

Bushfire Resilience Inc.

Black Saturday, 2009. Horses

Interview with Dr Andrew McLean, horseman, educator

Interviewer: Malcolm Hackett OAM



Malcolm

My name's Malcolm Hackett and I'm here with Andrew McLean, a behaviour scientist who runs the Australian Equine Behavioural Centre in Clonbinane. Andrew as well as having vast experience with horses and being a horseman himself, has some Black Saturday experiences which he's very generously offered to share with us.

Andrew could you tell us something about the preparations that you had set up at the centre?

Andrew

We had quite a few fire experiences before Black Saturday and probably the most pertinent of those was in 2005. We had quite a big scare. We had a severe fire. My property, the Australian Equine Behaviour Centre, was just one property away from the Mount Disappointment State Forest. That property was owned by my brother. And that fire actually went right into his property and burned quite a bit of his establishment. We put that out and there were flames and embers landing on our property. So that really gave us quite a scare. And as well as some of the previous experiences with quite a few fires lit in that forest with fire bugs and whatever. So that prompted us to get in contact with the local fire station in Clonbinane and say, what can we do and how can we also be of help to other people in the community? Because we're right at the end of the road and we're a big place. We have a big car park and infrastructure.

Through the Clonbinane Fire Brigade we built a fire plan, a very substantial fire plan which really saved us. I think 7 out of 10 neighbours on the road their houses were burnt and were all sorts of tragedies. We were really very lucky in that most of our farm was burned but our house and our stables where we had 30 horses in the indoor arena were not. We'd put the horses in there when we suspected the fire could come our way. Two stallions we had in boxes beside the indoor arena.

We had a petrol driven fire pump just in case electricity went down that would drive the water. We'd built a dam just halfway down a hill with a big two-inch pipe. It was gravity fed so we didn't even need a pump to our house. We had a fire tanker that took two kilolitres of water behind the quad bike. And we had all the material things that we needed - clothing and preparation ready for the fire. So, in some ways it was fortunate that we had this scare because had we not had that we wouldn't have been so well prepared for it. But of course there some things we learned lessons from.

Malcolm

What actually happened on the day Andrew?

Andrew

Well on the day I actually wasn't there. My wife was there and we had I think six other people on the property. I was actually in Newcastle with my son at a bucks party believe it or not, for his best mate who was like a member of our family. But when I heard that there was a likelihood of a fire I went straight to the airport and basically managed to get on a plane and flew down to Melbourne. And actually, as I was coming down through the fire was already going strong from Kilmore East. This Jetstar flight flew into this huge brown cloud that went right up over the normal cloud zone and then took a bit of a dive out and I realized this is a pretty serious event.

We got in the car from the airport to drove home. By that time the first wave of fire had been to the south of us and that came within 50m of our house. By then everybody had already implemented the fire plan and we had 30 horses in the indoor arena, most of them were horses that were owned by other people that we were training. We also had our two stallions in the boxes. And one of our students (we always had a lot of students from overseas) happened to be a stewardess with an expertise in fires on airplanes. And she volunteered to be at the stables because in those times you could stay with the fire. You didn't have to automatically leave.

So, we chose to stay. And she chose to be with the horses and did a marvellous job with the watering system there and keeping all the horses happy. We had the water system going and we gave them hay and whatever. And I don't know that the horses even barely noticed there was a fire to be honest. We had an open side but they'd look out of the stable every now and again. But they're more concerned with their own social arrangements and who they are friends with and who they didn't like, and they made little groups. But that was actually what happened. We implemented the fire plan. I came home and drove through the end of the second wave with my son. And it was truly quite a horrific experience. On social media my son had seen that people had been saying that everybody at the Australian Equine Behaviour Centre had perished and that place was burned to the ground. There were all sorts of rumours and this was written on social media.

I didn't even recognize our road. There was a police blockade at Wandong and the police stopped me to say you can't go further because of the fire further on heading towards our place and I basically just rolled the window up and just went straight through the blockade and thought, well he's not going to shoot me and really what else can I do? I'm not going to hang around and wait. I want to see. It was so important to be with our family and everybody else there. The road was unrecognizable. There were powerlines down and there were trees still falling. I wrote the car off. It was almost a brand-new Nissan Ute and it was so dented and injured by the drive home. When I got home along our road there were houses still on fire. Some had already burned down. We didn't see any people and there were no cars on the road except for us. We had to go around a lot of trees that were on fire.

