

# FESTIVALS AS DEVICES FOR ENHANCING SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY AND THE RESILIENCE OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

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## Introduction

Rural communities in New Zealand have had a long association with festivals and events. Agricultural and pastoral shows (known colloquially as ‘A&P’ shows) – with their displays of farm machinery and animals, and competitions for farm-based prowess, from wood chopping and sheep shearing, to home preserves and baking – have been an annual highlight for many rural communities since the early 20th century (Phillips 2008). Since the 1990s, however, rural festivals in New Zealand have proliferated and diversified in content and audience (Fountain & Mackay 2017; Higham & Ritchie 2001). Nowadays many small towns invest in and host an annual portfolio of events, rather than focussing on a single community celebration. While A&P shows remain important occasions for many rural communities, they now jostle for space in an increasingly crowded rural festival marketplace.

In this chapter, we examine the social value and utility of rural festivals. We focus particularly on the opportunities these events create for enhancing social connectivity and resilience within communities, and speak to calls for research that contributes to the development of an advanced understanding of the social dimensions of festivals and their value and role in community building and rural development (Black 2016; Wilson, Arshed, Shaw & Pret 2017). We define rural festivals as ‘themed, public celebrations’ (Getz 2007, p. 31) that are held regularly but infrequently (often scheduled annually), and which are firmly anchored in a specific rural locality (Wilson et al. 2017). We interpret a ‘resilient rural community’ as one that is socially cohesive, connected and communicative, and where residents share a strong sense of identity and belonging, and ultimately care about each other and their locale (Aldrich & Meyer 2015; Berkes & Ross 2013; Maclean, Cuthill & Ross 2014; Magis 2010; Scott 2013).

Our chapter relies on findings of a study of two community festivals held in the rural township of Akaroa (South Island, New Zealand). The first – ‘Akaroa French Fest’ – is an annual two-day event that celebrates the town’s European settlement history, especially elements of its French heritage (Fountain & Mackay 2017). The second event is the ‘Akaroa Harvest Festival’. This festival provides a setting for local food and beverage producers to publicise and sell their goods to locals and visitors to the town, while simultaneously

raising funds for community causes. While both festivals include the usual spectacle and fun associated with community celebrations, and have underlying economic objectives, our argument here is that they each make a valuable contribution to the resilience of this rural community. They achieve this by providing time and space for active citizenship, community collaboration and teamwork, particularly for those involved in the organisational activities leading up to the event. They also enable residents to develop new skills and intra- and extra-community connections that may be drawn on in times of crisis and change.

### **Festivals, social connectivity and resilient rural communities**

Over the past two decades the ‘resilience renaissance’ has led to a proliferation of research programmes and papers exploring resilience, its characteristics and the extent to which it can be measured (Adger 2000; Aldrich & Meyer 2015; Magis 2010; Steiner & Markantonio 2014; Walker, Hollings, Carpenter & Kinzig 2004). The term ‘community resilience’ generally refers to ‘the collective ability of a neighbourhood or geographically defined area to deal with stressors and efficiently resume the rhythms of daily life through cooperation following shocks’ (Aldrich & Meyer 2015, p. 255). Resilience research commonly focusses on disaster risk reduction and the capacity of communities to ‘bounce back’ from immediate shocks such as earthquakes or other hazard events; however, there is also a growing interest in how communities respond to slower-onset change processes (Steiner & Markantonio 2014). In the early resilience literature, the focus was almost exclusively on natural and mixed human-natural systems (Carpenter, Walker, Anderies & Abel 2001; Walker et al. 2004). In response to calls for a ‘social turn’ in resilience, more recent attention has been paid to place, attachment, social justice and livelihoods, much of it focussed on rural communities (e.g., Brown 2014; Pomeroy 2015; Scott 2013).

