EXPOSURE OF PARK MANAGEMENT STAFF IN VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS AND TRAUMA: RETHINKING OUR APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Park management staff regularly respond to incidents in parks that can lead them to experience or witness trauma. These incidents include assaults, suicides, anti-social behaviour, search and rescue operations, wildfires, and deaths and serious injuries caused by accidents. Exposure can generate what is known as Critical Incident Stress. Staff are often first responders for many of these incidents but are not typically seen by their agencies as performing emergency service functions except when being tasked to fire or flood response. This paper explores how one agency, Parks Victoria, has approached managing staff exposure to trauma. It argues that historically, there has been a focus on the management and prevention of physical injuries in the workplace, and a tendency to restrict recognition of stress impacts on staff to those incidents tied to natural disasters such as wildfires. Numerous strategic actions to address this shortfall are suggested and explored. The discussion has relevance to other park management agencies and reflects the author's experience working in park management in different parts of Australia over the last twenty-five years.

Key words: Critical incidents, trauma, park management, organisational resilience

INTRODUCTION

A career in park management brings many unique and unforgettable experiences. Opportunities to care for the environment, be part of a team, and serve the community are just some of the elements that make these careers fulfilling.

There are, however, other aspects to these jobs, especially in operational roles, that are not commonly associated with either the public's perception of 'rangering', or the way that agencies themselves describe these roles when advertising or managing them as part of a workforce. Exposure to traumatic events, or what at times can be classed as 'critical incidents', are for many an element of their working life.

In a park setting they can include assaults, drownings, suicides, homicides, vehicle accidents, rock climbing and mountain bike accidents, search and rescue operations, vandalism, animal welfare incidents and anti-social behaviour. Park staff may be first responders or support the work of other emergency services in these situations. In some parks, these types of incident may occur on numerous occasions during a year. Occasionally, park staff may experience situations where their lives are threatened or lost.

The scale or severity of incidents can vary greatly. At the most severe are what are termed Critical Incidents. These are events that overwhelm an individual's or group's capacity to cope with what they have experienced (Lunn, 2000, p.48; US Forest Service, 2014, p.4). Critical incidents include, but are not limited to, those incidents where staff feel that their safety or life has been put at risk, and where staff have witnessed death or serious injury. Critical Incident Stress (CIS) may eventuate from exposure to such events. At the same time, an accretion of exposure to repeated events that may not all be critical, but still associated with trauma, can generate an impact on a person's well-being (Jenner, 2007, p.26).

This paper seeks to examine how one agency, Parks Victoria, has responded to the exposure of staff to trauma, critical incidents and CIS in the workplace. Both formal and informal approaches to CIS and its management are discussed and the trajectory of the agency's recognition or awareness of CIS is explored. In doing so, the paper draws a picture that is potentially reflective of how park agencies in other jurisdictions in Australia have tackled this challenge. It is important to note at the outset that the author's perspective is based

on insight gained as an employee in three Australian park agencies, not as a health professional.

The objective of this paper is not to portray a career in park management as being inherently traumatic. These careers are typically associated with positive, life-affirming experiences in strong and resourceful teams. However, there is significant potential for staff to experience involvement in a traumatic incident at some point, either during what might be termed 'normal duties', or as part of a structured response to significant natural events such as wildfires. This exposure may also accumulate across a career. While forming what may only be a small fraction of the overall time worked by employees, this exposure can have a significant impact on staff and, by extension, their families.

Agencies such as Parks Victoria have an opportunity to formally acknowledge this reality and establish systems of work and staff management that prepare and support staff and their families to develop a capacity for resilience. A key argument made here is that a connected, resilient organisation is one of the most essential ingredients in creating a workplace that effectively prepares and supports staff in the face of trauma. We need to ask whether park agencies, as they experience change, are managing to build or retain this resilience. Without this characteristic, organisational mechanisms put in place in response to CIS and stress more broadly may not ring true with staff and be perceived as 'off the shelf' responses rather than genuine strategies that reflect the dynamic of park workplaces and team culture.

