

EAST GIPPSLAND

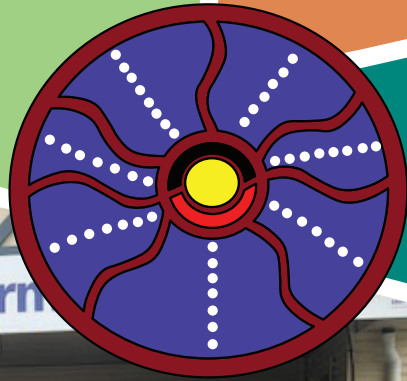
FIRE to FLOURISH

Strength through community-led action



Fire to Flourish East Gippsland

Enabling communities to strengthen their
resilience to disaster



Community & Inform



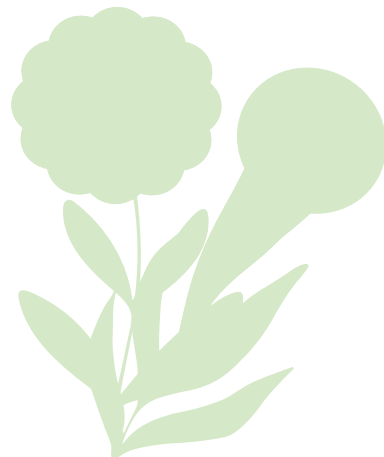
About Fire to Flourish

Fire to Flourish is a five-year (2021–25) community impact program pioneering new ways to support communities holistically in their disaster recovery and resilience efforts.

Led by Monash University and funded philanthropically, we are trialling participatory, community-led resilience approaches with four partner communities who were impacted by the 2019/20 bushfires: East Gippsland in Victoria; and Clarence Valley, Tenterfield and Eurobodalla in NSW.

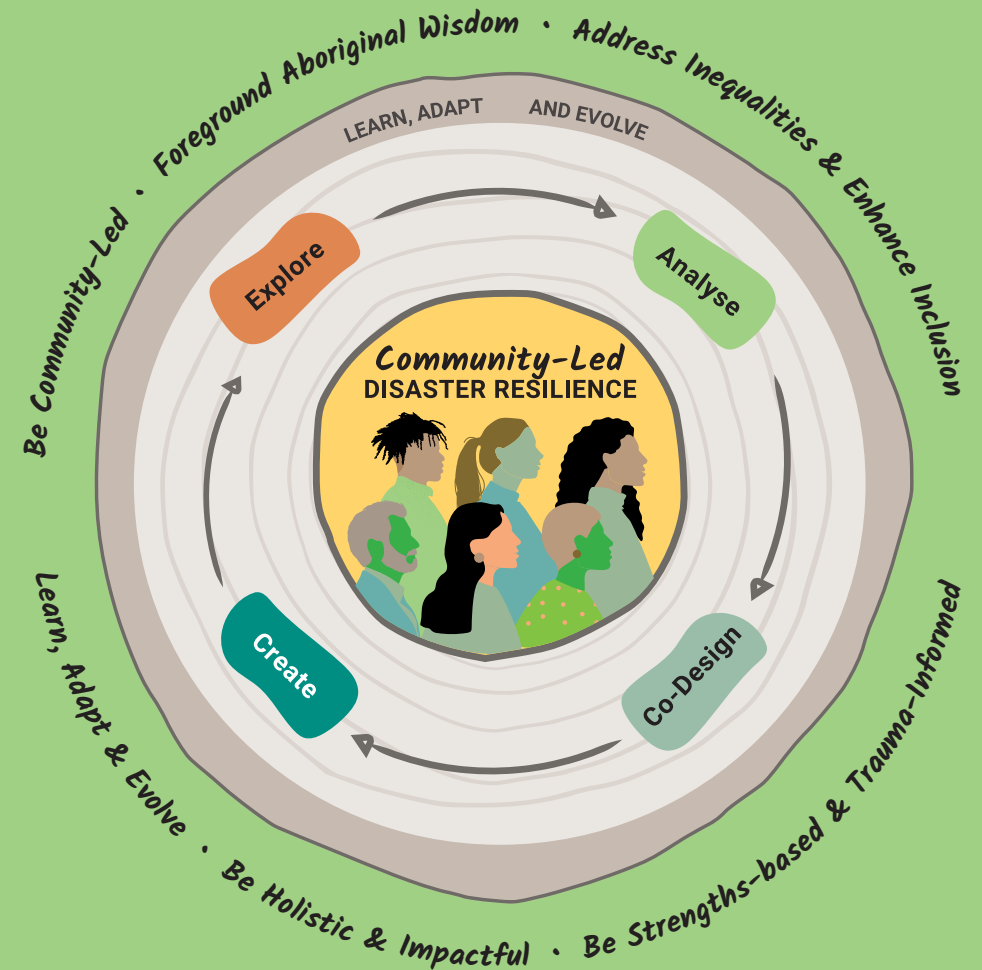
We provide communities with decision-making power over flexible, easy-to-access grant funding, which resources them to design and implement projects to enhance disaster resilience. Working alongside these communities, we've co-created tailored resilience solutions that tap into local wisdom and capabilities.

