

Aboriginal burning

Background

Aboriginal burning, cultural burning, firestick farming and traditional burning are terms often used to describe the burning practices developed by Aboriginal peoples to enhance the health of the land and its people. Aboriginal burning is one of the ways Aboriginal people maintain their relationship with Country. Indigenous people in many parts of the world undertake traditional burning, or similar practice.

Aboriginal burning principles and techniques vary around Australia, but usually involve patch burning to create different fire intervals across the landscape, which is undertaken during cool evening or morning conditions, in light winds. Aboriginal burning is often used to promote particular plants and animals, as a tool to gain better access to country, to maintain cultural responsibilities, as a ceremonial practice, and to reduce fuel loads. Aboriginal burning in the true sense is place-specific. It involves the use of ancient knowledge of that place, its landscape, flora, fauna and weather to control fire in the landscape – knowledge that has been acquired through multi-generational occupation, use and burning of that country.

Aboriginal burning can be a useful tool in meeting the management objectives of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) through promoting the ecological health of landscapes and reducing bushfire severity through fuel reduction and fuel modification. Traditional burning improves Aboriginal health outcomes, allows Aboriginal



people to connect with country, and can provide training and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people. Aboriginal burning knowledge can also assist and inform non-Aboriginal burning practices, and the reintroduction of Aboriginal burning in the TWWHA offers opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing.

The Parks and Wildlife Service acknowledges that Aboriginal people are the knowledge holders and practitioners of cultural burning and a shared understanding of cultural burning, its principles and objectives are necessary in order to achieve the reintroduction of cultural burning within the TWWHA.

Challenges

The near complete dispossession of Aboriginal Tasmanians from their traditional lands has led to a discontinuation of Aboriginal burning practices. In recent years, there has been a resurgence in burning activities by Aboriginal Tasmanians, mostly due to ongoing Tasmanian involvement in the annual National Indigenous Fire Workshop, and participation in well-planned and executed burns on Aboriginal land and private property. It is accepted there are a number of Aboriginal Tasmanians and Aboriginal community groups with an understanding of burning principles and experience in executing burns, who could participate in supported burning activity. It may, however, take time and resources to further build Aboriginal community capacity in cultural burning through continued exposure to Aboriginal burning knowledge and activities.

Improving cultural awareness amongst current Parks and Wildlife Service fire managers and operations staff will support the sharing of respective fire knowledge and practices. Greater cooperation and information sharing should also lead to opportunities and support for Aboriginal people to access Country to undertake burning.

There is an assumption that a reintroduction of Aboriginal burning will provide the solution to the bushfire risk we face. While this type of burning can potentially contribute to a reduction in fuels, it is not the panacea to the bushfire risks associated with climate change.

As a cultural activity, Aboriginal burning must be led by Aboriginal people and is subject to their cultural burning lore and protocols. For example, cultural burning is often a family and community activity, performed over many days, and involving supplementary activities. It is a time for Aboriginal people to gather and connect. The involvement of children is common, due to a need to pass knowledge on to future generations. A challenge may be providing such opportunities for Aboriginal burning free of onerous and culturally unacceptable requirements.

The way forward

Support Aboriginal communities to re-establish their cultural burning practices within the TWWHA to complement current fire management activities.

The option to simply provide opportunities for Aboriginal Tasmanians to be part of the current Parks and Wildlife Service planned burning program is unlikely to achieve outcomes required by the 2016 TWWHA Management Plan or the aspirations of Aboriginal communities. Cultural burning needs to be led by Aboriginal people.

The TWWHA Fire Management Plan must be consistent with, and effectively implement, the direction set by the 2016 TWWHA Management Plan.

The Parks and Wildlife Service is working with Tasmanian Aboriginal communities with the aim of supporting them to re-establish cultural burning practices in the TWWHA.

OTHER ISSUES SHEETS THAT MAY BE OF INTEREST

- 01 Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area fire management objectives
- 03 Planned burning: landscape fuel-reduction burns for asset and ecosystem protection
- 04 Planned burning: use of fuel-reduction burns for ecosystem maintenance

