



# CULTURAL BURNING

*in southern Australia*

WITH CONTRIBUTORS

GILGAR GUNDITJ ELDER

*Eileen Alberts*

GUNDITJMARA NATION

NGUNNAWAL MURRINGE (MAN)

*Adrian Brown*

BUNDJALUNG AND  
WONNARUA WOMAN

*Vanessa Cavanagh*

KAYTEJ ELDER

*Wayne ampetyane  
Davis*

MINUNG/GNUDJU KAYANG  
(WISE WOMAN)

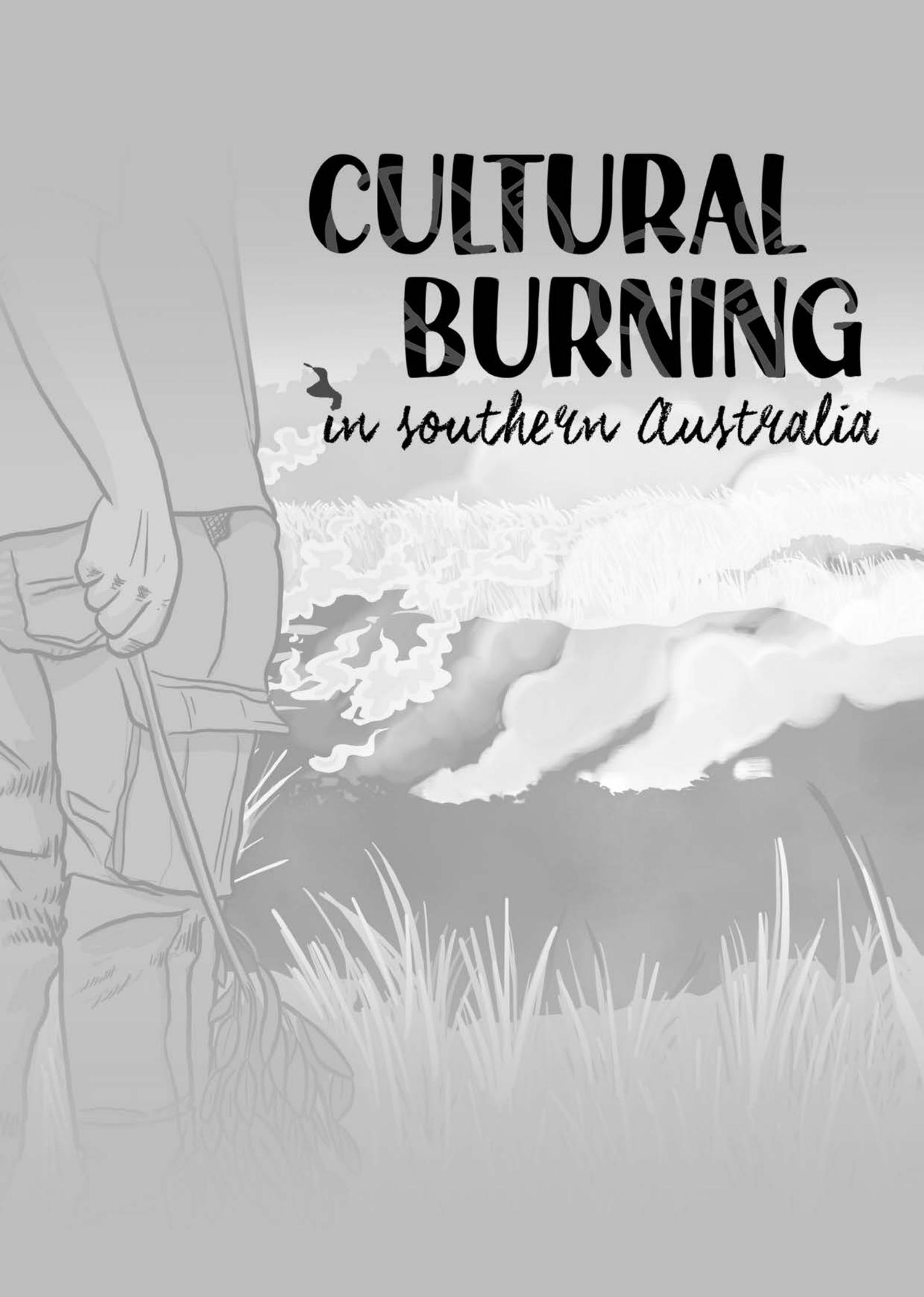
*Carol Pettersen*

NOONGAR NATION

PALAWA MAN

*Jason Andrew  
Smith*





# CULTURAL BURNING

*in southern Australia*



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Industry, Science,  
Energy and Resources**

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Cooperative Research  
Centres Program

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## INTRODUCTION

There is so much interest in cultural burning – the landscape burns practised by Aboriginal people – and its relevance to southern Australia’s bushfire risk, but what is cultural burning? The people to learn from are the First Nations, Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country. Indeed, to really understand requires being part of a cultural burn on Country.

This edited report, as well as the posters available separately online, bring together and uniquely present six diverse personal cultural burning experiences from across southern Australia. These experiences both diverge and align as Aboriginal peoples’ paths, perspectives and priorities have always diverged and aligned.