An important goal for research on community resilience has been to characterise the ‘attributes’ of resilient communities. For example, in work on community resilience and natural hazards, awareness of hazards, the ability to cope with them, positive expectations regarding the effectiveness of mitigation actions, articulating problems, trust, empowerment and participation in community affairs are signposted as key attributes to enhance individuals’ resilience (Paton 2013; Thornley, Ball, Signal, Lawson-Te Aho & Rawson 2015). Resilience is fostered at the level of community through collective action, as individuals socialise, develop trusting relationships, recreate, work and solve problems *together* (Adger 2003; Aldrich 2011; Cradock-Henry, Greenhalgh, Brown & Sinner 2017; Paton 2013). Other studies have identified similar characteristic features of resilient communities: vision, leadership and trust; the development of social connections/networks and information and knowledge sharing via these networks; and collaborative and social learning (Maclean et al. 2014; Matarrita-Cascante & Trejos 2013). Berkes and Ross (2013) have sought to synthesise the different perspectives on resilience. Locating their integrated approach in an understanding of complex adaptive systems, they emphasise the ways in which agency *and* the capacity for self-organising invigorate social strengths and agency to help realise resilience (Berkes & Ross 2013).

Particularly important in the context of this chapter are studies of resilient communities that emphasise the importance of social connectivity, and the various relationships that *bind individuals and communities together*, which can be drawn on in particularly challenging times (Adger 2000; Aldrich & Meyer 2015; Magis 2010). Thus, Aldrich and Meyer (2015), pioneers in this field, call for community leaders and planners to extend their activities and investments beyond preparing for and responding to disaster events through ‘hard’ infrastructure

improvements (e.g. roads, communications) – the norm – to investing also in ‘softer’ social initiatives that connect people to each other and strengthen social relations. They review a selection of policies and programmes from around the world that have deepened, or created new, social networks and community cohesion and trust, and identify social events as key opportunities for this to occur.

While not explicitly discussed by Aldrich and Meyer (2015), some researchers have identified festivals as providing important opportunities for extending and building the social connections so critical to community resilience. Arcodia and Whitford (2007), Moscardo (2007) and Black (2016) argue that festivals provide the time and the space needed to deepen the connections people have with each other, including participating in the organisational processes leading up to the event.

Derrett (2008) is one of only a handful of scholars who has explicitly examined the links between festivals and community resilience. Derrett (2008) studied four community festivals in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Australia, to understand how local events and the associated community interactions foster relationships that ultimately build community resilience. She posits that festivals nourish resilience by ‘unleashing’ relationships within and beyond the locale, thus enhancing the community’s overall sense of connectivity (Derrett 2008, p. v). While acknowledging the role of festivals in the development of social connections, Derrett (2008) draws attention to a wider set of outcomes that also help to nourish resilience, including the development of a shared sense of place and community and social identity. Such positive outcomes are possible, she argues, when the designs of events are inclusive and ‘provide a vehicle for communities to host visitors and share such activities as representations of communally agreed values, interests and aspirations’, thereby providing ‘a distinctive identifier of place and people’ (2008, p. v).

Derrett (2008) found that festival stakeholders cited community resilience as an important festival goal, and that ‘what is learned from the experience of designing and delivering a festival ensures that the community is better placed to deal with the management of risks associated not only with event management, but broader community challenges’ (2008, p. v). This conclusion finds support in other festival research literature. Whilst not specifically looking at the concept of resilience, Gibson and Stewart’s (2009) study of rural Australian festivals found that nearly half of the festival organisers contacted believed their festival had helped the community cope with a severe and long-running drought, by lifting residents’ spirits, bringing people together and building community networks. Similarly, the National Country Music Muster, which was held in a field near Gympie (New South Wales, Australia) between 1982 and 2006, also contributed to the community’s resilience by drawing upon existing, traditional ‘country capital’ whilst also creating new community capital, thus increasing the capacity of the community to cope with rural change and to assert its identity (Edwards 2012; see also Sanders, Laing & Frost 2015).

