

Cultural Burning – Diversity of Fire

OLIVER COSTELLO

Nature Conservation Council of NSW; Firesticks Project
Corresponding Author Email: ocostello@nccnsw.org.au

Abstract

Cultural burning is a story of place and has many uses, characteristics and outcomes. So what can we learn from cultural burning about good vs. bad fire? Fire's function in the landscape is as diverse as the country and people interconnected with it. Fire is known by many terms in many languages; the Firesticks project uses the term cultural burning to describe the myriad ways that fire exists in a cultural context to achieve the same or different objectives as contemporary fire management. The cultural values and practices that manifest as cultural burning are underpinned by the fundamental intent to care for country.

Cultural connections to Country vary among people, but generally can be understood as interconnected relationships between all elements and beings. Country is more than a tangible landscape as it encompasses all things including cultural lore and the stories of that Country which relate to the people, plants, animals, landscape, water, sea, wind and sun, moon and stars. Aboriginal people's cultural values and practices are increasingly being recognised by land owners and land managers as important in contemporary land and natural resource management. The impacts of colonisation has, without a doubt, affected Indigenous people's ability to openly implement their cultural practices and pass on traditional knowledge in the way it has been done for thousands of years. That is not to suggest that the knowledge has been lost. Across Australia there still exists strong cultural lore, knowledge of burning practices, connection to country and a physical memory that is present within the landscape. Indigenous people's living knowledge systems accommodate the application of this knowledge to contemporary fire management concerns facing our society and environment. How can we share relationships and meaning of fire, people and country to explore common ground on how burning makes us feel. What elements, values, practices and evidence do we need to utilize to manage fire to meet desirable local outcomes? People and Country taught me this story.

INTRODUCTION

Firstly, I would like to begin by acknowledging country and paying my respects to the elders, past, present and future. It is always important for me to pay my respects, because I am asking for permission both from the Country and the people. It is also very important with respect to fire and culture. I would also like to pay my respects and thanks to all the mobs that I have worked with through Firesticks and other projects. Without their support, guidance, mentoring and

knowledge, I would not be in a position to share these stories with you today.

The original Firesticks venture I initiated was a collaboration between Indigenous communities, Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways, UTS School of Design and Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning and Kuku Thaypan Fire Project, however it has evolved into other projects including the current NCC Firesticks Project, There are also many other communities out there that are operating Firesticks type projects.

Firesticks has become a bit of a movement. It is about creating awareness and giving opportunities to people who live on Country and have a connection to that Country. It provides opportunities for other ways of connecting to Country and helps expand knowledge and appreciation for Country.

I am a Bundjalung man, my grandmother was taken away. I myself am quite fair, so identity has always been a bit of a challenge for me, both to understand who I was and where I come from. I was born in Byron Bay, so I was very fortunate to be born on my ancestors' country and the connection to that place is very important to me. I have had the opportunity to live near the coast

and up in the hills, so affinity to all that country is very important to me. It provides a sense of grounding and an opportunity to understand who I am in a way I believe is really important and relevant in a contemporary setting where it does not matter how light or dark-skinned you happen to be, or where you come from. It provides the opportunity to be able to make a connection with Place, which I believe is a vital attribute to being a healthy and happy person. Firesticks has very much been a vehicle that has made it more possible to express myself and be able to connect with other people. It is very important for people on Country.



Fig.1: Watagoes Beach, Byron Bay NSW.

Watagoes Beach in Byron Bay (Figure 1) is a place which is not very far from where I was born. It is beautiful country. Country tells us stories. It is a memory of Place and Firesticks attempts to draw on these connections to place and the environment as a way of seeing country and its cultural values.

The NCC Firesticks project which is funded through the Clean Energy Futures

Biodiversity Fund and delivered as part of the NCC's Healthy Ecosystems Program, is about exploring the cultural pathways associated with biodiversity and fire.

It is a five-year project working in partnership on Aboriginal owned lands in northern NSW, through integrating Aboriginal and contemporary fire practices to help manage natural and cultural values.

