



# Walking with fire: Cultural burning sparks renewal

Ongoing dispossession of their ancestral lands robs Aboriginal people of their right to care for Country, but not their responsibility to do so. It's a double cruelty, but the return of knowledge holders, fire sticks in hand, to Country is helping heal generational wounds. In interviews for the NSW Bushfire Risk Management Research Hub, Aboriginal people have recounted grief and frustration, but also joy and hope. PhD candidate Vanessa Cavanagh has documented the critical importance of women "walking with fire". Dr Kat Haynes has amplified cultural burning's links to renewal and wellbeing.

Photo: Mane Collective;  
Andrew Kainerder; Ryan Lee

## Welcoming women to the fire

Geographer Vanessa Cavanagh's research into cultural burning was always going to be personal.

When the Bungum Bundjalung and Wonnarua woman began her PhD, her mum offered advice: "Take your children with you."

Vanessa treasures a photograph of her daughter, Emma, lighting her first cultural burn "on her grandfather's lands".

"It was the first time in our family history we've been able to go back and connect on our traditional lands and practice caring for Country through cultural burning," Vanessa said.



Emma Cavanagh lights her first cultural burn.



Young women at a cultural burning workshop in Ulladulla in 2020.  
Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kainerder; Ryan Lee

"It's incredibly important, not only for her as a young Aboriginal woman, but for the elders (who) welcomed us back (and) for the Aboriginal people who were there to teach and guide her."

Vanessa worked for an agency for 16 years, including as a field officer and firefighter, and says women and Aboriginal people were scarce in those arenas.

She wants Aboriginal women to feel welcome at the fire and at the forefront of cultural renewal.

Those she spoke to are ready.



"It reinforces our cultural rights of passage as Aboriginal women," one said.

"We were proud of our roles. Through colonization, that patriarchal line has taken some of our rights of passage away."

Another said cultural burning was a reminder of "what's important".

"Walking alongside the fire, listening to the stories from aunties and uncles, re-engaging with carving and weaving and dance, you're igniting all these other cultural practices," she said.

Vanessa knows "it's beyond fire and flames".

The landscapes fire agencies manage are "filled with traditional medicines, ceremony and story".

"You all work on somebody's Country and people have responsibilities to care for that Country," Vanessa said.

"Aboriginal women want these opportunities for themselves, for their children and for their communities, without fear or barriers ... so we can care for women's places, maintain our stories and practices.

"It builds our resilience."

Vanessa seeks to "understand how women are participating, and identify barriers or challenges ... to assist in making cultural burning more gender equitable".



Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kainerder; Ryan Lee



Vanessa Cavanagh in her firefighting days



Vanessa Cavanagh, left, at a cultural burn.  
Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kainerder; Ryan Lee

She hates to think women might see "a male-only space".

"I position my research as a voice for the thousands of Aboriginal women who continue to be rendered voiceless and marginalized in their efforts to maintain relationships with Country," Vanessa said.



“Current land management approaches are male dominated, and this can be unfavourable for women, some simply won’t engage.”

Without funded strategies, Vanessa says Aboriginal women will miss out.

“You need to listen and support women as equal decision makers and knowledge holders,” she said.

“This means ongoing resourcing for women’s roles.

“Aboriginal people want to stay on Country with secure jobs, maintaining Country, caring for culture and identities and responsibilities.”

Women said change was long overdue, even before Black Summer broke records for extreme fire.

“The fires we see today are too hot,” one said.

“The Country is too dry (after) years of mismanagement.

“It is making Country sick, which is making our people sick.”

Vanessa says suicide and incarceration rates in Aboriginal communities and species extinctions are “devastating to us as mothers, sisters and knowledge holders”.



Students from four South Coast schools attended a Cultural Burning for Resilience workshop in 2021. Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kainerder; Ryan Lee

“Women want burning done at the right time and the right way, which means Country will be healthy: healthy waterways, plants, and animals, so that we can gather our weaving fibres, our bush medicines and our resources, and not have them burned out at the wrong time,” Vanessa said.



Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kainerder; Ryan Lee



“Prior to colonization, Indigenous women were just as active and engaged in the landscape as Aboriginal men.

“In some places, burning is women’s business.

“For some mobs, it may not be appropriate for women, but it has been my experience that the men have been excited, welcoming and supportive of Aboriginal women’s participation.”

However, Vanessa’s research revealed fears Aboriginal knowledge would be exploited if not treated respectfully.