Explore our knowledge and evidence of community-led resilience here:

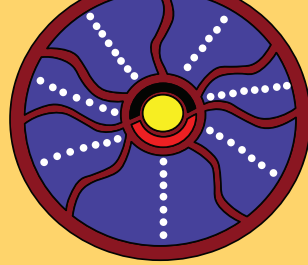


The Fire to Flourish approach

Grounded in our six guiding principles, our innovative approach — **explore, analyse, co-design and create** — bridges the gap between hyper-local realities and government responses by using locally led planning and participatory granting to put decision-making into the hands of community.



Fire to Flourish in East Gippsland



Fire to Flourish has been active in Far East Gippsland since 2022, building community-led disaster resilience from Cabbage Tree Creek to Gipsy Point, including Bidwell, Yuin, Gunaikurnai and Monero Countries.

Across East Gippsland, no two communities are the same; every community has different recovery needs and priorities for future resilience. Fire to Flourish exists to allow each community to shape a program of

resilience in their own way, especially the smaller communities who often miss out on funding opportunities.

The Fire to Flourish East Gippsland team – Sara Matthews, Bonnie Nebauer and Eva Grunden – has been working closely with Community Planners across disparate communities – listening, learning and adapting to meet each community’s diverse recovery needs. Alongside Community Planners, they have established strong partnerships with existing community groups and have built on what was done before them.

“This is a new way of working, we are just getting to know the approach, the language, the empowerment. It would be great if we could keep working in this way.”

– East Gippsland Community Planner



(L-R): Fire to Flourish Strategic Advisory Council member Kate Cowden with the Fire to Flourish East Gippsland team: Community Facilitators Eva Grunden and Bonnie Nebauer, and Community Lead Sara Matthews.

“We have the local insight, lived experience and understanding of our communities – the context of our communities, our values – we are best placed to do this work.”

– East Gippsland Community Planner

 **2** granting rounds

\$1.8M disbursed to community

32 community-led projects



 **12** Community Planners engaged

How is our Participatory Grantmaking different?

Our participatory grantmaking model is different from traditional grant funding in four ways:

The process is community-led

The eligibility, criteria and resilience priorities have been developed by the local team of Community Planners. This process has included consultation with community and draws on community context. The grant process has been designed to ensure that a wide range of local or connected organisations, small community groups and/or individuals can apply and benefit.

Applications are assessed on merit

In alignment with Fire to Flourish participatory funding principles, eligible project applications are assessed on their merit according to the criteria and priorities defined by community members, not assessed in comparison or in competition with other applications.

We offer flexible support

Right through from idea conception to the application process, to funding agreements, implementation and finally acquittal, the support we provide is flexible and tailored to the needs of each project. For example: if community members have identified a need but have no specific project ideas, we can support a series of facilitated workshops to clarify the needs; we provide hands-on support for writing applications; large-scaled project ideals can be funded in stages, and we support to ensure the team is application-ready.

We use a participatory approach to evaluation and acquittal

When it comes to deciding what strengthens disaster resilience for a particular community, Fire to Flourish is committed to learning from community members and their project preferences. Throughout the granting process, community are invited to share insights, outcomes, achievements and learnings in a number of participatory ways:

- **Learning circles:** Informal 'catch up' sessions with the F2F team/s and key people involved in each project, to hear stories, celebrate achievements, learn about challenges and how to overcome them, provide feedback, and support networking and collaboration.
- **Flexible and supported acquittal processes:** Equitable acquittal is used to demonstrate the impact of the project, its strengths and any lessons learnt, and to show that the funds have been used for the purpose intended in the funding application. We encourage projects to document and celebrate their 'story' through a range of creative storytelling opportunities.

