Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Aboriginal grassy pathways: Unpacking how they underpinned regional biodiversity

Dr Malcolm Ridges and Geoff Simpson
Office of Environment and Heritage
Link to slides

Mal: I'm going to co-present with my team mate Geoff Simpson because we've been working on this project together. The project came about because we had a bit of extra money from a project and we wondered what we could do with it to develop a two-way, Aboriginal and science knowldge, type project. I rang up Lyn Baker one day and said, "I've got a bit of money. What do you think we should do with it?" And she said, "I've got this great idea." Since then Geoff and I have been working together to scope out this idea. So… this talk isn't about fire ecology or how you burn or how you plan a burn but rather about the back story around burning. Where that's significant is Geoff and I work in the knowledge services team in the science division of the Office of Environment and Heritage and our role there is to provide facilitating and coordinating roles of how we work with communities and science to make all this sort of stuff come together.

Geoff: One of the binding things for our team when we first forged together relates to something from an Uncle. An Uncle told me that our culture, Aboriginal culture comes from country. So if our culture comes from country, where does everyone else's culture come from? It's the same place. So one of our binding principles, values or beliefs is that our country is our shared heritage and our shared resource. So Mal can you tell these good folk the story about the grassy pathways up on the north coast?

Mal: I reckon I can make one up.

Geoff: He's got his slides and I've got my note.

Mal: Yeah so take note… sorry I bore my kids to tears with Dad-jokes. Anyway, where we thought we'd start is this idea of some challenges. This is big picture stuff I suppose but in our experience coming into this sort of field, we're not fire ecologists and we're not landscape managers, but we're here to help people out. The thing that struck us is we create these silos and do a lot of science around things like fire behaviour, the technical aspects of how things burn and we do a lot of ecological work about how things respond. I've got a middle silo there I'm calling legacy, which is here we do a lot of history, we do a lot of cultural mapping and cultural history, and look at landscape history, and this is all about how things use to be and some idea of how things should be now. Then on top of that we do a lot of stuff that is about practice, like for example, how Aboriginal communities and other community groups, actually undertake a burn– like we heard with Hornsby and North Head. As we've heard, there's a lot involved with the practice about putting burning in, and then there's a whole other side of that which is all the regulation around how you actually undertake those practices.

Geoff: We haven't heard much about the regulation today.

Mal: But often it's hard to string those things together. What we think is a little bit unique about what's come about with the discussions we've had on the north coast is the story that's behind some of the grasslands work that's been undertaken up there. Liz Tasker was talking about this yesterday. But there's a unique story here. I think everywhere has got its own story but in this particular case this story is useful for stringing all these bits together. In very simple terms if you're familiar with the north coast there was the big scrub. At contact there was lots of observations of native grasslands in that landscape. We know that if you burn those systems you maintain those grasslands. If you don't burn them they revert back to rainforest or some other covered system. We know that the maintenance of those grasslands was an artefact of Aboriginal burning. So what we're looking at is grasslands which are effectively a cultural artefact in the landscape. On top of that we've got this ecological situation where you know engendered species like the Eastern Bristlebird and the Hastings River mouse are now dependent on these grasslands which must have been maintained for a very long time. We also know that these grasslands aren't just serving or were serving an ecological function, they had a cultural function as well. So they were part of how people moved around the big scrub, and moved around the landscape. Through both those things we're now in a situation where we need to look after the grasslands. We need to do some more burning to maintain them and that will hopefully help things like the Eastern Bristlebird, but that all requires us coming together to do coordinated landscape management. So there's this neat background story.

Geoff: I guess the other thing that underpins it too is that we often talk about in our team is about Aboriginal people having inherent responsibilities and obligations to manage country. That's passed down from when we're born through to now, and it should be a practice that's adopted by all of us.

Mal: A quick example, Doorabee grasslands, managed at the moment by the Widjabul people of the Bundjalung Nation with a bunch of different partners. They're putting fire onto this knoll (slide 4). That's their story, I won't go too much into it. The thing that really struck Geoff and I when we went there with Oliver Costello, was the signs they've got there (slide 5). When you stand on that hill there's all these things in the area around that connect with that place. It's not just this grassland and how we put fire into this particular place. This place has connections throughout that whole landscape. If you think about that, these connections tell you about how Doorabee is connected in that landscape (slide 6), north of Lismore and in relation to the big scrub. It has connections with a whole range of cultural sites in that landscape (slide 7), and if we do some computer analysis we can identify in that landscape areas that are highly visible in that landscape. So these are like visible corridors and they connect with these cultural sites (slide 8).

In a similar sense we can look at where Eastern Bristlebirds occur in that landscape or have been observed in that landscape, and we can put in something like an ecological pathways picture of that landscape which is like a regional wildlife corridors (slide 10). This example may not be directly associated with Bristlebird but they give you an idea of a different view of pathways through this landscape. The point is these things aren't unresolvable. They can overlap and they do overlap in this landscape. The real question is how do we bring them all together? That means thinking beyond just the property (slide 11). If we want to do something that connects both the ecological and the cultural pathways, then the story is we need to think about not just how do we one burn on one place, but how do we coordinate a number of burns across multiple places and start thinking about landscapes?

This is what we're trying to start scoping out with this project, but it's challenging. You take any landscape and it's complex. All these different colours on this map (slide 13) represent all the different types of land tenure in that landscape. There's a lot of players. How do you get all this stuff working together and that's what we're trying to scope. We think this back story about the connection between cultural and natural pathways is a nice hook for bringing all this stuff together.

If you look at the sorts of messages that are out there in this landscape already, so this is at Mellanganee Lookout and it talks a lot about the stuff that we're use to which is about connectivity of patches through the landscape, then the one thing that's missing there, which is a fire story and the cultural story about pathways. This is the sort of thing we're thinking, there's a lot of detailed issues with burning but there's also a back story that brings people together and links things together.

We're going to finish by considering one of the things that is sometimes missing in this discussion about fire. Paul Gordon, an Aboriginal elder who we've often worked with, said to us, "If you're going to go burn, the very first thing you need to work out is why you're burning." We think this back story is important to working out why you're burning. This idea of having a back story and working from a back story is something that can help bring all these different players in the landscape together and these are just some of them (slide 15). These players can then come together and start talking in some coordinated way how we do something like restoring pathways in the landscape and restoring grassy systems.

Geoff: The added value for our cultural perspective from my end is that for years cultural practices have not been understood or recognised in terms of our planning and decision making. Where we're coming from is, let's meld the science with some of those practices. Restore the practices and then meld the science with that so we can use that to make better decisions in the landscape.

And just to finish with a story. When I was up at Galiwinku a couple a year ago I met this old uncle and he rang the Bureau of Meteorology and he said, "Is it going to be a cold winter this year?" He went to the public phone box and they said, "Absolutely sir." So he went and got all this mob, went out and started collecting firewood. He rang back a week or two later just before winter had set in and said, "Are you sure it's going to be a cold winter this year?" "Absolutely," the bloke from the Bureau of Meteorology said. So off he goes, him and his mob, out they go again, big stack of firewood in his front yard and he just went and made one last call before the worst winter in 15 years set in Galiwinku. He said, "Are you sure it's going to be a cold winter?" They went, "Yeah absolutely." And he goes, "How do you know?" And the Bureau guy goes, "Well our satellite imagery tells us Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land are collecting firewood like it's going out of fashion." That's a true story.