“They’re extracting the pieces of knowledge they find beneficial ... and implementing it into their own context, for their own benefit,” one person said.

“Cultural burning has to be Aboriginal led ... Aboriginal people who have genuine decision-making power.”

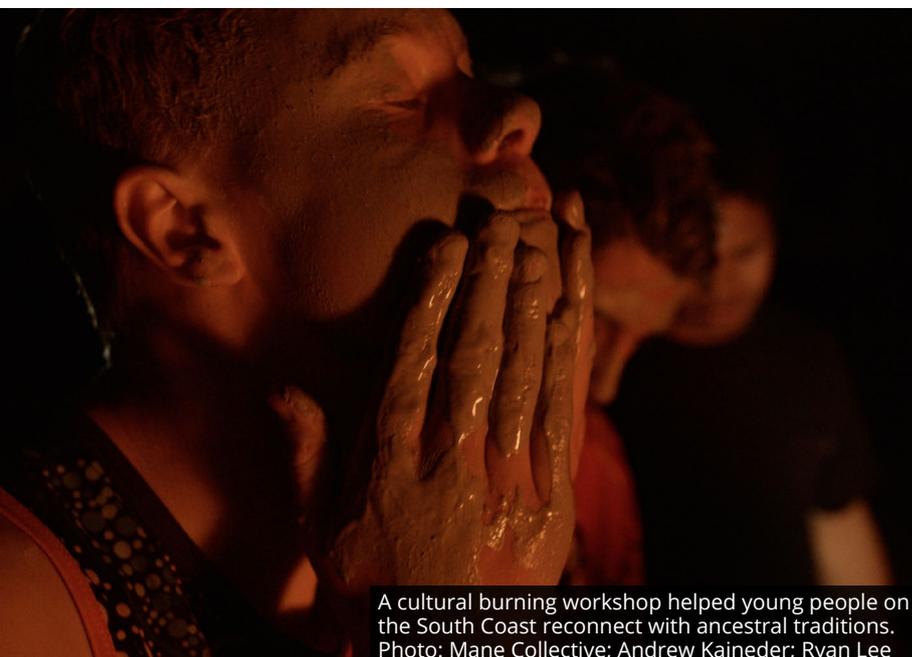
## Benefits for everyone

Dr Kat Haynes drew an enthusiastic response when she spoke to men and women who had participated in cultural burning.

“It’s listening and making sure it’s the voice of the land being listened to,” Ado Webster said.



Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kaineder; Ryan Lee



A cultural burning workshop helped young people on the South Coast reconnect with ancestral traditions.  
Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kaineder; Ryan Lee

“Once you accept you’re part of that landscape ... it’s not just, ‘I am connected to it’; it is connected to you,” Mal Ridges said.



Another described the “great feeling” when “you’re picking up the emotions of what’s happening in the landscape”.

“Because you’re healing that, you’re healing yourself, healing people.” Uncle Nook Webster said.

“It’s empowering. It’s really strengthened my connection to Country, walking with fire.

“It’s connected me. It was part of my journey that’s been missing for a long time.”

Ado Webster described how cultural fire had filled “a massive void that was created from our education system”, bringing the pride to “stand strong”.



Jacob Morris, Ado Webster and Uncle Nook Webster lead discussions with National Parks and Wildlife Service staff before a cultural burn at Triplarina nature reserve. Photo: Kay Hayes



Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kaineder; Ryan Lee

“We’re finally getting to learn who we are and what we’re about and why we’re here,” he said.

“For our mental health, it’s huge.

“It does all the right things for the spirit.

“It’s crazy, just how much a bit of fire can do for people.”

The benefits are clear to everyone involved, but Dr Haynes said frustrations remained.

“People talk about how they’re not supported, taken seriously or funded,” she said.

“They’ve been ignored, disappointed, and faced delay after delay; too much bureaucracy, too much red tape.

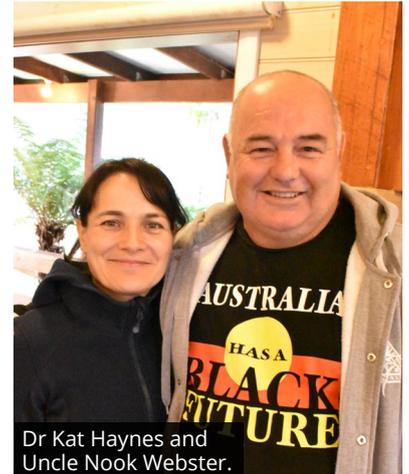


"They often need to compromise culturally to conduct burns that comply with fire and land management agency policy, such as restricting who can attend a burn, what you have to wear, who is in charge, where you can burn, when you can burn.

