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CULTURAL BURNING IN SOUTHERN AUSTRALIA: COLLABORATIONS BASED ON INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This *Hazard Note* summarises the *Hazards, culture and Indigenous communities* project, which began in 2017 as a partnership between the CRC, Western Sydney University, Deakin University, hazard and land management government agencies, and many Indigenous representatives and organisations. Focusing on cultural burning, researchers assessed existing engagements between Indigenous peoples and fire and land management agencies in southern Australia.

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SUMMARY

Cultural fire management collaborations between Indigenous people and the emergency management sector are usually reported as success stories, obscuring their complex and often fraught terms. Fundamentally, considerations about whose values matter, and whose political-legal rights and entities are recognised and resourced, underscore the opportunities and challenges of these engagements. This research



▲ Above: WIRADJURI MAN DEAN FREEMAN (ACT PARKS AND CONSERVATION SERVICE) AND A CULTURAL BURN IN GUNNAWAL AND NGAMBRI COUNTRY. CREDIT: ACT PCS.

investigated this intercultural context, to provide practice, policy, administration and regulation insights and recommendations. Findings show that while successful collaborations involve many things, they require in particular: leadership, trust and support from Aboriginal peoples, and agency initiative to account for Indigenous protocols and permissions as part of core

business. Through this research, the team developed and built on collaborative relationships between different communities and the emergency management sector. With this foundation, researchers make several recommendations to support respectful relationships with Indigenous communities across southern Australia, especially for cultural burning in those areas.

CONTEXT

Across southern Australia, many Aboriginal people are practising and promoting cultural fire management and burns, yet the emergency management sector has limited experience in engaging with Indigenous peoples or research about such collaborations. This project begins to address this stark gap in evidence-based policy and practice, outlining a suite of priorities for agency consideration.

BACKGROUND

Collaborations between Indigenous peoples and natural hazard and land management government agencies are increasingly being initiated and formalised in response to changing public policy and societal values, and the recognition of Indigenous peoples' legal and political rights as First Nations people. As a result, the public sector is undertaking policy and program reviews to meet their legal obligations, address

historic and contemporary discrimination, and create more equitable partnerships. Yet, past and present discrimination persists, including in the absence of evidence-based policy and practice, and there is much retrospective and forward-looking learning to be done. So, how can these collaborations be better supported?

Critically, these are intercultural matters, concerning both Indigenous and non-Indigenous values and cultures, and what is

ABORIGINAL, INDIGENOUS OR FIRST NATION?

Aboriginal people/s describes the Indigenous people that the researchers collaborated with in southern Australia, with 'peoples' referencing their political forms and societies, while 'people' refers specifically to individuals.

Indigenous people/s refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people/s more broadly.

First Nation/s and First People/s are also used to identify specific political-legal forms and societies.

considered possible and appropriate from different viewpoints. These matters also go to the heart of understanding how the public sector sits in relation to Indigenous peoples. As First Nations, Indigenous peoples have their own territories, societies, laws and cultures, and are not just another interest group or stakeholder. Lastly, as an Indigenous activity, cultural burning requires Indigenous leadership.

BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS CRC RESEARCH

The focus of this research was to understand beneficial and respectful collaborations, through qualitative tools of inquiry, interpretation and argument, so as to track and analyse how social, cultural, political and legal matters are navigated and addressed.

Research methods centred on forming partnerships with key Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners and adjusting research activities in response to end-user priorities and interim research findings. Cultural burning dominated as a sector priority and, later, the focus included policy and practice issues raised by the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires.

Significantly, researchers formally established Indigenous people outside of the sector as end-users within the project plan. This follows the ethical standards set by Indigenous research institutions and others and aligns with the approach taken by the CRC's Indigenous research projects in northern Australia. This structural inclusion provided clear guidance on how to be responsive to Indigenous peoples' priorities in research methods and outcomes, which was particularly important given the lack of Indigenous people working within the sector and universities, and because the project co-leaders were non-Indigenous.

