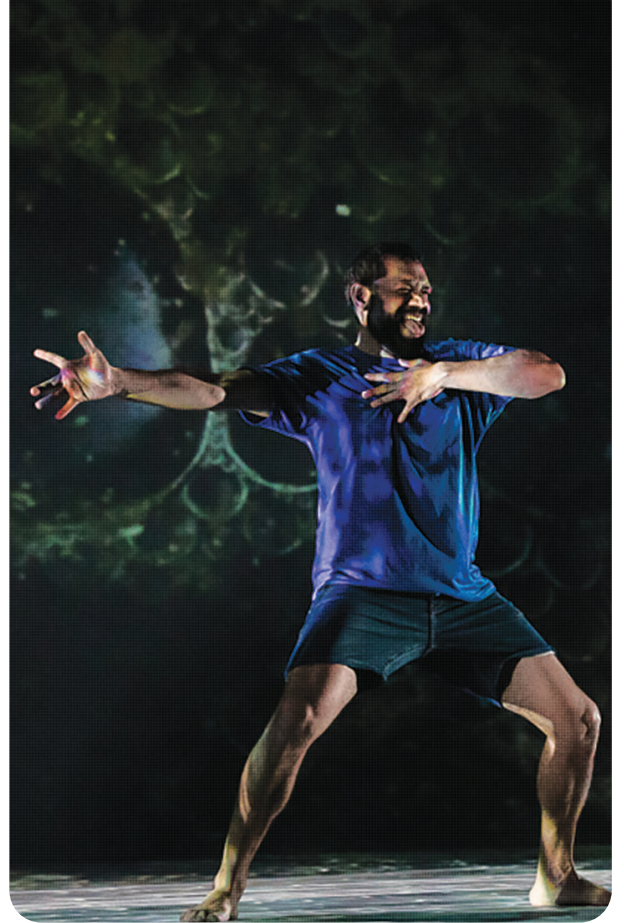


Creative Recovery: How the Arts Rebuild Community After Disaster

Despite employing the largest number of cultural workers outside of Sydney, creative arts and cultural organisations in the Northern Rivers are often overlooked in the wake of natural disasters. Yet their role in helping communities process trauma, rebuild connection, and imagine new futures is profound. Drawing on insights from the NRCF 2025 Flood Impact Study, this case study explores the unique and powerful contributions of artists, performers, and creative practitioners in disaster recovery, and why their work is essential to building truly resilient communities.



Holding space for healing

In the aftermath of disaster, creative spaces are often the first places where people feel safe enough to begin processing their experience. Whether through storytelling, visual art, music, or performance, artistic expression provides a non-clinical, culturally safe way for people to make meaning of their experiences and connect with others. LightnUp Incorporated, which produces the iconic Lismore Lantern Parade, shared:

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The Lismore Lantern Parade provides an opportunity to come together at a time of trauma and crisis and find joy and connection. We put together the event in a couple of months of having our workshop wiped out by the '22 flood, the crowd that came out to be together in beauty and light was beyond all expectations. - LightnUp Incorporated

Protecting cultural artefacts

While buildings and other infrastructure can be re-built, disasters can pose a serious threat to cultural artefacts and artistic collections, which are irreplaceable. NRCF is now supporting the Nimbin Aquarius Foundation with a project that will protect its collection from future disasters.

“

A further impact (of the 2022 floods) was the destruction and/or deterioration of some of the Aquarian Archive materials stored in Lismore, including artefacts which are irreplaceable.

- Nimbin Aquarius Foundation Inc.

The Northern Rivers Conservatorium Arts Centre and Northern Rivers Performing Arts (NORPA), the region's flagship theatre company, lost their facilities in the floods. Both are working on ambitious projects to build back a flood-resilient facilities.

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“The loss of our venue has left us without a home and solving this is not only something that will be delivered in the long term but is an effort so large it consumes our focus.”

- Northern Rivers Performing Arts (NORPA)

The Northern Rivers Conservatorium has focused on flood resilience and sustainability in the refit and additional capital works of its historic building in the centre of the Lismore CBD”.

- Northern Rivers Conservatorium Arts Centre

Reconnecting fractured communities

In flood-affected towns, arts-led initiatives have helped re-knit the social fabric, providing opportunities for people to reconnect, share stories, and rediscover, or even re-imagine community identity.

“

Creative recovery and accessibility are key focus areas of Byron Writers Festival and addressed via our vital Schools Programs. We are continually seeking support to maintain the programs and meet the demand from schools and caregivers, especially in flood-affected regions and communities with high First Nations and lower socio-economic populations. - **Byron Writer's Festival**

A powerful but under-recognised force

Even as they lead recovery, arts organisations remain under-resourced and often absent from formal disaster systems. They continue to meet rising needs while managing their own displacement, funding pressures, and emotional toll.

