

Uki News

An initiative of the Uki and District Residents' Association (UKIRA)

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FLOOD WRAP 2017



Brendan Esposito

Cyclone Debbie dumped on our corner of the world, bringing the biggest flood in recorded history and significantly impacting not just Uki but a large portion of QLD and NSW. We are still living with the devastation. Uki and surrounding communities have been severely damaged. Byrill Creek, Mount Warning Road, and properties at Doon Doon remain isolated with access to Mullumbimby impossible as Manns Road is cut in two. While most roads remain trafficable few escaped damage and need constant driver attention to navigate safely. Flood debris and damage is everywhere we look. Businesses remain closed in town, people have been displaced from their houses, livestock has been lost and major infrastructure and assets destroyed.

Issue 93 had already been printed when Cyclone Debbie arrived. As such, some of the content may seem prophetic (the articles requesting volunteers for the RFS, the call to arms to support your community and Paola's Astrology contribution); some more poignant (protecting electronic devices from storm damage); and some may seem ironic (Gabrielle's 'Water'... although I would add, there has been no clearer demonstration of how heavily we are bound to the sacredness of water). Being the most significant event in recent times, distribution of Issue 93 was delayed and this 'wrap around' flood supplement included.

The pictures and contributions in the supplement serve to highlight some important points:

- **As dedicated as the SES is, it has a limited ability to respond to emergencies in Uki when flood levels cover Byangum Bridge.**
- **Crossing Byangum Bridge when levels are rising may not guarantee access to Uki via Kyogle Road and may prevent a retreat.**



- **As a community, we need to prepare for these realities. Individual preparedness and responses are crucial as well.**
- **Heeding warnings by emergency services is mandatory but also comes with a caveat that we need to think for ourselves.**

The pictures and contributions in this wrap around are witnessed testament to what has occurred. Contained are salient lessons that serve to highlight the single biggest asset we now have: We all know what 13 meters of water in the Tweed River looks like and how it effects a community and its connection to other communities. You are a witness. Your recent experience and knowledge will be essential to planning for future events. We all have something to contribute to plans for the future. As a community we have demonstrated fortitude, acumen, an abundance of community spirit and charity. This is what will sustain us as a community.



Disaster assistance for the Tweed has been declared by the federal and state governments. Details at: www.nsw.gov.au/news-and-events/news/flood-assistance-for-the-north-coast/. Or contact the NSW Rural Assistance Authority on 1800 678 593

Corey's Story

Corey Fisher

Should we save the old man first, or the 12-year-old boy? Do I save myself? How do I live the rest of my life after watching someone drown? Liam and Aydan, point to a floating palm frond that has three screeching rats on top of it. It rolls over silently.

We have crossed a small causeway in the driveway that rarely fills up and never this fast. Ten minutes later and water is chest level and running ferociously into a barbed wire fence.

Eleven of us are surrounded by rising water near Meadow Place Uki, trapped on ten square metres of grass. We've been in the rain for four hours. The water is rising. There are two trees that might hold seven of us. Our clothes are drenched and stick to us like papier mâché suits. A few of us might survive. If I survive, I may lose more people I love than I can bear to live with.

Three abandoned cars sit up the road from Meadow Place. Shaz, Liam, and Danielle have become stuck coming back after abandoning work in Murwillumbah. They had swum across a causeway to get here, almost drowning. The officials say to stay out of the water, but if they had not swum across, they would now be underwater. With us are an old man with a heart condition, two older women, one of whom has leukemia, and a mother and her 12-year-old son, all of whom are there for their own reasons. We all met in a paddock alongside a woman named Kate, and retreat to the road as the water flanked us fast. Initially we took refuge under a shelter in the park for two hours but the water slowly pushed us all up together and now here we are, on the last piece of land left.

I walk up to the highest point and my eyes catch a carpet python snaking beneath my feet in the grass. The SES has advise us wisely to, 'stay out of the water' but because of current conditions and the amount of call outs, they are unable to send a helicopter or boat to rescue us.