PERSONAL REFLECTION ON PAST PRACTICE

Many years ago, I commenced my first day as a ranger in a busy national park. My induction involved being shown key visitor facilities such as picnic grounds and toilets. Standing outside one of these toilet blocks, my experienced colleague explained that this was frequently a location where people died of drug overdoses. Being new, I did not think to ask many questions about what our role was if we encountered someone in this circumstance. Fast forward over many years and in a role as a District Manager I found myself managing teams that have an infrequent but regular exposure to incidents such as suicides and attempted suicides by members of the public, accidents and search and rescue events. Looking back over my career, I can readily recount a list of incidents, some critical, to which I and my team members have been required to respond. In some cases, these incidents have involved exposure of team members to significant personal risk, witnessing death or serious injury, and the associated reactions and distress of victims and their families.

The vast majority of interactions between park visitors and staff are positive. Park staff can however experience aggression or anti-social behaviour that affects their wellbeing © Parks Victoria

I have worked with peers who have had repeated exposure to death and serious injury in the parks they manage. These experiences are overlaid on other professional stressors associated with organisational restructures, workloads and erratic budgets.

I have begun to look critically at how I as a manager, and my organisation, plan for and respond to such contingencies. While there are many examples of effective small-scale responses, there is a general failure of Australian park agencies to adopt a strategic approach to workforce management that embeds within it an analysis of the challenge and potential ways to manage or limit staff exposure.

CHARACTERISING THE CHALLENGE

The veracity of this personal observation needs to be tested by looking at recorded information about incidents and their frequency. To achieve this, I sought to review the database of formal incident reports held by Parks Victoria relating to incidents involving members of the public that were attended by staff members.

Data covering the period 2013-2016 revealed that up to 700 events were logged that had the potential to

generate staff exposure to a critical incident or a level of trauma during that time. This looks to be a significant number of events across a workforce of only around 1,000 people. Importantly, this figure did not include data relating to wildfires, floods or workplace accidents or injuries. The types of events listed in the database included vehicle accidents, drownings, suicides, assaults, theft of personal property, unsociable behaviour by visitors, vandalism and search and rescue operations. The database suggests that most of the recorded incidents tended to be of short duration, and each involved in most cases only a handful of staff.

Analysis of the data was hindered by many factors. The classification system for event types changed during the period reviewed, many entries were incomplete, and a large number were logged as being 'unspecified'. Without going to the actual individual reports, it proved impossible to determine the true nature of a large proportion of the events. It was also not possible from many of the records to determine whether staff members were directly exposed to the incident, first responders, or working in a support agency role.

The database could not therefore be used to accurately characterise the type and frequency of incidents occurring on the park estate. This itself reflects an underlying issue; namely the lack of structured attention by the agency to these incidents as repeat and significant elements of the workplace. Clearly, the information collected could not easily be used by the organisation to track patterns in incident type, or the exposure of individual staff to incidents across the span of their careers. Such knowledge rests instead with the informal collective awareness of individual teams, and with the respective staff members themselves.

Importantly, there was also no associated or linked data captured on internal Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) systems about exposure to trauma. In effect, the

Fire response is a core element of most staff member's careers at Parks Victoria. While this experience can generate critical incident stress, many other, and often more frequent incidents that are not fire-related, can have the same effect. © Anthony English

Incident Reporting system was, and remains, separate from OH&S reporting. OH&S reporting itself does not provide a field for entering exposure to trauma as a hazard or issue. In this way, the mental well-being effects of the incidents are not captured well in either system.

It is important to point out that studies suggest that many of the incidents of the type referred to here do not necessarily generate any long-term health impacts on employees (US Forest Service, 2014, p.5). A recent Australian investigation of effects on emergency service staff suggested that many staff members have, or develop, a level of resilience that allows them to cope with and rationalise their exposure. It argued that between 10 and 30 per cent of emergency services staff can develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from attending a traumatic event and that of those, 10 per cent need support beyond that of peers, friends and family to recover (WA Parliament, 2012, p.5).

