

Anarchy in the Uki! How a hybrid of structure and autonomy can exist in community self-organisation

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Abstract

Self-organising community-led emergency responses and recovery are here to stay. Increasingly frequent, more severe, longer and more widespread natural hazard events mean that the demands placed on official response and recovery agencies will outstrip capacity. Drawing on a mix of first-hand accounts from 2 community leaders and excerpts from research interviews with community members, this paper focuses on 2 linked case studies of community self-organisation; the experiences of greater Uki (Uki and surrounds) and the experiences of the Byrill Creek community, which sits within greater Uki but has its own Community Resilience Team. These case studies serve as a useful comparison of how community self-organisation and activation can be successful, but different, in 2 locations despite encountering similar challenges during the same flood event. They show how pre-organised and decentralised structures combined with strong links with emergency services can be mobilised to support community self-efficacy. The requirement for flexible approaches to enable communities to plan and self-organise in ways that suit their contexts and compositions is an underlying theme. Accommodating these idiosyncrasies is one of many challenges facing emergency

management organisations as they transition to a complex and balanced power-share with communities and identify ways to integrate with the cooperative, democratic and sometimes fragile forms of anarchy they possess.

Interviewer: *What was it that helped you most after the flood?*

Resident: *Community support, darling, just community... hugs, hugs and just people really caring about what's happening.*

Background

Communities will always be first responders in emergencies and disasters and will activate to protect their neighbours and friends and their animals and their possessions, especially when the scale and magnitude of an event stretches the capacity of formal response organisations. In Australia, and in the context of climate change, with expectations of more intense, prolonged, worsening and concurrent natural hazard events (floods, bushfires, cyclones, heatwaves), the need to support and enable communities to prepare, respond and recover from these events is well recognised. A recent independent review of the response to floods in New South Wales during February and March 2022 (the event focus in this paper) acknowledged the role of community activation in saving lives and assisting recovery and recommended the creation of a Community First Responder Program to support and empower community-led initiatives.¹

Case studies of successful community-led and volunteer groups have analysed the various challenges encountered by these groups to gain

1. 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry, at: www.nsw.gov.au/nsw-government/projects-and-initiatives/floodinquiry.

legitimacy and the authority to operate (e.g. McLennan *et al.* 2021; Nissen, Carlton & Wong 2022). Support in the formation and development of these groups by ‘insiders’ in the paid and volunteer workforces of emergency services organisations had been recognised, and been found to contribute to their success.

This paper includes firsthand accounts of community self-organisation and activation in the greater Uki area (that encompasses the community of Byrrill Creek) in 2022. In addition to these accounts, de-identified data were collected from interviews with Uki residents on their experiences of the 2022 flood. These had been used to provide additional information about the community activation and organisation. These data were collected as part of a Natural Hazards Research Australia funded project that was supported by New South Wales State Emergency Service (NSW SES) and Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (see Taylor *et al.* 2023). This project included interviews and surveys with residents in areas of New South Wales and Queensland who were affected by floods during the period January to July 2022. Interviews were held with 192 residents; 100 from New South Wales and 92 from Queensland. Of the New South Wales interviews, 73 were with residents of the highly affected Northern Rivers area. Eleven of these interviews were with residents from around the Uki area, including 2 that were conducted with the authors.

This research received Approval 11902 from the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Eastern Australia floods in 2022

During 2022, there was extensive flooding in Australia and all states and territories experienced flood events. The flood event that is the focus of this report was experienced in late February to early March. The greater Uki area is located in the Tweed Shire local government area in the north of the Northern Rivers region in New South Wales. The record flooding that was experienced followed a period of wetter-than-average conditions, with higher rainfall, greater soil moisture and higher groundwater levels. A persistent La Niña event linked to climate change created conditions that left the landscape prone to flooding.

