

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Revival of Aboriginal Cultural Burning to Restore Country

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[Link to Slides](#)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that the following presentation contains images of people who have passed away. I'd like to ask you all in the audience if you wouldn't mind standing just for a moment as we remember our old people and many of our young people that are also being lost. Just for a moment. Thank you.

Thank you everyone. We acknowledge Country and pay our respects to elders past and present, the Sky Father Creator and the Good Ancestral Spirits and, of course, our Mother, Mother Earth. Our Mother provides us with everything that we need (Slide 3).

Two years ago, I stood on this very spot and presented a speed talk for the NCC's 10th Biennial Bushfire Conference entitled 'Fire and Restoration: working with fire for healthy lands' (Slide 4). I presented about Blue Mountains Firesticks under the theme of 'where do we go from here?' Two years on, I have the opportunity to tell you where, in fact, we did go as part of this year's conference theme, 'Buildings and backyards for people, plants and animals: risk, resilience and adaptation' (Slide 5).

In my 2015 presentation, I introduced Koori Country Firesticks as a personal vision for a broader Firesticks community group initiative (Slide 6). I'm happy to inform you all that, two years on, this vision is now being realised and is the subject of my presentation today.

It's still very important, of course, to acknowledge that I'm only standing here on this stage as a direct result of the influence that elders pictured here, sitting at the front of this group, have had on me (Slide 7). The gift of knowledge that they passed on and the passion I, and others like me, now have for doing the same and carrying out this important cultural practice. Furthermore, I also acknowledge Uncle Victor Steffensen of Mulong, Cape York, and Oliver Costello, founder of the

Firesticks initiative in New South Wales, who have been a great source of knowledge, inspiration and support.

I'm also privileged to be in the position of Land Services Officer Aboriginal Communities for Greater Sydney Local Land Services, who have provided funding for not only Koori Country Firesticks, but for a number of other Aboriginal cultural burning projects throughout New South Wales (Slide 8). They have also sponsored my attendance at this conference, for which I am very grateful.

My name is Dennis Barber, better known as Den to my friends. I'm a descendant of the traditional Aboriginal custodians of the people from Mudgee, of the Wiradjuri (Slide 9). This image is of me walking through a fresh culturally burnt area of Yellomundee Regional Park in Western Sydney, at the foot of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales. I wasn't aware that this photo was being taken, but the smile that you see on my face is one that's very genuine and one of a very satisfied Aboriginal man who has just practised culture and fulfilled his cultural obligation to care for country. I experienced this along with about 30 other people that witnessed this special occasion who, I am sure, felt much the same.

Who are Koori Country Firesticks (Slide 10)? I'm not here to repeat what I had to say in 2015 or give an explanation of what cultural burning is. The awareness of cultural burning is increasing, as has the interest and involvement in many projects happening right around the country, including right here in Sydney and New South Wales.

Koori Country Firesticks Aboriginal Corporation is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to revive traditional Aboriginal cultural practices of burning country as an alternative approach to hazard reduction techniques used by private and public landholders and managers (Slide 11). Our primary objective is to care for Country, our Mother Earth, regardless of tenure or ownership. This knowledge has been passed onto us by Aboriginal cultural elders and knowledge holders. We are Koori Country Firesticks and we are culturally burning country and passing on the knowledge.

Koori Country Firesticks offer a community driven model that assists private and public landholders to manage country using Aboriginal cultural knowledge and practices (Slide 12). Our group also pass on this knowledge to other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to help restore country that has been impacted by wildfire, the absence of fire and/or the infestation of weeds.

Cultural burning also acts to reduce fuel loads that surround urban development and regional towns and properties (Slide 13). We have been doing this work, with our first cultural burn workshop conducted on the 28th of May 2016. In the past two weeks, we have been involved in cultural burn forums, demonstrations and workshops in Nowra on the South Coast, in Western Sydney at Penrith and Mulgoa, and over the weekend in a local reserve in Broke.

Here is a map of cultural burns performed and planned for this private property since June 2015 (Slide 14). It has become somewhat of our cultural burning training ground and it's a wonderful opportunity to be able to show people the results of past burns and how it compares to Country that we're surrounded by that hasn't been burnt for more than 40 years.

Quoting Uncle Victor Steffensen, 'there is only one fire and that is the right fire and fire for your Country' (Slide 15). Our members all share similar values and love for the land. For Aboriginal people especially, an overwhelming desire to fulfil what they perceive to be their custodial responsibilities to care for Country (Slide 16). Whilst cultural burning activities by members have been undertaken as part of cultural practice, they have done so voluntarily and at their own personal expense. There exists an opportunity for Aboriginal cultural fire practitioners to engage landholders in assisting them with ecological restoration, hazard reduction and weed management through use of cultural burning. Imagine the many environmental, cultural, spiritual and economic benefits that may be afforded to both Aboriginal communities and to the landholders that utilise this knowledge and practice.

Koori Country Firesticks is well placed to act as a facilitator for cultural learning pathways to fire and land management for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Cultural burning may be a valuable part of integrating other land management activities in achieving ecological restoration outcomes, while reducing risk, increasing resilience and adapting to our environment (Slide 17 &18). Thank you.