



# THEME 3A- PEOPLE AND PROPERTY IMPACTS

Theme leader: Katharine Haynes

Subproject: The social benefits of cultural burning

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*'We are learning our true identity, it puts nothing but pride in us and makes us stand strong because we are finally getting to learn who we are and what we are about... it's crazy how much just a bit of fire can do for people and that's not just for us; that's for each tree and each animal too'*

*Ado Webster, Mudjingaarbaraga Firesticks*

## OVERVIEW

### 1. Theme

**i** People and Property impacts

### 2. Project questions

**i** Explore how engagement in cultural burning leads to cultural renewal and revitalisation, and how this links with resilience and wellbeing.

### 3. Acknowledgment

**i** We acknowledge the traditional custodians and knowledge holders of the Country where we conduct our research, walk and live. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. The focus of the NSW Bushfire Risk Management Research Hub is to reduce bushfire risk, but to do that we must look after and respect Country, and better support and learn from Aboriginal people. We deeply thank all those who have given up their time to be interviewed for this research.



#### 4. Project partners

- i** This research is conducted in partnership with Oliver Costello, Firesticks Alliance and Noel Webster, Mudjingaarbaraga Firesticks

#### 5. Overview

- i** This submission presents preliminary findings from a project funded by the NSW Department of Industry, Planning and Environment to understand the social benefits of cultural burning. The salient points from 11 interviews with Aboriginal cultural burning practitioners are provided. Although preliminary, these key findings provide a substantial amount of evidence in relation to the social benefits of cultural burning.

#### 6. Key points stated by participants

- i** ***Cultural burning and why it is different***
  - While it was acknowledged that cultural burning can reduce fuel loads, the reasons for undertaking a cultural burn were for holistic benefits for Country; a reference that refers to all living things, elements and the connections between them.
  - It is Country that leads when the time is right, not the needs of humans to reduce fuel loads.
  - Caring for Country is seen as a reciprocal and spiritual relationship, where care is provided and received in return.

##### ***Connection to Country***

- Cultural burning is an extremely valuable pathway for connecting people back to Country
- Cultural burning was felt to be particularly beneficial for promoting and encouraging an interest from younger people in connecting to Country
- Frustration and grief from the impacts of the 2019 / 2020 fires.
- Cultural burning is a journey of healing people and the environment.
- Engagement with cultural burning and connection to Country has significant benefits for spiritual, physical and mental health. Increases pride, confidence and resilience to life's knocks and stresses.
- The emergence of and the importance of strong Aboriginal role models.



### **Challenges**

- The need to compromise culturally to conduct burns, due to the need to comply with fire and land management agency policy.
- Large power imbalance, those with the knowledge to burn culturally were not able to do so.
- The danger of cultural burning being taken, or manipulated, to suit other needs, such as to get more area burnt and to reduce fuel.
- Ensuring that cultural burning is Aboriginal led and conducted with good cultural frameworks and protocols.
- Limited short-term funding for projects.
- Limited opportunities for training and earning a livelihood from cultural burning.
- Many Aboriginal people, not employed in land management, were using their own time and funds to learn and engage with cultural burning.
- Limited Aboriginal representation within agencies and on decision making bodies.

### **The future**

**All participants were very hopeful about the future and the growth of an Aboriginal led industry around cultural burning. However, while the 2019 / 2020 fire season led to significant interest and momentum, there is yet to be serious commitment in terms of long term funding or policy change.**

## **7. Video links**

**i** Yuin Country: We Read The Country with Adrian Webster  
<https://vimeo.com/423901194/43361c98a8>

Yuin Country: Fire Reunites the People and the Land with Jacob Morris  
<https://vimeo.com/423901576/d6e4ec1199>

After the Wild Fires - Yuin Country: Blood On Our Hands with Noel Webster  
<https://vimeo.com/423901813/d007e86804>

After the Wildfires - Yuin Country: Two Sides of Two Fires with Joel Deaves  
<https://vimeo.com/423902130/e770fab863>





## 10. Limitations and remaining knowledge gaps

- i**
  - While connection to Country and engaging with culture is often offered as an ‘antidote’ to disadvantage and poor health outcomes (Wexler, 2014), what engaging with culture really means for people and how it can be best supported remains poorly understood by many organisations.
  - Further work is needed to support communities to develop participatory indicators to foster and monitor cultural renewal.
  - This work and analysis are preliminary. Further interviews, data collection and analysis will be undertaken.