Stress can also have a scale of severity, and many incidents may not generate anything beyond a low-level response due to their nature or the role performed by staff at the event. Individual response to stress is shaped by a wide array of factors and it has also been pointed out that responders can gain affirmation from their work at incidents such as a sense of achievement, teamwork or having provided an important service to the community (Jenner, 2007, p.26; Holgate & Di Pietro, 2007). Nevertheless, the potential for negative exposure to serious or critical incidents at Parks Victoria appears, on the basic analysis presented here, to be high.

In the absence of effective data, personal observation as an operational manager can be used to identify other dimensions to critical incidents in parks that shape the challenge for park agencies and their staff. These include the fact that firstly, in remote areas, staff members may need to perform a broader array of first response tasks as it can take time for other emergency services agencies to arrive on scene. This can also apply in less remote settings because emergency services may be stretched and park staff may have to provide first response skills even in urban parks.

Secondly, these incidents are occurring in the workplace. They are not events that are witnessed on the street. As such they may form part of the overall perception of the workplace by staff, and form part of the personal history of a staff member's service.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the type of incidents discussed here arise during a normal working day when staff are not focused on the need to undertake emergency service tasks. In this way these incidents differ markedly from structured deployment to a large fire campaign. In the latter case, a team may be briefed and provided with information that prepares them for the event they are responding to. In contrast, the myriad of non-fire incidents described in this paper may arise at a moment's notice when a staff member is least expecting it. One minute they may be in the office taking phone calls or out maintaining park facilities. The next they may find themselves coming across an incident, some serious, others less so. Arriving at a picnic area they may encounter an assault taking place. Driving around a bend in a track they may encounter a vehicle accident. These incidents are typically rapid in their onset and resolution and often are followed by a staff member seeking to return almost immediately to the task they were conducting before the incident occurred.

This reality generates a very different challenge for park agencies than that experienced by more emergency service focused organisations. It suggests that approaches to preparing park staff for exposure to trauma and supporting them to resume normal duties may be required that differ from those used in other organisational settings. The place of traumatic incidents in the rhythm of staff work patterns certainly calls, I believe, for a specific form of leadership, agency culture and internal conversation.

It is this challenge and its complexity that has partly shaped the lack of strategic focus by park agencies on this element of their workforce's experience. It has been far easier to see staff as undertaking emergency services work when attending fires and floods. Whereas other non-fire related incidents have effectively been viewed as unfortunate interruptions to 'normal' duties, rather than being an embedded element of a staff member's role. As we will see, agencies like Parks Victoria have tended to rely on teams themselves to self-manage post-incident staff support in these circumstances. These approaches have been shaped by, and are as variable as, the dynamic of individual teams and the attitude or awareness of individual managers.

Finally, some of the incidents experienced by staff in a park such as a fire can create long-term consequences for teams that require them to constantly re-engage with the original event. As an example, the work that goes into recovering the natural and built assets of a park after a fire can encompass years of effort. The landscape itself can bear the scars of an incident for a long time.

Overlaying these, and other factors, is the fact that careers in park agencies have historically tended to be

Parks are unique workplaces that inspire staff, many of whom develop close attachments to the landscapes they work in. This sense of connection to place can be a key factor in the development of staff resilience and their capacity to manage the effects of critical incidents on their wellbeing © Anthony English

lengthy. This can create a situation where staff members accumulate exposure to incidents either on an infrequent or semi-regular basis across their thirty or forty years of service.

CURRENT APPROACHES AT PARKS VICTORIA

What then has shaped the historical approach of organisations such as Parks Victoria to managing critical incidents and staff exposure to trauma? Five key drivers are posited here as being primary contributors:

- Parks Victoria's approach to this challenge, and perhaps that of other park agencies, is reflective of broader societal responses to stress and trauma in the workplace;
- Critical incidents have tended to be seen by the agency as being primarily tied to large-scale fire or flood events. The plethora of small-scale, but more frequent events, have not been managed or perceived as fitting into this category;
- Agencies such as Parks Victoria have relied implicitly on their operational teams to handle or manage exposure to trauma themselves; and
- OH&S attention in the workplace has been traditionally focused on physical injuries and risks.

We can explore these elements in turn.