We call on the following immediate actions from leaders and policymakers to ensure environment and wildlife organisations are a central part of disaster recovery:

1. Recognise creative practitioners as essential workers in community recovery - Include artists and arts organisations in formal disaster recovery planning alongside health, housing, and community service providers.
2. Provide multi-year support for community arts programs that foster healing, cultural continuity, and connection — particularly in disaster-affected areas.
3. Prioritise the repair or replacement of flood-damaged arts venues, studios, archives and program delivery spaces to restore the physical and cultural backbone of affected communities.

The Critical Role of Neighbourhood Centres in Times of Disaster

Embedded within local communities, Neighbourhood Centres are among the first to mobilise when a disaster strikes. From material aid to long-term recovery support, Neighbourhood Centres supply a broad range of supports to help communities recover and be more resilient to future disasters. Yet despite their proven effectiveness, Neighbourhood Centres remain underfunded and under-recognised within formal disaster management systems. Using data from the 2025 Flood Impact Survey, this case study highlights the urgent need for greater investment in Neighbourhood Centres to secure and strengthen their role in community-based disaster recovery.



Always relied on but often excluded from decision-making

Neighbourhood Centres' ability to act quickly and effectively stems from deep local knowledge and trusted relationships. When government agencies and departments are eventually deployed to disaster-affected communities, they rely on Neighbourhood Centres to advise them on how to interact appropriately with communities. The expectation that Neighbourhood Centres will provide this advice without compensation or acknowledgement can become tedious and burdensome, especially when they are excluded from formal decision-making processes.

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Tropical Cyclone Alfred confirmed that once again the MDNC is the default support for community in times of disaster, once again providing food for the evacuation centre without resources or support and holding the community who are retraumatized...we have gone into this event with depleted resources, both financial and human resources. Team members are now supporting people from 2022, plus Alfred.

- Mullumbimby District Neighbourhood Centre (MDNC)

...we will be dealing with disasters as part of the new normal. We need this to be recognised and built into our funding — so we can keep the expertise on board rather than having to rebuild it every time disaster strikes.” **- Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre**

Supporting long-term recovery and resilience

Neighbourhood Centres know better than anyone that the road to community recovery is long. When government agencies and other funded services have packed up and gone home, Neighbourhood Centres continue to support their community's recovery journey, providing trauma-informed counselling, case management and advocacy to address issues such as housing instability, financial hardship, and mental health. These locally driven initiatives not only prepare communities for future disasters but also strengthen social cohesion and agency — key pillars of resilience.



We are at a breaking point. This level of responsibility and expectation, without adequate resourcing or support, is unsustainable. The wellbeing of our team and our community is at risk. We are not asking for recognition—we are asking for urgent, practical support. We are calling on decision-makers and funders to step up and ensure that services like ours can continue to operate.

- Kyogle Family Support Services

Stuck in a constant cycle of short-term funding

Without secure operational funding, the critical services provided by Neighbourhood Centres remain precarious, and capable staff often have no choice but to leave in search of more stable employment opportunities.

Without consistent investment, the proactive community-led disaster recovery efforts of Neighbourhoods Centres in the Northern Rivers will falter, increasing long-term vulnerability in communities and costs to government.



we have) played a pivotal role in developing and delivering innovative resources aimed at enhancing community preparedness and resilience. These initiatives have been well received and have had a measurable impact on community confidence and capability in responding to disasters. Unfortunately, securing sustainable funding for such proactive and community-driven projects remains a persistent challenge. Without adequate investment, the organisation struggles to maintain the momentum of these valuable initiatives, which are critical in reducing long-term vulnerability and strengthening community-led recovery efforts.

...our ability to carry out responsible and effective community assistance work will be severely diminished to a tiny trickle, if we do not get dedicated funding to cover the large number of staff hours required to respond, i.e. to complete myriad tasks and buy/organise the range of resources required to assist community in the immediate, medium and long term.

- Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre

An urgent call to action

Neighbourhood Centres have proven themselves as vital pillars of community-led disaster recovery. They mobilise rapidly, sustain long-term recovery, and build the community resilience that is critical to facing future crises – while offering strong value for money to governments.