## 11. Policy recommendations

- i**
  - Provide long term funding and policy change to support Indigenous led cultural burning, through:
    - Greater opportunities for cultural fire training
    - Ensuring Indigenous cultural fire knowledge is recognised and more equitable power relationships are created across fire and land management
    - Creating and supporting sustainable livelihood opportunities for cultural burning practitioners to conduct burns governed by strong cultural protocols

## 12. Interview participants

Ado Webster Nook Webster	Mudjingaarbaraga Firesticks Yuin Country
Les Simon Andy White	Batemans Bay LALC Walbanga Country
Bunja Smith	Walbanga Country
Mary Wilson Maitland Wilson Lilly Wilson Kesha Wilson Belinda Gomes	Minyumai IPA Bandjalang Country North Coast NSW
Oli Costello	Firesticks Alliance Director Bandjalang Country



## 13. Qualitative Data

### **i** Preliminary analysis and key points

The information presented below represents an initial thematic analysis where the key points discussed by participants have been grouped into themes. Direct quotes have been used to highlight the salient points and to ensure the voices of participants are heard and represented.

#### **Cultural burning and why it is different**

Participants discussed that while hazard reduction is the aim for prescribed burning, it is just one of many outcomes from cultural burning. While it was acknowledged that cultural burning can reduce fuel loads and risks, the reasons for undertaking a cultural burn were for holistic benefits for Country; a reference that refers to all living things, landscapes, elements and the connections between them. An important distinction, was that hazard reduction applies a uniform methodology of burning across the landscape, whereas cultural burning is sensitive to environmental and cultural needs. In other words, it is Country that leads when the time is right, not the needs of humans to reduce fuel loads. Above all, respondents described how Cultural burning is about connecting with families and communities to fulfil obligations and responsibilities to care for Country. In this way, caring for Country is seen as a reciprocal and spiritual relationship, where care is provided and received in return.

*'they're miles apart in what they're trying to achieve in the end... there's benefits to cultural burning – it does reduce fuel, and it can assist, the western way of fire management but they don't see all the interactions; they just apply one fire regime or methodology across the whole landscape where cultural burning, you look at and read indicators and you apply different fire techniques to that Country. It's burned... not to reduce fuel, but to create healthy landscapes, and that includes the people as well'* Oliver Costello, Firesticks Alliance

*'the way we look at the landscape – we see it as the boss; we're not the boss and we listen to its needs. It's never our conclusion of what we want to do or how we want to see change. Yeah, it's never a human decision; it's listening... and make[ing] sure that it's the voice of the land being listened to, not the voices of people'* Ado Webster, Mudjingaarbaraga Firesticks



*'It is all just spiritual and like cultural to me. It's like connecting with the land and rejuvenating and regenerating the bushland, connecting with your family, to help the land, and just help it for the animals to habitat in it, and the plants, native plants, to regrow' Maitland Wilson, Minymai IPA*

*'It seems much cleaner, the land's healthier – it can breathe, it almost sings, if that makes sense, like the trees just sing... It makes me feel awesome. I love when all of us rangers set up for a fire and we've done it and then, about a month later, we look back after we burned, and it just looks awesome...'* Lilly Wilson, Minymai IPA

### **Connection to Country**

Despite historical and contemporary processes of colonisation, that have displaced Aboriginal people from their land and eroded cultural knowledge, Aboriginal peoples are increasingly reengaging in a number of cultural practices. This is particularly the case for cultural burning throughout the South-East of Australia. The benefits of place-based cultural activities for healthy country and healthy people are well documented in the academic literature. As explained in the quote below, and a view echoed by all participants, cultural fire is an extremely valuable pathway for connecting people back to their culture.

