Cultural or traditional burning requires taking the long view about how to live with each other and Country

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Introduction
Since 2016, we have worked collaboratively to understand how relationships between the natural hazard management sector and Aboriginal communities might be better supported in southern Australia. We have done so with qualitative methods that interpret the viewpoints of the different institutions and individuals involved.

Results
Aboriginal people bring to natural hazard management their own territories, their own governance processes and their own people. This is not just another cultural viewpoint: their self-determination and territorial rights are integral to the passage and generation of their knowledge, identity and ongoing existence as a people.

All Australian governments have a history of denying and disrupting these authorities – including through colonial policies of segregation and assimilation. Indigenous research collaborators have generously shared how such policies affect the governance of fire, Country and their own life stories today.

As partnerships with Aboriginal communities increase, the sector must identify and address where these histories remain evident in disparities in funding and authority, language and meaning, and how this informs what is considered “normal” and appropriate.

Where collaborations are forming, this context means that: 1) Aboriginal communities are often reliant on relationships with non-Indigenous practitioners, even if they do not wish to; and 2) Where collaborations are supported by the sector, these rely on the commitment of individuals, and are vulnerable to staff turnover, budgets, and the weight of meeting existing priorities.

Indigenous peoples’ fire management captured national and international attention during the 2019-2020 bushfires. More than a burning technique, cultural or traditional burning is embedded in ways of knowing and doing attuned to the land and sustained relationships across generations with practical and purposeful understanding.

The long view
Unsurprisingly, this is a complex topic and involves initiatives not just in the natural hazard sector, but across governments and society. This is why taking the long view is so important. It is work that requires change in core institutions. It requires a more equitable sharing of power and authority. It also requires understanding that there are multiple viewpoints, and that Indigenous people need to be addressed as partners in the management of all Country. The foregrounding of Indigenous voices and leadership, on meaningful terms, across a suite of natural hazard practices and policy, is fundamental. We suggest this may include:

- Resourcing and support for Indigenous communities to conduct their own natural hazard management, including through greater authority over land
- Social learning for non-Indigenous policymakers and practitioners to evolve agency culture, and foster more culturally safe workplaces
- Supported knowledge exchange and networking for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners
- Support for policy groups and networks for indigenous people to have access to sector decision-making forums
- Appropriate regulatory, training and qualification regimes that enable Indigenous peoples access to cultural fire
- Indigenous-led research to support evidenced based policy and practice
- Clear public sector reporting of agency performance in these activities

“By and large, people working in government are there to do a job, and they’re there to do it by the book. You’ve got to find those driven people who will work with you to move things around and adapt the policies and procedures.”
Amos Atkinson, Djia Djara Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation

FINDINGS

• Clear public sector reporting of agency performance in these activities
• Social learning for non-Indigenous policymakers and practitioners to evolve agency culture, and foster more culturally safe workplaces
• Supported knowledge exchange and networking for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners
• Resource and support for Indigenous communities to conduct their own natural hazard management, including through greater authority over land

COUNTRY

The Indigenous Estate is all of Australia

For more information, please email j.weir@westernsydney.edu.au, and t.neale@deakin.edu.au, and see our HCIC project at www.bnhcrc.com.au

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