Park agencies reflecting social norms

Park agencies such as Parks Victoria are not alone in their lack of effective attention to critical incidents and stress in the workplace. Many, if not most, sectors in the Australian workplace have been on the same slow path to broadening their attention beyond physical injuries and their prevention, to consideration of staff well-being and mental health. Perhaps this has been reinforced in park agencies by the historical image of the ranger as being a hardy, resilient jack of all trades who is able to get on with the job in the face of hardship. We need to ask whether this image has created a blind spot in park agencies themselves and obscured the reality of these roles and the effect of exposure to trauma on staff. As historically male dominated workplaces, park agencies have also reflected overarching cultural norms that are tied to treating stress as a private matter that staff members should 'deal with' themselves. The influence of gender on internal cultures in this context was highlighted by a Western Australian Parliamentary Committee review of the effects of trauma on emergency service staff (Parliament of Western Australia, 2012, p.6).

At the same time, apart from a few well-known examples such as the Azaria Chamberlain case, parks and reserves in Australia are not talked about or perceived as being sites of potential trauma. Rather they are valued, and marketed as places to recuperate, be inspired and seek solace from stress. While this is true, they are also workplaces where the staff responsible for them can at times confront both low level and significant trauma. There can be a tension between the lived experience of staff, and the way that agencies themselves talk about parks and their management both internally and in the public domain.

The lack of published literature on the experience of staff in park agencies is illustrative of this form of organisational silence. Writing on this topic in Australia is limited and it is hard to find published material that addresses the subject. Conroy's (2016) paper on a park agency's response to the effects of the loss of staff at a hazard reduction burn at Mount Kuring-Gai in 2000 is a rare example. He emphasised the importance of peer support, support for families and tools such as return to work planning, staff transfer (at their request), and good senior leadership.

Australian literature on emergency services staff and community responses to critical incidents and CIS such as Lunn (2000), Gordon (2006) and Jenner (2007) provides significant insight that can be translated to a park agency setting. Nevertheless, there appears to be little evidence that park agencies and their staff have been a specific focus for researchers in this context. Equally, as noted above, the place of incidents in the rhythm of a park agency staff member's working week, may mean that we need to consider strategies that differ from those suggested in other emergency service agency settings.

In the United States, by contrast there has been significant investment made in understanding critical incidents stress within park and land management agencies, and developing formal procedures for equipping and supporting staff to face their effects. There are a few well-known publications that touch on the subject; one of the most dramatic being Lankford (2010). United States land and fire management agencies have a much longer history of developing CIS strategies designed to tackle its effects on the workforce. Within the US National Park Service, this commenced in the early 1980s, initially as Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), then as more holistic Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) approaches focused on development of peer support teams and the organisation of targeted expert psychological support (Bucello, 1998; Collins, 1998). It has since evolved again to form larger programmes that focus on developing pre-event resilience in staff through Psychological First Aid and the development of training and resources for managers and staff (see for example, US Forest Service, 2014).

The focus on large-scale natural events

Over the last decade or more, staff at Parks Victoria have been involved in many significant fire seasons. Staff members serve in a broad range of roles at these incidents; on fire grounds as operational fire fighters, in Incident Management Teams, and as members of teams that work on post-event recovery, often with local community members. It has been here, in a cross-agency emergency management context that Parks Victoria has been both exposed to and advanced a level of recognition of CIS and lower levels of stress in the workplace.

These events can, and do, generate the potential for stress, fatigue and long-term impacts to staff well-being. As an example, the Black Saturday fires in Victoria in February 2009 have been discussed as a source of PTSD in the ranks of agency staff, other firefighters and the broader community (Stanley, 2013; Parliament of Western Australia, 2012; and pers. obs.).

In such post natural disaster settings, agencies like Parks Victoria have typically responded to the need to manage impacts on staff by undertaking formal debrief and after-action review (AAR) processes. Importantly there appears to be a growing body of thought that actively questions formal AARs as an effective approach to supporting staff who have experienced trauma (Lunn, 2000). AARs have tended to be focused on reviewing how an operation was carried out, and whether tactical changes can be made to ensure the next response is run more effectively. In my experience, they have rarely been an effective vehicle to discuss how staff feel about an event, or to talk in genuine terms about stress.

