

Aboriginal fire management

Aboriginal people have lived in the ACT and surrounding districts for thousands of generations and Aboriginal cultural heritage exists throughout every part of the ACT. Their land-management practices achieved sustainable living within the surrounding environment in climatic extremes over thousands of years. This management has always included purposeful implementation of effective fire regimes and their use of fire was closely regulated by specific lore and customs.

However in non-Aboriginal society there has been some confusion about what Aboriginal fire management meant. For many years it was widely referred to as supporting extensive hot burns across the landscape with little research or reference to local traditional custodians. Even recent submissions to the House of Representatives report on the 2003 fires “A Nation Charred” claimed that a major cause of the devastation in Kosciuszko National Park was the neglect of extensive annual prescribed burning which supposedly mimicked the Aboriginal practice.

The claims were given fresh impetus by the 2011 publication of Professor Bill Gammage’s book, “The Biggest Estate on Earth”. The book documented first hand reports of early colonists and explorers on the use of fire throughout the landscape. It explored an extraordinarily complex system of land management using fire and the life cycles of native plants to ensure plentiful wildlife and plant foods throughout the year. However some readers saw the book as continuing to justify large scale frequent burns; other readers took the opposite view and the discussion on Aboriginal fire management continued to focus on the opinions of non-Aboriginal sources.

Then in 2014 Bruce Pascoe published “Dark Emu” which explored the complex engineering and land management traditions of Aboriginal people from the Aboriginal point of view. Pascoe was asking us to see the landscape as Aboriginal people lived in it, as they interacted with and managed the land. His documentation of housing, farming and resource management has brought forward the traditional custodial voice, which has been missing, in our debates.

Traditional custodians have been speaking to us quietly all the time we have been banging on about what “Aboriginal fires” meant. Up to now we haven’t been listening. Many of us have convinced ourselves that traditional practices are long gone, lost in two centuries of disruption and destruction. It is time to put aside that myth and start a real conversation.

This task is not easy; the landscape has changed significantly. Natural areas are infested with feral pests and weeds which significantly alter fire behaviour; urban and rural assets have sprung up on traditional sites and require protection; we have an obligation to our neighbours to prevent fire spreading into their jurisdictions. We are moving into a period of drastic climate change which will challenge all our fire management strategies; and we have extensive scientific research and amazing machines and

tools which are changing established practice in fire management. How can Aboriginal knowledge contribute to this modern world?

The simple fact is that where we walk in Namadgi National Park and in local traditional

cultural areas we still walk in a landscape familiar to the local custodians. Less has changed than we think. Properly conducted burns easily carry on the long-established practices of the traditional custodians.

Here in the ACT, Parks Conservation and Lands (PCL) are committed to Cultural-Ecological burns as “a vital component of implementing highly effective fire regimes for the future”. An Aboriginal staff member of PCL is required to facilitate every phase of planning, implementing and monitoring Cultural-Ecological burns. Traditional Custodians must be given the opportunity to be involved and “a Traditional Custodian is required to be part of any team that implements any burn”. (*Aboriginal Cultural Guidelines for Fuel and Fire Management Operations in the ACT*)

Cultural burns are generally low-intensity and take place within a traditional seasonal calendar indicated by certain native flora and fauna species mainly in autumn. Burns are lit from multiple ignition points and ‘creep’ or ‘trickle’ through the fuel layers with very little or no crown scorching. They provide cultural renewal for the Aboriginal community; safeguard culturally significant sites and renew native vegetation.

So what does this mean for broader fire management? How could traditional knowledge contribute to the extensive work being done to extend our fire management practices? There is a temptation to consign traditional knowledge to the sidelines and get on with the hard work of scientific research and development. We’ve made that mistake before with Aboriginal knowledge, corralling it into a specific, limited ‘heritage’ category but it need not be ‘either/or’; it can be ‘both’. We need to ask what we can learn and apply to our broader fire strategies and how to use that information in conjunction with our scientific knowledge.

Some jurisdictions are already going through this process. In Northern Australia traditional fire management is being used to re-write previous fire management practices. Traditional methods and traditional timing is being used to manage ferociously dangerous feral weeds like buffle grass; to reduce carbon emissions from large wildfires; and to restore traditional country. It is also contributing significantly to better management of commercial properties and increased productivity. The key process appears to be a respectful partnership between the two strands: professional fire management teams supporting and training tra-



ditional custodians in modern fire management with modern tools and equipment; then working with them to fulfill both their traditional duties and the wider public safety goals.

Down here in the ACT it is a very different landscape with different challenges but we've made a good start. It is clear from the PCL guidelines quoted above that Aboriginal Fire Management in the ACT is built around Aboriginal ownership of the processes and execution of cultural burns. We are only beginning to explore how this knowledge can be extended into fire management for boarder public safety but I am willing to make a prediction: western science and Aboriginal knowledge have many meeting points and this will be yet another point where modern understanding and skills will be enhanced by traditional wisdom and experience.

The journey is just beginning.

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She has been a member of the ACT Bushfire Council since 2008 and was a member of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan Advisory Committee.

Prior to retirement she was a senior policy adviser in various Federal departments and before that taught in both NSW and ACT high schools for fifteen years.

Apart from environmental issues, her particular passions are bushwalking and writing.