We can see the corner of Kyogle and Smiths Creek Road in the direction of Uki. We yell and whistle as loud as we can, but the absolute thunder of the rain and the flood is like banging our fists on a stone wall. Lizards and spiders cling to



AMALYA AND NIALL WITH ONE OF THE PEOPLE RESCUED FROM MEADOW PLACE

our shoulders and faces. Grass hoppers climb up under our shirts. Green ants bite our legs, but we're too tired to take them off. We're all refugees here together. Liam finds a mouse on the ground, frozen in shock, and he holds it to his own shivering chest.

I walk back to the two trees and check them again. The branch I had planned on using is inaccessible now. The rain is unrelenting. We're all in good spirits, but our brains can't fathom how much water our eyes can see.

Shaz shrieks, jumping up and down and waving in the direction of Uki. On the bank, roughly 200 metres away from us stands three brave individuals Brad, Niall and Amalya; with canoes and paddles. Amalya paddles out first like a charging bull and carves around the tessellating currents to reach our island. "This is a bit of a rough situation isn't it", he says jovially.

In minutes, we organise a rescue effort, and one by one canoes come back and forth. The old man went first, then the older women, then the boy and his mother, then one by one we came too. On a few occasions our rescuers almost lose their lives.

Strangely I'm disappointed at how easily we paddled across, and I wanted to savor the feeling of leaving that island of death for a moment more. Unexpectedly we all

safely stand with a few more members of the Uki community, exchanging 'thank yous' and having a laugh in a bubble of community spirit that blocks out the deluge. None of us fully comprehends how close we have come to being washed from our island, we are still in auto pilot survival mode.

A woman comes down the street, yelling at us. She's calling us a bunch of idiots, threatening to report us to the SES for breaking the law. Instinctively she is told to 'shut the f*@k up'. Three hours later in the dark our island is submerged underwater. Our cars are lost, but we are alive, and after what has happened to other people, we are extremely fortunate.

The next day was spent clearing fallen trees from Shaz's driveway, with blistering rashes on our bodies from the polluted flood waters. A couple of us break down as the nervous energy slowly comes out. We are all family now, bonded together by blood and adrenaline.

When I tell my friends and family the story, it sounds like a great adventure. It makes me laugh a lot... but I find it hard to express that I'm having a hard time taking a shower, and that I feel water in my lungs when storm clouds come overhead. I can only imagine what soldiers must feel like when they come back from war.

Still, I'm glad I have had this experience. I was baptised by more water than my rational mind could fathom. It has given me something that can only be gained in such a way. I now have nothing to lose, because I have everything, always. Everything being, the life I have.

Every minute before my death, which will come, is an opportunity for me to be as alive as possible, to make gold from this gift, with every gorgeous morning.

Amun-Ra!



Recovery Services' Contact Details

Australian Red Cross	Australian Red Cross provides personal support to those affected by the storm.	1800 812 028
Housing NSW	Housing NSW provides assistance with housing for those affected by the floods and storm.	1800 486 746
Disaster Welfare Services	Provide disaster relief grants to eligible individuals and families whose homes have been significantly damaged or destroyed. Provides assistance for those with limited financial resources and no insurance.	1800 018 444
NSW Small Business	Through the Small Biz Connect program small businesses can receive assistance and advice.	1300 134 359
SafeWork NSW	Will replace SafeWork NSW licences at no cost to those affected by the floods	13 10 50
Services NSW	Services NSW will replace certificates and drivers licences at no cost to those affected by the storm.	13 77 88
Motor Vehicle Stamp Duty Relief	Motorists whose cars have been written off as a result of a natural disaster may be eligible for a stamp duty refund on their replacement vehicle.	1300 139 814
Legal Assistance	Legal Aid NSW helps people with their legal problems. Legal Aid NSW lawyers can provide free legal advice and minor assistance to people affected by disasters on a range of issues including insurance, tenancy and credit and debt problems.	1300 888 529
NSW Fair Trading	Provide assistance and advice to consumers and business regarding fair and ethical practice.	13 32 20
NSW Emergency	Disaster assistance grants for individuals	180 22 66
Department of Primary Industries	Provide assistance with livestock and other animals during the flood.	1300 795 299
NSW Rural Assistance Authority	Provides disaster relief low interest loans of up to \$130,000 to eligible primary producers and small businesses, and transport subsidies of up to 50% of the cost to transport livestock or fodder, to eligible primary producers.	1800 678 593
Farm Household Support	Federal government Department of Human Services provides assistance to farmers and their families facing financial difficulties. Conditions apply.	1800 050 004
NSW Health	Information relating to community mental health following a natural disaster.	1800 022 222
Salvation Army	To provide assistance to residents affected by the floods.	1300 363 622
Telstra Assistance Package	Customers can call Telstra to report a fault and register for the assistance package if they have had to evacuate or have lost their home.	13 22 03
Insurance Council of Australia	Helping policyholders if they are uncertain which insurer they are with, or have general inquiries about the claims process.	Disaster Hotline: 1800 734 621