In the period before and around the flood (23 February–15 March), rainfall exceeded 1,700mm. Uki and Byrrill Creek were within an area hit with by a ‘rain bomb’ and received daily rainfall of around 500–600mm; exceeding prior daily rainfall records dating back to 1911. This extreme 24-hour rainfall reached 0.2% Annual Exceedance Probability (AEP) (1-in-500-year) and was part of more prolonged record rainfall. The height of the flood occurred on Sunday 28 February 2022. The river gauge on the Tweed River at Uki showed the river level rose more than 12m to a peak of 13.45m (normally sitting around 1–2m). Recorded river volumes were more than twice as large as historical floods, including the previous major flood in 2017 (Lerat *et al.* 2022). The flooding at this time has been referred to by emergency management spokespeople and politicians as ‘unprecedented’ and was certainly exceptional. Importantly, this also meant that the flooding was outside the lived experience of residents who were, in general, familiar with the risks and effects of flooding in the area.

Community descriptions: the geographical and community context

Uki is a village at the base of Wollumbin (Mount Warning) in northern New South Wales. It is situated on the banks of the Tweed River high in the catchment and 12km southwest of the main urban centre of Murwillumbah. The village is surrounded by rural properties and multiple occupancy communities that are spread across thin alluvial plains and heavily forested hills with the occasional grazing plain. This landscape forms neighbourhoods, many of which were previously independent settlements. The greater Uki area has a population of approximately 3,000 people, of which around half would consider themselves to live in the village of Uki itself. The community comprises a mix of farmers and those seeking alternative lifestyles, with an increasing percentage of post-COVID ‘tree-changers’ who have recently settled in the area.

Byrrill Creek is one of the small communities within greater Uki and is located 12km west from Uki village. The Byrrill Creek community comprises about 150 people, mostly over 50 years of age and many retirees. There are only 4 families with children in this area. Many of the older residents settled and created multi-occupancy communities in the rainforest or on the farmland around 40 years ago with aims to be self-sufficient and away from crowds. Because Byrrill Creek is a bushfire- and flood-prone area, these older residents are used to working together in times of crisis. Most of the community would consider themselves ‘alternative greenie free thinkers’.

We’re well-positioned as far as being able to look ourselves; we come from a rural background but we’re very close to Nimbin obviously, so we’ve got a lot of hippies – I’ll just come out and say it – hippies, living in the hills around here as well, so we’ve got this interesting mix of farming folk and hippies in the hills, and we like each other and live very nicely next to each other but there’s a wide range of capabilities within that and people needing to be looked after and people looking after others.

[Uki resident]

Community organisation and supporting structures in place prior to the 2022 flood

The communities of Uki and Byrrill Creek are generally resilient and self-reliant. Two NSW Rural Fire Service brigades and the Uki Flood Group (now a multi-hazard organisation, Resilient Uki) and the Byrrill Creek Community Resilience Team (BCCRT) are testimony to this.

The area has been declared a disaster zone 5 times in the last 5 years. During the last big flood in 2017, Uki experienced an extremely high-risk swift water rescue of more than 20 people using kayaks. In addition, multiple houses were lost during the summer bushfire season in 2019–20 when bushfires came within 7kms of the Byrrill Creek community. In response to experiences of severe natural hazard events, a culture of disaster preparation

at the household and neighbourhood level has grown over time in Uki and Byrrill Creek.

In 2015, the Uki Flood Group began implementation of a neighbourhood system where designated neighbourhood coordinators were the point of contact between residents of their allocated area and the NSW SES. This system was formalised into the Community Action Team model by NSW SES. This model was further developed and revolutionised by the Australian Red Cross as the Community-led Resilience Team (CRT) model (Australian Red Cross 2020). The Uki Residents Association has a resilience officer and ‘Get Ready Days’ are undertaken annually. Active members of the community participate in regional disaster-related forums and connect with people in other towns in the Northern Rivers region. During the 2019–20 bushfires, a fact-checked emergency Facebook group for Uki was established to provide accurate disaster-related information. The Uki Flood Group also has a website with response information and access to flood gauge information.