COMPONENTS OF CULTURAL BURNING

Figure 2 is a concept that, using the well-known fire triangle presents a model for what Firesticks is trying to achieve. Basically, the “AIR” is about providing safe places and safe spaces for people to tell their stories and to recognise and advocate for the values of cultural burning. Much of the energy I spend is on getting out there to share the stories so that people have a

better understanding of what we wish to achieve and how we are trying to do it. There are many versions, with plenty of people who have different versions, so there is no one “right” version. People and Country are very diverse, so it is a very diverse story. Firesticks aims to provide a space where people are able to have that conversation, and bring forward their stories.

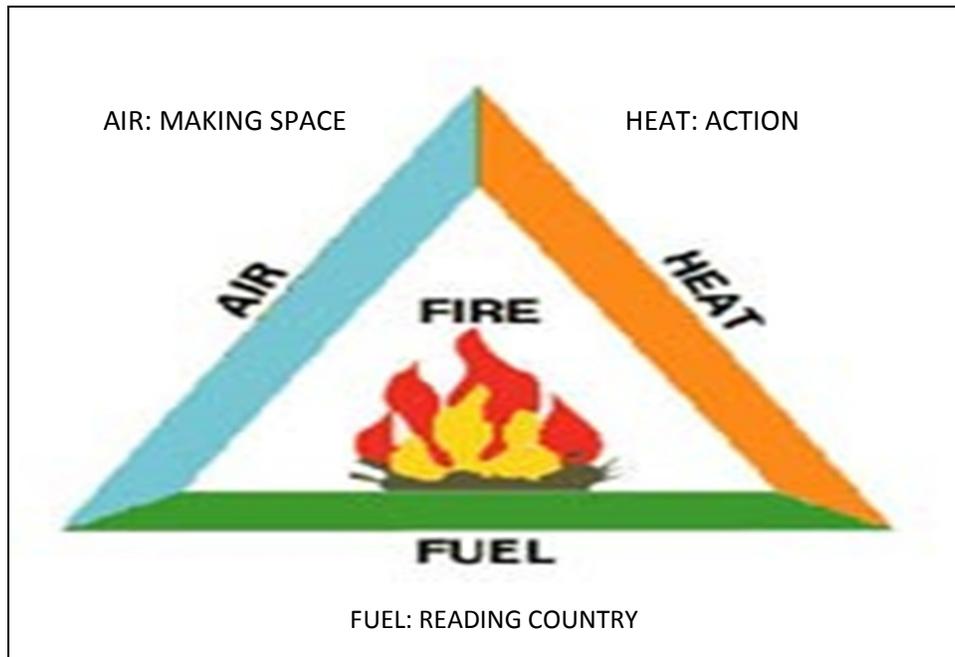


Fig. 2: A model of the components of cultural burning

The application of “HEAT” is about enabling empowerment through Action, so they are able to participate in managing their country. Figure 3 shows knowledge being recognised. Telling stories of Country is a way of sharing how fire is important for the health of the land and for biodiversity values, and it provides recognition of the work being done on Country by the people telling the story. There is a lot of fire knowledge that has been lost from my people and many other people across NSW and throughout Australia. But Country is still telling us stories and as Aboriginal people it is still important for us to know

who we are and connect with our place and country to build on those stories. The old people learnt those stories from Country. They had thousands of years to understand and do it, this was interrupted and we have only had a few generations to recover that part of our culture.

For example, I have only really started learning about fire and telling the fire stories for about three or four years, so it is important to appreciate the opportunity we now have and not disregard the chance for improving our understanding and cultural connection to place, which in turn can inform others.

Another example of the “HEAT” i.e. empowerment of the people, is undertaking training to build capacity. As an example rangers from the Jali lands have undertaken bushfire awareness training at the Yarrowarra cultural centre. This program provided another valuable opportunity for people to be able to share and learn together and from each other.