Opportunities are also often established after large natural disaster events to support staff at an individual level when they have been exposed to trauma. Even in these cases, however, this tends to focus on short-term response and quite limited formal support. This situation is compounded by the fact that managers are not provided with training to allow them to identify or support the need for more extensive support services either in the short or longer term.

A focus on physical injuries and their prevention

As well as a tendency to consider stress and trauma only in the context of large-scale fires, there has been a long-

standing focus on the prevention and management of physical injuries in the workplace. This focus is either a by-product of an inability by agencies to encompass consideration of non-physical injury, or a driver of this situation. It is a focus that is reflected in current internal and external Parks Victoria documents such as the most recent annual report (Parks Victoria, 2017). At depot and office level it has manifested in the last few years in a variety of ways including the re-establishment of injury rate boards at work centres that show how many days it has been since each site has experienced a lost-time injury.

One of the drivers for this focus may be that physical injury and risks are often more easily quantifiable and linked to 'evidence' such as near miss reporting. Strategies to lower the frequency and extent of these injuries are also more easily tied to statistical benchmarks reflecting 'industry standards'.

Reducing and preventing physical injuries in the workplace is, of course, vital. There has been a significant and positive shift to improved safety cultures addressing risk of physical injury in park agencies over the last 25 years. Parks Victoria is a good example of this. As an agency it has undergone a transformative focus on safety that is built on the need for safety, and safety systems, to be a day-to-day focus of staff and managers. The use of safe working practices is linked to the accountability placed on line managers, and there is an increasing pride amongst teams in working safely and developing innovative ways to enhance safety in the workplace. This is critical given that many of the tasks undertaken by staff are associated with risk. Operating heavy plant and machinery, handling chemicals, working in rough terrain, conducting planned burns and patrolling, all come with risks that staff and the agency work hard to mitigate.

As this safety culture has evolved, there has been some limited attention given to non-physical injuries. Parks Victoria have for over ten years provided services to staff such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) that allow employees to receive up to three free and confidential counselling sessions. Nevertheless, the role of the EAP service in workforce management and support has not been linked to a broader, meaningful and well led conversation in the agency about stress. A culture that supports and promotes the importance of mental health well-being has not been developed at an agency level. This has meant that promotion of EAP has often generated very little take-up by staff. Instead, EAP has tended to be referenced at the end of management emails about organisational change as something staff should consider if they are feeling distress.

A reliance on team level management

It is at the team level, at the scale of individual work centres of Districts, that I would argue different approaches have evolved first. Operational teams in park agencies tend to be close knit and to contain an in-built resilience that is developed through shared experience and commitment to the job. This is not unlike the camaraderie that exists in emergency service organisations more broadly (Silbauer, 2003). This strength has no doubt assisted many staff members to develop resilience and to find effective support.

Despite this, it is now clear that such a team culture does not prevent staff from experiencing the effects of exposure to trauma. It is also likely that internal team cultures have historically been characterised by a lack of active discussion about the effects of incidents on team members. A focus on 'getting on with the job' and putting these experiences to one side has, in my experience, been a common past response.

This is changing. It is now more common that staff and line managers 'check in' with each other after a significant incident has occurred. More explicit discussions between line managers about how a staff member is 'travelling' after an incident are also more frequent than may have been the case ten or fifteen years ago. Managers may also choose to bring in specialist expertise and to work with their teams to improve their approach. Importantly, as operational managers we are being increasingly supported to take this approach by corporate based safety staff. This reflects a gradual shift to a workplace culture that is more comfortable acknowledging mental health well-being and the reality of critical incident stress.

This indicates that the need for this approach is now being reassessed within Parks Victoria at a whole of agency level. In part, this has been driven by broader societal trends and expectations. Mental health and well-being are becoming an increasingly common topic of conversation in the media, community and workplace. Initiatives in Australia such as RU OK Day (https://www.ruok.org.au), and the work of bodies like Beyond Blue, have raised the profile of a topic that has typically been hidden behind closed doors.