At Byrrill Creek, floods come once or twice a year and restrict access to the community for a day or two. Generally, this is a fun time for the community as, due to flooded causeways, they can’t go to work or school. Even the newer community members are prepared for staying home for a day or two. In 2017, Cyclone Debbie caused major flooding and ‘Byrrill Creekers’ lost the main access bridge over the Tweed River. They resorted to canoeing and rock hopping to get to work and school for several months until a new bridge was constructed.

...because we are high in the catchment, we’re used to flooding. It’s a common thing for our residents to be flooded in for a day or two, a number of times in a year; we have little causeways going over said upper-level tributaries, so you can’t get the kids to school. We quite like it actually... Because of that, we’re all generally a little bit prepared with things – food and stuff like that as well, and a lot of people are on standalone solar and with water tanks and those kinds of things.

[Uki resident]

Communication, specifically a lack of internal community communications during the 2017 flood, had been a major challenge in Byrrill Creek. A Facebook Messenger group was set up, which slowly grew to include many of the new residents of the community as they began to reach out for help and information. Interestingly, many original residents were the last to join and use this group as they did not see nor feel the need or were too ‘free thinking’ to use Facebook Messenger. This forum was used to share information about flooded bridges, causeways, lost animals and other Byrrill Creek-related information.

In 2020, the Australian Red Cross advertised support for community resilience teams and the Facebook Messenger group was used to recruit interested members. Twelve people attended the first meeting and by the end of that meeting all 6 areas of Byrrill Creek had designated neighbourhood or street leaders and buddies. This group, the Byrrill Creek CRT (BCCRT), met monthly for the first 2 years to push forward disaster preparedness

activities to make their community capable and adaptive at times of need. At the time of the 2022 floods, the BCCRT was a well-developed team and was on the cusp of creating an alternative communications network using VHF radios, with assistance from Australian Red Cross.

In addition to the local community self-organisation, greater Uki receives support from the council (Tweed Shire) with a Community Resilience Network that is made up of community representatives. The network informs the response through the Local Emergency Management Committee that operates under New South Wales legislative arrangements. Solid relationships have been forged between CRT members in both case study locations and with the Australian Red Cross, local NSW RFS, the NSW SES and the local Council Resilience Officer.

Local floods and community response

At the time of the 2022 floods, greater Uki had some neighbourhoods under versions of the CRT model that were at various stages of activation, with Byrrill Creek being developed as a formal CRT. Despite the preparedness and engagement of communities, the flood events caused extensive disruption. The area experienced multiple landslips, bridge wash-outs and flooded houses as well as fences and animals being washed away. Communications and physical access to homes and services were major issues in both communities. Due to the widespread flood event, it became apparent that immediate support would not be possible.

Most residences in Uki were not directly affected but all had access restricted in some way. Local residents with excavators and tractors responded by chipping away at landslips, raising concerns for their safety. The lack of communication meant that the Resilient Uki group didn’t know who was injured, where the landslips were or who was flooded and who needed help. In the early stages, they tried to organise and send out information and tried to problem-solve in an ad hoc way. Food and fuel were early priorities. In Byrrill Creek, residents experienced flood waters that were 5 metres higher than previously experienced. Power and phone connections were lost and, tragically, one member of the community was washed away and died while trying to reach his home by foot.

As in Uki, early response included assessment of the status of residents and using chainsaws, tractors, bobcats and excavators to establish roads into properties and gain access over or around landslides. When floodwaters started receding, the extent of the damage was evident. Four bridges were lost, massive landslides covered at least 8 sections of road and many roads were unusable due to wash-outs. Many driveways were covered by mudslides; one narrowly missing a house and one house was completely inundated. Three members of the BCCRT had satellite internet connection and had set up generators to enable communications. This allowed phone contact with the Mullumbimby SES Commander and other outsiders throughout the 2 weeks of the community’s isolation. These 3 homes became vital communication hubs as community members tried to contact family and family tried to reach community members.



Receding flood waters exposed extensive damage to large sections of local roads.