Specific research activities included:

- an international literature review, as the national literature was sparse
- cultural burning case studies on Dja Dja Wurrung Country in Victoria, and on Ngambri and Ngunnawal Country in the ACT, including participant observations and semi-structured interviews
- interviews with practitioners across southern Australia
- co-presenting and co-authoring with cultural burning practitioners which enabled more opportunities to elicit research data.

This research builds on earlier CRC research from the same team about the need for qualitative evidence expressed by bushfire and flood risk mitigation practitioners. Quantitative approaches have provided valuable support to the emergency management sector, but this sector is now gradually also working with qualitative expertise to understand societal priorities about what is at risk and what should be done about it, as these are also always political decisions that practitioners must make and defend.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Indigenous peoples' leadership has much to offer sector policies of resilience and shared responsibility, however, this research has shown that the government and research institutions should not ask Indigenous people, who live with two centuries of colonisation and discrimination, 'How can your knowledge improve our resilience?' Instead, they should ask 'How can we support Indigenous peoples and their engagements with natural hazard management as part of their and our resilience?'

This research found that substantial sector leadership and investment is required to support cultural burning and other collaborations with Indigenous peoples, because of the lack of current sector and research expertise, as well as the complicated nature of these matters. Researchers found that when the sector does not account for Indigenous protocols and permissions across policy and practice, this produces barriers to collaboration because it:

- consolidates suspicion amongst Aboriginal people about public sector intentions
- compromises the role of Aboriginal staff recruited to act as intercultural conduits
- often results in Aboriginal people being perceived as delaying an activity, thereby entrenching racist attitudes about Aboriginal people as difficult

- continues to undermine Aboriginal peoples' self-determination, rights and relationships with Country and each other
- works against government policy to take partnership approaches.

Notably, the Federation of Australia and its public sector was not established to support Indigenous peoples' governance and land management. Instead, it relied on the assumed erasure of these policies and territories.

Research participants reminded researchers that conducting a cultural burn in and of itself is not necessarily a good outcome. The value of a cultural burn is dependent on the meaningful involvement of First Peoples.

Key findings are organised under the following six themes:

Context familiarity: There needs to be a rapid growth in sector capacity in understanding the context itself, including the legal landscape, agency responsibilities, histories and geographies of discrimination, and that cultural burning is a socio-cultural, political-legal matter and not simply about new hazard reduction techniques.

Trust and partnerships: With Indigenous leadership, the sector needs to develop specific policies and programs that demonstrably grow opportunities for Indigenous engagement and partnership so as to address the challenges of the current operating context. These challenges include a lack of trust, bureaucratic constraints, tokenism, racism, and a lack of resources and appropriate funding models.

Centring Country and First Peoples: If emerging collaborations are to be sustainable, Aboriginal people need to be centred in the process on meaningful terms, not just invited to be included. Researchers suggest that this involves:

- supporting Aboriginal peoples' governance organisations to lead, partner and participate
- ensuring that Aboriginal staff are present across all levels of agency decision-making
- building capacity in sector understandings about Country and about principles of non-discrimination, as a required expertise for all public servants at all levels
- supporting knowledge exchange and networking for Aboriginal and non-Indigenous practitioners to learn about working together and to mentor each other.

"...you get a lot of the long-term firefighters or people who've been on the ground and doing this for quite a few years. Some of them just have the wrong understanding, y'know. Being Aboriginal people there is a feeling that we get handed a lot of stuff without doing the hard yards. But with this sort of stuff there's a role for everyone in fire in Australia – how big the land is, how much we've got here – so people can contribute regardless of how long they've been around, and we're not here to take other peoples' roles and livelihoods. We're here to make the Country healthy."

