

People and bushfires: situational crime prevention and bushfire arson

The routine activities theory of crime posits that crime can occur when there is a convergence of a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the lack of a capable guardian. Situational crime prevention assumes that crime is a rational choice by offenders and that crime can be prevented by hardening targets to increase the risks and reduce the rewards.

Recent research examined data from the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries' (DPI&F) wildfire database in Queensland, which revealed that the Beerburrum forestry district, on the coast of South East Queensland, accounted for 47 percent of all wildfires in the database even though it occupies only 16 percent of DPI&F plantation land (Christensen 2006). Nearly two-thirds of all intentionally lit fires in DPI&F districts also occurred in Beerburrum, which resulted in Beerburrum being considered an arson hotspot.

Environmental factors contributing to the high number of deliberate fires in Beerburrum were identified as:

- its location on the periphery of a major and expanding population centre
- proximity to major thoroughfares
- a well maintained road system and popularity as a tourist destination
- limited monitoring by DPI&F staff.

These factors make it a popular spot for the dumping and torching of stolen vehicles – torched cars are responsible for nearly 20 percent of the intentional fires in the district. Target hardening strategies were recommended in the research report and included:

- prescribed burning to reduce fuel loads, making fires harder to start and reducing the reward to the arsonist, while increasing the risk by increasing the time and effort required to start a fire
- constructing a network of fire trails, which could restrict the spread of wildfire and increase access for firefighters. Access control measures can restrict access to areas of the district and improve levels of surveillance by legitimate forest users
- creating rapid response firefighting units which are able to respond quickly to new fires, and can actively patrol the district during periods of high fire risk to serve as a deterrent to arsonists
- taking advantage of the high public usage of the area to encourage the reporting of suspicious behaviour to Crime Stoppers
- promptly removing dumped stolen cars before they can be set alight.

Such strategies suggest that there are concrete ways in which forestry and land management agencies can work to reduce the occurrence of deliberately lit wildfires in identified arson hotspots.

Reference

Christensen W 2006. Nipped in the bud: a situational crime prevention approach to the prevention of bushfire arson. Masters thesis, University of Queensland (unpublished)