

CREATIVE RESPONDERS

Podcast Transcript In Conversation with Sam Savage March 2022

Scotia: Hi I'm Scotia Monkivitch,

Welcome back for another episode of Creative Responders: In Conversation; our interview series where we hear from people on the frontlines of the arts and emergency management sector as they prepare, respond and recover from disaster.

First Nations Peoples are disproportionately impacted by disasters in Australia but research and practical guidance about how the recovery system can better support First Nations peoples is limited.

Today, we're looking into this with our guest, Sam Savage.

Sam works for Australian Red Cross as the Northern Queensland Emergency Services Regional Coordinator where he manages response, recovery and community resilience programs with a focus on psychosocial support.

He is also the Chairperson of the First Nations Recovery Group, a national network within the Australian Red Cross team and a member of the organisation's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Team.

I wanted to speak with Sam about his perspective on the specific challenges faced by Indigenous communities in a disaster context, what kind of action organisations like Red Cross are doing to address this and also, how our emergency management systems can improve to better serve marginalised communities.

We recorded this episode in early March, just a few days before the Queensland / New South Wales flooding event took place - I wanted to mention this in case you're wondering why we don't discuss that particular emergency directly as I know it has been top of mind for many of us over these past few weeks and it's something we will address in future podcast episodes.

For now, please enjoy my conversation with Creative Responder, Sam Savage.

Scotia: Welcome, Sam, thanks for joining us today. I'm talking to you from our Meanjin, Jaggera Turrbal Country here in Brisbane. How are you today? Where are you calling us from?

Sam: Yeah, hi Scotia. Look great to be here and joining this podcast. I'm joining you from the Townsville region up in North Queensland. So I'd like to acknowledge the Bindal and Waggarukaba Traditional Owner groups whose land I'm presenting from for this podcast.

Scotia: Great, well could we start off by telling us a little about your Country there Sam? What about the area where you live and work at the moment? That beautiful, dry country?

Sam: Yeah sure. Um look Townsville's. Yeah, Townsville's part of the dry tropics region up in North Queensland. And if I can compare it to far north Queensland, places such as Cairns, they're more known as the wet tropics so a lot more rain up further, a bit more greener. But as I said, we're along the coast so live off the the the saltwater, the coastal side of life, but also live off the land in regards to, you know, we have our freshwater holes and and rivers and lakes that we love to connect to as well. So, you know, Townsville's roughly over 200000 people population wise, we have a high population of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people living within the city of Townsville, but also a whole range of other diverse community groups that is growing so much in a region that you know, it's lovely up here to live in and and grow.

Scotia: So your current role is with Red Cross, you're the North Queensland Emergency Service regional coordinator. In addition to that, you are also the Chairperson of the Australian Red Cross National First Nations Recovery Group and a member of their National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership team. Could you describe for us, from your perspective, why was it so essential that we have a focus on First Nations peoples within this disaster context that you're working with, particularly at the moment?

Sam: Yeah, I think I think the importance of not just First Nations people, but also marginalised groups within the disaster management space. Obviously, First Nations people are identified as one of those people that they like to be known as vulnerable groups. We have other groups that we've identified through a recovery phase after a response of an emergency, and some of those groups may be you know cultural and linguistically diverse groups, people with a disability, the aged sector, elders, even the youth sector. You know, there's a whole range of different groups. But for myself, being part of these First Nation groups within the Red Cross and being an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person myself, I have a great passion to make sure that we're advocating around recognition, inclusion, but also empowerment of our peoples and communities within the disaster context and making sure that we can create a voice to bring to the table and and hopefully get support to empower our people to become more resilient in their own communities.

Scotia: So I think the Red Cross First Nations recovery group is kind of very new that it's a sort of an evolving context of work for the Red Cross particularly, but also probably within emergency management across the board. What are some of the projects you're working at the moment or where do you see this kind of group going in terms of the focus that you're developing?

Sam: Yeah, the First Nations Recovery Group, it kicked off probably last year, late last year around maybe November and how it occurred is we we received a bit of funding through I think it was the bushfire program and a few positions were created in identified roles across the country so what we thought would be an opportunity was to to connect some of those identified positions obviously filled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and connect them as a as a group and use the group as more of a support base to to learn from each other, to bounce off each other with ideas and experiences. What are the gaps within the community sector around recovery? But also then we looked at our group as a collective to add value to Red Cross's response, community resilience building around First Nations people and in saying that it was around adding a cultural lens to our our emergency services sector, not just internally but also externally to other agencies that might be in that space.