Image: Natascha Wernick

Community self-organisation and local challenges

...it's a great little village, it's a very community-minded village. We had a community hub in our hall where services and people were connected. We had people that took on the roles of coordinating that scene; the whole hall was full of donated stuff – stuff for people to clean houses, bedding, clothing, food, everything. And there was a whole team, the "mud army" we called them, and people would just come to that hall, see who needed help, see who was stuck and needed their driveway dug out, or whatever, to get them out, and all that sort of stuff, and together with the fire brigade, that's what happened.

[Uki resident]

In Uki, the isolation experienced allowed for a sense of cohesion and connection to emerge (a 'crisitivity' – a crisis opportunity). Neighbours checked in with, and assisted, neighbours. Even those who did not usually get on together worked side-by-side with a shared sense of purpose. The situation allowed for local leadership to emerge and for individuals to assess their capacity to help others.

A mix of safety concerns and adversity created favourable conditions for the mobilisation of neighbourhoods. Predominately, these were access to food, fuel, medical services,

power, telecommunications and, in some cases, water. Creative solutions were found and implemented among clusters of neighbours and these self-led groups were largely free to work as they pleased.

Fortunately, the supermarket in Uki and the community hall and one petrol bowser remained operational. Once alternative energy sources were established for these facilities, food could be kept refrigerated and fuel was stored and distributed. Access to Murwillumbah was gained within the first week following the flood for people with 4-wheel-drive vehicles as there was 40cm of mud on roads and large sections of the road had washed away.

With no internet or telecommunications, arrangements could only be made by word of mouth. Minor medical needs were attended to by neighbours and major needs were assessed by registered nurses who lived in the village. Navigating roadblocks to gain access for medical support for the injured was a challenge. Later on, coordinated help was organised to get medication scripts filled by the pharmacy in Murwillumbah, but initially this was haphazard.

Medical needs of livestock were, in some ways, more difficult to attend to than for humans. Mud fever and infections were prevalent and many dead livestock had to be buried as a priority in the first few days. Containment was also an issue as creek-line fences had been washed away. Stock and companion animal food stores also had to be brought in. NSW Local Land Services assisted with fencing and feed was provided from public donations. A veterinarian from the Gold Coast generously donated wire and solar set-ups for temporary electric fencing. Food for household animals ran out very quickly.

In addition to the autonomous neighbourhood groups, Resilient Uki established a focal point for community support in the community hall. Butcher's paper was tacked to the walls and used to chart decisions and task jobs that needed doing. This open (visual) approach made it easy for community members to view progress and enabled those needing help to add to it while being mindful of protecting privacy of personal information.

Once a road route into Uki was established, external (spontaneous) volunteers arrived to help. This provided much-needed assistance but also raised challenges for management and coordination. The hub was able to help coordinate this and spread the help around to the broader community, albeit in a haphazard way.

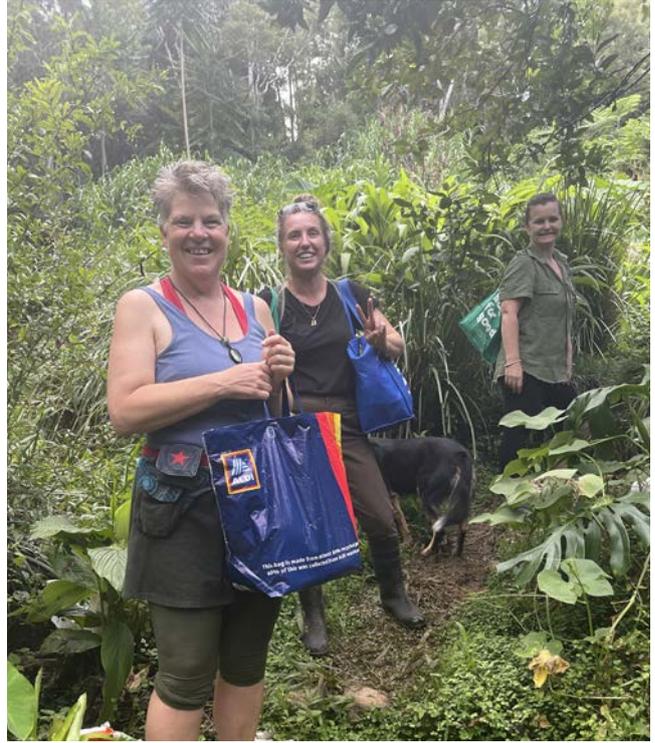
So, we were just thrown into dealing with spontaneous volunteers and donations and that was hectic, it was really hectic. What we found is that all our community were busy helping either themselves or their neighbours – they were all busy, or if they weren't, they didn't have the capacity to be, so we were sort of full. We had a lot of people whose houses went under and who needed help and so the outside help was really great. It was chaos though, because we still really didn't have an overview of exactly where and who and what...

