distributed from the Lake Conjola Community Hall by a small group of volunteers who worked until they almost dropped. Goods distributed included ice and urgent water and food supplies and some emergency clothing. The one road into the villages from the highway was blocked by fallen burnt trees and power lines. The Princes Highway was closed in both directions as fires continued to burn in the surrounding areas.

For eight days we had no power or telecommunications (the only news of the 'outside' world was via old transistor radios if you were lucky enough to still own one). Uncollected garbage bins became rank in the streets and our sewerage system was at the over-flowing stage. Being completely cut off from outside help, those residents of Lake Conjola and Conjola Park who remained because they had a roof over their heads, realised that they needed to organise themselves in order to survive and begin moving forward.

At a hastily gathered group of concerned residents the decision was made to organise the remaining community. It was the start of our Conjola Recovery Team formation. Community volunteers appeared with an array of skills and expertise and the recovery process began. This hardworking Recovery Team of approximately 15 committed to remain in place until they are no longer needed by the Conjola community –

this may be measured in years, not months. Additional volunteers assist us when their time permits. COVID-19 has meant that the Recovery Team has had to work from home and conduct the recovery effort remotely. This is difficult but it is happening, and it is effective.

For the first seven weeks our volunteer recovery centre opened every day, all day (very long days), for people to drop in and register, be provided with someone to talk with, find a shoulder to cry on, receive basic necessities, find help with temporary housing and access to government support services that were available. Amongst other things we provided many free hugs! In the early stages, there was no support organised from Government, or Council, however, by mid-January, a Disaster Recovery Centre was established in Ulladulla by the NSW government offering a range of formal assistance services. By this stage we had already tapped into counselling services as many of our fire effected residents were struggling to cope after the fires.



As the weeks passed one of our biggest challenges was the coordination of the huge influx of donations from across the country to ensure they reach appropriate families. Our community hall was overflowing with clothing, toiletries, children's toys, linen, kitchen goods & food. Donations continued to pour in, and additional volunteers helped sort these donations as the task was enormous. If asked what people could do, we began asking for donations of vouchers for local businesses. We saw this as a win/win situation as the residents would be able to use them locally and help struggling businesses.

As time has moved on, we had groups of young and not so young people arriving for weekends to help with the clean-up. Tasks have included tree removal, cleaning up of yards, making driveways safe, carting rubbish to the tip and general sorting of donated goods. Donations have included cars, caravans and even short-term accommodation houses. We have endeavoured to match donations to appropriate residents and tasks required with those that have offered their services.

When torrential rain arrived on the 10<sup>th</sup> February and the lower areas of the town flooded it was almost too much for most to handle – we had to ask if the locusts were to be next! (little did we know what was coming with COVID-19). The flooding required another clean-up effort – not fun after all the residents had already had to deal with.



The needs of affected residents continued to change. Mental health issues are still being attended to as people are helped deal with their losses. The clearing of house blocks took a long time to commence and there has been high levels of stress. Some residents were relocated for a longer periods and so needed our help with sourcing furniture, household goods and physically moving.

Workshops were arranged on the rebuilding processes, starting gardens after fires and financial management. Social activities including community BBQs and visits from sporting stars helped with the recovery and brought some sort of normality.

At the request of the various small communities around Lake Conjola, the Recovery Team is now busy working on plans for new infrastructure to build resilience, connectedness and to ensure the wider Conjola community environment is enhanced following this disaster. A wide community consultation process has been conducted. A concept plan has been delivered *pro bono* by architects and this has been received very favourably by the Mayor and CEO of Shoalhaven City Council.

Council has requested that the Concept now be developed into a Master Plan. This is necessary to allow a Motion to be passed by all Councillors to give formal authority to the CEO to implement the Master Plan. The development of the Master Plan must be undertaken by the community as this is a community initiative. Council has, however, offered advisory assistance where it can to assist the development of the Master Plan.

The aim is to complete Stage One of the Master Plan by NYE 2020. This first stage, which is the residents' highest priority, includes a new memorial park with a playground, covered community assembly/evacuation areas and toilet facilities in the worst affected area of Conjola Park. Stage One will also include the start of a shared foot/cycle pathway joining the two villages of Conjola Park and Lake Conjola. This would bring together the communities from the highway to the sea and create another incentive to bring tourists back to the area. This has been a goal within the community since Council was first approached in May 2006.

Since the chaotic scenes of the evacuation from the Conjola Park area on NYE 2019 unfolded it has been clear that a new approach is needed for evacuations in the event of another disaster. The shared use pathway has come to be a major element in any future evacuation planning as it will be constructed to give an easterly exit route for residents should the single road leading to the safety of the beach ever be cut again. The pathway will follow the shoreline of Lake Conjola wherever possible.

Since this project has been raised by the community it has received enthusiastic support. It is envisaged that both mountain bike trails and BMX tracks will link with the access points provided by the shared use pathway. The pathway will be commenced from both ends – Lake Conjola and Conjola Park and meet in the middle. Extensions are planned to Fisherman's Paradise and Narawallee/Mollymook. The intention is to introduce cycling as a major drawcard to visitors to the Conjola area.

Our community recovery process will go on for a long time as needs change and rebuilding begins. However, this project has the whole of the community excited and anticipating a brighter future.