Scotia: So can you unpack what you mean by that, Sam like to add a cultural lens. It's a kind of language that people can assume so many things about. But what what do you actually mean when you when you say that or as an organisation when Red Cross says that?

Sam: Yeah sure. A few examples I can give is a lot of resources that we provide out to community sectors around preparedness and recovery. It is very mainstream for a whole of community approach. That's good. But as as First Nations people and people that live out not just in remote communities, but even in regional settings, a lot of the a lot of the communication or the strategies that we're trying to provide information doesn't really not so much doesn't, but may not resonate with a whole range of family groups within within our space. So what we try to do is make it a bit more culturally appropriate add our type of language into those sort of resources, whether it be training, whether it be documents, documentations and so forth. So we'll work really closely with the different programs within Red Cross emergency services to to provide what is it knowledge, our practices, our experiences, our lived experiences, but also evidence based research that we can utilise around First Nations people. So it gives people and not just our First Nations people, but also our volunteers that are going out into the field to do outreach or to to provide psychological first aid or work in an evacuation centre, in a remote community or in a regional community that it has, you know, a high population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - a bit more awareness around protocols around, you know, the communications styles that they're used to delivering messaging through mightn't be the the the right style for that particular group or that particular community. So it's around trying to give a bit more support around information dissemination,

Scotia: more like deepening deepening knowledge,

Sam: deepening knowledge, you know, changing up the practice, changing up the practice of not just having a one shoe fits all approach. Let's try to tailor it to make sure it fits that specific group. So as I said, focussing on our First Nations people, we'll try to tailor programs, training, resources that will really resonate with our community members.

I just want to add as well around the advocacy piece as well, when we're at the table with external providers in the, you know, disaster management space, a lot of conversation will be around the different pillars that they like to call it - infrastructure, environment, political, economic, human and social. Obviously, human and social, we get a good opportunity to have conversations with government non-government bodies around these different marginalised groups. But for me, it is around making sure that when we are responding or building community resilience in our in the communities that they may be in, it's really important that they do identify these different types of groups and in this conversation, we're talking First Nations people.

Scotia: Yeah. So it's that very much people centered approach in terms of ensuring that we're identifying needs across the board.

I've come across this very interesting indigenous-led research project that's coming out of ANU. It's a national study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing. So looking at cultural wellbeing indicators, it's a kind of it's a comprehensive longitudinal study about how strong culture is related to good health and well-being and what are the kind of frames of reference that you need to be holding and balancing to to get good individual health and well-being and good collective community health and well-being. Could you speak about your understanding and experience that the role of culture and connection to Country plays in health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? And why is it so important that we need to contextualise any approach that we have, particularly in a recovery space around all of those structural knowledges that hold your communities together, particularly.

Sam: Yeah, I think for us, you know, when a disaster does hit a community, it does have an impact on everybody but for First Nations people, there's other impacts that that need to be considered around our people, such as, you know, Country, for example, there's a lot of cultural heritage sites out on Country. And when we say Country and community and, you know, we don't just, Country is about everything within a community. So it's not just about the infrastructure, it's not just about the household damage and roofs flying off. It's about our Country as in, people have responsibility to protect, preserve and maintain cultural heritage sites. So when a cyclone or a flood or a bushfire may unfortunately impact someone's area, they're the types of stuff that can really emotionally, spiritually, physically, obviously, you know, damage someone's well-being.

And for our people, we have responsibility to protect the land. In particular, Traditional Owner groups within all parts of Australia, you know, they're custodians of their own Country and their primary role is to try to make sure that some of these sacred sites, spiritual sites are looked after and maintained. So when it is impacted, how do we recover? This sort of stuff really isn't at the forefront of conversations within disaster recovery. And it really is important that we need to consider those type of impacts for First Nations people.

As for culture, you know, people may unfortunately have to move from their own homeland to another homeland due to, you know, impacts of of a bushfire or a flood or whatever. And they might, may not be able to return for months, for years or however long. Over that period of time, they're losing connection to country. They're losing their opportunity to practice cultural, you know, traditional hunting, traditional medicines, collecting their their traditional foods as they would do in any part of Australia. So they're the types of stuff that really impact us differently to the broader community.

