



REIGNITING CULTURAL BURNING IN SOUTH-EASTERN AUSTRALIA:

The ACT Aboriginal Cultural Fire Initiative

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FIRE HAS AND WILL ALWAYS BE AN integral component of Aboriginal peoples cultural livelihoods and Australia's landscapes. There now exists many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ranger groups who perform fire management as part of their general operations. Collectively, these Ranger groups have and continue to contribute to a range of positive environmental outcomes including a significant decrease in severe fire events. Analysis of these programs however, reveals that they are limited mostly to northern and central Australia. The uneven geographical distribution of these programs has led some to question whether managing the land with fire can offer Aboriginal peoples in southern Australia what it has in the north. In Australia's Capital Territory (ACT), this question is being answered through the ACT Aboriginal Cultural Fire Initiative.

Oral histories passed on by Aboriginal peoples matching western scientific observations through carbon dating, show that regular fire activity took place throughout Australia pre-1788. In the lands in and around the ACT, there is extensive evidence that Aboriginal peoples, including local Ngunnawal people, purposefully used fire to create a rich and ecologically diverse landscape (Gammage, 2011). It was in this landscape, rich with grassy plains, wetlands, woodlands, open forest, and fresh, clean water, that the first settlers established

farms for grazing and other purposes.

The first land grants in the ACT region were made in the 1820s with a number of settlers coming into Ngunnawal lands to graze on the open pastures. The towns of Goulburn and Queanbeyan were established by the mid-1850s. With the inundation of white settlers, the populations of Aboriginal people in the region were decimated through the introduction of diseases and violent frontier conflict. From the 1870s onwards into the 20th century, Aboriginal people throughout the region were forcibly moved onto missions throughout the Southern Tablelands and Riverina districts of NSW.

During that period, Aboriginal people were under the control of local Protectors and mission managers, and not free to move around as they had previously. It was not until the mid-1970s, following the success of the 1967 referendum and the subsequent abolishment of the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW) in 1969, that Aboriginal people were able to move more freely. From this time, many local Aboriginal peoples returned to their ancestral lands, with many Ngunnawal people returning to the ACT, Queanbeyan and other surrounding towns.

Due to this history of colonisation and displacement, Aboriginal peoples in the ACT as well as other groups with a similar history in south-eastern Australia, have found it immensely

difficult to have their inherent rights and interest in their Country recognised. This is not to say that these groups do not continue to possess cultural knowledge such as stories, songs, language, dances and any other expression of an actively lived culture. Rather, it shows that the colonising state has narrow indicators of what constitutes 'authentic' culture and connection, and, often, Aboriginal groups in south-eastern Australia fall outside these imposed definitions of 'real' Aboriginal culture. Due to these and other colonial circumstances, Aboriginal groups in south-eastern Australia generally do not possess large parcels of lands or have sweeping rights to access, manage or utilise the resources of their Country. Much of the land that has been reclaimed (in some form) to date, has been small parcels of lands acquired through state based mechanisms such as the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW), the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010* (VIC) or through joint or co-management arrangements of parks and protected areas. To date, Caring for Country activities in these areas such as cultural burning, have been limited to small-scale, one-off activities, mostly over these small parcels of land.

In the ACT, Ngunnawal people are recognised as the Traditional Owners of lands and waters throughout the ACT (Maher, 2013). However, Ngunnawal people do not have any formally recognised rights to access



or manage the lands and waters throughout the ACT.

ACT Parks and Conservation Services (PCS) are the legislated body that has the responsibility to protect and manage national parks and conservation reserves throughout the ACT (Maher, 2013). Within PCS the ACT Fire Management Unit (FMU) carries the responsibility for the management of fire including prescribed burning.

Murumbung Yurung Murra (now Murumbung Rangers) was created in 2009 as a supporting and mentoring network for Aboriginal staff located in different units in PCS. As well as being a support network, the Murumbung Rangers now deliver cultural activities including ranger guided activities and cultural burning, and engages Traditional Custodians and Elders on issues relating to cultural and natural resource management. The Murumbung Rangers are located as various depots (or stations) throughout the ACT and are overseen by a new centralised Healthy Country Unit.

In 2015, The Murumbung Rangers commenced a process to re-introduce cultural burning into the planning and management of parks and nature reserves throughout the ACT. Since this time, the ACT Aboriginal Cultural

Fire Initiative has achieved remarkable success. Some of the outcomes include;

- the creation of an identified Aboriginal Fire Officer within the FMU
- fire training opportunities for all Indigenous staff in the Murumbung Ranger network
- creation of guidelines for the identification, protection and reporting of cultural heritage sites
- embedded education and training on cultural and natural resource management (including cultural burning) in wider PCS networks
- created terms for non-Indigenous land management staff to volunteer on cultural land management activities (two-way learning pathways)
- outlined research priorities
- conducted site assessments in various culturally significant areas
- created terms to re-initiate cultural burning including the allocation of staff and resources.

The Murumbung Rangers have trained a large number of fire crews and land managers in the protocols and procedures for identifying and

protecting cultural sites. The Rangers have also reduced fuel loads and removed hazards throughout many culturally significant areas and conducted multiple cultural burns. Perhaps most significantly, by reinitiating these and other associated activities, the Murumbung Rangers have made a significant contribution to the wider Aboriginal community, including the Ngunnawal Traditional Owners. The ACT Aboriginal Cultural Fire Initiative is actively facilitating cultural revival through fire management. It promotes the ongoing healing of the community and strengthens the connection to, and management of, Country for younger generations.

Significantly, the ACT Aboriginal Cultural Fire Initiative has proved that there are pathways to culturally informed land management, including fire management, in south-eastern Australia. The absence of rights in lands and waters, as recognised by Australia through mechanisms such as native title, need not be the constraining force that has previously limited Aboriginal peoples from looking after their Country. The initiative shows that it is possible to scale-up smaller Caring for Country activities, such as cultural burns, that have occurred in isolation over small parcels of Aboriginal lands.



Caring for Country is a vital aspect of healthy livelihoods for all Aboriginal people. With the growing effects of climate change as well as other localised environmental impacts such as invasive weeds, feral animals, urbanisation, deforestation and others, cultural knowledge of using fire to manage Country is an important part of the future of land management in south-eastern Australia. Embracing Aboriginal peoples' cultural knowledges and perspectives has been shown to offer immense benefits to not only Aboriginal peoples, but all peoples. It is not about 'going back', but forging new pathways, developing new knowledges, and respecting and supporting that the ancient knowledges offered by Aboriginal peoples is part of our common future, and the future of land and water management throughout every part of Australia.



Above: Cultural burn at Jerrabomberra Wetlands, ACT.

Behind: Cultural burn at Gungahderra Grasslands Nature Reserve, ACT.

Credit: ACT Parks and Conservation Services.