



Hub

Northern Australia Environmental Resources

Case study title

Identifying lessons for fire management in Northern Australia

Project number(s) & project title(s)/or Hub activity

Project 5.2 Identifying lessons learned from the incorporation of Top End Indigenous fire knowledge into fire management, to inform the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in fire management and carbon abatement planning nationally (12-18mth review project, complete)

Short version

Effective engagement in Indigenous fire management requires a combination of respect for customary practices and openness to new and innovative fire knowledge. This project collaboratively identified lessons from existing efforts to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into fire projects and worked to ensure these lessons guide future efforts. The protocols developed are being used to communicate the importance of Indigenous fire management priorities, as well as to help ensure that government and non-government partners invest in fire activities that are appropriate and endorsed by communities.



Indigenous ranger conducting a controlled burn (photo Glenn Campbell)

Narrative

Aboriginal people have long traditions of using fire to manage landscapes for a range of purposes, and this practice has shaped many of the defining features of Australia's terrestrial biodiversity and ecosystems. Aboriginal communities across the country are now seeking to engage with contemporary fire management projects and business opportunities such as carbon farming and fee-for-service work to reduce fire risk or to enhance biodiversity through strategic burning, with many such projects underway across the north. This timely study therefore set about to learn, from these efforts, how to best incorporate Indigenous knowledge into fire projects, and how to best inform future fire management partnerships.

The study brought Indigenous land managers, fire experts and researchers together to meaningfully elicit and synthesise scientific, Indigenous and local knowledge through a cross-cultural and transdisciplinary approach. This facilitated a) the sharing of what's happening locally in fire management, with peer learning raising the level of discussion among participants, b) the translation of what's happening locally, with the use of shared terminology resulting in more structured and comprehensive accounts of why and how people are burning, and c) the scaling



up of what's happening locally, with participants sharing messages and ideas back home and putting these into practice.

Participants and researchers identified challenges and lessons in Indigenous fire management from these discussions. These in turn were used to develop six protocols to help guide future efforts and investment in fire partnerships. The protocols are now being used to support non-Indigenous and Indigenous organisations to work together to use, share and develop their Indigenous and contemporary fire knowledge to undertake effective fire management. The protocols provide a platform against which fire-management partnerships may be designed and assessed to support Indigenous fire enterprises and programs. Importantly the protocols communicate the importance of Indigenous fire management priorities, and how partners can ensure that fire activities are appropriate, legal, safe and endorsed by the community.

The partnership has also informed non-Indigenous investors in the fire management industry, including private corporations and non-government conservation organisations, by producing a more consolidated picture of the industry than previously available. This picture reveals the diversity of Indigenous fire related enterprises (e.g. for conservation, carbon and hazard reduction) as well as the maturity of some industries.

The project has improved the Department's understanding of how to evaluate success in fire management and fire management partnerships across the country. This in turn has led to a new project looking at cool burns across Australia that includes identifying economic opportunities for Indigenous groups, and how to improve the monitoring of benefits and outcomes to provide a better platform for investments. The information and approach provided by the project has also created baseline information for the National Landcare Program.

The project is continuing to promote the recognition of Indigenous knowledge in fire management programs and partnerships, and the importance of Indigenous people being the drivers of work on the ground.

Testimonials

"Forums like this, sharing ideas between our own people, working out ways happening round the country, good to see southern people coming in sharing information, we have come a long way with our traditional practices, a key element of how country is being looked after, it is a tool that should still be carried on, even though parks put knowledge for burning country, we over-ride it because fire is the only tool for making health of our land, our environment, our people. Great to meet, good to catch up again with you guys, we are going forward." (Secretary, Warddeken Land Management)

"I've been travelling a long way to get here, and last few days I learnt a lot. I take it really seriously, I will take it back, I will talk to my country men. I have a lots of hats, sometimes I work for other mob, we always have partners, without partners you can't get anywhere without building good relationships." (Senior Ranger, Gurrwilling Rangers)

"As Indigenous people we are walking this real line between culture and governance and it's good to see that everyone is on the same page, walking in the same direction, on one side you have all the traditional ways, on the other side all the compliance mechanisms they don't match and this is a good way forward to getting that on the table." (CEO, Olkola Aboriginal Corporation)

"Really impressed with knowledge and enthusiasm in the room. Indigenous fire knowledge is paramount going forward, to manage that land in the future." (Senior Fire Officer, Kimberley Land Council)

"The project provided a lot of information on the economic opportunities of fire management work for Indigenous people, and on the environmental benefits of fire management, and how to potentially measure these outcomes. This, along with the protocols and the scientific approach



of the project, has provided a really good starting point, and will potentially inform baselines for projects being procured through the Regional Land Partnerships element of the National Landcare Program” (Director, Monitoring & Reporting Team, National Landcare Program [& former National Indigenous Coordinator, Caring for Country/National Landcare Program]).

Research outputs

[Protocols for Indigenous Fire Management Partnerships \(final report\)](#)

[Appendix 1 National Indigenous Fire Knowledge and Fire Management Forum](#)

[Appendix 2 North Queensland](#)

[Appendix 3 Northern Territory](#)

[Appendix 4 Kimberley](#)

[Protocols for Indigenous fire management partnerships \(wrap-up factsheet\)](#)

[Protocols to guide the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in fire management and carbon abatement programs \(start-up factsheet\)](#)

[Protocols for Indigenous fire management partnerships \(presentation\)](#)

Attributions

Project team: Cathy Robinson (project leader), Marcus Barber, Ro Hill, Barbara McKaige (CSIRO), Emily Gerrard (Allens), Glenn James (NAILSMA)

Organisations (listed in alphabetical order): Larry Towney, Michelle Hines (Central Tablelands Local Land Service), Richard Ingram (Cradle Coast Authority), Greg Wilson, James Houkamacu (Djelk Rangers), Darren Forster (Goldfields Land and Sea Council), Otto Campion (Gurruwilling Rangers), Virgil Cherel (Gooniyandi), Anthony Mann, Fred Hunter, Kadeem May, Lindsey Whitehurst (Kakadu National Park), Richard McTernan (Kiewa Landcare Group), Ariadne Gorring, Rhys Swain (Kimberley Land Council) Gary Hudson, John Clark, Taron David (Kowanyama), Mario Redford, Roberto Redford, Junior Redford (Mimal Rangers), Jen Redway (Northern Land Council), Debbie Symonds, Brendan Ross, Hamish Kulka, Glen Kulka (Olkola), Andry Sculthorpe (Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre), Anthony Kerr (Territory NRM), Willie Rioli, Kate Hadden (Tiwi Land Council), Jimmy Morrison, Donald Shadforth (Waanyi Garawa Rangers), Dean Yibarbuk, Shaun Ansell, Jake Weigl, Terrah Guymala (Warddeken Land Management), Rona Charles, Chloe Nulgit, Pansy Nulgit (Wilinggin), Leonie Cheinmora, Tom Vigilante (Wunambal Gaambera).