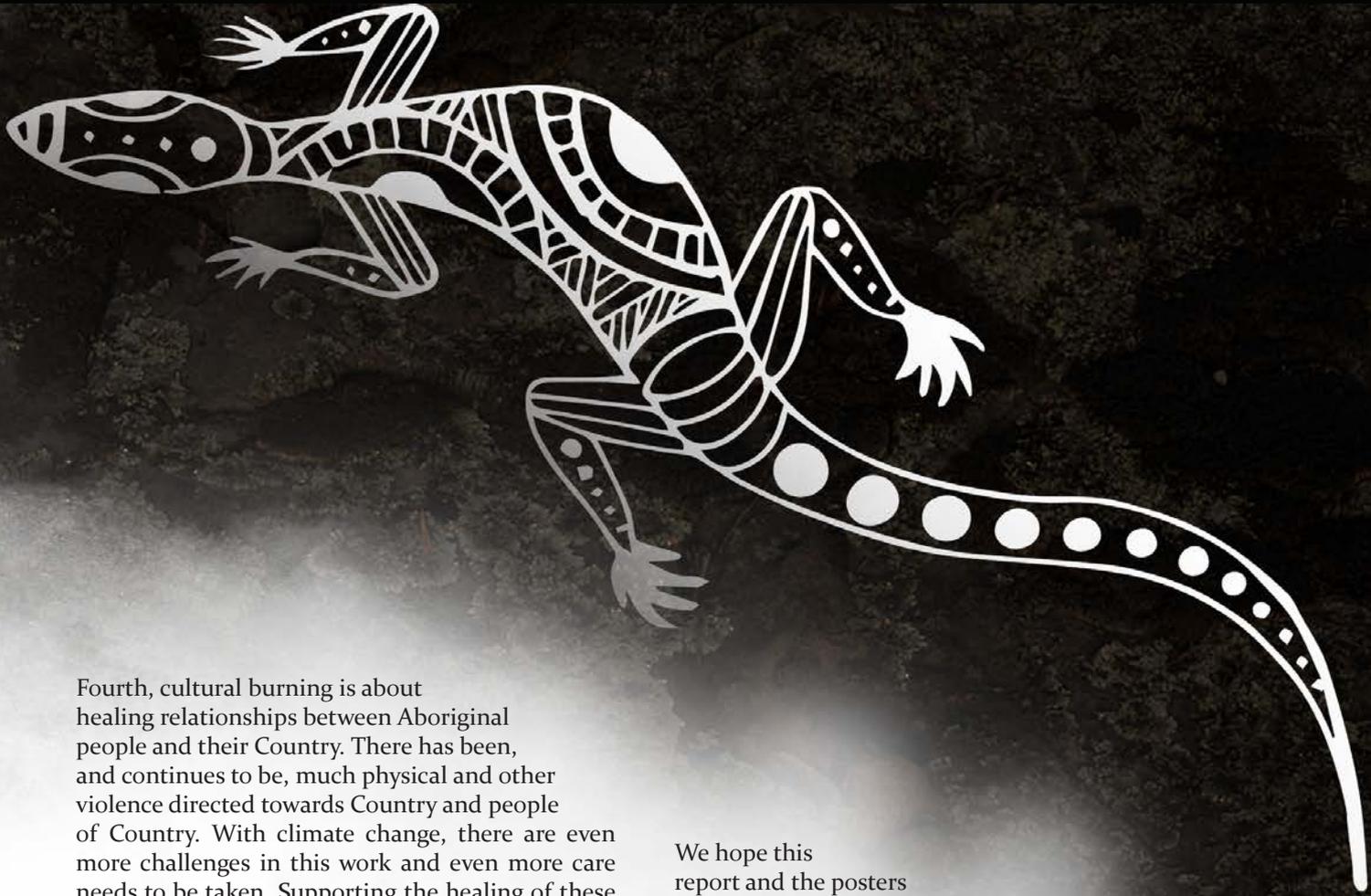
Four of the contributions centre on burning one’s own Country in southern Australia, as shared by Minung/Gnudju kayang (wise woman) Carol Pettersen of the Noongar Nation, Gilgar Gunditj Elder Eileen Alberts of the Gunditjmarra Nation, Palawa man Jason Andrew Smith and Ngunnawal murringe (man) Adrian Brown. These experiences range from growing up burning with family and continuing to be involved today, to reigniting cultural burns on lands where it has too long been absent. We also have two stories about roles in university and government as shared by Bundjalung and Wonnarua woman Vanessa Cavanagh

and Kaytej Elder Wayne ampetyane Davis. They describe how their roles involve learning from and supporting the First Nations, Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country, and the difference when they themselves are involved in burns on their own Country.

This difference is no minor matter: it marks the unique authority and connections held between specific people and places. More than an inter-generational form of land management, cultural burning involves matters of respect, obligation and responsibility with ancestral lands, waters, skies and everything in between. These burns are a cultural practice undertaken by Aboriginal people in relation to Country and kin, connecting and investing in their wellbeing and self-determination, and Australia’s fire regime.

This authority and connection with Country is the first of four matters that inform the creation of this report. The second matter is the assumption by some people in society that cultural burning is to be imported from northern Australia into southern Australia. This fails to understand that cultural burning only occurs in relation to Country and the people of Country. Further, the cultural burning leaders show how this specific cultural practice has been passed down by families and nation groups to present times in places that are often described as settled and urban. At the same time, knowledge has always been shared by Aboriginal people across the continent, and this is not de-valued.

Third, Aboriginal women have long been marginalised from land management conversations with government and university. In recognition, women come first in this report. As Aunty Carol, Vanessa and Aunty Eileen share, cultural burning practices have intricate and interwoven roles for men and women. We look forward to hearing more such voices as cultural burning becomes better known.



Fourth, cultural burning is about healing relationships between Aboriginal people and their Country. There has been, and continues to be, much physical and other violence directed towards Country and people of Country. With climate change, there are even more challenges in this work and even more care needs to be taken. Supporting the healing of these relationships is an important responsibility for non-Indigenous people.

These six individual and shared cultural burning experiences bring to life these four matters and more. You will also see that ten Cultural Burning Principles have been developed. Again, this is to help articulate some of the core matters at hand, which Aboriginal leaders have been raising for generations. These voices can be hard to hear when they are the minority in the room, and so different from the dominant culture of governments and universities.

We are particularly concerned that the groundswell of support for Aboriginal peoples' fire management expertise, during and after the catastrophic Black Summer (2019-2020), does not address fundamental misunderstandings about Aboriginal peoples' fire management practices. By not addressing these misunderstandings, existing problems become repeated in the new work that is being established around cultural burning.

We hope this report and the posters will help address this by providing the opportunity to see a different viewpoint, to stand in someone else's shoes. This is critical in developing more respectful relationships between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people. We are all living together on Country.

Whilst the report and posters cannot compare to the experience of being at a cultural burn, they share realities that are little known in places where important decisions are being made – such as the offices of bushfire inquiries, the boardrooms of government agencies, the risk-reduction burns of fire practitioners and the professional practices of university researchers.

We note that cultural burning is a new term to describe burns that in earlier times never needed such a label.

And now, over to our six cultural burning leaders.

**Jessica Weir  
Dean Freeman  
Bhiamie Williamson**

5 July 2021

# CULTURAL BURNING

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*Illustrated Stories*



## *Aunty Carol's Story*

My name is Carol Pettersen. I'm a Noongar Elder from Albany, the great south of Western Australia. I was born in 1940 and grew up in the bush like 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 carts to carry our tents and things. When we walked to go fishing or to our bush gardens to gather tubers and berries, grandfather would stop, look around and say, 'Yeah, I think it's time to burn this patch.' He didn't address us, he was listening and talking to the land. He'd light the fire and then stand back and watch to see that it was heading towards last year's burn, leaving enough shelter for animals, that sort of thing. We had to burn around waterholes, make sure grasses were growing, working in traditional practices with the bush and nature. We had a traditional responsibility because we were provided with everything – fish, meat, poultry, eggs, fruit, vegetables and even sweets. Our food and medicine, and our cultural connections.

My totem is a little bird, which is the spirit of our grandmother.\* When walking looking for kangaroos on the new burnt ground, the little spirit bird would jump in front of us from tree to tree, singing, and we would follow it. Just before the kangaroos came into sight, she gave a different call and dad would

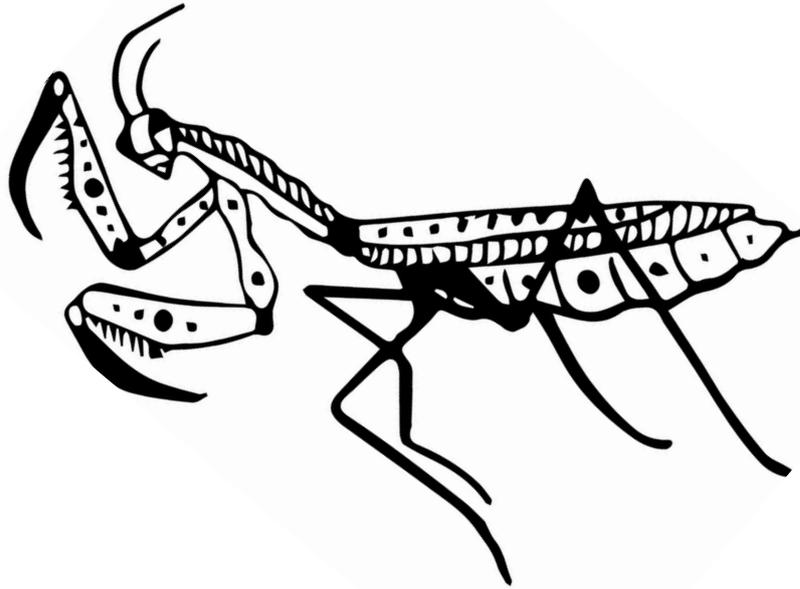
signal to sit down. He would sneak forward with this little bird still telling him what to do. When we killed a kangaroo, they'd put a piece of liver on a tree for this bird. I've learnt later it's a honeyeater, so I don't know what it did with it. When wild-honey hunting, our spirit bird would guide 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. Nowadays, we do that for the physical spirits in the land, called Mummeries, leaving food out wherever we go.