This community based and media driven conversation has been linked directly to debates about what constitutes effective recognition of and support for employees in the Australian workplace. As an example, media analysis, and in some cases court cases revolving around the plight of veterans or police members, have sharpened our focus on the place of well-being in the

Teams work in settings that can present risks to their safety; both physical and mental. Good communication, training, respect and experience play a significant role in mitigating the effects of critical incident stress © Anthony English

workplace more broadly (see for example ABC News, 2017a and b).

Perhaps most significantly, agencies in Victoria have for many years been governed by the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (Vic) that defines 'health' as encompassing psychological health. The implications of this for employers has taken some time to eventuate, or to shape policy and practice. This legal foundation is nevertheless in place, and this, as well as growing acceptance by staff and the agency of the importance of mental health, will continue to generate change.

Parks Victoria's successful focus in the last few years on what it terms a 'Safety First' culture that has looked at physical injuries and risks, has assisted employees to extend their conversations to include mental well-being by making safety conversations more frequent and accepted in the workplace. Ironically, the virtual absence of formal recognition of mental health and well-being throughout the evolution of the Safety-First programme has played a role in prompting more staff to question why it is not considered more strategically in our workplace.

ACTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION BY PARKS VICTORIA

Several actions are suggested here to strengthen Parks Victoria's ability to manage and prevent stress generated by traumatic and critical incidents. Some of the actions are high level and strategic, and others are more tactical and require a strategic context to be developed and implemented. Their relevance to Parks Victoria is strengthened by the fact that as an agency it has started to explore more strategically how mental health and well-being can be supported through its approach to workforce planning and management.

A fundamental first step would be for park agencies like Parks Victoria to express formal acknowledgement at whole of organisation level that exposure to trauma and critical incidents occurs, and can occur regularly in a range of settings. Taking this step would underpin any ensuing workforce management actions or directions.

Not only would acknowledgement provide an opportunity to also thank staff for their service, it would have a significant positive effect on staff resilience and well-being. Recognition would validate not only the lived experience of staff, but also the range of feelings or responses they encounter during and after these events. Gordon (2006) emphasises that to enable individuals and communities to recover from disaster, people need to feel safe, have their experience acknowledged, and access both social and psychological support. Recognition of the presence of trauma in the workplace at Parks Victoria, and of the form and frequency that it can take, would be a critical first step in creating an environment where staff feel safe and supported.

Flowing from this high-level step are a myriad of potential tactical actions. These can be grouped under several headings.

Data management and use

We have seen that data relating to incidents involving staff exposure to trauma needs significant redesign. Not only should Incident Report (IR) data support analysis of incident trends, it should also assist managers and staff to record and track employee involvement in incident response. Data could also be used to map locations where incidents occur and how frequently. Importantly, IRs themselves should be reflected in agency OH&S reporting systems so that staff exposure to incidents, potentially rated for their severity, can be made visible and a structured approach to talking with those staff members about their well-being can be initiated.

Workforce planning and management

Many of the actions below are predicated on the idea of developing staff member resilience, and enhancing their capacity to recover from or manage their exposure to trauma. This approach underpins the direction of the US Forest Service (2014) and reflects some of the core findings of the Western Australian Parliamentary Committee review (2012).

Critical workforce planning actions at Parks Victoria could include:

- Ensuring that staff induction includes effective messages and guidance about the potential to be exposed to significant or critical incidents. At present, new staff are sent into the workplace with very little awareness of this potential;
- Investing in developing pre-event resilience across the workforce through greater use of peer support and Psychological First Aid training;
- Expanding the concept of leadership and leadership training to encompass effectively supporting and managing the welfare of teams and not just their performance; and
- Active analysis of trends in the type and frequency of events in individual parks and the development of specific training, management and peer support for staff at those locations. As an example, there are parks that have tended to witness higher levels of suicide or significant accidents than others. This can be driven by an array of factors such as proximity to population centres, or the nature of recreational uses occurring there.

Policy and procedures

One of the notable dichotomies in current operational policy and procedure is that there is a plethora of training and guidance relating to responding to wildfires, but very little formal procedure that guides park agency staff response to other more frequent and potentially critical incidents such as suicides or accidents involving death or serious injury.

