



Ranger conducts a controlled burn, photo Glenn Campbell.



Northern Australia  
Environmental  
Resources  
Hub

National Environmental Science Programme

# Protocols for Indigenous fire management partnerships

Wrap-up factsheet

## Northern Australia's fire future depends on good partnerships

Fire has influenced the way Australian Indigenous people live on, with and through their land for millennia. Contemporary Indigenous elders are aware of this significance, and this has underpinned their advocacy on behalf of Indigenous fire knowledge and associated fire management practices. Indigenous peoples' material and cultural understanding of the importance of fire, coupled with their knowledge and understanding of their local environment, enables them to undertake burning in a way that achieves desired ecological outcomes.

**Across Australia, Indigenous communities are applying, adapting and rejuvenating Indigenous fire knowledge and regimes through a range of activities and partnerships.**

This has produced a diversity of Indigenous fire management enterprises, each of which combines and adapts the material, cultural, ecological and economic significance of fire for Indigenous people in different ways.

Indigenous people are securing jobs and cultivating new knowledge needed to burn contemporary landscapes through a range of conservation, carbon offset and natural resource management agreements. Accounts from Indigenous people highlight the Indigenous values and benefits achieved through landscape-burning activities, provided fire knowledge sharing and land management practices are supported by Aboriginal governance frameworks and land ethics.

## This project:

- Evaluates how Indigenous knowledge has been incorporated into northern Australian fire projects
- Charts the key methods, processes and protocols for sharing and incorporating Indigenous knowledge into environmental management
- Presents protocols that can be used to guide the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into fire management and carbon abatement planning nationally
- Suggests key areas for future research into Indigenous fire knowledge and its incorporation into on-country fire enterprises and fire programs
- Highlights some of the key aspects of Indigenous peoples' relationship with fire, as well as the implications of this relationship for wider Australian landscapes and biota

As these partnerships and activities mature, it is timely to reflect upon the range of cross-cultural, social, institutional and environmental factors that need to be considered in order to develop and sustain Indigenous community, public program and private investor support for efforts to prescribe landscape-burning efforts.

## Consultation activities captured the perspectives of fire program stakeholders

The research team was guided by a Steering Committee that represented a broad range of Indigenous fire management contexts and project activities across Australia. During an eight-month period, the research team conducted a literature review, individual and small-group interviews, focus groups, regional workshops and a national fire forum with key Indigenous fire managers and partners, including Traditional Owners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scientists and government agencies. The findings were then synthesised to generate the protocols presented in this factsheet and in a final report.

## Landscape burning regimes need to respect the priorities of all partners

Although on-country fire enterprise opportunities have enabled some Indigenous groups to develop well-designed and strategic approaches to fire, there are a number of challenges associated with incorporating Indigenous fire knowledge and practices into contemporary fire regimes.

Perhaps most importantly, approximations of Indigenous fire regimes (such as patch mosaic burning) can ignore the culturally-embedded aspects of those practices that determine the right time for burning; the kinship relationships that determine who can light fires for country; and the knowledge of cultural sites and cultural resources that influence the pathways of fire at a very fine scale. In doing so, they ignore the holistic nature of Indigenous fire management, which acknowledges important linkages between Indigenous

people, customary law, spiritual significance, and knowledge of plants, animals and country. This can lead to regions being burnt incorrectly (damaging flower and fruit resources for animals and harming culturally important plants and animals) and/or disrespectfully (by inappropriate people who lack the necessary residential and kinship ties to country).

As this suggests, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians conceptualise and use fire differently, and have different cultural relationships with fire, and this should influence policy approaches and risk assessments in project partnerships. Ignoring these differences and adopting a 'one size fits all' or 'lowest cost' approach challenges the feasibility of such projects. Instead, collaborative and adaptive approaches are needed to build landscape-burning regimes that respect the priorities of all partners. Non-Indigenous fire managers need to understand Indigenous fire management priorities, and vice versa. This may mean that partners have to accept burning at certain times and in certain places that they would not choose themselves.

## Six key protocols for Indigenous fire management partnerships

Although participants who attended the Northern NESP National Fire Knowledge and Management Forum noted that protocols should be specifically designed to suit local on-country activities and partnerships, there was a consensus that a generic set of protocols would be useful for communicating (1) the importance of Indigenous fire management priorities, and (2) how partners can ensure that fire activities are appropriate, legal, safe and endorsed by the community. Six key protocols have been developed with these goals in mind, drawing on data collected through the literature review, interviews, focus groups, workshops and national fire forum. These protocols are detailed on the next page.



Controlled burn, photo Jaana Dielenberg.