Transparency, fairness and equity

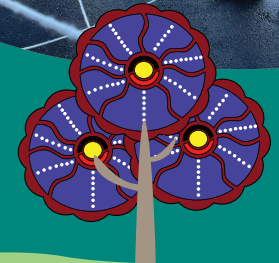
were very important to this group, and they were supported to think about and articulate clear local governance and transparent decision making, including clarity around conflict of interest and having an independent grant assessor to support final decision making around funds allocation.

Our vision for disaster resilience

Created by Community Planners

From the ashes and flooded plains, isolation and scarcity, a vibrant tapestry is woven by the people and land. Prosperity is built by our ideas and creativity to combat the challenges that arise within our home, community and environment, to connect our knowledge and resources for future generations to come.

Right: Roger Rumbottle, Ian Mitchell, Emma Short, Dave Peters, Rod Bechaz and Barry Cowden taking part in a yarnning circle activity as part of their co-design workshop for the Gipsy Point Storage and Meeting Place project in June 2025.
Below: Aunty Aileen guiding a community mapping exercise.



Indigenous consultation and leadership in East Gippsland

Throughout 2025 and beyond, we are working closely with Monero, Yuin and Ngarigo Elder from Cann River, Aunty Aileen Mongta-Blackburn, and experts from Monash Art, Design and Architecture, the Cann River Indigenous community, Moogji Aboriginal Council and Monash's National Indigenous Disaster Resilience program, to implement the Staying on Country project that ensures culturally safe evacuations and sustainable, resilient housing.

"Some people might see some of these projects as 'not tackling the big stuff', but how can we tackle the big stuff when our community meeting place doesn't have a functioning septic system?"

– East Gippsland Community Planner

Our disaster resilience priorities

First Nations people

Knowledge and connection to Country is respected, applied and celebrated to strengthen resilience and support healing through culturally appropriate practices.

A strong and connected community

Building and nurturing a strong community that is safe, kind, connected, curious, caring and inclusive, and where people know about what's important to the community. Strengthening connections and engagement in whole-of-community planning and processes through shared events, regular catch-ups etc.

Looking after our health and wellbeing

Access to services, groups, and initiatives that strengthen our health and wellbeing, for example: local mental and physical health services; childcare; wellbeing initiatives, including local learning, training and education opportunities; sports, arts, crafts, creative connection; developing community capacity.

Connection with the environment and caring for Country

Nurturing connection with and caring for a healthy environment.

Places and infrastructure

Reliable, affordable telecommunications (internet) and power supplies (i.e. solar); community-owned and shared

assets; local food security; community places to gather and connect; evacuation and relief centres; equipment sheds; emergency accommodation; eco-tourism infrastructure; Access: Better roads and public transport.

Economic wellbeing and resilience

Innovative ideas for local employment, education and training; sustainable and environmentally sensitive economic development, for example: community-owned assets; eco-tourism & microbusiness; community arts & craft micro-business; First Nations land management: teaching and employment, sharing culture and information; access to childcare etc.

Disaster planning, preparation, relief and recovery

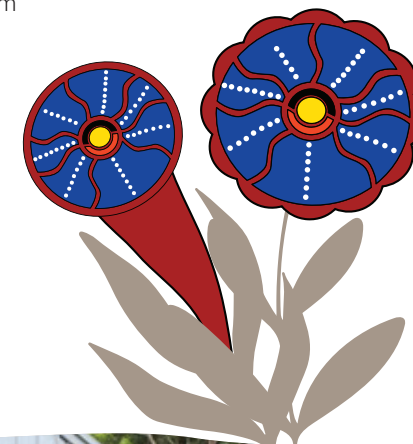
Our communities are as prepared as they can be and are adequately supported, resourced, informed and trained to be prepared and to lead their recovery, for example through: local level fuel management; local level preparedness, response and recovery planning; regular information and planning sessions and drills run by locals; localised warning networks and communication plans; local equipment, infrastructures and skills training; strengthened relationships with emergency/disaster management agencies.

