

COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO SEA LEVEL RISE POLICY OF PLANNED RETREAT: LOCALISED DEBATES IN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

Byron Shire Council has had a policy of 'planned retreat' in its dynamic coastal environment since 1988. Planned retreat is a planning and land use management tool for areas susceptible to coastal erosion. Storm events in May 2009 led to erosion of beach environments in Byron Shire which impacted on a number of private properties in the Belongil Spit area and triggered a local and national discourse on the Council's policy of planned retreat. The power of news media in portraying public issues and being able to inform and shape public opinion is well documented. Local newspapers play a major role in opinion formation within a community. This research presents a quantitative content analysis of articles appearing in the two local newspapers in Byron Shire during the four months following the storm event. This paper focuses on the community discourse on: the storms' impact on the coastal environment, Byron Shire Council's policy of planned retreat, and community responses to the policy. The published letters to the editor show a wide range of opinions on the planned retreat policy. Major themes that emerge from this analysis include discussions of: the event and its impacts, perceptions of risk, perceptions of actors, perceptions of policies, sense of community, and suggestions for actions.

Introduction

Australian governments at all levels are currently considering statutory and regulatory instruments to manage potential sea level rise as a result of climate change. New South Wales State Government has recently released a draft sea level rise policy which aims to provide guidance to local councils to support their sea level rise adaptation planning (NSW Government 2009). Response to sea level rise, and its biophysical impacts, is usually conceptualised as either protect, accommodate or retreat (Bijlsma et al 1996). One local authority in northern NSW, Byron Shire Council has had a policy of 'planned retreat' through its planning controls for coastal development, as part of its local environment plan since 1988. Planned retreat is a planning and land use management tool that details the limits to development in coastal areas deemed to be vulnerable to hazards.

In May 2009 a storm event led to erosion of beach environments in Byron Shire. The coastal erosion impacted on a number of private properties in the Belongil Spit area. This storm event, which occurred across Northern NSW over a few days, triggered a community discourse on the coastal erosion and Byron Shire Council's policy and management response of 'planned retreat'. Coincidentally this occurred just as Council was finalising its draft Coastal Zone Management Plan which will be released for public comment in late October 2009 (so it is too early to assess the impact of this discourse on the draft plan). This episode of community discourse was chosen as the subject of study because it highlights the issues that are raised by a community around a council's attempts to implement a coastal policy of planned retreat.

This research presents a quantitative content analysis of Letters to the Editor (LTE) appearing in the two local newspapers in Byron Shire during the four months following the May 2009 storm event. The power of news media in portraying public issues and being able to inform and shape public opinion is well documented (Holliman 2004, Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). Mass media, due to its social utility and narrative style, plays an important role in social construction of risk (Kitzinger 1999, Miles and Morse 2007). Newspapers, even in times of declining readership and the rise of electronic news dissemination, still play a key role in opinion formation of decision makers (Miles and Morse 2007). In particular, local newspapers play a major role in opinion formation within a community about local issues and so can be useful source of data for investigating community discourse (e.g. cancer cluster investigations Besley et al 2008; biotechnology Priest and Ten Eyck 2003, Crawley 2007). Such newspapers, which are a media outlet targeted to a specific location, can offer different perspectives than those of newspapers at the national level and also may, in turn, influence how an issue is defined at the state or national level (Priest and Ten Eyck 2003, Wahl-Jorgensen 2005).

Letters to the editor (LTE) are written by everyday people who have a different status to the socio-political elites and so provide a 'voice' for everyday people to express their daily concerns and opinions and interact with their community (Habermas 1989, Rojas-Lizana 2007). Scarcely studied, LTE provide some asymmetry, as only a few people are stimulated enough to write them, however they reveal what is valued by a community (Rojas-Lizana 2007) and are influential in opinion formation, both of local people as well as more broadly by decision makers (Wahl-Jorgensen 1999) and often comprise one of the most read sections of a newspaper. Content analysis is a secondary data analysis technique for gathering and analysing the content of text (Neuman 2006). Generally content analyses of news usually probe the national or 'elite' newspapers and often focus on how an issue is framed by journalist(s) and whether the coverage is positive, negative or neutral. Content analyses of climate change have studied representations of global climate change (e.g. Boykoff and Boykoff 2007, Boykoff 2008, Boykoff and Mansfield 2009).

This paper uses an inductive approach to describe what issues emerge in LTE in local newspapers to distil any broad lessons that may ensue for Byron Shire and other local councils in developing or refining sea level rise policies for their region. We report on initial findings from a broader study of community discourse in local coastal councils currently being undertaken (Leitch and Robinson in prep).