The fire would be small, slow, low. Grandfather would say, 'You kids break that branch and make sure the fire don't burn too far that way.' Then, after looking around, 'Yeah, that's good', and we'd move on. 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. Grandfather, dad or uncle would also know who else had burnt, from the other families connected to the land. I'd hear, 'Oh, so-and-so has been here.' They'd know whether it was a month ago, two weeks ago or two days ago. We could then go a little further and comfortably light a fire knowing there was a fire break.

We called our fires white smoke fires. I didn't see

\* *The Western Spinebill*





any black smoke until 1950 when the government started up the War Service Land Settlement Scheme. They mowed the bush down with big tractors, and the following year 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. The land was crying out to us and we couldn't help her. Profound cultural grief. To watch the land being ploughed in and new crops being planted, fences blocking off the animals – that whole disruption to the land that we had connection with and relied on us to care for it. Not only did the land suffer, but we suffered as well.

Apparently the early settlers thought our burning was indiscriminate and wilful, so they stopped us and took over. Now because they're in such a mess they're saying, 'We want you to do cultural burning.' But, some people think cultural burning just means a group of Aboriginal people burning. But it is not only about who is doing the burn, it's more about when and where and according to reading nature. We need to see the weather, if there are strong winds, where is the wind blowing and the time of year and day. The government talks about

reducing fuel load by clearing undergrowth, but animals and birds, like the Malleefowl, rely on it for food, nesting and breeding, so we need to know those times as well as when plants propagate.

Everything is not based on economics and risk management. Everyone has got to see their spiritual connection to the land.

Getting our cultural burning practices going again has been very healing, for the land and for us to care for Country. We're getting land back, but I say to government, 'You first clean up the mess that you've got, put fire breaks in, do little bits of burn at a time.' Fire is still a risk management until we can get it back to the patchwork situation. Somehow we've got to fix it up. It's a slow process but with commitments and spirit of head and heart, we can do this.

It's sad when I hear people talk about fire as an enemy, a demon. It's not. Fire is a beautiful, warm, comforting entity. It's got a spirit of its own and we see that and the energy within and we respect it.

**Carol Pettersen**  
Minung/Gnudju kayang (wise woman)  
Noongar Nation

**“ Cultural burning  
should not just be viewed  
as risk management,  
it’s a spiritual obligation  
to the land. ”**

*Aunty  
Carol Petteesen*

## Vanessa's Story

Jingee Walla, Vanessa Cavanagh here. I'm a Bundjalung and Wonnarua woman. After school I did a TAFE bush regeneration certificate and then won a Field Officer job in the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service. Later I completed a science degree and returned to the Department. I now teach Indigenous geography at university and I am doing a PhD about Aboriginal women and cultural burning in NSW. I've always been keen to promote Aboriginal women's empowerment and engagement in caring for Country. Through my PhD I support Aboriginal women to participate as well as participating myself and doing the research. Statistically there are fewer Aboriginal women in paid employment in caring for Country roles than men, and currently the majority of voices guiding cultural burning programs are male. It's important to raise Aboriginal women's voices so that we hear from women here today, as well as the voices of our barbinjs, our female ancestors.

At National Parks I completed firefighting training and attended many different fire events. Then later through cultural burning workshops I learned about applying fire to enhance the landscape, rather than just reducing a hazard risk for humans. After the Black Summer fires, wider public interest in cultural burning really took off. But this is not about Aboriginal people giving knowledge to non-Aboriginal people and that's the end of the story. It needs to be a fair and just process, with Aboriginal leadership.

Through my research I understand some of the gendered sensitivities about places in the landscape,

and shared community roles. For some groups and nations in NSW, Aboriginal women don't or didn't participate in cultural burning traditionally, whereas for others they talk about women being the matriarchs, the fire-keepers, the holders of that knowledge. So it's not a one-size-fits-all approach.

Across all the aspects of cultural burning shared with me, there are two key themes: in principle, it needs to maintain and follow local cultural protocols so the uniqueness of different Aboriginal nations is not lost. And, that it is really important for Aboriginal women to do cultural burning with their children, families and Elders because it allows passing on intergenerational knowledge. Given the experiences of colonisation and the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge, people don't want their knowledge and practices to be extracted and taken away from communities, and have that authority lost or misappropriated by others.

Sometimes when things are tough I remind myself, 'Yeah, but we've come this far in a few decades, there's potential to do a lot more in the next thirty years.' I get motivated again because I get to be a part of that change. In Parks in the late 1990s, Aboriginal people's knowledge wasn't incorporated into management practices, it was very much based on Western science. At the same time, co-management started. I got to see that fundamental shift in who has ownership rights to land. It's now moved from, 'Aboriginal people would have managed this Country differently', to, 'Why don't we actually listen and implement those changes, reinvigorate some of those Aboriginal land management processes practically?'



AUSTRALIA  
HAS A  
**BLACK**  
FUTURE

TIME FOR  
RETURN OF  
LAND



With Aboriginal people in the lead, we can respond to Country, pass on Indigenous knowledges to younger generations, maintain Indigenous protocols, create employment and social outcomes while also reducing hazard risk. It's just common sense. We need to go back to the ways that work. It will look different because the human population is radically different to what it was, but we have the science to address that.

My kids and I participated in the 2019 Dhungala National Indigenous Fire Workshop in Yorta Yorta Country. There were workshops around cultural dance, plants, animals, fire, traditional tool making, and stories from the Elders – set up and led by Aboriginal people about local Aboriginal culture. Throughout, my kids were very connected to me and they got to know other Aboriginal people and experience that Aboriginal leadership, ceremony, practice and community – they loved it! We got to experience an Indigenous leadership

model which has been undermined for too long. Around the campfire, the kids made up scenarios about the wind, lightning, thunderstorms, and fire, and connected them to protecting animals, Aboriginal stories, and why fire needs to be done in the right way. Even though it wasn't our homeland, we had an embedded experience in learning culture. All Aboriginal women should be able to share that experience with their children, wherever they are. An actual lived experience of their Aboriginal identity on Country and through Aboriginal-led processes.

Recently I took my daughter to a cultural burn on Wonnarua Country. I witnessed my daughter, a young Wonnarua person, lighting a cultural burn on her grandfather's Country. She's practicing the thing that we talk about – being Wonnarua and having that connection to Country. It's an actual physical thing that she's done with her body rather than talking about it as an idea or reading it in a book or watching it on a screen.