Our open-call community grant round, 2023 – 24

From June to October 2023, we focused on providing grants to the community quickly and appropriately, and worked closely with groups to implement our first granting round. Our 'tell us what you need' approach brought lots of people forward with ideas for building resilience.

We successfully funded seventeen amazing community resilience projects, showcasing a broad spectrum of ideas – from large-scale and Indigenous art projects to cultural learning spaces, backup generators, disaster relief sheds, and sprinkler systems for public buildings.

These ideas reflected our communities' immediate priorities for resilience, and their sense of urgency to prepare for the 2023/24 bushfire season.



The Bemm River Mens Shed was granted funding to install upgrades to their facility and establish a Disaster Relief Hub.



Our co-designed participatory grant round, 2024 – 25

The following year, we put a call out to local communities to become Community Planners, and twelve passionate people stepped forward, pictured in the photos overpage. We met regularly in the second half of 2024, facilitated by the Fire to Flourish Community Team and Monash researchers, to reflect on what disaster resilience means in our local context.

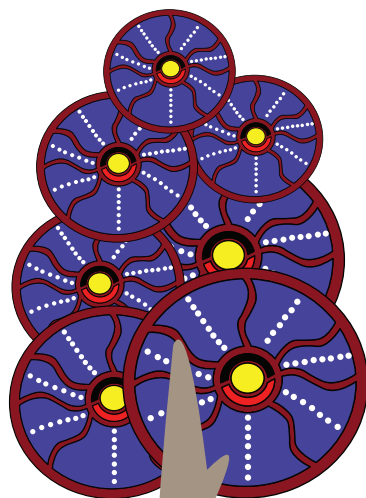
As part of this process, Community Planners talked with people in their communities to 'ground truth' and get feedback on their thinking and planning. They co-designed a round of participatory grant funding, which they identified as playing a key role in supporting community members and groups, and ensuring that community voice is centred and prioritised when allocating resilience-building funds.

This round focused on delivering flexible grants to remote communities of Gipsy Point, Genoa, Cann Valley, Cabbage Tree Creek and Bemm River. The variety of the inspiring projects funded is testament to the deep knowledge and existing motivations of local communities to ensure that East Gippsland remains a thriving region when disasters hit.

We thank these Community Planners for their incredible commitment, time and insight into strengthening disaster resilience in their communities.

“F2F has provided facilitation and support for a genuinely community led approach, building our confidence and capacity as a foundation.”

– East Gippsland Community Planner



(L–R) Top row: Irene Birt, Sara Matthews, Shanise Mongta-Porter, Aileen Mongta-Blackburn, Tiffany Russell, Eva Grunden, Anna Curren, Robyn Sturgess; Bottom row: Maria Edwards, Kate Cowden, Christy Bryar, Kazz Hamilton, Chris Lanyon, Bonnie Nebauer.



(L–R) Top row: Dawn Mongta, Ash Shannon, Jana Axinja-Paschen, Mila Paschen, Anna Curren, Irene Birt, Robyn Sturgess, Michelle Mongta, Kazz Hamilton, Tiffany Russell, Eva Grunden; Bottom row: Christy Bryar, Aunty Aileen, Shanise Mongta-Porter, Kate Cowden, Chris Lanyon, Sara Matthews.

Our community-led disaster resilience projects

Through our two grant rounds, and with support from the Gippsland Community Foundation, we have funded 32 amazing community-led projects that are now building disaster resilience, and supporting community empowerment and self-determination, for future generations across East Gippsland. Each project, and the community-led processes behind it, have ignited deep conversation, healing and resilience. It has been a privilege to do this work alongside the rich tapestry that is our communities.