*'We've seen through colonisation a lot of Aboriginal communities have become very fractured, people have lost connection with the land and in a cultural context, it's like "Well, who are you then? If you don't have a connection with the land and you're not connected to your community". What makes you Aboriginal? Is that just a genetic thing? Because to me, if you think about that, it's like "Well what does that mean for the world?" Everybody is a mix of everything from everywhere essentially. What defines people's culture? It's their practice. And so people have become removed from that practice so the idea is that we reinvigorate people's understanding of connection to Country and community by using fire as a pathway for that'* Oliver Costello, Firesticks Alliance.

Utilising cultural burning as a pathway for connecting to Country was felt to be particularly beneficial for encouraging an interest for younger people.

*'Yeah, that sparks an interest in culture for the young people and once they get that little bit of interest and going and looking at their culture, and burning does that to them. I've seen a couple of young fellas just change straight*



*away because they're into their burning – now they're into tool making and everything.* Uncle Les Simon, Batemans Bay LALC Walbanga Elder.

Respondents reflected on their journey towards cultural burning. They discussed their sadness at not being connected to their culture, frustrations with knowing Western models of looking after the land were not only bad for the environment but not working for people. Participants talked about mental health issues, failing in Western education systems and failing in the workforce. The absence of their connection to Country was a 'void' which they didn't know how to fill. Participants then also discussed how challenging it was to get cultural burning programs properly supported and funded. Interviewees also discussed their grief due to the impacts of the 2019 / 2020 fires.

*'I've never been as sad as I am now... and a lot of it I can't even explain because I didn't see it, I wasn't there. I don't understand how it can affect me so bad but I think it's knowing that all those preventative measures are there and we could have been acting on it and personally knowing that there's things I could have been out there doing to help – all that stuff, barriers that stop us that allows all this to happen, there's so much anger that it's not even anger anymore – it's just pure sadness'* Ado Webster, Mudjingaarbaraga Firesticks

Participants stated how they had learnt that caring for Country was much more than simply caring for the environment and had a deeper meaning about taking care of themselves. They discussed how their spiritual, physical and mental health had improved once they started learning and engaging back on Country with cultural burning. Participants described an empowering journey of healing themselves and the environment, and an increase in their pride and confidence.

*'Yeah I just love it. Just having that interaction, it's just a great feeling and I think you're picking up the emotions of what's happening in the landscape and the environment as well, because you're healing that, you're healing yourself, healing people, so it's just an empowering journey. So yeah, I feel empowered when I do that... It's really strengthened my connection to Country, walking with fire. It's not just applying fire, it's pre and post and all that as well. Yeah, it's been part of my journey, it's connected me and I think it was a part of my journey that's been missing for a long time...'* Uncle Nook Webster, Mudjingaarbaraga Firesticks

*'I thought just managing or taking care of Country was just, I don't know, cleaning weeds or just monitoring animals, but it's more than that. There's a*



deeper meaning to taking care of Country; it's taking care of yourself' Mary Wilson, Minymai IPA

*'I guess I'm happier. Yeah, just after seeing... after the burns, and new plants shooting through, it's just made me more confident in my work and everything else. Yeah, happier. I'm prouder of myself'.* Kesha Wilson, Minymai IPA

*'... the Firesticks program, I learned a lot from that – not even about fires, just even communicating, confidence, if that makes sense, talking to other people. Firesticks helped us girls out a lot with standing up in front of a lot of people when we had to'* Lilly Wilson, Minymai IPA

*'Oh my God. Yeah, it changed as soon as I... the first couple of weeks I started working out here. Yeah. Changed me straight away and it made me feel really good...I just got connected straight away and I loved it and then doing the cultural burns just made it even better'* Belinda Gomes, Minymai IPA

The holistic benefits are well described in the quote below by a young cultural burning practitioner, Ado Wilson. Ado discusses how his engagement with cultural burning has filled a 'void' that was created through the Western education system that did little to acknowledge or connect him to his cultural heritage. Through cultural burning Ado is finally learning about his true identity.