We call on the following immediate actions from leaders and policymakers to ensure Neighbourhood Centres stop surviving and start thriving:

1. Recognise Neighbourhood Centres as essential to effective disaster recovery, and include them within state and regional emergency management frameworks
2. Move beyond piecemeal project grants and establish enduring funding models that recognise the role that Neighbourhood Centres play during disasters.
3. Endorse the Local Community Services Association's Policy Platform that calls on the NSW Government to recognise Neighbourhood and Community Centres as essential social infrastructure and appropriately resource them.

Our sincerest thanks to the Mullumbimby District Neighbourhood Centre, New School of Arts Neighbourhood House, Wardell CORE Neighbourhood Centre, Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre, Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre and Kyogle Family Support Services for sharing their insights in the development of this case study.

Forgotten Frontlines: Environment and Wildlife Organisations in Disaster Recovery

Environment and wildlife organisations play a vital role in protecting ecosystems, rehabilitating injured animals, and restoring landscapes after natural disasters. Yet these organisations are often overlooked in disaster response and recovery efforts, leaving them to meet steep increases in demand with limited resources. Drawing on insights from the NRCF 2025 Flood Impact Study, this case study highlights the critical challenges these groups face.



Disasters displace wildlife too

Following the 2022 floods, environment and wildlife organisations in the Northern Rivers region were inundated with urgent work: rescuing stranded and injured wildlife, clearing debris from waterways, responding to habitat loss, and managing environmental contamination risks. Northern Rivers Wildlife Hospital (NRWH) highlighted the challenges of supporting wildlife in disaster conditions, particularly with limited infrastructure and funding:

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The 2022 floods highlighted the urgent need for dedicated resources to respond effectively during disasters. Increased investment in infrastructure, specialised equipment, and trained personnel is essential to strengthen our capacity to provide emergency wildlife care and contribute to broader disaster resilience efforts in the region. - Northern Rivers Wildlife Hospital

However, many reported that their efforts were “invisible” within broader disaster recovery systems, with funding, recognition, and coordination overwhelmingly prioritised towards human services and infrastructure.

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Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital was open to wildlife presenting during and in the aftermath the 2022 floods. Our veterinary team reported that the flooding events directly caused death, injury, suffering, displacement and illness to countless animals, as evidenced by their clinical presentations indicating injuries, illnesses and other health impacts caused by being found outside of their usual home range or territories. As natural disasters increase in frequency and intensity, the need for dedicated, expert treatment for native species is critical to survival of not only individual animals, but entire species - Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital

NSW Wildlife Information Rescue and Education Service Inc. (WIRES) added to this call, highlighting the chronic lack of integration of wildlife care into formal disaster management:

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As wildlife rescuers and carers, there is a feeling that wildlife is not really taken into account when a natural disaster occurs or more importantly after one occurs... Our rescuers and carers are already at capacity, and a natural disaster often tips them over the edge.”

- NSW Wildlife Information Rescue and Education Service Inc

The long-term impacts on ecosystems

The floods created new and complex challenges for environmental groups, including mass fish deaths, water pollution, erosion, invasive species outbreaks, and damaged wildlife corridors. Wildlife and conservation organisations faced surging demand for their services while grappling with their own operational challenges, including flood damage, financial strain, and staffing shortages. Brunswick Valley Landcare highlighted the critical role that skilled environmental organisations can play in disaster recovery, sharing:

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We have excellent in-house expertise and experience in disaster recovery and resilience, restoring people's land, rivers and mental well-being, and training people to assist themselves via our quality workshops. This is our forte. - Brunswick Valley Landcare

Northern Rivers Wildlife Carers Inc stressed the importance of having basic, practical infrastructure, such as trailers and dismountable aviaries, to safely evacuate and house animals during future floods or fires. Northern Rivers Wildlife Hospital emphasised that strengthening the network of carers and rescuers, and investing in regional veterinary capacity, is essential to safeguarding wildlife and building long-term resilience.

WIRES Northern Rivers noted that while temporary emergency support during disasters — such as wildlife ambulances — is helpful, there remains a critical gap in caring for animals after veterinary treatment. They emphasised the urgent need for more trained carers and dedicated central facilities for wildlife rehabilitation during disaster recovery periods.

The urgent need for investment

As climate-related disasters increase in frequency and severity, investment in environment and wildlife organisations must become a standard part of disaster preparedness and recovery planning. These organisations not only protect biodiversity but also strengthen the natural systems that underpin community resilience — such as healthy waterways, vegetation, and ecosystems that reduce disaster risk.

Without recognition and sustained support, we risk losing not only critical environmental assets but also the grassroots organisations that work tirelessly to protect them.