Again, this reflects the historical emphasis on fire as being the core of park agency emergency response. While the Victorian Emergency Management Manual (State Government of Victoria, 2017) sets out agency roles at different types of key incidents such as fires, this has not triggered the development of response procedures for many of the other incident types discussed here. Instead in Parks Victoria there has tended to be a reliance on locally developed approaches that have no formal standing. As an example, staff members may be advised by their managers that there is no obligation on them to go up to and look inside a vehicle in a park that looks suspicious and which may be the scene of a suicide. They may be directed that while they can choose to do so, it is equally appropriate for them to simply contact police or ambulance staff to attend the scene. This approach however is not enshrined in policy or procedure and team culture tends to lead most staff to actively investigate vehicles or other potential incident sites.

The reality is that operational field staff such as field service officers, rangers and seasonal fire fighters will often be the first to encounter or respond to a significant incident in a park, even if the ultimate responsibility for its management lies with another agency such as the police. Mapping out this reality and exploring whether staff are going beyond what they are required, trained and equipped to do, needs to occur. Park agencies need to confront the question of how they should train and

support staff to prepare for the events that will inevitably occur in the workplace. Overarching systems and incident response procedures also need to be established that are built on the premise of limiting staff exposure to trauma.

Looking outwards and learning

It is also very clear that the topics of CIS, stress and resilience have received a great deal of attention in settings outside park management. Recognition of the reality of significant incidents in the workplace by park agencies should trigger them to engage the expertise of those in the health, research and emergency services sectors to share their learning. This should not be a case of a park agency thinking that establishing a few new training courses, or key messages, will effectively address the challenge its employees face in the field. Adopting a strategic, adaptive and evolving approach that reflects best practice elsewhere needs to be the goal.

The importance of organisational culture and resilience

Finally, underpinning all this needs to be acceptance that only strong, resilient and connected organisations can effectively prepare and support teams involved in managing significant or critical incidents. A resilient organisation can be defined as one that is aware of and recognises threats, is able to predict and plan for disruption, supports staff to recover from significant events, and builds a collective sense of purpose (Parsons, 2010). These organisations possess positive leaders who enable devolved decision making, but also provide stability to the workforce. Without these characteristics, I argue that tools like EAP and training that may be put in place to manage CIS and exposure to trauma may become mechanistic, and not connected in any way to a meaningful relationship between employees and their manager or agency. It is for this reason that recognition by the agency of the occurrence of incidents in the workplace is so critical. Recognition is based on awareness and from this should flow action.

Tools and approaches need to resonate with staff and have meaning and validity in an operational team setting. Peer support processes that rely on active operational staff providing that service have been deemed successful because the affected staff feel that they are talking to someone who understands their experience. Successful peer support systems are therefore a good indicator that an organisation is indeed resilient. Parks Victoria would benefit from strengthening its currently small peer support programme, but it also needs to do so in the context of a strategic plan that addresses stress in the workplace holistically.

I would extend this by arguing that a resilient organisation is one that embodies many of the elements that researchers argue create resilient communities. The concept of community resilience has been a significant area of investigation in recent years. The objective of creating resilience that enables communities to plan for and recover from significant incidents now underpins core emergency management policy such as the Safer Together programme in Victoria (State Government of Victoria, 2015).

Some of the principal elements that typify resilient communities according to Maguire and Hagan (2007) are their capacity to embody resistance to disruption, a capacity to recover and return to normalcy, and an ability to be creative and learn from experience in a way that further builds resistance. We need to explore how relevant these characteristics are to the goal of building resilient organisations. Maguire and Hagan emphasise the important role played by naturally emergent social resilience, exemplified by people pulling together after an event to support each other (2007, p.19). While this inherent capacity can be overwhelmed, they argue that it is a foundation that governments should build upon. Park agencies can look to the inherent connectedness of their teams in the same way.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, staff in park management agencies have significant potential to be exposed to trauma and critical incidents of many different types in the workplace. Park agencies need to assess whether the language, leadership styles and culture they use supports or opposes the development of staff resilience. Many park agencies in Australia have undergone significant and, at times, protracted restructures in recent years. While change can and does bring significant innovation and new approaches, it can also have an impact on morale, and by extension the capacity of staff to manage their exposure to critical incidents.