Memories left in a basement

Memories left in a basement

A beloved doll

A photo album

A girl's smile

Now wrinkled, spotted, splotted

Washed away

Music left in a basement

Grand piano.

Grand designs

Grand dream

Now the record is broken

Washed away

Moddy

Uki Flood Group

Carla Wilson, Geoffrey Colwill, Gerold Mayr and Brendan Esposito

After the 2012 floods, a group of people got together with the SES to organise a local response for flood situations. We put the call out for people to join the group through the Uki Newsletter and over the course of the next 12-18 months we held monthly meetings and endeavoured to develop systems to prepare ourselves for floods.

We organised a communication network between ourselves and the Murwillumbah SES to use in times of flood and we did training with them. The SES explored our area to update their information about where helicopters could land. We also developed the Uki Flood Group website which contains information about floods, and when roads and bridges will be cut. We currently have about 6-7 active members.

The group was started because of the isolation flooding creates in Uki and surrounding communities. Once we are flooded in, the SES cannot get to Uki, hence the need to organise, prepare and look after ourselves. During floods and fierce weather helicopters may not be able to take off to reach us if there is an emergency (as was unfortunately confirmed in recent events). We need to be prepared to take care of ourselves as best we can. We are fortunate to be part of a community which has the potential and ability to do this.

We have learnt a lot in this flood and we can strengthen our community's capacity to respond to extreme weather events because of this experience. Heavier rainfall, stronger winds and more intense cyclones, which move further south on the Australian coast are a consequence of climate change. The Climate Council is an excellent source of independent information about this. The climate science behind Cyclone Debbie and the intense rainfall we have just experienced is outlined in two concise factsheets on their homepage at www.climatecouncil.org.au. This is highly recommended reading as we all consider how to prepare for floods in the future.

We have learnt in this flood that waters

can rise faster than they have before. Consequently, flood waters can and will trap more people unexpectedly at points along Kyogle Road and surrounds. We need to advocate for more road signage at key places along Kyogle Road to provide warnings when we know heavy rain is coming. We need to improve the Uki Flood website and have a more coordinated social media strategy. We need someone in the village willing to help with keeping the hall open in times of emergency (as a central meeting point and for people isolated in the village). We need to consider whether we should keep a boat in the village for emergency rescues.

We need to develop a strategy to achieve back up power for mobile towers. The best chance of maintaining communication during a flood is through mobile phones. Two-way radio is not an option in our area due to extensive foliage interference and those with landlines often losing them during a flood. We need a system to alert people to evacuate. We need access to local doctors and nurses when we are cut off. Any centralised efforts in Uki need involvement from surrounding communities at Byrill Creek, Mt Burrell, Mt Warning and Doon Doon where centralised efforts will help them advocate for repairing bridges and roads etc. A coordinated response to repairing and clearing riverbanks is also needed. We could be eligible for grants for any or all of these ideas and we need community help to write grant applications.

The present emotional stress of this flood is also difficult. Being part of an event which has caused such widespread devastation is a surreal and traumatic experience. It has also been an amazing way to recalibrate priorities and get a taste of what really matters in our lives.

The Uki Flood Group is a grass roots, self-help group. If you have an idea and want to carry it out in a coordinated fashion with other members in your community you should come and do this. Contributions and initiative are needed. Contact can be made through the website at ukiflood.org, or email contact@ukiflood.org. Stay tuned for the next flood group meeting.

