

Healing Country, Healing Spirit

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Abstract

For thousands of years Australia's landscape was subject to a fire regime that formed part of a sophisticated Aboriginal land management practice. This practice not only supported hunting, but enabled fresh growth of grasses and essential bush-foods. It also resulted in a fine-grained mosaic of vegetation which promoted the resilience of a range of plant and animal species - many of which are now rare and endangered.

We are now in a new era of Aboriginal land management. Using historical knowledge and scientific monitoring, many communities are once again managing the land and restoring balance to the environment. Aboriginal people are building resilient communities fuelled by local economic development and enterprise.

In April 2013, the NSW Government launched the NSW Aboriginal Affairs plan OCHRE, which presents the Government's new priorities for Aboriginal Affairs. Under OCHRE, Aboriginal Affairs is tasked with developing a revised approach to Aboriginal economic development. This new policy narrative will support socially resilient Aboriginal communities through economic development with a focus on healing and language.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to start by paying my respects to the Gadigal people of the land that we are meeting on. In doing so, I recognise and honour their culture and heritage. For Aboriginal people, culture and heritage is a touchstone for community strength and resilience. Communities that are strong in their culture and with tangible sense of heritage, often have a greater sense of community, and are better able to respond to their own advantage in the face of adversity.

Acknowledging these custodial links to the Country, and acknowledging Aboriginal people and culture are essential in fostering a society where Aboriginal culture and people are respected. Today, I pay my respect to the culture and heritage of the Gadigal, not as something that existed in the past, but as something which is alive and vibrant in

inner Sydney today. I am very pleased to be here, and in the traditions of my Yuin ancestry, I promise to speak honestly, and in the best interest of our Mother Earth.

Today I am going to talk about Aboriginal fire management and Aboriginal land management more broadly, and how it is used to promote the social, cultural and economic resilience of Aboriginal communities, particularly through the creation of on Country employment and enterprise.

ACKNOWLEDGING CUSTODIAL LINKS TO COUNTRY

We know the tremendous importance of Country to Aboriginal people; we come from it. As young people, we learn to respect it, we draw our strength from it and our spiritual connection is to it. It is our home, it is our economy, it defines

who we are, and it defines how we relate to other people and to other living things.

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal people have had this relationship with Country. But again, as in recent times, the opportunity to be connected to, and learn from Country and land has been denied to many Aboriginal people. It was during the introduction of the *Equal Pay Act 1972* legislation, that the Aboriginal people lost, in many cases, their final connection to Country, which had been enabled to them through the pastoral industry. Once equal pay came into practice, notwithstanding how good a horseman you were, the fact was, you weren't going to get paid, if there was a white person who could get paid to do the same work. We see the impact of government policy.

Now we have the job of creating new policy, which reverses some of that, and start facilitating once again Aboriginal peoples' ability to access Country and to continue the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and skills, in so doing, hopefully create economically and socially resilient Aboriginal communities.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FIRE

Fire has always played an important role in Aboriginal culture, and will continue to into the future. It is significant in healing the land, and the people. It is not just about ancient traditions; it is also about creating future economic opportunities.

FOSTERING A CULTURE OF RESILIENCE WITHIN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

One of the biggest challenges for Aboriginal Australia is about creating a shift in the current rhetoric around disadvantage. It is true that many

Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal people suffer a range of serious issues around: housing, health, education, incarceration and alike. But we also have to recognise and celebrate the unique strengths and opportunities that stem from traditional knowledge and practice.

NEW INITIATIVES - OCHRE

In April 2013, the Commissioner for Aboriginal Affairs launched a new Aboriginal Affairs plan, 'OCHRE'. It stands for Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility and Empowerment - <http://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/nsw-government-aboriginal-affairs-strategy/>.

OCHRE has a strong focus on creating long-term economic development and employment outcomes for Aboriginal people, both off and on Country. Some of the actions that are within OCHRE include the establishment of language and culture nests, which are about language revitalisation, embedding local language and culture into the school curriculum, to promote identity, self esteem and a positive school engagement for Aboriginal kids.

A second initiative within OCHRE is the establishment of opportunity hubs, again focused very much on young people, and creating collaborative partnerships with employers to create pathways for Aboriginal kids out of school into work and into further education. These hubs and nests will ultimately lead to Aboriginal people, in particular, young people to participate more fully in social, economic and cultural life.

ADDRESSING THE CYCLE OF DISADVANTAGE

One of the biggest challenges we see in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and

dysfunction in aboriginal communities is addressing the issue of healing. In creating OCHRE, there was a ministerial taskforce established. That taskforce went out and spoke to thousands of Aboriginal people and quite literally the largest Aboriginal consultation process ever undertaken in New South Wales. The issue of trauma and healing came up at every session. The extent to which people spoke of the dysfunction in their lives, like drugs, alcohol, child abuse, amongst other things was always enveloped in this idea of trauma. The general message was that healing was needed to overcome this trauma.

The general opinion from people was that, millions of dollars can be spent on services, but that just puts band-aids on symptoms. The root causes that are creating the dysfunction are not being addressed. People also spoke about powerlessness; they talked about frustration, anger, all of those feelings that anyone of us would have, if we felt as though somebody else had more control over our lives than we do.

The message that was received loud and clear was that we needed to start dealing with the root causes of these issues.

