

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service Cultural Fire Management Policy

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Firstly, I'd like to acknowledge Country and pay my respects to elders past, present and future. I'm a Bundjalung man from the Northern Rivers of New South Wales, it's really important for me, wherever I go, to always acknowledge Country and pay my respects and hope that the Country and the spirits of that place will help guide me (Slide 2).

I wear many hats, I'm very passionate about cultural fire management and have been involved with lots of projects. Today I'm representing National Parks to talk about the Cultural Fire Management Policy that we've developed. I'm a Project Officer in the Aboriginal Heritage Joint Management Team, we are a state-wide support unit for Aboriginal heritage and joint management within National Parks. Our team worked with the policy and the fire branches of NPWS to develop this policy.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service recognizes the importance of working with Aboriginal communities to manage National Parks and reserves (Slide 3). That's a key function of my team. It's really about shifting and building on traditional land management, cultural land management, Aboriginal joint management processes within National Parks. 25% of National Parks are under joint management, we have 30 agreements with Aboriginal communities. A key part of concerns and interests that community have are around fire, which is partly why we developed the policy.

The policy aims to support Aboriginal community aspirations to connect to and care for country through cultural fire management on parks (Slide 4). We're taking a very broad approach, we understand that there are all sorts of cultural heritage issues and aspirations the community have to use fire in the landscape.

One of the key considerations, and this has been an issue ever since I started learning and talking about cultural fire, is understanding definitions about what cultural fire is (Slide 5). I think,

personally, and the agency's taken this view, that cultural fire management should be defined by the local people, who have cultural connections and cultural responsibilities to that land. They can talk about what cultural fire management is to them. As an agency, we don't need to necessarily define what it is to them, we need to know how our agency and our staff can support those aspirations.

We've come up with two key terms which are really important to understanding the policy and the approach that we're taking on Park lands. The first one is 'culturally-informed burning', which is any burning that we're doing which has cultural objectives and Aboriginal partnerships in the planning and approval.

As I said before, 25% of NSW National Parks are under joint management. This is governed by many boards that manage lands, and committees that advise on land management. Where they're involved in that planning and approval process, that can be culturally informed. Also, engaging beyond joint management with other Aboriginal community around cultural heritage and understanding that NPWS has lots of Aboriginal staff.

There's a whole lot of space where culturally-informed process can be expanded (Slide 6). We've done some great work on Park, we need to do more, and that is what the policy is saying: how can we do better?

The key part of the policy which is new, is these guidelines we've developed for 'community (low-risk) cultural burning'. Really that's about enabling community participation. So you take culturally-informed burning, planning and approval, and then you have community there to be able to enact that. You can have young people and Elders that aren't fire fighters on fire grounds managing their land for cultural practice. That's a new thing and it's a big thing for the agency to take on.

Scope and application of the policy: NSW National Parks has a Fire Management Manual, which is still the key fire document for National Parks staff. It still guides the work we do and it is updated annually. We need to make some updates to the manual so that it reflects cultural fire management. We're not replacing this but we do want to add to it. The other key document that we work with in National Parks is the Aboriginal Park Partnerships Policy. That's still really important, we are not trying to replace that. We still use the Fire Management Manual and the Park Partnerships Policy to guide the work that we do.

We've also got The Guidelines for Low Risk Cultural Burning around supporting community participation. The new policy covers all Aboriginal lands, but it's important to note that some lands that Parks manage are actually Aboriginal owned lands, and under the board of management, the board can set its own policies. So, just to be clear, the boards may or may not choose to take the policy on.

There are many objectives of the policy (Slides 7-8). To engage Aboriginal communities in fire management; to support the practice, promotion and renewal of culture through the use of fire; to integrate cultural fire values, knowledge, practices into National Parks fire management generally, including identifying and protecting natural and cultural values. We want to take a broad approach. We understand that the country is intertwined with natural and cultural values and we need to understand how to do that work better. We also want to facilitate Aboriginal community participation through the Guidelines that I'll speak more about later.

Another objective is to ensure safety. Safety is the number one priority of National Parks around fire management. We've lost lives, we've lost our own staff, we've seen communities lose lives and property. Safety is a key mantra for fire management, we all understand that and we want that to be understood in the policy. But we also want people to understand cultural safety and understand the importance of culturally-led processes, community leadership, understand protocols of the land, places people can and can't go, different ways of managing the land which are culturally appropriate. Together, we bring work health and safety and all the other important safety work together with cultural safety, and we think we're going to have better outcomes.

Another objective is increasing the cultural fire awareness and cultural capabilities of our staff. We have a lot of Aboriginal fire fighters, a lot of cultural capabilities. But we all need to build our capabilities further. We also understand that there are a lot of non-Aboriginal staff in the agency that need to understand more. They need to know what is cultural fire management? What does it mean to them? How does it influence the work that they do? And how do we build that capability together?

A very important objective is recognizing and protecting Aboriginal knowledge and practice in cultural fire management as the cultural, intellectual property of Aboriginal people. It's not about Parks coming in and taking information out of community and then going and applying it somewhere else and calling it something different, or even calling it cultural when it's not. It's about understanding that Aboriginal people's knowledge and practices is their own. It's about how we partner together to implement what's appropriate for the land and for the people of the land.

A further objective is to protect and enhance natural and cultural values through culturally-informed planning and operations that implement appropriate fire regimes in partnership with Aboriginal communities. That's what the National Parks and Wildlife Act does, it protects natural and cultural values. We want to make sure that the policy is helping to achieve those outcomes. When you're doing cultural fire management in an appropriate way, you'll be protecting those values.