- 1. Commercial Kitchen Caravan** to share cultural and agricultural knowledge through two-day Cultural Immersion Workshops.
- 2. Disaster Relief Hub at Bemm River Mens Shed** to ensure adequate bushfire response for this community.
- 3. Cann River Community Centre Garden Upgrade** to increase capacity for the centre to facilitate youth groups, social events, community lunches and other wellbeing activities.
- 4. East Gippsland Timber Milling Service** to provide free milling service to land owners with fallen trees, and to create timber fences, bridges and stockyards.
- 5. Cann River Valley and District representative group Community Power Generator** to use during fires, and a Memorandum of Understanding for the maintenance and deployment of the generator.
- 6. Gipsy Point Fishing Event** to reignite this special annual event that brings the whole community together, with funds raised going towards supporting the local community.
- 7. Generating Power for Tamboon Inlet Firefighting** to charge the batteries that run the pumps and slip ons from the water storage tanks.
- 8. Tamboon-Peachtree Association's Lyrebird Sculpture for Cann River** to thank Cann Valley locals and Indigenous people for their firefighting efforts, and symbolise community strength.
- 9. Buldah Community Committee** Fire Guard equipment
- 10. Cabbage Tree Creek Hall** to install a sprinkler system that protects the building during fires.
- 11. Genoa History Park (Stage 1) – feasibility study** to house the community-owned fire trailer shed and offer a place for the community to collect and connect.
- 12. Bemm River community collaboration** – Bemm river and district neighborhood house, Bemm River progress and improvement association inc and Bemm River recreation reserve committee of management – bushfire preparedness sprinkler system installation on Bemm River and district neighbourhood house community facility.
- 13. Aboriginal arts and culture on country (Stage 1)** – to establish a First Nation's art space in Cann River
- 14. Combienbar Community Hall Committee (Stage 1)** – emergency equipment shed
- 15. Cann River Monaro Centre** – develop their social enterprise model and fund a manager position
- 16. Cann River Community Centre (Youth Group)** – a youth-led development of community priorities
- 17. Cann River hall and recreation reserve committee of management inc** – Bushfire debris cleanup, repair and painting of the community facility
- 18. Bemm River Disaster Preparedness Hub (Stage 2)** – to complete the Disaster Preparedness Hub by ensuring 'all ability' and all-weather access to the building.
- 19. Kitchen Renovation – Cabbage Tree Creek Community Hall** to upgrade the kitchen, creating usable spaces in emergencies and for community events.
- 20. Aboriginal Art & Culture On Country (Stage 2)** – to provide a pathway for local Aboriginal community to combine art, culture and lived experiences of post-bushfire wellbeing.
- 21. Bemm River Winterfest** to bring all the communities together to take part in and celebrate East Gippsland Winterfestival through a variety of events and entertainment, leading the way for all future winterfest activities.
- 22. Cann Community Cafe** to establish a community-owned training cafe that supports employment opportunities, training, financial support for town needs and funding for current programs.
- 23. Cement Paths at Noorinbee Hall and Recreation Reserve** to ensure that disabled or mobility-impaired people are able to access the toilets and showers.
- 24. Wilderness Coast KELPfarm Scoping Study** to assess the feasibility of establishing a seaweed aquaculture industry on the Far East Gippsland coast that provides local jobs and training for communities.
- 25. Bemm River Foreshore and Boardwalk Development** to create a fire break along a section of the boardwalk using lighting, mulch, revegetation, raised garden beds containing native Australian edible plants.
- 26. Gipsy Point Community Meeting Place** to investigate the feasibility of building a permanent meeting place, and surveying the community to achieve consensus on next steps.
- 27. Pathways to Growth** to provide mentoring for volunteering, skills and shared community opportunities in sports, recreation, and arts in Far East Gippsland, through Reclink Australia.
- 28. You Can Stay and Play – Bemm River Recreation Reserve** to support the Bemm River community and visitors with full utilisation of the facilities by building all-access toilets.
- 29. Combienbar Hall Facilities Upgrade** to renew the septic system and install an all-gender, wheelchair-accessible external toilet and shower connected to the new sewerage system.
- 30. Gipsy Point Community Asset Ownership** to help Gipsy Point convert private assets into community-owned assets that foster local business and employment, encourage tourism, offer ongoing economic opportunities, and attract permanent residents.
- 31. CBCC (Cabbage Tree, Bellbird Creek, Cape Conran, Cann River) Wellness, Strengthening and Preparedness** to apply a trauma-informed approach to community wellness, strengthening and disaster preparedness.
- 32. Genoa History Park (Stage 2)** – to create a local history park that houses a community owned fire trailer shed and showcasing and celebrating the rich history of Genoa.

Project highlights

Bonnie Nebauer, Eva Grunden, Briony Rogers, Sara Matthews, Neil Findley and Frank Herbert visiting the Big Lyrebird in Cann River.



"We felt that the lyrebird statue would promote feelings of great joy and achievement in town, being a physical symbol of recovery, and we also wanted to donate the sculpture to the town as a gift, a symbol of the resilience of its people, to help with healing following the bushfires."