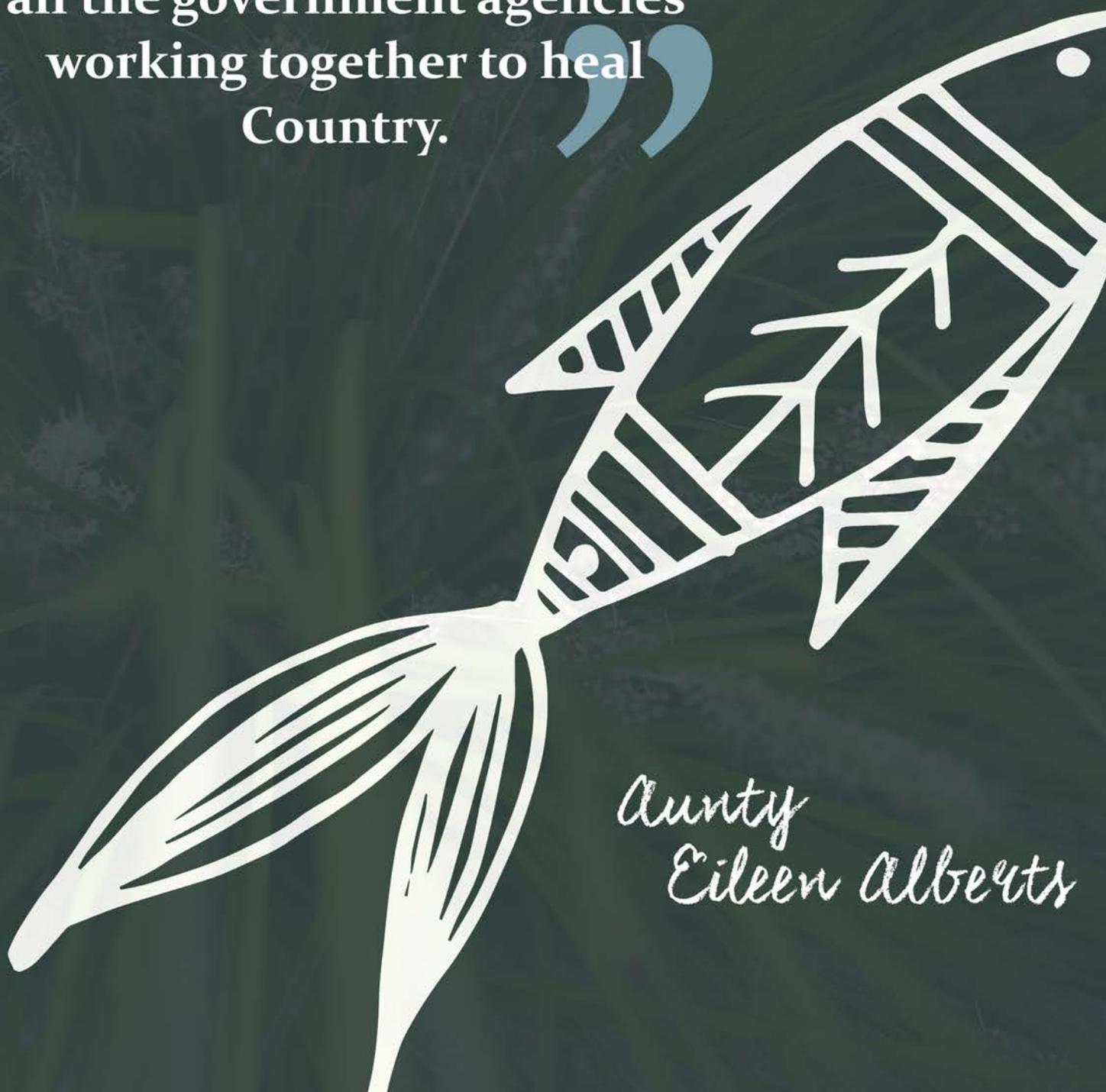
And that's what cultural burning and all those cultural land management processes and caring for Country are able to do. It's connecting back to those cultural processes that have maintained us for thousands and thousands of generations. When we talk about Indigenous wellbeing, to me, that is it.

**Vanessa Cavanagh,**  
Bundjalung and Wonnarua woman  
Associate Lecturer, University of Wollongong

**“At the same time as Aboriginal people leading fire and land management, we need to see change in the disparities around health, education, employment and more. We need to make this society fair and just so we can move forward sustainably.”**

*Vanessa  
Cavanagh*

“ We’ve worked through these matters by talking and planning together, and that’s what we need to do. We developed a fifteen-year plan, and that’s all the government agencies working together to heal Country.”



*Aunty  
Eileen Alberts*

## Aunty Eileen's Story

My name is Eileen Alberts. I'm a Gilgar Gunditj woman from the Gunditjmara Nation. I grew up 200 yards away from the Budj Bim lava flow. My grandmother was a weaver who wasn't allowed to teach her daughter how to weave. But every May my grandfather, Pop, would go down into the paddock in front of the house and burn the puunyort, the *Carex tereticaulis* grass, so that my grandmother would have fresh growth the following year and the year after that to weave the baskets that she sold. Now, because of global warming, we have to burn it in early March if we're going to have any good crops by weaving season. Weaving season starts around mid-January and goes through until March.

As a child, I watched Pop supervise his sons and brothers as they did a very cool cultural burn of the puunyort. It grew right beside the lava flow and was always treated as a special area that the men only went to when they were burning it. Burning was men's work and they weren't allowed to touch the grass otherwise. It was left there for the women to go to. The men weren't allowed to gather it for the women to weave with. They couldn't even run their hands over the eel basket as it was being made. Men's only job with the puunyort was to burn and only when asked to by the women. Everything else connected with the grass was women's work.

We never stopped burning, and keep it going today with the Budj Bim rangers. They do the burning as dictated by us women. I just tell them when it needs to be burnt and which patches to burn. This cultural burning has been here all the time. It keeps the puunyort strong. Fire is essential for the wider landscape too. It has to be planned and done right, not just to clear the land because that is like a wild-fire going through. It has to be mosaic burning all the way. A little bit here and a little bit there and leave the logs and the deadwood on the ground. You cannot burn it with no thought to the small insects and animals that live amongst the dry wood, small shrubs and ferns and what have you.

I weave because it was a tradition that we very nearly lost, apart from Aunty Connie Hart. Her mother was born and raised on the mission where she wasn't allowed to teach her daughter weaving. If you taught cultural things on the mission, you lost your children. But Aunty Connie sneaked around and tried a stitch or two when they went in for a cup of coffee, and sneaked behind them to find out where they got the grass from. It still took a long time for us to convince her to teach us because of that threat of your children being taken away.

The puunyort is absolutely fantastic to work with. It holds this remarkable quality – if you make a basket now, in 50 years' time when it gets a bit floppy all you've got to do is soak in water and it becomes very rigid again. You can also use the baskets for basically anything. I've got ones that I carry around with my purse and put whatever in it. And of course, eel baskets. I'm the only one here that makes the eel baskets. To make a good eel basket if you were working on it every day, for six to eight hours, it'd take you about three months. That's what I learnt from my aunt. She also taught us how to use the shoulder blade bone of a kangaroo to flatten the puunyort for weaving.