The final side of the Firesticks triangle is “FUEL”; it is about reading country and the evidence of the value of cultural burning. It is really important in a contemporary setting, where science and policy are the basis for many people’s standards and

decisions. We are undertaking foundational research that can act as a basis to demonstrate the importance of cultural burning for Country.

By having this supporting framework, the aim is that people will understand the value of what is being proposed and being undertaken as part of Firesticks, so they can better understand what we see and feel within the project. The idea is to enable us to demonstrate what may be intangible to others with the ecological evidence that is able to be scientifically assessed. This is crucial in being able to demonstrate the value of cultural burning.



Fig.3: Discussions on cultural and biodiversity values of Ngunya Jargoona IPA recognise knowledge of Country, in this case the importance of fire for this landscape and species such as the vulnerable long-nosed potoroo (*Potorous tridactylus*).

I am not a scientist, and have only a limited understanding of ecology. However, from my little experience of learning from Country and reading Country, I hear explanations in scientific terms that equate with how I understand Country. Bringing together those two strands of understanding, although not necessarily

fitting neatly together, creates a shared understanding of science and culture which speaks to many people.

The discussion depicted in Figure 3 about the long-nosed potoroo and its relationship with fire and other natural processes, is an example of science and culture coming

together. The work being undertaken at the recently declared Ngunya Jargoan Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) is very exciting because the mob are taking back control of Country, which is leading to beneficial outcomes for the people and the land.

Considerable work has also been undertaken setting up monitoring sites to be able to demonstrate that the burning that is done on Country is actually culturally and ecologically beneficial.

IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL BURNING

Fire is not just in the landscape; culturally fire is used for many reasons. An example of this is a welcome smoking ceremony. Figure 4 shows a ceremony in Cape York.



Fig. 4: Fire used for a welcoming and cleansing ceremony – practicing customary law/lore. Cultural fire across the landscape is often used to cleanse country.

The brother maintaining the Fire for the smoking ceremony's grandfather was one of the leading elders to bring Cultural fire back into Kuku Thaypan Country and continued telling the story of fire in that place. This ceremony is a very important process for cleansing and welcoming people. It is important to recognise that holding ceremony when and where appropriate enables greater connection to

Country and people. When people are having meetings and managing country the holding of ceremony can change the context and build on the meaning of whatever is happening. Often landscape fire can be understood as important ceremony for that country and people. It is another example of how fire means many things to many people.

The question of what is cultural burning is still being answered. I have certain ideas of what I think it is, but there is much I am still exploring. Within the Firesticks project we use the term "cultural burning" and have moved away from "traditional Aboriginal fire management", because many of our communities have limited access and control of their traditional lands. We feel the term 'Cultural Burning' better represents our partners' aspirations and a contemporary understanding of who we are and how fire can be applied within their cultural landscape.

Putting fire into the landscape (Figure 5) in order to maintain a tradition that has happened over many generations, often provides a new opportunity to people who have had limited opportunities to learn about it when they were younger. Through the mentoring and the engagement of Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways in Cape York and use of the accepted methodology, Aboriginal people in Cape York are now implementing fire management on Country, and many others across Australia are also part of that movement.



Fig. 5: Reclaiming the land through the sharing of fire stories and the practicing of cultural burning

Walking with fire (Figure 6) symbolises the diversity of fire and how we think about fire in different ways. I am not suggesting that all types of fire can or should be walked through, but it is important to learn to walk with it, understand it and learn from it; its behaviour, intensity and how the plants, animals and people are reacting to it.

There are difficulties in applying traditional fire management in places such as the Blue Mountains and Western Sydney due to the lack of access and control of country by Traditional Custodians and the impacts of fragmentation, land use and other environmental issues. However, I believe cultural burning still has a place in managing the landscape and continuing cultural practices. Ideally, it allows for the empowerment of Aboriginal people to enhance their understanding of themselves and to put fire into the landscape in



Fig. 6: Walking with fire is a way of learning about fire

collaboration with other people, organisations and communities based on their cultural values. In essence, it allows them to practise who they are and where they want to go and make Country healthy. It is intended to care for Country.