This argument points to the connections people have not only with each other but also with the places they live and around which they develop their sense of identity. As noted by Magis (2010), people–place connections play an important role in the building of strong and resilient communities. A connection to a particular place often impels individuals to engage in discussions about the future of their town or region (also see Maclean et al. 2014). Community festivals are one arena where such active agency takes place by providing opportunities for people to express a particular version of place, heritage and culture through which community pride, connectedness and belonging are reinforced. Similarly, festivals provide a place – a moment in time and space – to display and celebrate personal heritage and connection to a locale (de Bres & Davis 2001; Duffy & Waitt 2011; Gibson, Connell,

Waite & Walmsley 2011). However, as de Bres and Davis (2001) acknowledge, community festivals may not only reinforce existing place and personal identities, but they can provide the opportunity and space to challenge such constructions (e.g., Chalip 2006; Clarke & Jepson 2011; Paradis 2002; Quinn 2006). As noted by Fountain and Mackay (2017), while some constituents of a rural community may appreciate and support a local festival, the theme and focus may not resonate with all and, in some cases, may become the catalyst for friction particularly when the festival is important to the identity of only some sections of the community. A further warning comes from Black (2016) who suggests that the hosting of multiple events and festivals in a community may create silos and frictions as separate networks form around specific agendas. In this situation, the potential of the festival to act as a catalyst for community resilience diminishes.

### **A methodological note**

To explore the links between rural festivals, social connectedness and community resilience we carried out research in Akaroa, a small rural community on the South Island of New Zealand, which each year plays host to two key community festivals – Akaroa Heritage Festival (known as ‘French Fest’) and the Akaroa Harvest Festival. Semi-structured interviews of between 30 and 90 minutes with festival stakeholders ( $n = 27$ ) were the primary data collection method. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, prior to manual thematic content analysis by each researcher separately. The themes were discussed, revised and refined collaboratively ensuring credibility of the results and a high level of investigator triangulation (Wallendorf & Belk 1989). Periods of participant observation in the town, including attendance at both of the festivals in question, added to our understanding of the festivals and the broader research setting, including the town and its festival spaces, and helped to inspire and develop new interview questions. Finally, an analysis of historical and contemporary documentary sources including a simplified content analysis of the local newspaper, the Akaroa Mail, as well as reviews of printed and electronic promotional material, supplemented our understanding. The results of this analysis of interviews, documentary analysis and personal observations in the township, culminated in the following assessment of the role festivals in the enhancement of community resilience.

### **Community resilience through festivity: insights from Akaroa**

The small rural township of Akaroa (permanent population around 700) is a community that hosts thousands of international and domestic visitors every year. The settlement is located in the picturesque Akaroa Harbour on Banks Peninsula, 75 kilometres from the South Island’s largest city, Christchurch. For many decades, tourists arrived in the town by road; however over the last six years, and in response to the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes, which damaged Canterbury’s main port of Lyttelton, tens of thousands of cruise ship visitors have arrived annually, presenting both opportunities and challenges for the community (Carroll 2017; Cropp 2017). It could be argued that the community’s festivals have ensured a degree of stability for the town in the face of considerable change.

Akaroa is steeped in Maori and European settlement history, including a short period of French settlement in the 1840s, which has long been a central plank of the area’s promotional activities. This region is renowned also for its composite of natural amenities, including steep ocean cliffs and sheltered bays, rolling farmland and wildlife habitat. The traditional Māori name for Banks Peninsula: Te Pataka o Rakaihautū – the storehouse of the chieftain

Rakaihautū – recognises the abundance of food from the land and sea found in the region; a quality reflected nowadays in the area’s emerging reputation as a premium producer of wine, fresh produce, preserves, cheeses and olive oil. These elements of the region’s place identity and heritage are celebrated and animated through two community festivals: ~~the Akaroa Heritage Festival (known as ‘French Fest’)~~ and the Akaroa Harvest Festival.