To catch eels, in water where the eels are you just build a rock wall with volcanic rocks leaving an opening in the centre for the eel basket. This is out on the lava flow, where there are fish traps still in use and other fish traps being built. As the eels come through the basket you just take whatever you need and allow the rest of the fish to move on. Then there's a ceremonial eel basket as well which is much bigger and probably take you six months to make. You'd use that when you had salvations and gatherings and a large mob to feed. That one's got a closed-off end so the eels can go in and they're trapped in there, and other fish. And it'd probably take three to four men to lift it out of the water. The Budj Bim rangers use whatever I make. The last time they got eels in it and they were just so happy.

Now I hold weaving workshops and I invite any woman who wants to learn to come because it means then that the cultural tradition of basket weaving will never be lost. I also do special workshops for Indigenous women. I tend to grab the younger girls that I've taught, or my daughter, and say, 'Come down I need assistance to do this class', so it will continue on generations upon generations. I've also brought some puunyort plants into my backyard. They're in a very sheltered position so they have a little longer shelf life I guess you could say.

**Eileen Alberts**  
Gilgar Gunditj Elder  
Gunditjmara Nation



**“ We need communities  
to be given back their land,  
given the opportunity to care  
for them in the way that it’s  
been done for so long. ”**

*Jason  
Andrew  
Smith*



## Jason's Story

My name is Jason Andrew Smith and I am a Palawa man from South East Tasmania. I've worked as a ranger with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre for three to four years. About eight years ago, Victor Steffensen came down to Tassie and started teaching us how to read the landscape, and how to put the right fires back into the land.\* I also attended some of his fire workshops up in Cape York. From that point on, I pretty much started doing it on a daily basis, and learning those skills Victor passed on to us. In the last twelve months we've been running traditional fire workshops down here, and teaching landholders how to read Country and look after their land properly.

My Old People were doing this burning for 40,000 to 60,000 years on this land and I grieve for how the knowledge was taken away from our people just over 200 years ago. We've lost a lot, so when I'm out on Country, when I see the old spirit birds,\*\* or the way the animals interact with us when we are looking after Country, and then to see the results, months on after we've burned in those areas, that's everything to me. There's no better feeling than being out on Country with your mob and your kids and looking after the land.

Spiritually and for our cultural lives, it's important the land knows that we are still here. We've burnt in areas where there might have only been a couple of small patches of native grasses and plants. After we've burnt, we've gone back and monitored over a six-month period and it's quadrupled, sometimes five to ten times more have come back. We've seen how healthy they are compared with areas we haven't burnt. Animals are going back into these burnt areas to get healthy food. You can see how happy it makes them to be able to get what they need out of there. Wallabies and kangaroos, they need their wallaby grass and kangaroo grass. We are promoting some of our bush tucker as well.

Aboriginal people should be leading the way in traditional burning. Unfortunately, Western education has taught our government agencies some wrong things – they don't understand how to read Country, they don't have the connection that we have to Country that makes us accountable for how things are done, and there's a lot they don't understand spiritually with our fire stories and our Dreamtime stories. Country needs to be looked after and needs to be cared for slowly – the way we burn.

*\*Victor Steffensen is a cultural fire mentor, descended from the Tagalaka people in Queensland.*

*\*\*The Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo*

60,000 years

40,000 years



ABORIGINAL  
LAND

Kangaroo  
Grass

Wallaby  
Grass

We want to engage and train up non-Indigenous people, but the opportunities need to come to our fellas first. We need to be put in charge so we can lead the way. I want to see job opportunities created for us to train up our young mob, and other fellas in our community and women. We should also have opportunities to set up our own Indigenous fire network in Tasmania, like the Indigenous Firesticks Network and different mobs on the mainland. For once in this nation's history, we need to have the number one say in how Country is looked after. I am certainly no expert but I know enough to do things correctly, and spiritually the right way.

There is a very spiritual story to all this for me. After a bad accident in 2006, I was in a long, induced coma. I had a vision, something pretty powerful, in that coma. Once I recovered, my path was chosen by the Old People and I made a big turn. Every day since then it has been that path that they chose, that I had to do this and need to do this for the rest of my life – burn the land the proper way and care for Country. I feel very blessed that happened to me.

I just wish people could understand that the Old People, spiritually and in other ways, are still out on the land. And that they and that land is crying so bad. It has taken us this long to recognise and start having these conversations on not only traditional burning but being back out on Country and caring for it. People are starting to understand that this is, and must be, the way to go. It's vital that we not only teach adults and private landholders, but also get it into our school system and start teaching some of those young 'uns how to care for the land. Government agencies have still got a lot to learn, but I think in this conversation they are starting to listen, and they will try to start supporting us in different ways. My dream would be to be living back out on Country somewhere where I didn't have to worry about the white education system, and I could teach my boy all the time his heritage and his knowledge. The more we are out on Country the better off we all are, we are healthy, we are happy.