But going up our driveway was quite an extraordinary experience because my son and I never talked about this on the way home that there was a strong possibility that everybody would have been burned and that everything would be gone. But on our driveway we noticed the first glimmer of green. And we had spotted gums planted along the driveway which are apparently fire resistant and they were all standing. And then we drove past the cottage on our property and that was still there. And then we got to the house and the house was still there. And we got home, and everybody had done their job.

There were embers falling on the garden and some of the vegetable garden and surrounding parts of that area were burned. But basically all the infrastructure in our small circle was left. In fact, the very next morning after I got home I went up to the top of the ridge on the back of our property and looked down and it was just like a scene from Dante's Inferno. It was all black, still smouldering and still fires everywhere. And our house and stable area was just a little circle that was untouched.

Malcolm

The plan had worked. Did you put that down to the water you had available or other treatments you carried out on the property?

Andrew

Well, I think just putting out spot fires and having a fire truck really helped. That was always being filled up. We had a dam that had a two-inch pipe at the bottom of it as well that that filled this fire truck up rapidly. And I think just having the water in dam, such high-pressure water coming down onto the house and we had very a large fire hose installed with Camlock fittings all around the stable that we could ram in an instant and just put out any spot fires. That really saved the place. And we had the watering system going with a fire pump inside the stable area because it was more than 45 degrees, I think the horses appreciated being drenched with water.

The footing on the arena was a write off but that was a very small price to pay. And of course, we lost fences and whatever. But what was interesting was that the horses had to be in there for a week and people are always concerned about their horses being in with other horses because they think that they will hurt each other. And I've always maintained that as a social species they need to be with other animals. Within that week when all the horses were together in the arena we had one bite mark and that was all. So, they all got along very well. I think they were quite pleased to be in there together.

Malcolm

That's interesting. Kathy Brown told us about one broodmare that marshalled the other horses once they were put together. It seems like horses have an instinct to protect and sort themselves out. What other sorts of behaviours did you or others notice during the fire?

Andrew

Well because ours were all in the indoor arena and the two stallions were in the stables. Mina who was looking after them noticed the horses occasionally looking out the window and there's a firestorm going past. They were really more concerned about each other.

Our centre became the foraging refuge for people who had been burnt out and that still had their horses and needed fodder. So we had fodder being delivered onward. So I in particular heard all the stories from people who were arriving to get fodder for the horses and there were some quite extraordinary stories of horses going to dams and standing in the dams. Whether they found it by sheer coincidence I don't know, to go there for the fire. But there were horses and kangaroos and deer all in the same dam.

Some horses were only burnt on one side of their body when they survived. Many of them had burnt feet and the burnt feet was really what ended their lives after a few months. But there were quite a lot of stories of horses going through fences. It's really important that people open their gates and let the horses go where they need to go and take all the burnable materials off them. In the indoor arena we took all their rugs and even they're light summer rugs. Took the whole lot off, but that's what you should do because those burnable things like headstalls, if there are any plastics in them, that'll burn the horses.

So basically, give them as much chance to survive in as open space as possible. And really I think the important thing is knowing your property well and knowing where the exits are and know exactly how you're going to manage it on the day and not taking any chances. That was one thing that we also did is we had enacted this out before in other days or times when there were fires. It's always better to be overcautious and do this rather than be there too late because people going and collecting horses is dangerous.

Malcolm

What was the procedure there? You hear that there's a fire in the area. What sorts of things were to do and in what order?

Andrew

Well first of all we had got all the horses into the indoor arena and into the stalls. We did that. I had overalls for everybody, get all of that organized, all of the gear sorted out. We had all the gear sorted out anyway the weeks before when the summer began to arrive. We made sure it was all clean and ready to go with the right number of people. We had the fire truck full but that was always full every summer ready to go. All it needed was to hitch up the quad bike feed out machine. And then collect all the horses. Put them in the arena.

