



Bushfires - a catastrophe or an opportunity?

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2020 is already a year like no other – from bushfires, floods and drought to COVID-19 – and may provide opportunities to reassess planning approaches and strategies. Indigenous Australian land practices and bushfire management can contribute to these opportunities.

Bushfires are usually considered serious or catastrophic today – whereas for at least 60,000 years before white settlement, Indigenous Australian fire management was a constant and beneficial way to conserve the natural environment.

The early January 2020 southern NSW and Victorian 'wildfires' provided unprecedented images of destruction including the warlike evacuation of Mallacoota. Communities and properties were decimated by fire storms and the loss of lives and livelihood was shocking.

By contrast Indigenous Elders and organisations such as the Firestick Alliance¹ and Koori Country Firesticks² consider traditional cultural burning provides opportunities for safer, managed and beneficial outcomes. The Firestick Alliance states 'Implementing fire to enhance ecosystem health within culturally connected landscapes improves habitat condition and connectivity. Firesticks ultimately strives to empower Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to work together towards healthy, functional and resilient landscapes.'

The Firesticks Alliance uses the term 'cultural burning' to describe burning practices developed by Aboriginal people to enhance the health of the land and its people. Fire may be used to gain better access to Country, to clean up important pathways, maintain cultural responsibilities and as part of culture heritage management.

Koori Country Firesticks advise that 'Essentially, cultural burning involves applying fire to the bush in a controlled and methodical approach where the fire acts like water in trickling through the country. It moves slow and 'cool' and burns in a circular pattern away from single ignition points. Flame height is maintained at ground level and the canopy of native shrub and trees remain unaffected by the relatively low heat of such fire.'

Den Barber, from Koori Country Firesticks, is an Aboriginal man and descendant of Traditional Custodians from Mudgee of the Wiradjuri people in the Central Tablelands of New South Wales. He has more than fifteen years of experience in cultural heritage and environmental management with NSW National

Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) as a Ranger and Aboriginal Co-Management Officer.

Den considers there are great opportunities to develop strategies for managing unburnt country through Indigenous teaching – and there should be year round burning for better hazard reduction. Cultural burning works, with many examples in Queensland and NSW, by providing effective hazard reduction, reduced fuel load and less impact on the canopy, fauna and flora.

The January 2018 Paper Indigenous planning: emerging possibilities³ discussed how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples interact with Western planning system today. The paper states 'it is clear that Indigenous people are using the planning system to assert their rights, press their interests, express and maintain their socio cultural values and restore their livelihoods.'

The Paper further suggests 'Planning holds possibilities and responsibilities that Indigenous peoples are already seeking to engage with on their own terms. There is also a pressing need for more research, to be undertaken on terms negotiated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, about this intersection.'

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Figure 1: Cultural burning - Firestick Alliance ABC January 2020

Indigenous culture and knowledge are often discounted or marginalised. In *Dark Emu*⁴ by Bruce Pascoe, extensive evidence of indigenous society, housing, irrigation and agriculture is provided. He is criticised for challenging the prevailing view of nomadic hunter gatherer Indigenous Australians.

Opportunities

Adapting to change requires an objective assessment of current practices and clear identification of the likely costs and benefits of any change. Our COVID-19 world provides the opportunity to reassess our focus on economic factors and develop a better balance with the environment and society. This better balance should include genuine and constructive consultations blending Western and Indigenous knowledge. The opportunity is to exchange ideas and learn from Indigenous Elders, customs and traditions.

*Treading Lightly*⁵ provides a clear outline of Indigenous management and pathways to sustainable environments – including extensive examples of land, river and natural resources conservation. The title 'Treading Lightly' provides a guiding principle for 'adapting to change'.

According to the Firestick Alliance 'Indigenous Elders and fire practitioners can illustrate how fire can be good for country. It's an idea that confounds European notions of safety and danger, but in the Australian landscape, Indigenous people have always seen fire as a tool, to be used carefully and in the right cultural context'.

The Alliance considers there is a need to recognise that many conventional major fire responses are 'too hot, lit at the wrong time, in the wrong place and done the wrong way'⁶.

Oliver Costello from the Firesticks Alliance says 'Cultural burning generally uses small, cool, controlled flames, but there's no set formula for every burn. Ideally, a cultural burn helps prevent

fire risks, rejuvenate local flora, protect native animal habitat, all while restoring the kinship to the land. You can burn all year round in some way but be very careful about what you're doing.'

Victor Steffensen, author of *Fire Country*⁷ is a well-respected Indigenous advocate and provides a powerful account of how revival of traditional fire practices, including improved 'reading' of country and appropriate 'cool burns' during the year, can reduce fuel loads and avoid wildfires. This includes recognising no-fire and fire-dependent systems and seasonal burning that can provide natural firebreaks. According to Victor 'there is only one fire, and that is the right fire, for the right Country.'⁸

In 2018 the CSIRO published a National framework to report on the benefits of Indigenous cultural fire management⁹. The outcomes of this research provide a monitoring and reporting framework to evaluate and enable effective Indigenous cultural fire management. CSIRO recommendations include a 'National programs to recognise and support cultural fire management as part of Indigenous caring for country responsibilities and activities'.

The February 2020 Natural Disasters Royal Commission¹⁰ was established in response to 'the extreme bushfire season of 2019-20 which resulted in loss of life, property and wildlife and environmental destruction'. The 'Letters Patent' requires the enquiry to consider 'preparedness, response, resilience and recovery' and lastly to 'have regard' to 'any ways in which the traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians could improve Australia's resilience to natural disasters'.

Conclusions

Increasing population, climate change and developed areas create new challenges and require coordination of all available experience and resources including Indigenous land and fire management practices.

Recommendations and opportunities include:

- Change land and fire management from a reactive to a proactive process
- Respect and incorporate Indigenous land and fire management knowledge and practices into mainstream training and procedures
- Ensure all land and fire management planning processes involve and empower Indigenous Elders and Traditional Custodians with local knowledge and experience
- Change fire management to a year round process with seasonal 'cool burns' to protect and enhance the environment, public and private assets, and fauna and flora.

Indigenous land and fire management provides proven pathways and strategies to more effectively conserve and manage the natural and built environment ■

Michael is a mid North Coast based NSW architect, planner and human rights advocate. MFA programs include heritage conservation, more accessible environments and a range of community and residential projects. Michael Fox lives in Worimi country and respects and acknowledges Worimi Elders past and present. Refer www.michaelfoxarchitects.com

Endnotes

1. See www.firesticks.org.au/
2. See www.kooricountryfiresticks.com.au/
3. Indigenous planning: emerging possibilities. Libby Porter, Sue Jackson and Louise C. Johnson Research Gate January 2018 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331222899>
4. *Dark Emu: Black Seeds*. Bruce Pascoe 2014. Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation
5. *Treading Lightly*, Karl-Eric Sveiby & Tax Skuthorpe 2006. Allen & Unwin
6. Firestick Alliance
7. *Fire Country*, Victor Steffensen 2020. Hardie Grant Travel
8. *ibid*
9. A national framework to report on the benefits of Indigenous cultural fire management. CSIRO 2018
10. Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. Australian Government 2020