**Jason Andrew Smith**  
Palawa man  
Cultural burning educator  
and fire practitioner



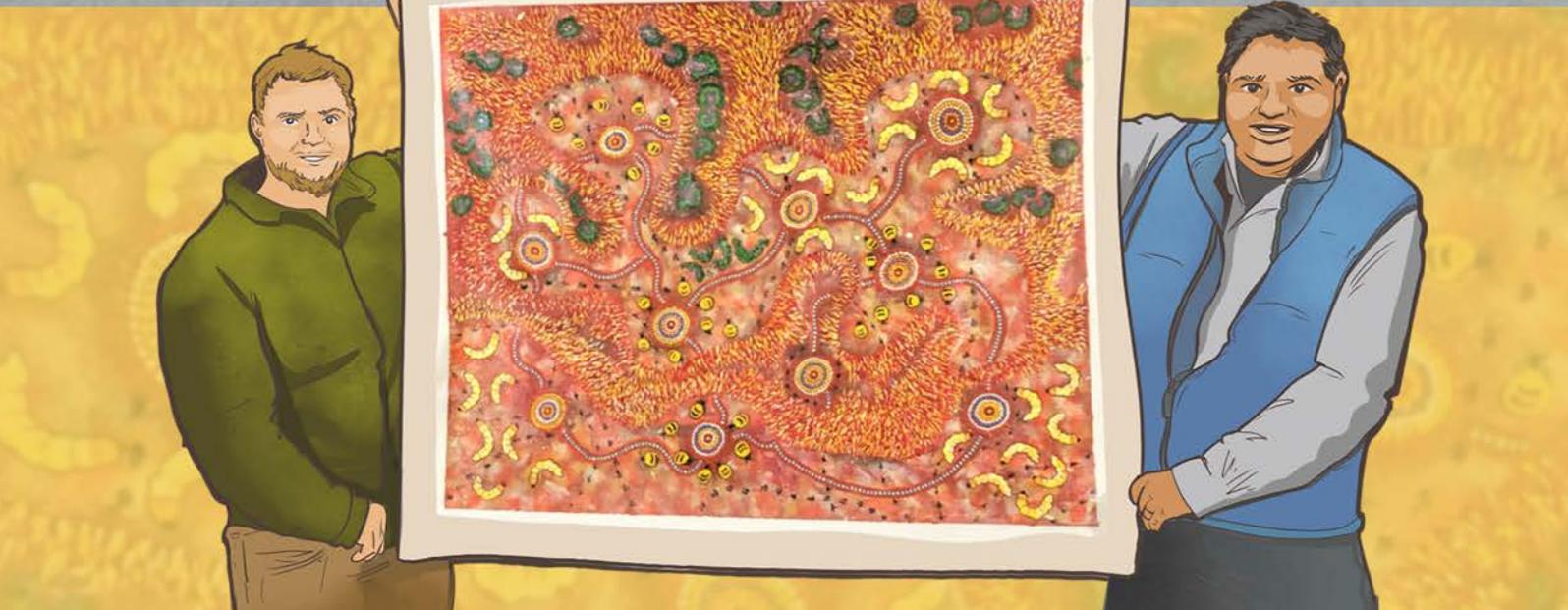
## Uncle Wayne's Story

My name is Wayne Davis. I have a skin name which is ampetyane, from central Australia, where I have traditional authority to manage my lands and look after my Country, as handed to me in the early 1980s. One of my parents was taken away in the Stolen Generation period. I grew up in the Top End where most of my work was on Country working with Elders, learning all aspects of land management. We'd burn every dry season, walking and burning the land.

Fire is my subject matter expertise. Sometimes the Country needs fire, sometimes it doesn't. There's all kinds of indicators. But it has to be put into the cultural context, with the Traditional Owners. They have to endorse it. Fire is also a great indicator as a Traditional Owner. It shows you you're playing your role as a cultural obligation in looking after your Country. And it's a therapy, it's about healing. You get to walk your Country and you get to clear your Country. You get to observe things while doing it – not just burning. You're looking for key signs of change in the environment, and there could be lots with climate change.

My current role is Traditional Fire Programs Coordinator, based in Western Australia working in the south in Noongar Country. I'm moving soon to work in a similar role in New South Wales. My role is to ensure that the Aboriginal community is a player in the process, the Traditional Owners telling the story, right across Australia. It's to ensure that bushfire fighting agencies, local government and state government agencies incorporate cultural burning into learning and approaches to managing land. It's important for governments to acknowledge that there are Traditional Owners that have attachment to land that's being managed by mainstream fire management programs. Even if non-Aboriginal people have put some boundaries around the land, Aboriginal people still have a cultural obligation to manage that piece of land. In urban environments and remote locations, there's cultural components that need to be acknowledged and factored into fire management.

We didn't have a written language so we learnt our knowledge through art and visuals. We feel it and see it. Walking the land is the way of scientific



connection to Country and land. Just walking Country helps you to see the changes, you might miss a few little things but you pick up a few new things. What I'm trying to do is share my current knowledge. Implementing cultural burning helped Aboriginal people survive for many thousands of years, and the knowledge has always been passed down and still continues on today. It is in the DNA of Aboriginal people, regardless of the area they're in. It might need to be heightened to support their empowerment, but it's not gone away. So it's applying and adapting the methodology, no matter what lifecycle of Earth.

Talking about cultural burning with different people is a good, healing feeling. My Elders are watching me now in a spiritual way, they are endorsing me to share this knowledge. We must bring this knowledge forward to open up discussion, because we are dealing with climate change. Whether at the policy level, ground level, working with staff, on Country working with Traditional Owners, understanding the environment, and understanding the regulations and legislation. For me it's about sharing that knowledge as a solution broker. I've watched and worked in regulations, legislation the majority of my life, working in the government and private sectors, and sharing this at a policy level in Canberra where all these funding and grant programs begin. Being at the forefront of that has given me an insight as to how we might need to consider flowing it out into the Australian community from a grass-roots level. We might have climate change but we have the influence change as well.

I also practise my culture through art, as part of exhibitions, commissions and things like that. Recently I've been doing a lot of paintings, teaching others about land management. This painting, in the poster, depicts my desert Country during a fire season. The small circles represent the sites and communities of significance, which are linked with each other. The painting shows how the fire is travelling around these sites to protect them, in a mosaic or patch burning pattern. There are also honey ants and witchetty grubs, and green to dry spinifex clumps. Spinifex is usually the dominant plant species, apart from introduced weed species that burn quickly and at times produce intense heat with dark black smoke.

Sometimes a painting is a more effective way of sharing knowledge because it's visual. Many of my paintings pay homage to the land. We don't actually own the land, that's not the way we think, the land owns us. It's very important that cultural burning is always applied in consultation with the land.

**Wayne ampetyane Davis**  
Kaytej Elder  
Traditional Fire Programs  
Coordinator WA\*

*\*At the time of writing.  
Now at Aboriginal Community and Heritage Partnership, Transport for NSW.*

“Fire management  
is always a part of  
land management.”

Uncle Wayne  
ampetyane  
Davis



## Adrian's Story

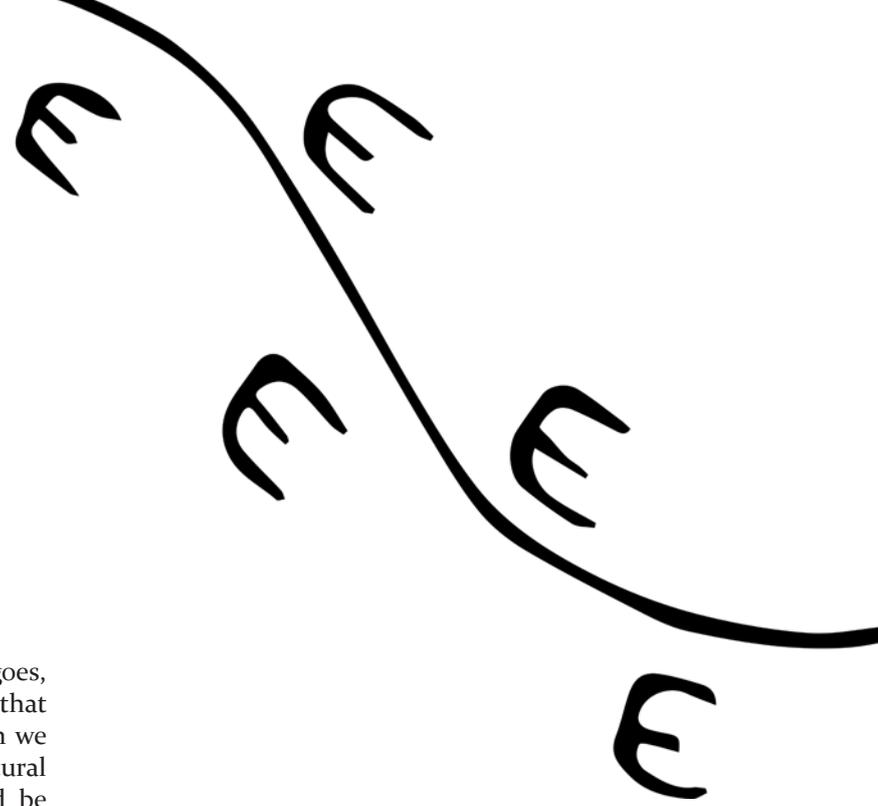
My name is Adrian Brown. I'm a Ngunnawal murringe (man). This cultural fire stuff is old, it's ancient. When we were kids, we were taught how to burn at the Queanbeyan River by my dad, Carl Brown. He was really keen on going out fishing, but he also wanted us to be part of culture. He just wanted us to understand this is our home, this is Country, and this is where we belong. In all of that and walking up and down the rivers all the time, that was beautiful.