Scotia: I had a very rich conversation with Uncle Milton Lawton. He's from Carnarvon Gorge area, and he was talking about how, when, when you carry, when you carry sorrow or grief, you carry. It's like a weight in your body, in your system and it's not necessarily a healthy weight to carry. And so in his culture, they take that sorrow and grief to Country and Country holds it for them. I'm kind of curious to know, well, how does that work in the reverse? Like if if country holds your grief or our grief, how do we hold it like in its grief and hurt? Because that's what happens in a disaster? You know, our country is is hurt or damaged in some way. How do we about how do we how do you perceive the manager of that imbalance for someone who's a custodian?

Sam: Yeah look, it's a very good, very good point. As I said, it's a sense of belonging to to come back to country, to heal and can really resonate from that conversation that Uncle shared with you Scotia. And for us around how do we look after Country, this is about collaborating with other external agencies and and looking at the preparedness around how do we build resilience not only to the people but to Country itself? So we might, you know, an example is we have a whole range of different Indigenous ranger programs that are all over Australia at the moment, and there's a lot of deadly mobs that are doing, you know, caring for Country initiatives, you know, looking after sea country looking at land as well. And in regards to, you know, coastal revegetation and rehabilitation of land to better prepare for disasters, so, I know up our way, we have some rangers that, you know are really looking at the seawall structures and how do we plant more trees to build a bit more stronger foundations for when tidal um you know the tidal storms are coming through and coming into our into our communities. They're the sorts of stuff that are now being considered around the Indigenous ranger programs where they're looking at that as in a conservation but a preparedness part around risk reduction of of, you know, disaster impacts on Country. And even as doing all that, it's around maintaining and protecting those cultural heritage sites as well.

Scotia: Mm. So the other thing that we so often we come in to work in communities perhaps that have had a mass displacement of traditional peoples or a lot of peoples who don't necessarily have connection to the Country that they are related to. You kind of mentioned this earlier. Sam, I'm just wondering how that massive displacement has taken place in Australia through colonisation, it's had this ongoing impact on many generations. But how does that work when you talk about preservation and passing on cultural knowledge and how you kind of apply that within a disaster context, particularly when so much of that has been lost?

Sam: Well, I think for our historical owners we'd probably acknowledge them as, as in other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that have been either relocated or relocated on their own calls or from other

sort of whatever reasons. For us, it is about learning and and sharing that knowledge around caring for Country and hopefully some one day they'll probably go back to their own homelands and and and have that knowledge or they may connect up with their own Traditional Owner groups, and they might have that connection already. And they'll be, you know, learning and talking about some someone else's ways of caring for country and looking after country and and building on that knowledge. But if they're in other people's location, I still think there's no harm in in supporting caring for Country initiatives because, as I said, Mother Earth to us, as in First Nations people is is the blood of of survival and and we all have a responsibility to protect it. And it's just about working with those Traditional Owner groups to support their part of the country, but also trying to get connection back to your own areas in regards to knowledge, family kinships and cultural heritage sites, but also culture in general, whether it be physical or spiritual or even through storytelling. It's about trying to learn and capture as much knowledge as possible to then, you know, share with the future generations that are going to be the next leaders in our in the future.

Scotia: It's such big work, isn't it? I recently heard you speak about communication around vulnerability versus resilience and how how that kind of freeze frame within vulnerable communities. What are your thoughts on that? And what are some of the ways to bridge the gaps experienced by these more vulnerable communities, your own communities, but also more broadly, as you said, there are there are so many vulnerable groups within the context of of disaster impacted how we work across that very complex environment.

Sam: Yeah, Scotia, I think for me and I did mention just this just before in vulnerability versus resilience and a lot of the times the disaster management space will identify the groups that I mentioned before as vulnerable groups, vulnerable peoples and for my through my experience and some of the recovery group members, our people have been resilient since colonisation. You know, we've adapted to change from through environmental changes, societal changes of of populations entering our country, but also systemic changes so we're pretty resilient in the sense of, you know, over 60, 70000 years of being on this planet and we've we've learned how to adapt to to change but time keeps changing and we have to change with the times.

But as for vulnerability, I think for me, we need to really bring the word in around marginalism. And it's not the people who are vulnerable, it's a system that makes people vulnerable. And for us, it's around how do we create a better system in our in our practices, in our connections and and support to community marginalised communities to to build that resilience for empowerment into their own groups or into themselves to then, you know, be more resilient for future events because at the at the moment, we're really focusing on the vulnerability of people, where it's our systems that are failing us, unfortunately, and we just need to really step back, review our systems to to factor in some of these groups that we've identified and and help them to to grow and and make choices for themselves around what's best for their community in regards to preparedness, response and recovery.