It's also really important to partner with public and private sector organizations to facilitate Aboriginal community participation in cultural fire management. That's essential. Country doesn't stop at the door of the Park. Cultural land is all the lands that our old people used to walk on. We understand that there are different tenures now and there are all sorts of different agencies with

different responsibilities: National Parks, Rural Fire Service, Local Land Services, NGOs. We need to come up with processes to enable Aboriginal people to be the ones that can carry those stories and make sure that their culture is strong on country, and their fire management is strong. All those agencies and organizations can play a role in that, so a partnership approach is really important.

The Guidelines for Community (Low Risk) Cultural Burning are really for our staff (Slide 9), to help support them to be able to make decisions about how we do this low-risk cultural burning. And people could argue that there is no low-risk burning and every time you light a fire it can get away. What we've done in the Guidelines is look at what are some of the conditions, the burn prescriptions and terrain, and all sorts of other safety issues that we think we can manage to make sure that it's a low-risk environment (Slide 10).

A key part of the Guidelines is around looking at this cultural assessment process, making sure it is community led, that the community are involved in those planning and approval processes. Understanding what the purpose and objectives of the cultural burn are, identifying values, sites and locations, landscape considerations, cultural protocols and safety issues. Also determining participants' roles and responsibilities is really important because we're talking about having non-fire fighters on the fire ground. They're participants and observers so it's really important that they understand what those issues are, and that's done in a cultural assessment process.

Looking at the desired cultural outcomes and developing a monitoring and evaluation process is essential. It's about reading country and understanding the landscape. It's not about burning and walking away, it's about coming back to country, looking at the winners and losers, understanding the values of that place and making sure that we improve the management.

The Guidelines go through a whole list of requirements for approval (Slide 11), they are essentially a checklist for our burn planners. If we can't meet those requirements, it goes back to the Fire Management Manual and it's done under that process, there's a clear process that needs to be maintained.

One of the key new things is that when you do a burn plan it covers safety issues (Slide 12). Because we've got volunteers as participants and observers, we need to do a JSA (Job Safety Assessment). One of the first things in the JSA is that you do a cultural assessment. We're pushing the agency to make sure that this is a cultural process, it's not about ticking boxes for hazard reduction or EBMP (Enhanced Bushfire Management Program) outcomes, it's about supporting community aspirations. Where we can have shared objectives, we can deliver shared outcomes but still making sure that we're following those processes.

Another key is community involvement and agreement around the burn plan and the process (Slide 13). On the day, conditions could be perfect, a beautiful day to burn, but the community may say today's not a good day to burn, for some cultural reason. It's their burn, it's not a Parks'

burn, it's a community-led burn. We have a really important role to maintain safety and the responsibilities that we have as an agency, but it's about a partnership.

There is more detail in the Guidelines for those that are interested around planning and initiation of the burn; burn prescriptions; and supervision, which is really important, because we've got non-fire fighters there. Everyone needs to know what their roles and responsibilities are. Also important is fire awareness and safety; and the obligations on fire-fighters to supervise participants and observers.

We've also got some special requirements. The Guidelines set out what we think is needed for a low-risk environment. We've increased some of those requirements so we can have children, the elderly and people with mobility issues there. We think that's really important. Ever since my kids could crawl, they've been on fires with me. They're learning about cultural fire management. A lot of the fire management that I've done culturally I've had elders there, they're not fire-fighters. We can't do a lot of this work on National Parks if we exclude the people that have the knowledge and the people that need to learn it. We need to protect what is so precious to us, our children and elderly, we want to make sure that we've got an extra-safe environment for them.

The aim is to balance National Parks' responsibilities for safety with socially inclusive cultural methods, and enable intergenerational knowledge exchange. We believe in sharing our knowledge and abilities by planning, conducting and monitoring burns together. We build capacity and respect for each other, understanding the roles that we have on country, the roles that Parks have, the roles that the community have. It's really important for cultural safety to know that the agency understands us and we understand the agency and how we can get the most out of that relationship and our job.

We'll be reviewing the Policy next year and the Guidelines. This is part of the process of targeted consultation with community stakeholders and National Parks staff.

Next steps (Slide 14): targeted engagement, you are all being a part of this; cultural fire ground awareness training is a key part of the Guidelines, to make sure that people understand fire safety and cultural safety; we want to do some more work on the training induction. We want to do some more work around developing cultural assessment and planning support, particularly for staff, but also community, so it's really clear how to go about the cultural assessment process and making sure that we can streamline and support those outcomes. We will also be implementing and reporting on cultural fire projects and supporting our staff with implementation.

Questions from audience

Question: Can you tell us a bit about your wonderful t-shirt?

Oliver: National Parks has an Aboriginal network. There's about 200 or 300 staff, 10% of National Parks are Aboriginal people. So the Aboriginal networks are a really important part of our organisation to support each other. We make a T-shirt every year, we have a meeting, it's a really good outcome and it was a big part of developing the policy too as the Network set up a working group. It's a really important function that we have in the organization to support each other.

Question: Do you see this work going off National Park estate and being applicable to other land management areas apart from IPAs etc.?

Oliver: Yes, absolutely. Parks is very constrained by our resources and our mandate. But we've got lots of Aboriginal staff that have lots of cultural fire and cultural capabilities. So we think that's a bit of a cornerstone to support Aboriginal communities across the state, and that last objective around partnerships. We need to be quite mindful of our responsibilities to manage lands, but we understand that community see country as a broader landscape and we understand that. We're always looking for opportunities to support those outcomes.