We call on the following immediate actions from leaders and policymakers to ensure environment and wildlife organisations are a central part of disaster recovery:

1. Provide core funding to the existing three wildlife hospitals in the Northern Rivers Region (NRWH, FOK and BBWH) to support their capacity to respond to wildlife impacted by increasingly frequent disasters.
2. Strengthen and support the volunteer wildlife workforce through training, mental health support, and resourcing.
3. Ensure wildlife rescue and habitat protection organisations are included in local and regional disaster management and recovery planning, alongside emergency and human service providers.

Hubs and the role of the spontaneous community-led response

In the wake of the 2022 Floods, grassroots “community hubs” emerged, spontaneously establishing themselves in Community Halls, Churches and other spaces. Volunteer-led and deeply embedded in place, these hubs filled critical gaps left by stretched emergency services and became the backbone of the community response. Drawing on data from the NRCF 2025 Flood Impact Survey, this case study highlights the indispensable role that Community Hubs continue to play in disaster response and recovery, and why investment in these groups is essential to building disaster resilient communities.



Rapid response in times of crisis

Community Hubs mobilise rapidly during disasters, often using little more than clipboards, white boards and community goodwill. They provide critical support in the early stages of a disaster while formal systems are established. This includes activating spontaneous volunteers, distributing emergency supplies and providing psychosocial first aid to flood-affected people.

For example, following the 2022 Flood, Chinderah Community Hub Inc. and Wardell CORE distributed emergency supplies, coordinated furniture donations, provided food assistance and offered material aid. In Murwillumbah, Hub 2484 volunteers delivered over \$1 million in vouchers and door-knocked over 400 homes, coordinating a massive clean-up effort with little more than whiteboards and spreadsheets.

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We had volunteers walking the streets and door-knocking to collect residents' information on what help they needed. - Hub 2484 (now Murwillumbah CORE Inc.)

Maximising the value of spontaneous volunteers

Community Hubs rely almost entirely on volunteers to coordinate spontaneous clean-ups, distribute supplies, run events, and manage information. But the reliance on volunteers comes at a cost. Many Hubs reported burnout, exhaustion, and the growing pressure to deliver professional outcomes without professional support.

For Main Arm Disaster Recovery Inc. (MADR), sustaining community support on volunteer labour alone has proven unsustainable and they are working to establish a paid Community Liaison role.



Our volunteer community members are under constant pressure to provide information and services to meet external agency objectives. - Main Arm Disaster Recovery Inc. (MADR)

Often treated like strangers by formal response agencies

Despite their excellent local networks, Community Hubs report that they are often kept at arm's length by formal response agencies. This can result in a missed opportunity to leverage community assets and ensure critical information is understood and acted on. For example, Together Pottsville reported that the recent cyclone revealed a lack of knowledge in the community about the State Emergency Service's new disaster messaging. As a result, some residents panicked and left home in dangerous conditions after receiving a 'prepare to evacuate' message.



Better links between government authorities and community groups are required so that we can make clear what resources and capabilities are available from within the community to support agencies.”

- Resilient Uki

From crisis response to permanent fixtures

Some Community Hubs that sprung up in the aftermath of the 2022 have formalised into more permanent organisations to serve an ongoing community need. For example, after lack of funding forced them to close their physical hub, Hub 2484 incorporated as the Murwillumbah CORE Inc. They have since built an online tool library, equipped a spontaneous volunteer management system, and established street coordinator networks — all without a permanent base. Wardell CORE moved from the local Community Hall into a disused Bank and has since become a registered Neighbourhood Centre, extending their programs and services to the broader district. Meanwhile, Resilient Lismore has stepped into leadership across multiple sectors, forging new relationships with emergency management authorities and attracting significant grant-funding.

Call to action

Community hubs are highly effective because they are the community. Unlike formal organisations, community hubs often form organically after disasters, tapping into local networks to deliver immediate support, drive long-term recovery, and build community preparedness. Yet despite their proven impact, Community Hubs remain chronically underfunded, under-recognised, and overburdened.

We call on the following immediate actions from leaders and policymakers to ensure Community Hubs are a central part of disaster recovery:

1. Ensure pre-allocated, flexible surge funding following disaster events to support community-led response.
2. Formally recognise and integrate Community Hubs into local disaster planning and recovery frameworks, valuing their local expertise as essential infrastructure.
3. Support and invest in the volunteer workforce by providing resources for volunteer coordination, training programs, mental health support, and recognition initiatives.

Our sincerest thanks to Resilient Lismore, Wardell CORE Neighbourhood Centre, Murwillumbah CORE Inc, Together Pottsville, Resilient Uki, Hub 2484 and Main Arm Disaster Recovery Inc. (MADR) for sharing their insights in the development of this case study.