Methodology

The focus of this study is the articles and 'letters to the editor' (LTE) in two local newspapers relating to the coastal erosion following a storm event that impacted on the human settlement at Belongil Beach in May 2009 and on Byron Shire Council's policy of 'planned retreat' in this coastal erosion zone.

Study area description

Byron Shire¹ in northern New South Wales has a population around 29,000 (ABS 2006) and supports a diverse community whose values, lifestyles and philosophies range from traditional to alternative (WBM 2005). Established as a dairy town by the 1890s, Byron Bay was a 'working class town' having supported, at various times, enterprises as diverse as a sawmill, meatworks, cannery and whaling station. In the 1970s the region was discovered by surfies and hippies and currently Byron Bay's economy is dominated by tourism with the town considered a 'sea change' coastal lifestyle destination (Gurran et al 2005). Byron Shire is also considered to have an

¹ The author is a resident of Byron Shire but has no link with Belongil residents or Byron Shire Council.

active political community who are “never shy of telling the Council, or for that matter state Government, about matters touching their beliefs or where the town should be heading” (Ryan and Smith 2001, p.31).

Byron Shire is one of the first councils in Australia to initiate and implement a planned retreat policy response which has existed since 1988. The coastal zone of Byron Shire is highly dynamic and as a result there have been several ‘dramatic events...these include the damage to fishing fleets and jetties as a result of storms and cyclones; the loss of Sheltering Palms, a village north of the Brunswick River entrance, due to shoreline recession; and the threatened loss of houses on Belongil Spit due to continued dune erosion and shoreline recession’ (WBM 2005, pviii). Belongil Spit lies just north of the Shire’s main town of Byron Bay.

Media description

Byron Bay supports two local newspapers which are both delivered free to the community as print copies as well as being available online. The *Byron Shire News* was first published as the *Byron News* in 1971 and is part of the APN News & Media Ltd and shares many news stories with the Lismore-based regional newspaper the *Northern Star*. The current editor Gary Chigwidden of the *Byron Shire News* has held that position since 1992. It is a weekly paper with a circulation of 17,500 (Margaret Gee’s *Media Guide* 2009). The *Byron Shire Echo*, the dominant weekly (Martin and Ellis 2002), is an independently owned newspaper that was established in 1986 to be a ‘provocative community-based newspaper’ (Martin and Ellis 2002, p.1). The *Echo* has a circulation of 21,000 (Gee 2009) and its current editor Michael McDonald has been in place for the past decade.

Content analysis methods

The cyclic and episodic nature of news is well understood (Downs 1972, Crawley 2007): coverage of an event begins with reportage of the stimulus – in this case the storm event and subsequent coastal erosion – and then interest is sustained through discourse about follow up actions and the political, ethical implications. This study takes account of one such news cycle that emerged after a coastal erosion event at Belongil Spit in May 2009. The sample period was from 1 June until 1 October 2009 inclusive with LTE collected each week and entered into a data management package QSR Nvivo 8 (Nvivo). Details of each letter’s author and their suburb were also noted. If another letter was cited then a relationship was noted between the two letters. Each letter was read and coded in Nvivo.

The coding scheme was developed through an iterative process. The LTEs which appeared in the first month of sampling, June 2009, were worked through in order to create and define each code. Comments could be coded in more than one category. In total there were six main categories created each with subcategories:

1. Descriptions of events, causes, costs, impacts
2. Suggested future actions
3. Perceptions of actors (decision makers, Belongil residents)
4. Perceptions of policies (planned retreat, coastal management plan and capacity to influence these policies)
5. Sense of community (community spirit, sense of place, identity, conflict, metaphors, symbolism)
6. Perceptions of risk (different types of risk, risk of climate change, types of knowledge).

This was the schema then used for the rest of the articles during the sample period (June – October 2009). The themes were coded by the number of LTE that mentioned the theme as well as the number of references to the theme. All LTE were coded by

the author which ensured consistency, although this does not meet the ideal of having another independent coder to ensure validity.

Results

Between 1 June 2009 (the week after the storm event) and 1 October 2009 there was a total of 50 LTE in the two local papers: *Byron Shire Echo* (*Echo*) and *Byron Shire News* (*BSN*). Eighty percent of the LTE appeared in the *Echo* (40 during the four months) compared with 10 LTE in the *BSN* during the same period (see figure 1). There were no duplicate letters between the two papers. The number of letters ranged during the sample period from 0 to 8 with an average of 2.78 letters each week across both papers. Usually there were two letters each week (mode). [Note that there were 11 articles in the *Byron Shire News* and seven articles relating to this coastal erosion and related topics in the *Echo* during the same period – these have not been investigated for this study (see Leitch and Robinson in prep)].