### **Akaroa French Fest**

Akaroa has commemorated the French heritage of the township through a relatively large-scale community festival for the past 25 years (Fountain & Mackay 2017). While the name and content of the festival have changed over this period, the focus on the ‘French Connection’ has remained strong, as has the network of stakeholders brought together to organise the weekend event, most notably through the Akaroa Heritage Festival Committee (AHFC). As is the case for festival committees in many small towns, membership is voluntary and changes as residents arrive and leave the district and as ‘new blood’ replaces older members who retire. Despite this churn, there are committee members who have been involved since its inception and who see themselves as guardians and disseminators of institutional knowledge to new members. Interviewees stressed the importance of newcomers joining the committee, bringing new skills, ideas, energy and enthusiasm. While the festival occurs over one weekend ~~annually~~, the AHFC convenes meetings monthly, providing regular opportunities to build and strengthen local connections and advance the festival agenda, by providing a forum to share knowledge and discuss community issues and personal news. In this way, committee meetings fulfil an important social role, particularly for some retired members who find the work gratifying, and new residents who use the meeting to socialise and embed themselves in community life.

A notable inclusion in the AHFC over the past decade has been Christchurch City Council representatives (the governing authority of Banks Peninsula). Increasing bureaucratic requirements, and costs, around festivals resulted in AHFC members agreeing to divest much of the organisation – and funding – of French Fest to the council events team. While the presence of the events team reduced the burden on time and resources, AHFC members acknowledged that having council representatives at meetings somewhat limited the role of local people and, by extension, the chance for them to engage in a meaningful way in the Festival’s organisation. This was most notable in the planning of a significantly upscaled 2015 festival, which marked the 175th anniversary of the arrival of the first French settlers. At the same time, AHFC members were mindful of the absolute need for Council support and resourcing and hoped the relationships they were nurturing with Council staff would endure beyond 2015, when the council withdrew from their on-the-ground organisational role (whilst still supporting the event in other ways). In looking forward to the 2017 festival, some AHFC members expressed hope that this new arrangement would provide opportunities to revitalise the event with greater community input, thereby enabling greater community engagement and strengthening community ties. As one respondent explained,

Now that the council are pulling out it seems there has been a bit of a reawakening and we’ve got a larger group of people in Akaroa back on the committee than I’ve seen for a while.

French Fest also provides opportunities for the wider community to interact and connect with each other, particularly on the weekend of the celebration. The event has three main

platforms for social interaction: 1) a Friday night street party primarily held for locals; 2) a re-enactment of the historical French landing on the first morning of the festival; and 3) a market day that takes place at the recreation ground over the remainder of the weekend, comprising stalls, French-themed games, food, drink and music. The landing re-enactment is an important expression of cultural identity for many locals, particularly those with an ancestral connection to the early settlers. The re-enactment was characterised by many interviewees as the device that galvanises the community's shared sense of identity – achieved through this form of storytelling – and has the added benefit of buttressing the town's French notoriety and place-promotion 'brand'. In recent years, the re-enactment has also been the catalyst for the formation of new partnerships in the community, such as a new relationship with local Māori representatives who joined AHFC and actively participated (for the first time) in the 2015 re-enactment. This is not a trivial outcome: one local Māori representative suggested the re-enactment ceremony was the impetus for her people to connect meaningfully with residents of Akaroa township.

The street party and market day provided a very different platform for community members to make and maintain social connections, either through direct involvement in the planning of particular activities or events, or through attending and communally celebrating positive elements of community life. One interviewee explained that the festival was a much-anticipated chance to 'go into carnival mode' and enjoy the company of visitors and other residents and friends from the district, some of whom they seldom saw during the calendar year. One interviewee said he could not imagine life in the town without the festival – echoing the sentiments of others about the embeddedness and importance of the occasion in the everyday lives of many residents. This is not to say that the French motif strikes a chord with all members of the community; one respondent thought the 'Frenchness' of the festival was overdone and that other local cultural markers could be celebrated. These debates over the meaning of the festival arise in the community newspaper every year, usually just prior to and after the event. While seemingly divisive, they play an important role in the building of resilience, by provoking critical – but crucial – reflexive conversations about local change and continuity, and provide opportunities for positive transformation that reflect and speak to a broader set of community aspirations.