*It fills a massive void that was created from our education system because when we went to school, that's what we got taught... now when we learn all these things we are learning our true identity so yeah, it puts nothing but pride in us and makes us stand strong because we are finally getting to learn who we are and what we are about and why we are here. So, for our mental health it's huge and then just as much as well for our physical health – yeah, all this exercise we've got to do... and our spirit, it does all the right things for the spirit, so that's all of our health systems that have benefits... it's crazy how much just a bit of fire can do for people and that's not just for us; that's for each tree and each animal too – everything gets all them benefits, and there's more...*' Ado Webster, Mudjingaarbaraga Firesticks

The significant benefits for youth are also well described by Unlce Les Simon and Andy White who discuss the drug and mental health issues face by youth in the Batemans Bay area. They has seen these issues ameliorated through connecting youth to Country through burning, particularly if it can be developed into a livelihood opportunity.



*'we've got a lot of mental health problems too, and this here, it just opens their minds up to their culture and the drug problem that we've got, ice, you know, these are stuff that we don't need in our community. Put kids back in the bush and no, they won't even worry about that, and especially if we can set up an enterprise that they're getting paid to do it, to learn their culture...'* Uncle Les Simon, Batemans Bay LALC Walbanga Elder.

*'we need more young people standing up and getting back into culture and growing that connection back with Country and dealing with the day-to-day problems without having to jump onto drugs... and that's where this cultural burning aspect comes into it because it gets them back to a sense of self-worth where they feel like they're important and they've got their own journey to lead. They're lost – they haven't got a journey at the moment... The mental benefits are just there. It's a no-brainer'* Andy White, Batemans Bay LALC

As Ado does, participants talked about the benefits to their spiritual health in addition to their physical and mental health. Some talked about quite profound spiritual experiences. They also talked about how they had become more resilient to knocks and stresses in general, and how other aspect of their life had improved. Participants also talked about new opportunities they had to travel, to meet others, and to share knowledge. They felt they were part of a movement that was gaining momentum. Participants talked about being empowered and recognised as having important knowledge by those outside the Indigenous community.

*I'm pretty modest, but you know, people are sitting actually talking to me and listening now and they're starting to recognise some of that knowledge... that's pretty empowering... sometimes I've got to pinch myself... how did I get invited into this space and I'm meeting some good people along the way'* Uncle Nook Webster, Mudjingaarbaraga Firesticks

The importance of strong role models was discussed by the younger participants, who described important Indigenous leaders they had met through cultural burning, who guided and inspired them.

## **Challenges**

A number of challenges were discussed, including that participants felt they often needed to compromise culturally in order to conduct burns that complied



with fire and land management agency policy (e.g. restricting who can attend a burn, having to conduct RFS training first, wearing full PPE designed for hot not cool burning, burns managed and led by agencies not Firesticks groups, and the timing and location of burns etc.). It was felt that there was a large power imbalance, and those with the knowledge to burn culturally were not able to do so. Participants also discussed the danger of cultural burning being taken, or manipulated, to suit other needs, such as to get more area burnt and to reduce fuel. Although called cultural burns, these fires were often not burnt through good cultural frameworks and protocols. There was a strong feeling that although agencies and organisations may think they are doing something positive there are long term negative elements for the environment and communities.