And then start organizing who would be staying there with the horses and who would be at the house? Who would be driving the quad bike? Who would be in charge of the whole thing? My wife was in charge of all of this because I wasn't there, and she did a really good job delegating all the

responsibilities to everybody, and everybody had a job. And I think the thing is if everybody has a job they lose a lot of fear. We had one guy from Belgium who as soon as he heard that there was a fire somewhere near he had packed his bags and he lived upstairs in our house, and he had his bags packed at the bottom of the stairs and my wife said, "what are you doing?". He said, "I'm going." She said, "you can't go. There's only one way out and that road's closed. That's where the fire is coming from, we have to stay here." He was really scared. He was in tears. But as soon as he had a job to do he was fine. He knew what he had to do, and he did it very well.

Malcolm

And you had those events where you practised. But had you conducted any practise or induction for those people who were new onto the property?

Andrew

No. This guy was actually very new. He'd only been there for a day. And the other person from Finland who was the aeroplane fire expert she had only been there for four or five days. But for all our staff we had it well sorted out, we had all the things bought for them that we needed to do.

And we had a plan too - all the gutters we had gutter blockers so we could fill the gutters with water. We didn't have overhead sprinklers on the houses which in hindsight I was thinking I would do next time. We sold that property, and we don't live there anymore. But I think that's one thing that would really help just to have automatic sprinklers. But definitely not relying on electricity because electricity was down. The phone towers were all down, you're really stuck. And we were there for five or six days.

My son and I after the fires started to cut away through a track through to the nearest town so we could get supplies. After four or five days we ran out of fuel for the generators. We even were fortunate we had two generators that we could hook up directly into the house. I had a house hook-up like a caravan so that our house could be directly hooked up with a generator. And so, we really had our freezers and fridges going and we just waited it out till we could leave. And the town of Wandong was pretty amazing when we finally got there for the meetings. Everybody pulled together. It was a great feeling of a town coming together. That always seems to happen when there are tragedies. But there was a fair bit of looting happening, and everybody had decided that all the young guys especially were very aggressive about catching these looters, they couldn't wait. But we had big signs a big W on our windscreens to show that we were from the town and if anybody was on our road in that week who didn't have that sign in their car we would pull them up and ask them what they're doing.

Malcolm

In the aftermath of the fire, you must have observed other people's horses that have been through pretty horrific situations. What was the level of stress and changed behaviours of those horses which had survived the fire?

Andrew

One of my areas of academic interest and expertise has been in stress and what animals do in stress. They first of all will try and run, but when they can't run when they're injured ultimately they'll become apathetic. And that's really what you do see is that PTSD type reaction in animals, that's pretty well documented where they become in a very depressed sort of endodontic kind of a state, they just don't hardly move. They don't show much interest even in food. And that's a pretty dangerous time for them because if they're also injured then their chances of survival are lower.

Because we were at the end of the road we couldn't actually go back towards the town, but we could go into the state forest, and most of that was passable. So we could actually drive to South Mountain Road in the back of Wandong and Heathcote Junction by going the back way through the forest which was all burned. And amazing to see this forest, now just a withered black smoky lifeless place driving through there. We visited friends who we knew had horses and we found one horse that had died at

one property, a friend's place, where we checked because she had a horse who had also died. And the fire had actually gone all the way to the woodpile that was right beside the house, but the house and the woodpile weren't burned. It was amazing. The fire had gone all the way to there along the lawn and that was it. So they were very lucky that house was saved. In terms of seeing other horses some of them were in very bad states and other animals too. We saw lots of sheep that needed to be put down. And similarly horses that were in that same condition as well.

Malcolm

For those horses that experienced those high levels of stress are there particular treatments that can assist their recovery? Or is it just a matter of time?

Andrew

It is just time. We didn't have any at our centre that had any remote injury, so we didn't have any experience. This is not my area in veterinary as I'm not a vet surgeon. There would be treatments that you can give horses that help them get through that stressful period. But it is something that they tend to do themselves. They tend to just basically become really endodontic and just stay quiet and not move. The big thing is to keep them well watered, sheltered and fed. If they can as much hay as possible. They often lose their drive to eat concentrates, but they still want to eat hay. So giving them as much of that as possible when they need it is important for their recovery.