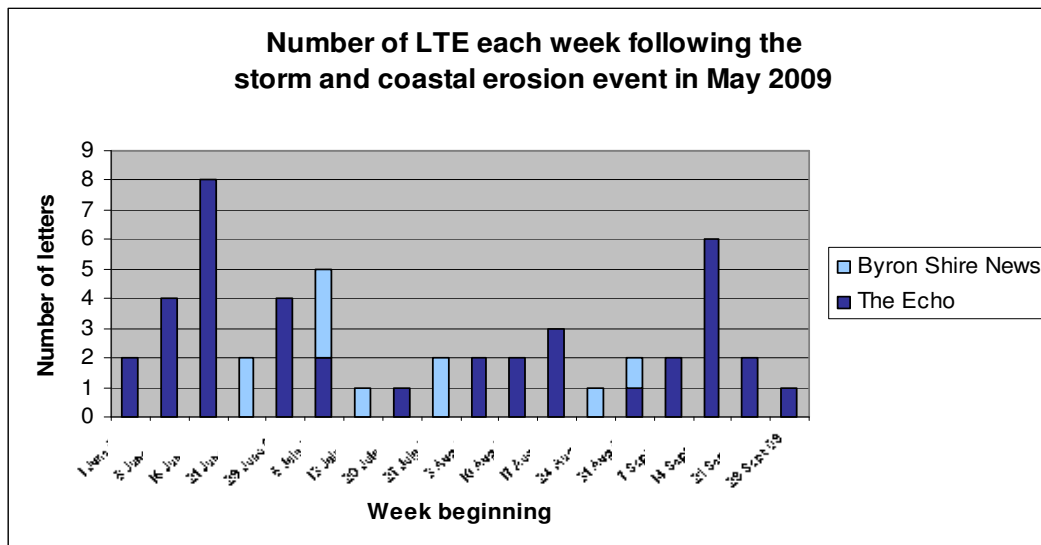


Figure 1: The number of Letters to the Editor (LTE) each week for both papers during the four months of June-September 2009

The themes discussed in the LTE were coded into six main categories which can be grouped as themes of ‘risk definition’ and themes of ‘adaptation and response’.

Themes of risk definition

Themes of risk definition include two categories which are concerned with the ‘facts’ of the event and the risk that this type of event presents. These included the coding categories:

1. Descriptions of events, causes, costs, impacts
2. Perceptions of risk (different types of risk, risk of climate change, types of knowledge, similar situations/metaphors).

The most common theme (mentioned in 70 LTE with 80 references) was in the category that discussed the coastal erosion event in particular its cause and its impacts. The main themes discussed were: disputing the specific causes of the coastal erosion, and highlighting the impacts of the coastal erosion on private landholders and public assets. In particular, the causes of the erosion in the Belongil Spit area were heavily argued and attributed to structures such as rock walls or jetties,

council's actions, historical sandmining activities, 'Mother Nature' or the original State Government subdivision.

The second most common category discussed different types of risk involved in the coastal erosion with biophysical risk being discussed most often (mentioned in 10 LTE with 12 references) followed by political risk (mentioned in 5 LTE with 7 references) and personal risk (mentioned in 3 LTE with 3 references). This category also included different types of knowledge that were utilised with expert knowledge and local knowledge discussed a similar number of times (16 and 14 references respectively) There were also a number of references (9 in 8 LTE) to similar situations for the current situation at Belongil (e.g. a comparison with a local emergency such as bushfires) or metaphors (e.g. King Canute, the English king who thought he had the power to command the sea).