### **Akaroa Harvest Festival**

The Akaroa Harvest Festival is a much smaller event than French Fest, and more recent in origin, being in its fifth year of operation in 2017 and hosting an estimated 500–800 visitors. The impetus for this festival emerged out of an existing community network of small-scale farmers/food processors who met weekly during the summer months at the Akaroa farmers market. It took the initiative of one key individual, however, and initial support from the ADP, for the Akaroa Harvest Festival to be established to celebrate 'Akaroa's bounty' (Santamaria 2017). As with French Fest, this event continues to evolve with time, and the stakeholders involved in its organisation have changed. Yet there is never a shortage of enthusiastic stakeholder-volunteers on the day; as one stallholder explained, 'whether it is just emptying the bins or whether they just love standing on the gate and talking to people ... there's somebody out there for every job'.

The purpose of the event remains true to its origins; it is an opportunity for small producers to display and showcase the region's multifaceted local foodscape and to share their stories in an environment of family fun and community celebration. The festival comes to life with music and food-themed activities, such as a highly competitive cake-baking auction that

raises money for local charitable causes. Stakeholders are proud of the charitable contribution this festival makes to the community, as evidenced by posters displayed in shop windows thanking the community for this support and publicising the amount raised for local causes. As one stakeholder said of the cake auction, ‘the community is amazing at being quite giving and so it’s a bit of fun and usually really well run and people put a lot of effort into the cakes’.

While hosting visitors and residents is an important element of the festival, the event also has a local small business orientation. A goal of the stakeholders is for the event to strengthen links between the region’s food and beverage producers, who share their connection with Banks Peninsula through the production and/or processing of fresh local produce and an ethos around sustainable, artisanal production. As one organiser explained, ‘It is absolutely a celebration of the great food and wine in the area and ... it would be fuelling those food and wine related businesses as well through profile’. The festival also provides local producers with a platform to display and ‘advertise’ their produce so that they might develop new relationships with local and Christchurch restaurateurs and extend their business reach.

Akaroa producers view these connections as crucial to the future viability of their businesses and want to increase this element of the festival, a strategy extended in the 2017 event with the showcasing of some well-known Canterbury-based chefs, who cooked taster-sized dishes for sale on the day. This network was extended and strengthened with the launch of the *Akaroa and the Bays Food and Wine Guide* at the 2017 festival, which highlights the area’s gastronomic delights, including produce outlets and award-winning producers, and ultimately seeks to (re)define the area as a ‘foodies paradise influenced by its sea side location and Mediterranean climate’.

## Conclusion

At the most general level, rural festivals are social events that bring local people together to celebrate and/or commemorate selected aspects of community life, while also displaying and reinforcing a particular sense of place (Fountain & Mackay 2017). The proliferation of rural festivals in recent decades provides sound evidence of their increasing social and economic significance. In the current chapter, we have focussed in particular on the *social* significance of rural festivals, emphasising how they provide an arena for celebration, community collaboration and the creation and strengthening of local and external relationships, while providing also a forum for the development of new skills, expressions of creativity and civic engagement. While some of this activity plays out during the day(s) of a festival, our research has shown that the ongoing process of planning and organising a festival is perhaps more significant to the goal of building camaraderie and connections, and ultimately enhancing community resilience (Arcodia & Whitford 2007; Black 2016; Moscardo 2007).

In the case study presented here, it is through committee meetings (where they assume roles and responsibilities) and associated interactions with local authorities and funders that festival stakeholders develop a sense of purpose and belonging. Here there are opportunities to demonstrate and share existing talents, while developing new capacities and learning new skills, an essential element of community resilience (Maclean et al. 2014). Other elements of the earlier discussion draw parallels with central debates in the community resilience literature. As noted earlier, Aldrich and Meyer (2015) have stressed the need to take seriously and invest in the ‘softer’ infrastructure and associated initiatives that connect people to each other and help to build social capital. Our research suggests that rural festivals are ‘soft devices’ that provide opportunities for the enhancement of social connectivity and other ‘resilience attributes’ (Maclean et al. 2014; Magis 2010; Matarrita-Cascante & Trejos 2013).

This research has revealed also the role of pride and passion for Akaroa, its people and products, in motivating continuing involvement and commitment to these festivals (Maclean et al. 2014). A strong sense of place and place attachment provides individuals with the impetus to participate in the shaping of their environment and the future of their town or region, including its cultural landscape, and a commitment to remaining in a region.

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