Dad always knew the right time to burn, the wind, the breezes, and just let it gently move down to the river and just push itself out. Dad would also burn blackberry so that we could go back and fish in that area. Or where the kangaroos were coming down. You've got to limit your tea tree depending on how many kangaroos you want to maintain, so the kangaroos still have a home. And with the bracken ferns the 'roos rub up against to get rid of ticks and bites. All those sorts of things that count.

Dad would look at a landscape and go, 'Well, we can't hunt here, can't move through it.' He always said if you can't throw a spear through it then it's good for nothing. That's what fire management meant to him. In the cool season we burnt nearly every day. We'd burn at the Queanbeyan River here during the week, and on weekends we'd visit my nan and burn the Yass River over there. It was just a natural process of life and growing up for us.

Dad talked about how his uncle, Alec Bell, took him out bush and taught him all the things that dad was showing us. There's that transition. That's the generations. Uncle Alec, who in turn was taught by other men. There was no stop to the practice until the late 1990s when I was in my mid-20s. We'd put a fire in and the Rural Fire Service would come and put it out. We used to sit on top of the hill and watch. I'd be thinking, 'This belongs to me, I'm part of this whole system, and now this big red truck's got a hose on it putting it out, putting something out that was spiritual to me and meant something to me and my family.' We knew the fire was going to push itself out. But their reaction – it's the fear behind the whole thing. Dad got to the point where he just said, 'This is getting a bit ridiculous', and yeah, we just stopped.

When working with ACT Parks, I was constantly recognising areas that needed to be burnt, but there was this distance between me and my cultural knowledge, and my cultural knowledge not being identified as academic knowledge. The academic knowledge behind the fire management seemed to have a higher level, but the cultural fire management was thousands of years old. When I first arrived at ACT Parks, I struggled to get them to understand. Then slowly things started to build. I was just talking with a government official about this cultural fire stuff that dad had taught me as a



young child, and then he's looked at me and goes, 'Well, we need to implement that.' Just through that one conversation, bang, it kicked off and then we started looking at how we could draft up a cultural management framework and how that would be implemented into the bushfire operational plan. But it's got to be about the total engagement of community and sharing that wellbeing that comes from being around your culture.

We read fire management from the Milky Way. When it is running from south to north, that's when it's hot and you don't want to be putting too much fire in, but when it starts bending and starts going back to the west, that's the time to burn. The stars also tell us when to go up to the mountains for ceremony. It's also the plant resources telling us to go, when the elevation triggers the fruit. People followed that season and they went up to where they did their ceremony, and talked about all this. They didn't just go up to the mountains to gather moss and talk and make little johnny cakes. There was purpose behind why they were going there. It was to receive law, it was to trade, to marry, all those things that integrate cultural society.

All the work that's being continued and that legacy that dad left, that legacy was for me and my siblings. Every time I've tried to achieve something, I've thought about that bigger picture about our ancestors and how I could do them justice. Always in the back of my mind, I think about dad. How powerful is that, that this man in his quietness, in his humbleness, has influenced hundreds, and now probably thousands, of people. I don't know what that impact is, but whenever I hear people talk here about cultural fire management, I know it stems from those conversations that we started back a very long time ago.

For me to see a fire makes me feel strong inside. When I see the flame, I see the spirits, I see the people talking, I see all that and I just say, 'Well here we go, we've woken up our ancestors, they're speaking again.'

**Adrian Brown**  
Ngunnawal murringe (man)  
Director, Bidgee Brown

“The Australian public should know that they live within an Aboriginal cultural landscape. Our knowledge has been maintained and hasn't been totally obliterated. You've just got to talk to the right people and get the right messages.”

*Adrian Brown*

# CULTURAL BURNING PRINCIPLES

*For all levels of government and for all of society*

*As understood in relation to the cultural protocols of diverse First Nations, Traditional Owners and Custodians*

1) The whole continent is Country, from the land to the sky and everything in between. Everyone benefits from Country being healthy, but only First Nations, Traditional Owners and Custodians can speak for Country.

2) First Nations, Traditional Owners and Custodians are the central authority in cultural burning, and therefore are the ones to take carriage of the protection of their homelands. This must be supported by government agencies and society to ensure that Australia's ancient landscape can be maintained through cultural fire practices, and give our future generations the opportunity to practise their culture and learn from their Elders.

3) Contemporary Aboriginal women have fewer cultural burning opportunities than Aboriginal men, although historically this has not always been the case. Therefore, Aboriginal women must be supported in their cultural burning roles as they consider appropriate, including with their children, families and Elders.

4) Cultural burning has been practised by Aboriginal people since time immemorial, as inherited from their ancestors and creator beings. It is not static. It has always changed and been adapted as places and times change, including deep evolutionary time. It relies on and informs many other cultural practices, in relation to Aboriginal peoples' philosophies, knowledges, beliefs, world-views, roles and responsibilities.

5) Cultural burning is an obligation and responsibility with the land, as part of living with and within our homelands. It supports the land, plants, animals, ourselves and future generations to thrive. It is good for all.

6) Cultural burning is healing for Aboriginal people because while Country is healing, they themselves are healing from being denied their cultural responsibilities and relationships with the land.

7) Elders and cultural burning knowledge holders are the guiding authority, drawing on their expertise in weather patterns, seasonal calendars, plant and animal needs, and more. Cultural burns need to be carefully prepared within a cultural plan, as mistakes can happen. Mistakes do not take away from the integrity of cultural burning, its true intent and purpose.

8) Cultural burning requires ongoing access to Country – this is a must for Aboriginal people to live, know, read, enjoy and look after Country.

9) Cultural burning can only really be understood through experiencing a cultural burn on Country, rather than through meetings or documents.

10) This is work that we have to do together, sharing our knowledge to heal Country and working towards more appropriate fire regimes and therefore a safer and healthier environment for all. Fire management is everyone's responsibility.

*These are starting points for further learning with First Nations, Traditional Owners and Custodians, to reach a deeper understanding.*

**Gilgar Gunditj Elder Eileen Alberts,  
Gunditjmara Nation**

**Ngunnawal murringe (man)  
Adrian Brown**

**Bundjalung and Wonnarua woman  
Vanessa Cavanagh**

**Kaytej Elder Wayne ampetyane Davis**

**Wiradjuri man Dean Freeman**

**Minung/Gnudju kayang (wise woman)  
Carol Pettersen, Noongar Nation**

**Palawa man Jason Andrew Smith**

**Euahlayi man Bhiamie Williamson**

# LANGUAGE, MEANING, AND TERMINOLOGY

**Colonialism** is the maintenance of political, social, economic, environmental, psychological and cultural domination by a colonial power.

**Country** is a word Aboriginal people use to generally describe their homelands and traditional runs (their regional traditional connections), although it has a much broader meaning than just territory. Country connects people with places, through multi-layered, multi-species and sentient kinship relations according to the spiritual realms of their belief systems, lores and knowledges. These are reciprocal relations of care with the land since time immemorial.

**Environment** is a term arising out of Western knowledge practices that have increasingly come to separate nature and society, such that the environment is in the background and is managed by humans.