## 1 Recognising traditional and legal rights and interests

*Indigenous fire management projects and enterprise can be rekindled predominantly on the lands for which the project owners have some customary responsibility and often other legal rights.*

This is highly significant in terms of the values Indigenous managers are aspiring to enhance and in terms of the nature of partnerships they seek. Much of the impetus for Indigenous land management is to substantiate and manifest local identity, connection, responsibility and control of well-being outcomes. These are core benefits sought through caring for customary lands and increasingly enabled by synergistic business activities (e.g. on-country fire enterprises).

## 2 Recognising Indigenous knowledge

*Fire management partnerships must recognise and support Indigenous fire knowledge and fire management as part of local Indigenous governance systems.*

Australia's Indigenous people have a long tradition of working collectively, systematically and purposefully to use fire to manage the landscape. Their complex and nuanced systems of knowledge are the product of varied collaborations over time, and they remain the intellectual property of Indigenous people. Fire has been (and continues to be) crucial to the way that Indigenous people live on, with and through their land, and determining its timing and location is an important part of Indigenous people's rights to be on, care for and govern their country.

## 3 Learning and sharing knowledge

*Partners that wish to support Indigenous fire management activities and enterprises need to pursue the best methods for learning, sharing and passing on fire knowledge.*

*Although other tools are needed to manage large areas, walking the country together is the best way to learn about Indigenous fire knowledge.*

Effective and appropriate landscape-burning regimes are based on high-quality information, built through collaborative knowledge-sharing partnerships. Indigenous communities need to be empowered to build knowledge about fire and fire management in their own way, and they need to be trained to appropriately integrate Indigenous and non-Indigenous fire management efforts to help make good decisions about where to burn, how much area to burn, and what transport methods to use to access and burn places on country. Information from Indigenous communities combined with information obtained from scientists, can guide this effort.

## 4 Fostering place-based partnerships

*Place-based partnership approaches are needed to design and deliver Indigenous fire management programs across Australia.*

Legal and policy developments often respond to Indigenous initiatives and leadership, and over time they have recognised that Indigenous rights and knowledge are critical to successfully managing biodiversity, Indigenous livelihoods and on-country enterprises. Indigenous communities are now applying, adapting and rejuvenating Indigenous fire knowledge to guide a range of landscape-burning regimes, including conservation and carbon-abatement programs and agreements. Practical efforts to incorporate local Indigenous fire knowledge, practices, priorities and techniques have demonstrated that agreeing on the times and places for burning can be challenging, but this should not prevent collaborative and adaptive approaches to landscape burning.

## 5 Working within governance arrangements

*Partnerships that are established to support Indigenous fire knowledge and management activities need to work within contemporary institutional and governance arrangements.*

Indigenous fire knowledge and management is influenced by an array of governance arrangements, including Indigenous customary governance regimes; government fire institutions and programs; and market-driven fire agreements. The rules and purposes of each fire governance regime influence the burning regimes and the management issues facing Indigenous fire management partners.

## 6 Ensuring benefits to local Indigenous communities

*Indigenous fire management programs and partnerships can and should deliver environmental, social, cultural and economic benefits for local Indigenous communities.*

The ability to apply local fire knowledge is a crucial and ongoing aspiration for successful Indigenous carbon abatement, conservation and other payment for environmental services schemes, primarily because of the substantial array of benefits delivered by such engagement. Multiple benefits from Indigenous fire management activities and partnerships are important to recognise, support and record, but they are often hard to balance and achieve. There are concerns that the institutionalisation of Indigenous fire management can lead to the simplification and diminution of local Indigenous fire knowledge and practices.



Controlled bush fire, photo Jaana Dielenberg.



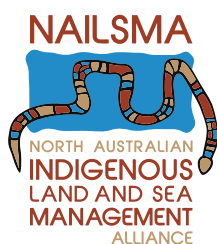
National Indigenous Fire Knowledge and Fire Management Forum in February 2016, photo Cathy Robinson.

## Further information

This project was led by Principal Research Scientist Cathy Robinson from [CSIRO](#). Dr Robinson was supported by Marcus Barber, Rosemary Hill from [CSIRO](#), Emily Gerrard from [Allens Law Firm](#) and Glenn James from [NAILSMA](#).

Contact: [catherine.robinson@csiro.au](mailto:catherine.robinson@csiro.au), 0437 170 024.

This factsheet and the full report, *Protocols for Indigenous fire management*, are available from: [www.nespnorthern.edu.au/projects/nesp/lessons-from-top-end-indigenous-fire-management](http://www.nespnorthern.edu.au/projects/nesp/lessons-from-top-end-indigenous-fire-management)



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[nespnorthern.edu.au](http://nespnorthern.edu.au)

[nesp.northern@cdu.edu.au](mailto:nesp.northern@cdu.edu.au)



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