ACT/NSW Aboriginal fire practitioner, interviewed by Dr Will Smith

"Yeah, well, there wasn't much engaging before, but I think it's improving through having conversations with guys, but the best place for the conversation is out on Country when we're doing burns. So, when we burn, we invite some [rural fire service] members to come along and when we're in that space, we can really have a meaningful conversation and attitudes change."

ACT/NSW Aboriginal fire practitioner, interviewed by Dr Will Smith

Administration and regulation: There is a clear need for more culturally appropriate and equitable regulatory, training and qualification regimes for bushfire management, including:

- changes to bushfire codes of practice to enable more Aboriginal community members to participate and lead cultural burns, including provision for Elders and children
- the re-considering of agency job design, levels, reporting and paperwork arrangements to support and recompense the cultural authority brought into the public sector by Aboriginal people
- embedding policy support for the sector to take partnership approaches to Aboriginal communities
- ensuring that current training for all personnel is culturally appropriate to Aboriginal participants, centres Aboriginal educators, and builds awareness of Aboriginal peoples' rights and inherited fire responsibilities with Country
- examining the fit with southern Australia of the current funding schemes devised for central and northern Australia.



▲ **Above:** A DJANDAK WI CULTURAL BURN AT QUAMBATOOK, VICTORIA. PHOTO: MICK BOURKE, DJA DJA WURRUNG/YORTA YORTA FIRE PRACTITIONER.

Expert evidence and erasure: Academic and government research has failed, almost without exception, to consider Aboriginal peoples' experiences with natural hazards in southern Australia. Specific and appropriate funding streams are needed to address this absence, whereby Indigenous peoples' priorities and rights are not even seen by the majority of practitioners and researchers.

Accounting and reporting: The lack of sector accounting and reporting reduces sector transparency, accountability and coordination. In response, researchers suggest that agency annual reports should include specific information about staff, targets, plans, policies, budgets, contracts, research, training, partnerships and advisory boards in relation to Aboriginal and First Nations people. This would help increase transparency about engagements.

HOW IS THE RESEARCH BEING USED?

Notably and of immediate benefit, researchers established a network of practitioners across southern Australia, within which relatively isolated people began working together to support cultural burns. These practitioners became known to each other, effectively gaining a new mentoring group.

Researchers also prioritised a cultural burning knowledge exchange visit between eastern and western Australia, facilitated by Ngadju Conservation Aboriginal Corporation in southern Western Australia, responding to end-user requests to extend the original

focus to all of southern Australia. The value of this trip, which saw a contingent from south east Australia travel across southern WA, was immediately apparent given the different policy and practice norms in south east Australia, which have moved away from requiring native title or lands rights as a precursor to government agencies undertaking collaborative land management with Aboriginal people.

As end-users had little or no previous research support for this work, researchers prioritised two industry reports for early circulation. Researchers also provided expertise throughout the project, on request (for example, to the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy process), and shared interim research results as they became available, ensuring that the research could be of immediate use. They wrote socio-institutional modules to address priority matters repeatedly raised during the project. These were designed as a '101' introduction about the collaborative context for both Aboriginal people and the emergency management sector. You can find more information about the industry reports and modules in this project's final report (see Further Reading page 4).

During the 2019-20 bushfires, national and international attention focused on Indigenous peoples' fire management. In response, researchers contributed written submissions to the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements*, the Victorian Government's *Independent Inquiry into the 2019-2020 Victorian Fire Season* and

END-USER STATEMENTS

“For thousands of generations, Traditional Owners have undertaken landscape actions and fire management as one. Here it is Djandak Wi and when we practice today it places good spirit back into Djandak as Country and Djarra as its people. This CRC research can be enabling for us to break down barriers that have inhibited Traditional Owners for far too long to be the leaders and masters of their domains that they inherited from their Ancestors. Let us not be the dispossessors of their culture and practices at this point in history. We can choose to support self-determination and to share in the celebration of healing Country and healing people. Dhelkup Murrupuk – we give good spirit.”