Malcolm

And lots of those horses belong to other people so there must have been a tsunami of distressed inquiries. "How's my horse" But I imagine also the communications were down so that must have been pretty challenging?

Andrew

Yes it was, it was immensely challenging. And we had all the names of the people of the owners of the horses, but we couldn't get any messages out for a few days, but I think they soon heard on the radio and on social media that actually the AEBC wasn't burnt down. And that we'd been saved and all the animals and were well. And that went on to social media and people realized that the horses would be in a well looked after in a good place. It was a period of two or three days or maybe four days, I can't quite recall, where they just didn't know, and some people were really desperate to find out of course.

Malcolm

So, you've gone through that experience. What did you learn and what would you do differently now?

Andrew

I suppose I couldn't do anything much differently. Because for example being away I couldn't have really changed that because you don't know days before if there's a fire coming. Really we just had a bit of an inkling the night before. There was going to be a very hot day and high winds which is always a problem that really put me on alert and so that's where we got back as early as we possibly could.

But in terms of a fire plan, I think just having had a fire plan really was what saved us and all the horses. What we would do differently. I would certainly have investigated having sprinklers on the roof just because it makes it easier to put out ember attacks that land in the gutters. We filled up all of our gutters. We lost our cat, but he turned up a week later with he was a bit burnt. He'd lost the corners of his ears, but I would have actually had locked him up. But I don't know that we would have done that much differently. We were just fortunate that we had had near misses that weren't serious but were serious enough that made us get stuck into a fire plan.

Malcolm

So, the fire plan is important, but the near misses provided the motivation to get organized?

Andrew

We had good communication with Clonbinane and Wandong fire brigades too who reminded us each year. And we're also the refuge centre for our road. And they reminded us each year about our fire responsibilities. We took them very seriously because we knew how devastating it could be. But nobody knew what the 2009 fires would be like. I mean it was a game changer in terms of fire.

Malcolm

Absolutely. Did you have people needing to use your centre as a refuge? What about your immediate neighbours?

Andrew

No, they mostly were evacuated. Our nearest neighbours who had a famous mansion called Clonbinane Park that was a historic place. That burnt down and the daughter was there with just a small garden hose facing the fire. She would have perished for sure had not another neighbour close by picked her up and took her away. But we had one neighbour on our road who did perish in the fires. But no, we weren't used as the refuge.

I think everybody probably sensibly got out early along that road. We're a dead-end road except for going out along the tracks in the state forests. But afterwards when we became a repository for all the forage for the horses that's when people started coming in. And we were almost feeling like psychologists because it was just awful and it gave you that feeling of survivor guilt that people would be telling you their stories and some of them had lost loved ones pets and their houses and everything they owned. And some of them were just collecting food for other people and they'd lost everything, but they were just helping other people. So, it was quite a huge lesson in humanity, probably the biggest one in my life and hopefully the only one that I'll ever have. But to see that kind of devastation that happens not only physically to the environment but also to people and the feeling you get because you escaped it, you feel guilty about escaping it.

Malcolm

There is that period of when people are in limbo out there. They're doing what they can, and some people are needing to move out of the area. They can't even be close to where they were. That has grounded them. It really does, it's not just the fire, it disrupts everything in people's lives.

Andrew

Yes it really does. And one of our staff, her boyfriend also supplied a really large generator that really helped us get through those days afterwards because the fire didn't just pass through, it went through the top and then came back the other way that afternoon. But it kept on burning, there were still places on fire, there were still trees on fire at night. We were in a valley and looking across the hills it was like fireworks going off all night and the next day and the next night as well.

Malcolm

Yes I remember. Well, it's a lesson in the power of nature alright. Now are there any things we haven't talked about which you'd like to comment on?

Andrew

I think one of the big take home messages about horses is that they aren't always rational and when horses get to a certain level of fear and panic they will just go, and they'll run into things irrationally, run through things irrationally. So, setting up the possibility for horses to escape is the best way possible or else enclose them if you can in a safe area, but they will do quite irrational things.

Malcolm

Thank you Andrew. We really do appreciate you sharing your experiences with us. I'm sure that will help a lot of people realize the importance of the fire plan and practising it, particularly if they have horses they care about. Thank you very much.