**Hazard** is an emergency management term for an event or situation that has the potential to cause loss. For example, a bushfire.

**First Nations, Traditional Owners and Traditional Custodians** are societies of Aboriginal people who have political-legal responsibilities for a certain area of land, their Country or homelands. They hold territorial and self-determination rights, whether formally recognised by the Australian government or not.

**Fuel load** is a fire agency term to describe the dry weight of combustible materials per unit area. It is often expressed as tonnes per hectare.

**Mob** describes a group of Aboriginal people related through kinship. It can also be used more generally to describe a group of people.

**Mosaic or patch burning** describes the spatial pattern of burnt and unburnt land at either a local or a landscape scale.

**Risk** is an emergency management term for what is considered threatened by the hazard. For example, people, property and the environment.

**Risk mitigation** is a fire agency term for reducing the risk of a hazard to human values. For example, the risk of a bushfire to property.

**Wellbeing** is a holistic understanding of health – physical, psychological, spiritual and cultural. It is more than the absence of disease or ill-health. Indigenous people emphasize that their wellbeing is in relation to kin and Country.

*For more information see the sections on terminology, language and meaning in Hazards, Culture and Indigenous Communities: Socio-Institutional modules for utilisation, free report published by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.*

# BIOGRAPHIES



## **Adrian Brown**

Adrian Brown is a Ngunnawal murringe (man) from Queanbeyan and runs his own business, Bidgee Brown. He worked for a long time with ACT Parks and Conservation Service, including as Senior Ngunnawal Ranger. He has mentored Aboriginal colleagues and advocated for the recognition of Aboriginal concerns by the ACT and New South Wales (NSW) government, including traditional fire management. Adrian is also an artist and wood artisan.



## **Bhiamie Williamson**

Bhiamie Williamson is a Euahlayi man from northwest NSW and a Research Associate and PhD Candidate at the Australian National University. Bhiamie's expertise includes cultural land management, cultural burning and the impacts of disasters on Indigenous peoples. He has a Masters of Indigenous Governance from the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.



## **Carol Pettersen**

Carol Pettersen is a Minung/Gnudju kayang (wise woman), Noongar Nation, from Albany, Western Australia. She was the NAIDOC Female Elder of the Year in 2008, the first Minung Noongar person elected to the Albany Town Council (1993-1996), and part of the Albany Town Hall was renamed after her. Her passion is to maintain traditional knowledge and practices to protect our fragile environment.



## **Dean Freeman**

Dean Freeman is a Wiradjuri man who has worked in fire management for over twenty years, and has crew leader responsibilities for hazard reduction burns and wildfires. He is leading a cultural burning program that is being developed at ACT Parks in partnership with local Traditional Owners who have a particular interest in fire.



## **Eileen Alberts**

Eileen Alberts is a Gilgar Gunditj Elder from the Gunditjmarra Nation, which encompasses parts of southwest Victoria and southeast South Australia. She is a mentor to the Budj Bim rangers, and at Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation, among many other roles. She is a cultural educator for trainee medical general practitioners, and won the Victorian Rural Health's Aboriginal Health Award in 2019. She is also an expert weaver.



## **Jason Andrew Smith**

Jason Andrew Smith is a Palawa man from southeast Tasmania, and a descendant of Fanny Cochrane Smith. He has been a traditional fire practitioner for over eight years. He has started his own business called 'Patrula Nayri' (fire good), teaching landholders how to look after Country with traditional burning practices.



**Jessica Weir**

Jessica Weir is a descendent of English and Scottish colonialists, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University (WSU). Her research explores the intersection of ecological and social justice. Jessica’s research practice is fundamentally informed by over two decades of collaboration with Indigenous peoples, especially in southeast and western Australia.



**Lani Balzan**

Lani Balzan is a Wiradjuri woman and artist living in the Illawarra, NSW. Her multiple awards include winning the 2016 NAIDOC Poster Competition. Her entry ‘Songlines’ became that year’s NAIDOC theme. Her work has been commissioned by NSW Police and the St George Illawarra Dragons, and the Aboriginal department of St Vincent’s Hospital.



**nicole marie burton**

nicole marie burton is a Canadian illustrator and a founding member of the Ad Astra Comix publishing collective, specializing in comics with social justice themes. Her recent work includes the poster series, ‘So you care about Indigenous scholars?’ and artwork for Amnesty Canada’s ethical batteries campaign, ‘Recharge for Rights’.



**Vanessa Cavanagh**

Vanessa Cavanagh is a Bundjalung and Wonnarua woman from NSW. She is a PhD candidate and Associate Lecturer in the School of Geography and Sustainable Communities at the University of Wollongong. She has extensive experience in environmental conservation in the public and private sectors, and has held various roles in national park operations.



**Wayne ampetyane Davis**

Wayne ampetyane Davis is a Kaytej Elder from central Australia. He has extensive experience in fire and land management, and has worked in the public sector across Australia. He is currently with Aboriginal Heritage and Partnerships at Transport for NSW. He is also a practising traditional and contemporary artist.



**Yasmin Tambiah**

Yasmin Tambiah is Sri Lankan. Trained in history, her research has focused on the meeting point of law, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, especially in post-colonial states. She works additionally in research management, and currently is a research officer at the Institute for Culture and Society, WSU. Yasmin is also a creative writer.

# MORE RESOURCES

## **First Nation groups, Aboriginal organisations and peak bodies**

You can search the internet to find websites hosted by First Nation groups and local Aboriginal organisations. These websites usually share introductory information, policies, resources, events and contacts.

[www.firesticks.org.au](http://www.firesticks.org.au)

The Firesticks Alliance is an Indigenous-led network that aims to re-invigorate the use of cultural burning by facilitating cultural learning pathways to fire and land management. Before COVID-19, they ran the National Indigenous Fire Workshop. In 2020 they convened the Firesticks Virtual Conference, which is documented on their website.

## **Research and other information**

Some key books by Indigenous authors include Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (2014) and Victor Steffensen's *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia* (2020).

[www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/indigenouscommunities](http://www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/indigenouscommunities)

The Hazards, Culture and Indigenous Communities project began in 2017 as a partnership between the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Western Sydney University, Deakin University, hazard and land management government agencies, and individual Aboriginal people as well as their organisations. The CRC project webpage has reports free to download, including: the final project report with recommendations for industry practice (2021); socio-institutional modules for introductory learning (2020); a knowledge exchange trip between eastern and western Australia (2019); and our reflections on the South East Australian Fire Forum (2018). The project webpage also lists the project's peer-reviewed and other publications.

[www.bnhcrc.com.au/driving-change/indigenous-initiatives](http://www.bnhcrc.com.au/driving-change/indigenous-initiatives)

The Indigenous Initiatives theme of the CRC's Driving Change online resource brings all CRC research on Indigenous initiatives together in one place, regardless of the project behind the research.

[www.culturalburning.org.au](http://www.culturalburning.org.au)

The Cultural Burning Knowledge hub is a knowledge repository and knowledge network to allow sharing of information across jurisdictions regarding cultural burning and related issues. It is funded by the Victorian government and developed in partnership with Traditional Owners. It covers: academic research; strategies, policies and procedures; news, videos, podcasts; events; and more.