Other underlying changes in workforce characteristics that may affect the development of resilience or connectedness need to be considered. One is the loss of field skills and experience that is occurring when staff retire or leave what is now, in places like Parks Victoria, an ageing workforce. The other is the increasing potential for senior leaders in park agencies to have had no exposure themselves to park operations at the field level. While not inherently problematic, where this is the case an agency should be looking critically at itself to

determine what type of leadership capability it needs, and at which levels, to develop an organisation that is connected across both the corporate and field-based elements of its structure.

Change will also be part of the solution. Importantly, it has been argued that the development of a gender balance in emergency management organisations and the influx of younger people will prompt employers and employees to develop more effective and mature approaches to preparing for and managing workforces that can experience trauma when conducting their duties (Parliament of Western Australia, 2012).

While there is much to be done, agencies like Parks Victoria are revealing a willingness and capability to tackle the challenge of staff exposure to critical incidents. Our goal should be to ensure that any staff members who may experience trauma in the workplace because of their duties should be supported to develop resilience ahead of such experience and supported effectively after exposure has occurred. While the needs and responses of individuals will vary widely, this should not detract from committing to such an organisational objective.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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RESUMEN

El personal a cargo de la gestión de los parques responde periódicamente a incidentes en los parques que pueden llevarlos a experimentar o presenciar un hecho traumático. Estos incidentes incluyen asaltos, suicidios, comportamiento antisocial, operaciones de búsqueda y rescate, incendios forestales y muertes y lesiones graves causadas por accidentes. La exposición puede generar lo que se conoce como estrés postraumático. El personal suele ser el que primero reacciona ante muchos de estos incidentes, pero por regla general sus agencias no consideran que desempeñan funciones propias de los servicios de emergencia, excepto cuando se les encomienda responder a un incendio o una inundación. Este artículo examina cómo una agencia, Parks Victoria, ha abordado la exposición del personal a sucesos traumáticos. Arguye que históricamente el enfoque se ha centrado en la gestión y prevención de lesiones físicas en el lugar de trabajo, tendiendo a limitar el reconocimiento de los impactos del estrés en el personal a los incidentes relacionados con desastres naturales como los incendios forestales. Se sugieren y exploran diversas acciones estratégicas para abordar esta deficiencia. La discusión es relevante para otras entidades de gestión de parques y refleja la experiencia del autor en la gestión de parques en diferentes partes de Australia en los últimos veinticinco años.

RÉSUMÉ

Le personnel de gestion des parcs doit répondre régulièrement à des incidents susceptibles de les amener à subir ou à être témoin de traumatismes. Ces incidents comprennent des agressions, des suicides, des comportements antisociaux, des opérations de recherche et de sauvetage, des incendies de forêt ainsi que des décès et des blessures graves causés par des accidents. Cette expérience peut générer un stress post-traumatique connu sous le terme de «Critical Incident Stress». Les membres du personnel agissent souvent en tant que premiers intervenants dans un grand nombre de ces incidents, mais sont rarement perçus par leur direction comme exerçant des fonctions de service d'urgence, sauf lorsqu'ils sont chargés de mener des actions d'intervention contre le feu ou des inondations. Cet article explore comment une agence, Parks Victoria, a abordé la question de l'exposition du personnel aux traumatismes. Il met en lumière le fait que, historiquement, la priorité est centrée sur la gestion et la prévention de blessures physiques sur le lieu de travail, avec une tendance à minimiser la prise en compte du stress encourru à la suite d'incidents liés aux catastrophes naturelles telles que les incendies. De nombreuses actions stratégiques pour remédier à ce manque sont suggérées et explorées. Cet exposé peut présenter un intérêt pour d'autres organes d'administration de parcs et reflète l'expérience de l'auteur qui a travaillé dans la gestion de divers parcs à travers l'Australie au cours des vingt-cinq dernières années.