Aunty Carol’s Story

“I grew up in the bush, a free range kid, our mum and dad protected us from police and welfare, the stolen generation, and for that our family is ever so grateful. When I was a child, we walked everywhere, or we had horses and drays to carry our things.

When we walked to go fishing or to gather tubers and berries, grandfather would stop, look around and say, ‘Yeah, I think it’s time to burn this patch.’

We worked in traditional practices with the bush and nature, we had a traditional responsibility because we were provided with food, medicine, and our cultural connections.

My totem is a little bird: which is the spirit of our grandmother. When wild honey hunting, our spirit bird would guide us by singing special birdsong to show us the wild bee hives. After harvesting, aunty and mother would put wild honey on a tree branch for the bird.

In my family it was mainly the older men that decided when and what to burn. Then, us as a family controlled the fire, as a group and talked about what it was doing, what it should do, and what it had done. So, burning was both a family affair and a cultural responsibility.

We called our fires white smoke fires, meaning cool burns. I didn’t see any black smoke until 1750 when the government moved the bush down with big tractors, and then burnt hundreds of acres at a time. It was a huge cultural loss and grieving process watching the bushland disappear and the birds and animals fleeing in distress.

Getting our cultural burning practices going again has been very healing for the land and us. But some people think cultural burning just means a group of Aboriginal people burning, it’s about reading nature — the weather, the wind, the time of year and day, when plants propagate.

The government talks about reducing the fuel load by clearing undergrowth, but animals and birds need it for food, nesting and breeding at certain times. It’s a slow process but with commitments and spirit of head and heart, we can do this.”

Carol Pettersen

Minung/Gundju Kyang (Lise Woman) Noonimb Nation

Western Sydney University

Cultural Burning in Southern Australia