"There is a large power imbalance.

"Funding is often short-term, with lots of one-off burns that generate interest, then frustration when there are no more burns," Dr Haynes said.

"Aboriginal people face discrimination and are not included in important decisions.



Dr Kat Haynes and  
Uncle Nook Webster.



Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kaineder; Ryan Lee

"The governance around cultural burning must change to support Indigenous people's rights to self-determination to care for Country, their way.

"Significant and ongoing funding must be provided for community-led cultural land and fire management.

"Decentralized, bottom-up and community-led initiatives must be the priority.

"One community's vision may be very different to others."

## Workshop connects teen searching for culture

Teenager Mickyia Glover lost her South Coast home to bushfire but is on a mission to win back cultural fire management skills.

The Year 11 student says she gained a deeper connection to her roots at a "Cultural Burning for Resilience" workshop with students from Batemans Bay, Nowra, Ulladulla and Bomaderry in Ulladulla in June 2021.

This was an Aboriginal-led community project, supported by the Ulladulla Local Aboriginal Land Council, the NSW Bushfire Risk Management Research Hub, University of Wollongong's Global Challenges Program, and Treading Lightly Inc.

Mickyia wishes she had that opportunity before the Black Summer fires claimed her Eurobodalla Shire home.

"I was a bushfire victim," Mickyia, of Mogo, said.

"My house did burn, a few of my neighbours did as well.

"A lot of us were highly affected by it.

"It was a traumatic experience."



The Batemans Bay High School student believes if the residents of her village had been putting cultural burning into practice, they would have been better prepared for the extreme conditions of 2019-20.

“If we did keep up with the cultural burning aspect and how it could help our land, it wouldn’t have got that drastic,” she said.



Young people from four South Coast high schools were enthusiastic participants at a cultural burning workshop. Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kainerder; Ryan Lee

Mickyia says she was inspired and moved at the workshop held after Black Summer.

It was a new and important experience for her and most students who attended.

“The majority of the people there had never done a cultural burn before,” she said.

“I don’t have the full cultural experience a lot of people do.

“I found it very beneficial because it gives you another insight of my culture and it really adds to my identity.”

It is a change that runs deep for a keen student, who tops her Aboriginal Studies classes and wants to continue them at university.

“It did change my overall perspective,” she said.



Mickyia Glover. Photo: Kerrie O'Connor



Young people at the workshop discussed how to care for Country. Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kainerder; Ryan Lee



“A lot of people assume cultural burning is an ancient practice that is not used as much.

“It makes us think about how we could really improve the land and what steps we can take for it.

“It made me feel more connected to my ancestors and everybody there.

“It did bring everybody together, talking about how they felt and how they’d never had that opportunity, and how are we going to show other people about it.”

Mickyia wants to spread the word about “how beneficial it would be to continue these Indigenous acts”.

She wants to gain a degree in Indigenous Studies.

“I’m very interested in that aspect ... I find it really intriguing to learn about it,” she said.

She also believes widespread paid opportunities to learn and practise cultural burning would help her community.

“It would definitely be a good career opportunity,” Mickyia said.

“We do have a lot of land in natural places around the Eurobodalla.

“Overall, it would be very beneficial.

“A lot of people would be interested.”

Mickyia says such a program would help bridge a cultural gap.

“There are a lot of people who don’t know much about it, and if they even had a trial run, to try it out, they would most likely be willing to do it,” she said.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians across all the lands on which we live and work, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise that these lands and waters have always been places of teaching, research and learning.



Cultural burning was also about cultural renewal for the teens who attended the workshop. Photo: Mane Collective; Andrew Kaineder; Ryan Lee

Cultural Burning for Resilience can be viewed at: [bit.ly/cultural\\_burning](https://bit.ly/cultural_burning)

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The **NSW Bushfire Risk Management Research Hub** ([www.bushfirehub.org](http://www.bushfirehub.org)) is a partnership between researchers at the University of Wollongong, Western Sydney University, the University of NSW and the University of Tasmania, supported by the NSW Department of Planning and Environment and the NSW Rural Fire Service.