*'you have agencies with individuals with power that don't understand their responsibilities and people that understand responsibilities that have no power going, you know, "Can we do what we're supposed to be doing" and they're only asking because they feel like they don't have the authority when they should. They should have the authority.... we don't want the government to tell us what cultural burning is and how we do it. We want them to support us, invest in us to do it because otherwise, how are we supposed to survive and have livelihoods and a career if we don't have investment. Oliver Costello, Firesticks Alliance.*

*'...our knowledge doesn't come for free either and that's the whole thing about it – I think they're getting all mixed up. They think they're just going to get knowledge out of us for free and try and change it to another thing in RFS agenda and legislation where it cuts out that whole cultural aspect – it's wrong' Andy White, Batemans Bay LALC*

Participants felt strongly that cultural burning should be Aboriginal led and provide employment for Aboriginal practitioners. However, it was also acknowledged that driving change and ensuring sustainable land management practices was everybody's business – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

*'I've also heard people say to me, "Why can't we teach the RFS this?" Well, I guess I could but then you're bordering on that intellectual property issue. If I give you everything, what have I got left?... Look, this is a practice that we're just relearning about because of history, but let's learn about it together. We both need to do this for the benefit of our country, but yes, it is an Aboriginal practice, it is intellectual property, but you know, when it comes to the land, it was all about maintaining the land, keeping the land, which is our Mother,*



healthy, for future generations. That's everyone today. ' Bunja Smith, Walbanga Elder

The real challenge discussed was the need for increased long term investment for training to build knowledge and confidence. Also to ensure there were livelihood opportunities for Aboriginal people to earn a good living by conducting burns governed by strong cultural protocols. Currently, all participants felt that there was too much of a dominance of small projects with finite timelines. It was stated that many Aboriginal people, not employed in land management, were using their own time and funds to learn and engage with cultural burning.

*'it's hard if we don't have a job in land management and come out and manage land – we have to sacrifice other jobs, other income so then that makes it hard for us to be able to maintain ourselves within society if we want to keep paying rent, if we want to buy food, pay the electricity bills and all that stuff, then yeah, we need to have jobs, we need employment and that but at the moment, yeah, it's one or the other. It's either have a job or go out and manage the land in the rightful way'* Ado Webster, Mudjingaarbaraga Firesticks

Participants also stated that Aboriginal people needed to be properly represented on all the major decision making bodies and agencies, to ensure their voices were clearly heard and accounted for in all decisions made.

*'They can't make decisions without having someone from Country...Elder there to sit on that table when they make decisions on what's going to happen with this Country. You know, they can't just make a decision and pass it down and expect us to deal with it – got to be part of the decision-making, from the top, otherwise we're just shit-kickers on the bottom trying to survive what culture they're allowing us to practice again'* Andy White, Batemans Bay LALC

### **The future**

All participants were very hopeful about the future and the growth of an Aboriginal led industry around cultural burning. All participants could clearly see the benefits to the environment and people – to Country. The benefits for hazard reduction were also well articulated, and while not the aim of cultural burning it is certainly an outcome in many instances. As stated by Uncle Les



Simon, he can very clearly see many benefits and the growth of a viable industry along the whole South Coast of NSW:

*Well, it's the lads with their heads down I want to get out the bush to lift their heads up and be proud of who they are, and their culture an, and come back into town and say, "We're out there looking after Country", you know, "We're saving you fellas from the next big fire"... I'm not only talking about here in Batemans Bay; I'm talking about Moruya, Bodalla, Narooma, Bega, Eden, all the way down the coast. There's ice in the community, you know, it's being pushed in – it's getting up and down the coast, destroys our community and you know, families need wages to survive and this is what it would be if we could turn this into an enterprise – mate, we'd make a big statement on the coast here' Uncle Les Simon, Batemans Bay LALC Walbanga Elder.*

Participants discussed the joy at passing on their knowledge to younger generations and seeing how knowledge, practice and connection to Country was growing. However, while the 2019 / 2020 fire season led to significant interest and momentum, there is yet to be serious commitment in terms of long term funding or policy change.

*'there's definitely more respect – you can see people listening, you can see that they're not just listening; it's making sense for them... [but] the support still isn't fully there from everyone, we need some really decent investment so we can have full-time coordinators and facilitators and trainers, and full-time practitioners on the ground doing cultural fire management... I want to see everyone working together, not sitting in silos... working together, acknowledgement and respect of Indigenous knowledge systems' Oliver Costello, Firesticks Alliance.*



## 15. Key reference list

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