

Building Resilient Communities: The Traumatic Effect of Wildfire on Mati, Greece

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Abstract : The present research addresses the role of place attachment and emotions in community resiliency and recovery within the context of a disaster. Natural disasters represent a disruption in the normal functioning of a community, leading to a general feeling of disorientation. This study draws on the trauma caused by a natural hazard such as a forest fire. The changes of the sense of togetherness are being assessed. Finally this research determines how the place attachment of the inhabitants was affected during the reorientation process of the community. The case study area is Mati, a small coastal town in eastern Attica, Greece. The fire broke out on July 23rd, 2018. A quantitative research was conducted through questionnaires via phone interviews, one year after the disaster, to address community resiliency in the long-run. The sample was composed of 159 participants from the rural community of Mati plus 120 coming from Skyros Island that was used as a control group. Inhabitants were prompted to answer items gauging their emotions related to the event, group identification and emotional significance of their community, and place attachment before and a year after the fire took place. Importantly, the community recovery and reorientation were examined within the context of a relative absence of government backing and official support. Emotions related to the event were aggregated into 4 clusters related to: activation/vigilance, distress/disorientation, indignation, and helplessness. The findings revealed a decrease in the level of place attachment in the impacted area of Mati as compared to the control group of Skyros Island. Importantly, initial distress caused by the fire prompted the residents to identify more with their community and to report more positive feelings toward their community. Moreover, a mediation analysis indicated that the positive effect of community cohesion on place attachment one year after the disaster was mediated by the positive feelings toward the community. Finally, place attachment contributes to enhanced optimism and a more positive perspective concerning Mati's future prospects. Despite an insufficient state support to this affected area, the findings suggest an important role of emotions and place attachment during the process of recovery. Implications concerning the role of emotions and social dynamics in meshing place attachment during the disaster recovery process as well as community resiliency are discussed.

Keywords : community resilience, natural disasters, place attachment, wildfire

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