Mr Rodney Carter, Group Chief Executive Officer Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, Dja Dja Wurrung Enterprises, and Djandak

“The project team has produced an outstanding set of outputs brilliantly crafted to bridge the gap between cultures and assist land and fire management agencies to develop new, productive engagements with Aboriginal First Peoples of southern Australia. At the same time the team has leveraged its expertise in Indigenous liaison to assist agency personnel to better appreciate the circumstances of First Nations people. The project is a timely, almost prescient addition to the CRC’s natural hazard research portfolio, and I commend the work to my colleagues in land and emergency management.”

Dr Adam Leavesley, Bushfire Research Utilisation Manager, ACT Parks and Conservation

the *NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry*, and gave evidence as expert witnesses, as well as numerous media interviews and opinion pieces. These activities were conducted with and alongside Aboriginal colleagues, friends and leaders, who found themselves in high demand to speak to issues that were previously considered marginal or not at all.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Aboriginal leaders have invested considerable energy in cultural burning in southern Australia, and all states and territories are eager to progress collaborations and partnerships with Indigenous peoples. However, histories and geographies of discrimination and exclusion remain present, and there is an extraordinary absence of expertise, funding and policy in this natural hazard research and practice. These are not matters that can be addressed through report writing, but require illuminating opportunities for co-learning and co-establishing more appropriate terms together, including the more equitable sharing of power and resources. To build further on the research, the team has

developed an illustrated booklet that shares stories of cultural burning, in partnership with cultural burning leaders across southern Australia, which will be available soon.

At a workshop that researchers convened in Perth in 2018, participants recommended that a national network of Aboriginal practitioners and volunteers be established with support from the emergency management sector, as well as establishing an AFAC reference group. In the final project report, researchers further suggest that the sector supports a national Indigenous partnerships and policy group, and a national Indigenous bushfire practitioners’ network. At the same time, national and jurisdictional agencies need to support and/or convene events that bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners together across regions. Fundamentally, the sector and Aboriginal peoples have to build capacity, meet and be more organised, not just locally, but across larger regions. This requires investing in time and people.

Lastly, there is huge demand for more research, and for that research to itself be based on appropriate terms, including being based in Aboriginal leadership,

FURTHER READING

Freeman D, Williamson B & Weir JK (2021) Cultural burning and public sector practice in the Australian Capital Territory, *Australian Geographer*, 52(2), pp.111-129.

Neale T, Carter R, & Nelson T (2019) Walking together: a decolonising experiment in bushfire management on Dja Dja Wurrung country, *Cultural Geographies*, 26(3), pp.341-359.

Smith W, Neale T & Weir JK (2021) Persuasion without policies: the work of reviving Indigenous peoples’ fire management in southern Australia, *Geoforum* 120, pp.82-92.

Weir JK, Neale T & W Smith (2021) Hazards, culture and Indigenous communities, final report, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, accessible at www.bnhcrc.com.au/publications/biblio/bnh-7902.

Williamson B, Markham F & Weir JK (2020) Aboriginal peoples and the response to the 2019-2020 bushfires, Working Paper No. 134/2020, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

with direct funding to Aboriginal parties, and containing protections for Aboriginal peoples’ intellectual property and self-determination. Some of the research needs identified through this research include:

- Indigenous governance: what are the pathways for respecting Indigenous peoples’ rights and interests more comprehensively with and within sector governance?
- Wellbeing and resilience: how do natural hazard management activities relate to Indigenous peoples’ wellbeing, and to what extent do collaborations increase the resilience of all parties involved?
- Economic models: what are the best economic models to implement to ensure engagement in natural hazard management is economically beneficial and sustainable to Indigenous communities?

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Hazard Notes are prepared from available research at the time of publication to encourage discussion and debate. The contents of *Hazard Notes* do not necessarily represent the views, policies, practises or positions of any of the individual agencies or organisations who are stakeholders of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

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