– Ernie Vare, project lead and Vice President of Tamboon Peachtree Association

◀ Lyrebird Sculpture for Cann River

For locals and Traditional Custodians of Cann River, the lyrebird has long been an emblem of the community. So when the disparate communities of this area were recovering from the 2019/20 bushfires, it made sense that the lyrebird motif should be immortalised as a sculpture that represents unity and strength.

With funding for a project led by Tamboon-Peachtree Association, the Lyrebird Sculpture for Cann River was created from salvaged farming equipment by local artist Neil Findley and is now a permanent attraction at Cann River Community Centre, drawing admirers from far and wide.

"These are the sorts of funding opportunities that remote communities like ours need. Without Fire to Flourish East Gippsland, this would never have happened."

– Jann Gilbert, marine scientist and project leader

▶ Wilderness Coast KELPfarm Scoping Study

For coastal areas, such as those prominent across Far East Gippsland, marine ecology is essential for environmental resilience to future natural hazards, especially floods and storm surge. One element of marine ecology that has shown significant promise in building environment and community resilience is seaweed aquaculture – that is, the practice of cultivating new seaweed beds along the coast to rebalance healthy marine ecosystems.

The Wilderness Coast KELPfarm Scoping Study is fighting climate change while creating employment opportunities for future generations of researchers in diverse and remote coastal communities of Victoria.



East Gippsland marine ecosystem.

Grassroots impact

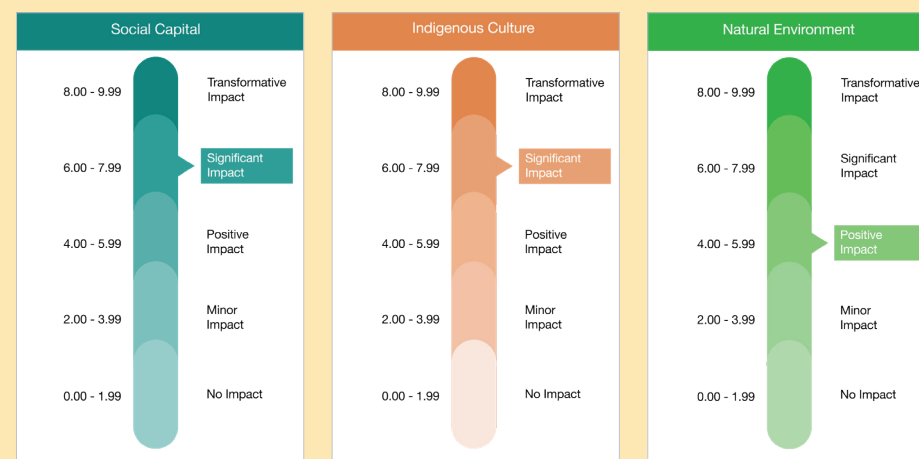
OVERALL IMPACT

No Impact Positive Impact Positive Impact Significant Impact Transformative Impact

Fire to Flourish East Gippsland has had a significant, lasting positive impact on the disaster resilience of local communities, through initiatives that have strengthened social capital, celebrated Indigenous culture and enhanced environmental stewardship.

- **Social capital:** profound benefits in building social connection and collaboration, especially new networks and enabling residents to take proactive roles in community-driven initiatives
- **Natural environment:** dual benefits of bringing people together while improving environmental resilience through habitat restoration, bushfire preparedness and sustainable land management
- **Indigenous culture:** improved mutual understanding and respect through two-way learning between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, as well as integration of Indigenous ecological methods into disaster preparedness.

"I've learned how to lead projects and bring people together in ways I never thought possible. Fire to Flourish gave me the confidence to step up and make a difference."
– East Gippsland local resident



EAST GIPPSLAND

FIRE to FLOURISH



Strength through community-led action

The Fire to Flourish East Gippsland team would like to thank our amazing community planners and the broader community for all of your participation and support throughout what has been a collective learning journey.

Together, through self determination, we have strengthened and empowered our connections to people and place.

We are hopeful that the Fire to Flourish legacy is one of optimism and knowing that a genuinely community-led approach is impactful and is the better way.

“Healing and caring for Country is nurtured through collaboration and social capacity building.

A connected community is a resilient community.”

– Sara Matthews, Fire to Flourish East Gippsland Community Lead

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