WHAT ARE CULTURAL VALUES?

Cultural values can be personal. My daughter's name is Jali. In Bundjalung language Jali means "trees". The tree with Jali (Figure 7) is a black bean tree. It is her tree as her placenta is planted underneath it. I grew up in the valley where this tree is, and her tree is from a seed off my tree,

which grows nearby. The black bean tree is culturally significant to me and my people, but to many Bundjalung people, the black bean tree may not be particularly significant. All of the environment, all plants and animals have significance, but some have greater significance because we have stories about them, or we use them for food, medicine or materials. There are many different potential meanings that need to be recognised before the true significance of cultural values can be fully appreciated.



Fig. 7: My daughter next to her black bean tree.



Fig. 8: A smoking ceremony taking place in the Blue Mountains, before a Firesticks workshop.

Figure 8 is a smoking ceremony, showing the importance of coming together, sharing stories and working together and moving forward.

Another example of a cultural value is the coastal emu; it is one of the specific attributes focused on by both the Hotspots and Firesticks projects.

Traditionally Aboriginal communities protected the north coast emu because they made pathways that allowed the old People to travel shorter distances. The

emus made food abundant, for both the old People and the emu, by spreading food seeds in their scats, and they provided protection by warning other animals of danger. The relationship was one of connectivity.

In the Bunya Mountains in south-east Queensland, the Aboriginal community is reclaiming the grassy balds – hills where grasslands occur on the tops, surrounded by tree and shrub vegetation on the slopes (Figure 9).



Fig. 9: The cultural pathways in the Grassy Balds, Bunya Mountains.

The example of the Bunya Mountains is what cultural burning is all about: people reclaiming their story, reclaiming their country and returning to it and connecting with it. There are similar stories in Bundjalung Country, where many fire stories are now being relearned, with realisation that there were pathways and grassy systems and other aspects that have a very strong cultural, landscape and fire relationship.

The science of fire and cultural burning can fuse together but it does not always do so neatly. In cultural terms, everything has its place and belongs somewhere, however if cultural laws and ways are broken or not practiced, sometimes things lose their place or get cheeky and go where they don't belong. That is why people need to play their part. We need to make sure that things are supported in their place and fulfil their role, as plants and animals are connected to their local environments. It is about planning and working together, so for our part it is important that we talk to each other but understand that we do not always comprehend each other and our values completely. However, we must endeavour to understand each other's values enough to be able to move forward together.

One of the most culturally significant burns I have been on in NSW involved the MAGIC – Mothers Ancestral Guardians Indigenous Corporation, near Lake Mungo in far western NSW at the Rick Farley Soil Conservation Reserve. Many people came together to manage and look after that Country. In this instance, preservation of the Mallee Fowl was one of the important values for the burn proceeding. The image in Figure 10 tells me lots of stories. To me, the fires appear like figures talking together with us - I guess you had to be there.



Fig. 10: An important cultural burning activity on Country in the Rick Farley Soil Conservation Reserve, located near the Willandra Lakes - lands of the Ngiyampaa people.

The diversity of fire, its patchiness, how the fire moves through the landscape shows that we need to make sure that we put the right fire in the right place. Sometimes that means a cooler or hotter fire. The use of it is an important way of supporting

communities, facilitating conversations about what is important for Country and providing a means of empowerment. It is about building relations and sharing knowledge.

BIOGRAPHY

Oliver Costello is from Bundjalung country, Northern Rivers of NSW and is currently employed by the Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC) as the Firesticks Project coordinator (on leave from the Aboriginal Co-management Unit of NPWS). He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Adult Education and Community Management at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and is a Visiting Fellow at Jumbunna

Indigenous House of Learning, UTS. Oliver initiated the original Firesticks project with Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways, Kuku Thaypan Fire Management Research Project and UTS to engage in the development of collaborative fire projects. One resulting project is the Firesticks Project, led by NCC and funded under the Australian Government's Clean Energy Future Biodiversity Fund.