Scotia: So true that sort of self-determination, so very necessary. And it's interesting, isn't it, when you say when you talk about systems because the vulnerability index that that's being built at the moment is all about infrastructure and access and time to this a bit of equipment, or that bit of equipment. It's not actually looking at the the complexities of those human connections and the social compatibility that we that are so very present in our communities, particularly vulnerable communities, wouldn't you say, because there's so much more need for them in the first place?

Sam: Yeah, most definitely, and as I said, even with the infrastructure, if we come at that human centered approach, everything comes back to the people either way, whether we're talking environment, you know, political infrastructure and as you said, as for the communities, you know, if we look at some of the remote communities that are up my way, for example, they only have so many different support services on the island. They're fly in fly out services so consistency, capacity, capability is very challenging. It's strained when a disaster does hit and a good example is COVID that we're all experiencing at the moment where those fly in and fly out support services are being restricted to how how many people or, you know, the the testing of before they they travel over to a into a community. It really has an impact on the people itself in the communities, because then they're missing out on essential services, whether it be therapeutic services or counseling services or or you know educational services for young people to to to keep their schooling going, even though they've got school and educational structures in place, it's about the human resources that we need to keep consistent over there, and if people are impacted by that in a remote setting or in an Indigenous setting, that has a greater impact on on learning and outcomes for for our mob.

Scotia: Sam, I've been really fortunate to work with you on our National Creative Recovery Taskforce. It's a project we've initiated through Creative Recovery Network and brings together representatives from a range of sectors including health, local government, emergency management. I'd love to hear your thoughts on the task force. It's still pretty new, but especially someone coming from a large disaster management organisation like the Red Cross. What do you think the value is of bringing people together from a range of different sectors as we work towards be building resilient communities? Because, you know, evidently the

disaster management sector is about collaboration. How do you see a role like something like our task force being supportive?

Sam: Yeah, I think the Creative Recovery Taskforce is great value in regards to advocacy and influencing conversations, changing policy in the future, but also supporting communities at the end of the day. At the end of the day, it's going to be about how do we support community communities through arts, culture, arts and culture in a recovery space. So I think with the members that we have in our in our group, it's really good that we can have the opportunity to influence at a national level, but also then try to enhance opportunities at a local level in regards to the Indigenous space. You know, my my sort of role and focus within this group is to provide that cultural lens and maybe add that extra conversation around what what can be opportunities, what are the gaps within First Nations communities. I don't talk on behalf of any community in particular, but try to create conversations of, you know, community needs and and where people are coming from, from a from a local grassroots perspective as well. So for me, I think the group's really good. It's it's it's new, it's exciting. And I think with the strategy that we developed for our members and the group going forward will be really a really big advocacy and influence piece that I can see in this sector.

Scotia: Well change takes so long, doesn't it? You know, we've got it's such an entrenched culture within disaster management ecology and there's lots of shifting happening at the moment. What are you most excited about? We're seeing where the direction is changing. What's kind of what are you following with great excitement about potential new developments?

Sam: I think for me, the inclusion piece, so as I said, we're not just looking at a community as a whole. We're starting to look at those different communities within a community. And if we can tap into those conversation pieces of specific groups needs and and and what they're asking for for around recovery support, that's the exciting piece that we're taking on board, starting to have conversations and trying to let community lead that conversation, rather than experts telling communities what they need. So for me, it's it's really around a bottom up approach and and getting getting the information, the intel from the community themselves. And then we try to do to support those conversation pieces and filter it back down to bring those needs and to turn them into action around their requests I suppose.

Scotia: Yeah, it's quite a it's quite a shift, isn't it? Sam, as you know, our focus is on the role culture and the arts can play to support and strengthen communities and to give them a voice I suppose in in in the same way that you're articulating this capacity for them to make decisions for themselves. I wonder if you have any examples from your own life or your work of seeing how this is played out in action. The application of culture and the arts as a kind of guiding support for communities voice.

Sam: I think I could give a small example back in 2019 in Townsville, when we had the monsoonal event, the big floods that occurred in Townsville and the North West region, up in up north and in the north Queensland area. After the actual event took place, we started to form different recovery groups and the human, local, human and Social Recovery Group was formed, and through that group we had a range of different support services on board to look at the recovery journey. And as we know, recovery isn't just immediate sort of instant where you can, you know, help people to try to get back to their lives as soon as possible. It's a pretty long journey and and people are still recovering, and it can take you nine months to years and many years, unfortunately. So what we did is we had this group activated or activated, and through that group we did do the identification of some of the marginalised groups that were impacted and First Nations group were identified as one of those groups. And what we had, we went forward in regards to the identification. We ended up forming different recovery taskforce groups. So one of my my roles or functions within the group was to form a range of different support services that have a focus around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support and bring them into the conversation piece of what were the impacts of our people through the flood event. Some of the challenges that they faced within getting support and in the recovery journey. What are we looking at in regards to long term support for some of our people? And it was good that we could have a collective to have those conversations. Then what what occurred was I was then able to bring it back to the Human and Social Recovery Group, which is basically run through the local government sector in that region and put some of the information, put all the information on the table. And then we tried to work out ways of supporting those needs and ways of of bringing that community back into the new normal, I suppose, after the event. So in short the best thing that was delivered through that approach was creating a voice for our people, you know, bringing conversation to the table at a at a local government level and community services sector level where people were aware of our First Nations peoples impacts, gaps, needs and how we need to move forward in walking alongside our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our in a healing journey. So, yeah, it was more about creating voice we didn't make big inroads in the sense of changing, changing the world, sort of in a sense. But we were able to create the voice and then able to table that with government sectors.

Scotia: Well, that's the beginnings of change in the world, isn't it?

Sam: Yeah, that's it.

Scotia: Yeah, well, I suppose in terms of bringing alternative ways to unpack or give people voice that those kind of systems are there for us to activate and to be able to influence and to bring new new ideas or new cultural strategies or new creative ways of working with each other so the systems have use in the sense of giving us an avenue to to open new perspectives, particularly within the kind of working structure that emergency management or disaster management works through.

Sam: Yeah, and I think identifying our local champions in communities itself, we have a range of not just individuals, but community groups that do a lot of different stuff to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a particular group, which is, you know, they they plan and develop and implement cultural arts performances. They do, you know, cultural art workshops for not just Indigenous community members, but you know, all of community to to really open up the awareness around traditional art, arts and crafts and culture, but also that sense of healing. When people start to embed in arts and culture, you can you can just go in a world of your own and really get a sense of healing through that sort of practice itself. So I think for me, it was around identifying those local champions within a community to bring out that sort of space as well.

Scotia: Sam, if you could add something to the mix or you have some sort of thing that you would like to see happen or a new vision for the future in terms of this work? Well, what would you like to see happen or what would you see as a kind of beautiful step forward into some change?

Sam: Yeah, look, I think for the First Nations space around, uh, building community resilience, it's around our disaster management sector, whether it be government or non-government agencies is around investing in this conversation. Investing resources, investing support and and doing practical actions that we that communities can see on the ground rather than just, you know, in a policy or in a document that people go ok, well, it's not just another conversation piece that's being put on paper, but not actually implemented into benefiting our community. So for me, it's around investment, creating that voice, empowering our people and collaborating as a community to to heal and heal the journey around disaster recovery. Mm-Hmm.

Scotia: Yeah. Well, I think it seems that a lot of your work you're doing is really action on the ground from both ends. So thanks, Sam, for coming and chatting with us today, and thank you for all your work and thank you for your involvement in the Creative Recovery National Task Force. It's been a real pleasure to meet you and find out about your work, and I really look forward to walking with you on that journey. It's pretty exciting, I think.

Sam: Thanks, Scotia, it's been great to connect with you, and I look forward to, you know, moving forward with our creative recovery taskforce group. But you know, as I said, also being that advocacy and influence piece to make change within this sector around recovery for First Nations people. Thank you again.

Scotia: Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders: In Conversation and special thanks to Sam for making the time to speak with me.

If you'd like to access episode transcripts and research links related to the podcast, head over to creative-recovery.net.au where you can find all of our past episodes and materials relating to each one.

Next month, we'll be back with a new episode of our documentary episode, taking you to the Woorabinda Arts and Cultural Centre in regional Queensland. I hope you can join us then.

This podcast is produced by me, Scotia Monkivitch, and my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson. Our sound engineer is Glen Morrow.

Thanks for listening.