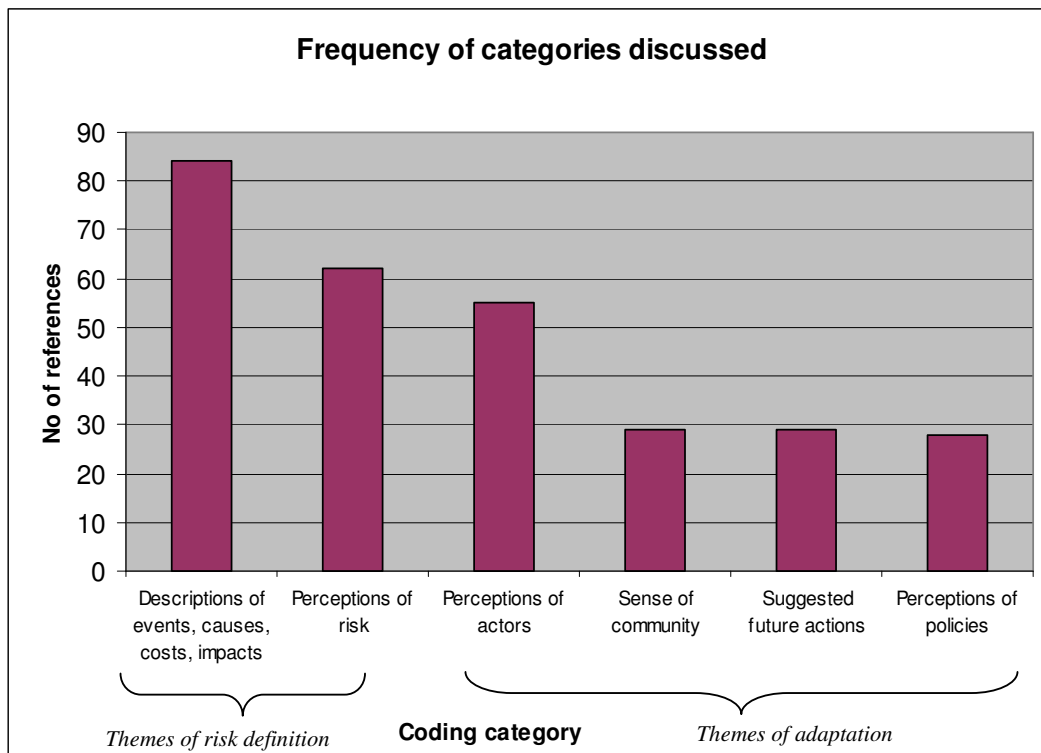


Figure 2: The frequency of categories discussed in the Letters to the Editor (LTE) in two local news papers

Themes of adaptation

Themes of adaptation include the response to the event and associated risk and are concerned with perceptions of those involved (the 'actors'), the policies that exist to deal with the event and the perceptions of the community (its community spirit and sense of place). Specifically they included the following coding categories:

1. Perceptions of actors (decision makers, Belongil residents)
2. Perceptions of policies (planned retreat, coastal management plan and capacity to influence these policies)
3. Sense of community (community spirit, sense of place, conflict)
4. Suggested future actions.

Perceptions of the actors were also keenly considered with many letters discussing perceptions of decision makers, particularly Byron Shire Council (mentioned in 23 LTE with 32 references) and Mayor Jan Barham (mentioned in 5 letters with 6 references).

There were many comments about Belongil residents (mentioned in 13 LTE with 16 references). Surprisingly there was only one mention of the role of State Government.

Many people expressed strong emotions through their choice of language in phrases coded as categories relating to a sense of community: the Byron community spirit, a sense of place, the conflict caused in the community (in 24 LTE with 29 references). There was also a discussion on what is Byron Shire Council's planned retreat policy and draft Coastal Zone Management Plan (about to be released for public comment) and what is the capacity of individuals to influence policy development (in 24 LTE with 28 references)

Discussion

This study sought to describe the types of issues that arose in two local papers through the LTE as a form of community discourse on coastal erosion of Belongil Spit and subsequently on the Byron Shire Council's attempt to implement its policy of planned retreat as a management and policy response. This is an interesting and timely issue as many coastal councils in Australia and elsewhere grapple to develop a response to potential impacts of sea level rise.

The community discourse in the two local papers was to some extent predictable in that it follows the classic news attention cycle described by Downs (1972). Downs described how in various types of media an issue becomes prominent, stays current for a short time and then, though largely unresolved, fades from media – and to some extent - public attention. There are subsequent smaller peaks in interest as novel news angles are found. For LTE, these news angles are comments by a letter author that stimulates another round of discussion of a new opinion or criticism of the author, comment or motivation. This community discourse was diminishing towards the end of the sample period however the imminent release of the coastal management plan – which includes further definition and clarification of the planned retreat policy – is likely to fuel another round of community discussion. It will be interesting to see how the community discourse influences, or is influenced, by the consultation for the draft plan.

The issue that received most attention was the discussion of the 'facts' of the event – supported by discussion of types of knowledge such as 'expert' (some of the coastal reports that have been prepared by scientific or coastal consultants) and buoyed also by 'local' or experiential knowledge of those who have lived through some previous coastal events and/or have walked the area on a regular basis. One lesson for decision makers is that their consultation processes need to incorporate many types of knowledge in planning and policy development. Another lesson is that knowledge is often contested making it difficult for people to move onto a more constructive solutions-based discussion.

Finally it is also important to discuss the limitations of this study as they are early findings from the initial scrutiny of the LTE during the sample period. Similarly the newspaper articles, which were beyond the scope of this study, raise some interesting issues, such as the involvement of the State Government, which have not been raised in the LTE to date. It would also be useful to know the criteria or process used by the news editors for selecting (and discarding) letters. A more detailed study is underway which will analyse in more depth this form of community discourse as it continues through the current formal consultation period of the Byron Shire's Coastal Zone Management Plan (see Leitch and Robinson in prep).

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