

## **Building in Dangerous Places on the Coast**

The recent catastrophic fires in Victoria again highlight the fact that many Australians live in hazardous places. Climate change projections indicate that situations such as those caused by bushfires will worsen as the continent gets drier and hotter. But dangerous places are not limited to forested valleys and hillsides. They are also on the coast.

Two types of dangers are waiting to hit those living in many coastal areas. Extreme events could strike any Australian city with devastating effect. Storm surges pushing tidal waters metres above high tide are expected to be more frequent and when combined with river floods will wash over and through many towns and cities. Property and infrastructure damage will not be restricted to a thousand homes as on 7 February, but potentially to tens of thousands. Waves will wash other houses into the sea making the 1974 event in NSW and SEQ look like a picnic.

The second danger is more insidious—it is the creeping event of more and more frequent high tidal inundation making living more unpleasant and reducing property values as well as impairing the functioning of essential services. Evidence for the impact of such incursions may appear to be slow in coming, but again all projections are for low-lying coastal lands to be more exposed to higher sea levels over the next few decades. We are beginning to see these effects now when tides exceed forecast levels.

What to do in coastal areas that will be impacted by higher sea levels and storm surges in the future? Should we take the view that people have a right to live in dangerous places if they want to and if so what are the consequences for society? Does the taxpayer through governments have an obligation to offer support in whatever form to allow building and re-building to take place in hazardous areas in the knowledge that these structures will be damaged and perhaps destroyed by extreme and eventually by creeping events?

Or should coastal planning and management authorities take a more regulatory position that imposes severe and binding constraints on property owners who seek to live and construct in dangerous places? If so, how do we make these conditions equitable and consistent across Australia? Should the federal government be involved or is this issue a matter to be resolved at a local level following some guidance from state and perhaps science bodies like the CSIRO?

Climate change adaptation is not a trivial matter in this country. If we are to take the IPCC projections seriously in our populated coastal regions there must be a national debate as to how best to minimize risk and impacts otherwise future generations will be left with huge burdens.

The Australian Coastal Society welcomes discussion of these issues. It will be maintaining a national perspective and seeking to input policy at all levels of government. Once state chapters are established it is expected that more local inputs will occur on how best to resolve particular planning and management decisions of hazardous coastal sites and regions.

Information on the Australian Coastal Society can be obtained from the web site [www.australiancoastalsociety.org](http://www.australiancoastalsociety.org). Membership information is available from the Secretary Dr Bev Clarke ([beverley.clarke@flinders.edu.au](mailto:beverley.clarke@flinders.edu.au)). The web site is serving as a hub with a range of links to other coastal sites. We have also set up a discussion group process.

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