[Author, Resilient Uki]



Australian Defence Force personnel gather and dispose of rubbish at the war cenotaph in Uki.

Image: Natascha Wernick



Byrill Creek residents Natascha Wernick, Holly Sullivan and Kaz Lopez carry supplies around a landslip.

Image: Sue Mothersole



Groceries were carried across the broken bridge over flood waters at Byrill Creek.

Image: Natascha Wernick

After initial challenges setting up processes for coordinating help, resources and essential provisions at the Uki community hub things became more orderly. Communication was established with the Murwillumbah community hub and they were able to support each other. The local council assisted by using an emergency dashboard to request the specific donations that Uki required. Important resources were also supplied through personal contacts with businesses, individuals and communities in other areas. Marine Rescue NSW assisted by bringing much-needed fuel to the area using a trailer with a fuel pod. This support was later coordinated by the NSW SES.

The arrival of the Australian Defence Force nearly 2 weeks after the flood lifted the morale of the community, both as a source of additional support but also as a symbol of help being provided by the Australian Government. By the time they arrived, many flood-affected houses had been cleared by residents and non-local 'mud army' volunteers. People's possessions were piled outside houses and the NSW RFS had helped to hose out properties. However, with no rubbish collection service, the Australian Defence Force personnel cleared domestic rubbish as well as helped with clearing and cleaning up community spaces of schools, sports fields and helping with the heavy lifting during council collection of flood debris.

Throughout this period the Uki hub worked with a 'loose' structure. Those who were present in the hall, were the team. Decisions were made by those who were there at the time. The decision-making process was fast, fluid and on-the-fly. Likened to a 'anarchistic alliance'. The Uki hub closed down after around 3 weeks and free meals were offered for a further 3 weeks to bring the community together. The Resilient Uki group decided not to persist with recovery support or create potential dependencies. Rather, they became a bridge between government services and the community, organising outreach sessions in the hall and promoting these through informal networks.

In Byrrell Creek, the community was smaller and the BCCRT was active and engaged ahead of the 2022 flood. Also, the community was acutely affected and isolated for longer. Communication problems, due to lack of working telecommunications, meant that communication within the community was non-existent, unless face-to-face. The BCCRT team leader maintained connections with the NSW SES at Murwillumbah using satellite internet and a generator. This connection was reassuring during the prolonged period of isolation and in dealing with the various challenges that arose.

By day 4, community members with bobcats and machinery were working in a coordinated way to clear the 12–15 landslips over the roads, a 4-wheel-drive access was established and an online food order from a supermarket was coordinated. Managing urgent medicine requirements for the largely elderly community was assisted by the NSW SES. Community members gathered at a pick-up point with jerrycans to access fuel. In the evening, the community gathered at the broken bridge to carry bags of much-needed groceries over the swollen river.

On day 5, food and supplies from the NSW Police and other people began arriving by motor bike or were dropped at the

broken bridge. Communication had been established with the Uki and Murwillumbah community hubs that organised volunteers from outside the affected areas to walk in the supplies over landslips, broken roads and bridges to get to the rest of the community. Such practices might be regarded as 'unsafe' but had to be undertaken by people to receive food and other supplies as there was no 'official' help.

By day 6 and 7, the BCCRT team had set up a community food hub and was able to focus on assisting community members as it had developed a method of delivery from the Murwillumbah community hub. At this time, a community member experienced a medical emergency and an access route had to be found to get them to a medical specialist. This entailed cutting a fence to access a temporary road on private property between 2 neighbours who were not on speaking terms. This was negotiated effectively.

More than 2 weeks after the flood, power and telephone connections were restored and road access was reinstated. The frustration around communications as identified before the 2022 flood was a focus for the BCCRT during the post-flood period and was raised with numerous recovery organisations when they asked what the community needed. The Australian Red Cross donated 12 UHF radios 2 weeks after the floods. The organisation, GIVIT, also organised \$30,000 for the purchase of VHF and UHF radios and equipment to network the greater Uki area to enable community communications.

Reflections

These case studies of community response to the 2022 flood provides a number of insights. The Uki and Byrrell Creek communities stepped up and worked with collaboration, neighbourliness and kindness. Both communities faced similar types of effects with relatively limited flood inundation of properties but with challenges caused by isolation resulting from landslips, damage to roads and loss of electricity and telecommunications. Both communities had experiences of prior flooding and had existing relationships in place within community via CRT-style structures as well as supportive personal connections to individuals outside the community in official agencies like Australian Red Cross, NSW SES, NSW RFS and local government. Although there were differences in scale (size of each community and period of isolation), there were many similarities in the challenges that needed to be addressed. Specifically, loss of community communications, initial assessments of community safety, clearing of roads and landslips for access, managing medical needs and injuries, obtaining supplies of food and fuel, coordinating tasks and managing help and supplies.

Organisationally, although working to a community CRT model, there were noticeable differences in how community self-organisation worked in practice. In Uki, there was an agile and open 'anarchistic alliance' in the community hub that helped to direct activities across the community, while allowing neighbourhood groups to manage themselves autonomously. In Byrrell Creek, there was a structured and developed approach

that enabled BCCRT members to lead and manage different activities and coordinate through a team leader. Both approaches worked and both have left their respective CRTs with issues to resolve and improve before the next flood or bushfire.

Whether the differences in community self-organisation were driven by different community demographics, topography, existing social structures, individual capacity or leadership styles is open to debate. These case studies demonstrate the need to allow communities flexibility to self-organise as they choose.

When reviewing the challenges and lessons identified by community leaders, many similarities are noted. Community safety was an issue, with untrained people doing dangerous work. Several dangerous activities occurred as soon as the rains stopped, with people attempting to regain access to unsafe zones (e.g. crossing swollen creeks and rivers). In Byrrell Creek, the decision to walk in fuel and groceries across the broken bridge at night was clearly unsafe. The lack of communications was a fundamental challenge for both communities and was identified as essential to address and to enable their community organisations to function effectively. This was recognised as a priority and has been addressed by establishing UHF/VHF radio networks. In Uki, ad hoc approaches and lack of processes and deliberate capacity building need improvement alongside a need to increase access to resources, such as generators, gas cooking facilities, water filtration equipment and solar lighting. Plans are in place to embed skills in all neighbourhoods, including psychological first aid and physical first aid.

In Byrrell Creek, the emphasis is on building better preparedness at the neighbourhood level and also for the community leaders. The need to prioritise self-care and manage fatigue is recognised and managed in professional emergency management but is new to community leaders. The extended period of community isolation and activation was exhausting for those in the Byrrell Creek flood situation. Finally, having support from professional contacts within emergency services was incredibly valuable. The ability to ask questions day or night to trusted contacts in Australian Red Cross, NSW SES and the Resilience Officer at the local council provided great reassurance and relief from some of the pressures of personal responsibility during the many novel and uncertain situations encountered.

There was no time for the real world, or my real paid work. It began as soon as I woke until I fell asleep at night. By day 14 I was extremely exhausted... I felt very under trained and under resourced. Although I had received the Red Cross training manual, I did not really grasp the disaster cycle, the purpose of many of the agencies and the many other social, environmental and physical aspects of disasters. In addition, losing a member of our community in the flood was extremely hard and, although I know it was not my fault and I couldn't have done anything, it is very hard for me to not feel some sort of responsibility.

[BCCRT]

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