ADDRESSING HEALING

Healing is about recognising and acknowledging the trauma caused by the past treatment of Aboriginal people, no matter how well intentioned it was, and which to some extent still continues today. It is about respectful relationships, it is about asking, listening and responding in a positive way. Ultimately healing is about drawing on culture and identity as a means of reinforcing positive self esteem. It is about a strong sense of purpose, self worth and social and economic prosperity. These are the

messages that we received from the Aboriginal community.

FIRE AS A LINK TO COUNTRY

Fire used in both ecological management and ceremony will have a role in promoting and empowering this cultural identity for Aboriginal people. For tens of thousands of years, it has had many purposes in Aboriginal life. It was used for signalling, hunting, cooking, ceremony and warmth. It was used to signify many rights of passage; it was used to celebrate life, and to mourn death.

As its custodians, Aboriginal people are charged with the protection of animals, plants and cultural sights located on our land. The role of Aboriginal Affairs NSW is to drive policy that respects and reinforces Aboriginal connection to Country. Our policies also need to focus on providing Aboriginal people with the opportunity to live and work on their Country. These policies will have the ultimate goal of building socially, economically and culturally resilient communities.

HEALING AND SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE

Being on Country and learning traditional fire and land management, plays to the multidimensional nature of healing in Aboriginal communities. It is about emotion, about spirit and culture. It is about building self-esteem and reducing reliance on government services. After too many years, we are now once again looking into the past to help us secure ecological biodiversity into the future. We are now starting to see government policies in grant programs reflect a greater recognition and inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge of Country in

conventional land management approaches.

HEALING AND ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

Some of the funding programs available including 'Caring for our Country', 'Indigenous Carbon Farming Fund' and 'Working on Country Fund' have all guaranteed money for things like Savannah burning, carbon farming and working on Country for Aboriginal people. The new economic development framework that Aboriginal Affairs NSW will be developing following OCHRE, will have a significant focus on creating economic opportunities around natural resource management for Aboriginal people in NSW.

Aboriginal people are significant land owners in NSW, perhaps not to the same extent as in other parts of the country, but nonetheless they have a range of land that are available for things like tourism, conservation tourism, biosecurity, carbon farming, and pest and weed management. All of which have the potential to create local enterprise and local employment outcomes for people.

This is important; getting a job for an Aboriginal person, is not just about paying the bills. It links to health, education and other social benefits that affects, not only the person with the job, but also to their entire family and in some cases, their entire community.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES

A good example of an Aboriginal enterprise that we are starting to see in NSW is MAGIC which stands for Mothers, Ancestral Guardians, Indigenous Corporation. They hold some land in

Mungo National Park. MAGIC is working on the Rick Farley Soil Conservation Reserve in Mungo, to illustrate how caring for Country can unite Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people around this deep respect for the Aboriginal world view and the land that we share. They have a great DVD that highlights their reclamation of traditional burning practices called 'MAGIC - Cultural Burning Activities on Country (2012)'. Here is a link to the DVD trailer.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q21MiwylmyU>.

Regarding carbon farming, there are some new successful businesses starting up, e.g. MAGIC, but often these opportunities are still limited for Aboriginal communities. So what we need is to create new openings for employment and enterprise where people are able to access land and use the land in new ways to create jobs and other social outcomes. We think that participation in the emerging carbon market provides one of those opportunities. We can now see, places such as Wilcannia where the Aboriginal land councils have quite large land holdings that for quite a long time, have been considered of little value, because they are a long way from where the development pressures are. But through the new carbon market and the green economy more generally, there are new opportunities for places such as Wilcannia where it is much needed.

So what we will be seeking to do is to align Aboriginal peoples' knowledge of the environment and fire management more specifically, with the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and at the same time, open up significant land-based enterprise potential. We understand that there is still a need to do

more research, but should a suitable fire abatement methodology be adopted in NSW, it will provide a great opportunity for Aboriginal people.

CONCLUSION

We now understand that the historic European view of wilderness is somewhat of a furphy in this country, because the Australian landscape has always had an interdependent relationship with humans, relying on regular burning to stimulate growth, to promote biodiversity and to provide habitat. Reigniting cultural burning practices is just one step in the healing process to create socially resilient Aboriginal communities with a strong connection to land, culture and history. It is certainly my aim, and the aim of Aboriginal Affairs NSW to see a time when Aboriginal land management practices are once again integral to way management is conducted in the future. An example of successful use of Aboriginal land management practices is that of the Wattleridge Indigenous Protected Area, near Guyra, NSW: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVFVmkzi82g>.

BIOGRAPHY

Mr Jason Ardler is the General Manager for Aboriginal Affairs; a leading whole-of-government and intergovernmental Aboriginal affairs strategy and program development across such diverse areas as economic participation, community governance, culture and heritage, environmental health and improved Government service delivery. Jason has 25 years' experience in public sector management, including ten years as a senior executive.

Prior to joining Aboriginal Affairs in 2009, Jason was Executive Director of Culture and Heritage in the Department of Environment and Climate Change (DECC) and that department's lead Executive on Aboriginal issues for eight years. Jason led a significant policy and program reform agenda within DECC, focused on strengthening and supporting Aboriginal peoples' connections with the environment.

Jason is the NSW Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services and a member of numerous executive level committees and working groups focused on improving outcomes for Aboriginal people, including the NSW Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs.