

Submission Number: NND.001.01156

Submission Of: Matthew Shanks

Your Details

Email address:

Phone:

Preferred means of contact: Email

What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation? Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations (the Federation) is the State-wide body advocating for the improved rights and interests of Victorian Traditional Owners while progressing wider social, economic, environmental and cultural objectives.

In 2017 the Federation was funded by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) to support Victorian Traditional Owners to develop the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy (attached to this submission).

As part of the Federation's role supporting Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, we facilitated several Traditional Owner Bushfire Response forums (statement attached to assist the collaboration between Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, including those from bushfire affected areas of Country with the aim of understanding what support groups will be seeking for bushfire recovery, and to share and learn from bushfire related experiences. Another key focus of the forums was developing a state-wide position on the implementation of the Cultural Fire Strategy

Traditional Owner Corporations reported positive involvement with several Incident Control Centres, and were engaged under their Registered Aboriginal Party responsibilities to provide advice and management recommendations to the Incident Management Team (IMT) on the protection of Cultural Heritage. Traditional Owner Corporations were also engaged by State bushfire recovery operations teams to participate in early recovery planning.

Some Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations have established NRM and Fire crews that contributed to the emergency response, including preparedness through both cultural burning and other fire and land management activities.

Subsequently, the Federation has been supporting Victorian Traditional Owners to activate their Cultural obligations to care for Country by undertaking a more active role in the management and decision making processes for Country. DELWP have taken an active approach in seeking advice from Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations during and immediately following the bushfire emergency on ways the Department can improve future emergency response situations and appropriately embed Cultural Fire knowledge and Practice in contemporary land and fire management

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

The Traditional Owner Bushfire Forums heard reports from Traditional Owner Corporations that there were some instances of emergency management that caused damage to Aboriginal Cultural Heritage sites.

There were also reports of some Incident Control Centres not adequately engaging with the Registered Aboriginal Party that has responsibility of managing Cultural Heritage over areas of Country that experienced a bushfire emergency response.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

The development of the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy (the Cultural Fire Strategy) was facilitated by the Federation and led by Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire knowledge holders. It was developed through funding from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning to support Traditional Owner rights and interests in reintroducing Cultural Fire to Country. Its development was supported by a partnership between Victorian Traditional Owners DELWP, Parks Victoria and the Country Fire Authority.

The Victorian Cultural Fire Strategy's vision is that future generations of Victorian Traditional Owners will grow up observing their Elders being at the forefront of the use of the right to fire for Country. The purpose of the Cultural Fire Strategy is twofold: to reinvigorate cultural fire through Traditional Owner led practices across all types of land tenure and Country, and to allow Traditional Owners to heal Country and accordingly achieve their rights and obligations to care for Country.

The Strategy provides a set of principles and strategic priorities to facilitate greater self-determination for Traditional Owners and provide a policy and practice framework for effective Traditional Owner-led cultural fire management in Victoria.

• The six principles underpinning the Victorian Cultural Fire Strategy are:

1. Cultural burning is right fire, right time, right way and for the right cultural reasons;
2. Burning is a cultural responsibility;
3. Cultural fire is living knowledge;
4. Monitoring, evaluation and research support cultural objectives and enable adaptive learning;
5. Country is managed holistically; and
6. Cultural fire is healing.

The Strategy provides a policy directive and framework across Victoria's fire agencies to support Traditional Owners to undertake cultural burning for the range of cultural values entailed by caring for Country

Traditional Owner Corporations, together with Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge holders, will guide the implementation of the Strategy. This may include the development of Country-specific fire strategies to reflect individual group's unique path to self-determined

practice. Land and fire management agencies will also need to consider how to support and enable the priority actions in the Strategy, including removing real and perceived barriers to cultural fire practice.

The Strategy outlines four programmatic areas for fire agencies to invest in:

Program component 1. Managing the transition to cultural burning and healthy Country. Developing operational pathways and frameworks for the transition of 'sick' country to healthy country that can be safely managed in a traditional way.

Program component 2. Restore and protect the knowledge system. Supporting the restoration, further development, knowledge transfer and governance of cultural fire knowledge and practice.

Program component 3. Holistic land management for healthy Country and healthy people. Supporting holistic land management by enabling the use of cultural fire for multiple objectives including healing country and people.

Program component 4. Embedding cultural fire practice. Embedding cultural fire practice within the fire management sector so that Traditional Owners can plan and lead cultural burns across all tenures in a manner that is culturally safe.

An implementation plan, including resources required to meet each group's path to self-determined practice, will be developed by September 31 2020. This includes budgets and a high-level rationale for each group that covers the next 5 years and leads into the following:

- A plan of each group's specific journeys to realise the reintroduction of Cultural Fire and associated practices for the management of Country.
- Training, equipment, together with the policy, institutional and legislative changes required.
- Funding for the Federation at a state-wide level to support all Victorian groups on an ongoing basis and to continue to provide secretariat support to the fire knowledge group, fire co-governance group, and to share learnings and build networks.

During and following the Bushfire emergency there was a considerable amount of positive public and media interest in Aboriginal Land Management knowledge and practice, specifically that which related to Cultural Fire knowledge and practice.

The Federation attended by invitation a Ministerial Roundtable on the Bushfire Environment Response, chaired by Minister Sussan Ley where a key theme for the day was a discussion on Indigenous involvement in land and fire management in the future.

A Statement developed by Victorian Traditional Owners was provided on the day (attached to this submission). The Statement highlighted the significant steps that Victorian Traditional Owners have made in partnership with Government land and fire managers to progress Traditional Owner rights and interests in managing Country through the reintroduction of Cultural Fire and requested that the Commonwealth Government supports the work of Victorian Traditional Owners and their Government partners in Cultural Fire.

Victorian Traditional Owners require long-term support and resourcing for further development of knowledge, practice and capacity in Traditional Owner Corporations to undertake cultural fire practice and to ensure operational feasibility of cultural burning in a changed environment. Key to the success of a Traditional Owner led Cultural Fire Program will be partnerships with Government Land and Fire management agencies.

Cultural Fire has a range of associated outcomes including; hazard reduction, protection of life and property and ecological regeneration.

However, we underline that Cultural Fire is not a panacea, but is part of the long term transformational change to the management of Country.

We exist in a changed environment and must draw on the 65,000 plus years of Traditional Owner experience managing Country combined with the modern tools and systems available today.

We strongly believe that working together with other land managers and communities we can influence and improve how Country is managed, including how fire is used on Country. Caring for Country is an obligation that is handed down generation by generation. Adequate resourcing and authority is needed to give effect to this and to contribute to the sustainability and productivity of all Country.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations is a company limited by guarantee, and is a large registered not for profit entity under the Australian Charities and Not-for profits Commission (ACNC) and has Public Benevolent Institution tax status.

The Federation seeks to advance the interests of Traditional Owners and supports the rights of Traditional Owners to recognition, self-determination and development. The Federation draws on the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, the Victorian Constitution, Charter of Human Rights, Traditional Owner Settlement Act and native title as foundations and guidance for its work.

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name

Supporting material provided:

Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy.pdf

TO Bushfire response forum final statement 6Feb.pdf

Ministerial Roundtable on the Bushfire Environment Response.pdf

THE VICTORIAN TRADITIONAL OWNER CULTURAL FIRE STRATEGY

THE VICTORIAN TRADITIONAL OWNER CULTURAL FIRE KNOWLEDGE GROUP



Fire is healing.

With access and authority to practice on Country in ways that are respectful of what is right for that place, the impact on our wellbeing, confidence, leadership and strength cannot be underestimated.

The development of the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy was funded by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) to support Traditional Owner rights and interests in reintroducing Cultural Fire to the landscape. Facilitated by the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, the project was led by Victorian Traditional Owner fire knowledge holders from around the state. The Strategy Development was overseen by a Project Control Group, where representatives of partners met to receive information from the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group about what was working on the ground and to ensure the effectiveness of the institutional arrangements for strategy development.

PROJECT PARTNERS



Graphic Design: Mazart Design Studio
Supply Nation certified | www.mazartdesignstudio.com





04	Preamble	
05	Purpose	
	Our Vision	
06	Enabling Principles	
08	What is cultural fire?	
	Strengthening cultural burning in Victoria	
10	Fire Dreaming - Aboriginal contemporary and historical interests in fire	
14	Objectives and Program Components	
	Objective 1	14
	Objective 2	18
	Objective 3	20
	Objective 4	22
24	Conclusion and Next Steps	
25	Glossary of terms	
26	Appendix 1: Methodology	
28	Endnotes	



"wee kutkut" Many Fire
(Dja Dja Wurrung language) by Drew Berwick

HOW TO READ THIS DOCUMENT

ORANGE BOXES contain quotes from recent interviews with Traditional Owner Elders and knowledge holders. For example:

Text appearing like this is used to give context, either in a Traditional Owners voice, or translated from a thematic analysis

Text in Italics is a direct quote from a Traditional Owner as part of conversations in the Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group or on-Country interviews with Elders.

QUOTES are sourced either directly from Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, or sometimes indirectly by reference to non-Victorian fire knowledge holders as part of conversations with Victorian Traditional Owners. This is a reflection of the connectedness of cultural fire practice among Traditional Owners across Australia.

FIRE DREAMING STORIES SECTION INDENTED TEXT contains attributed quotes from the literature.

INDENTED TEXT ELSEWHERE contains recent quotes or directions from Traditional Owner led institutions (NRM Committee¹ or Victorian Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group).

¹ NRM Committee is a Traditional Owner led advisory group in the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations that provides natural resource management policy and practice advice.

SEQUENCE OF ACTIVITIES

1. The importance of this Strategy was acknowledged and authorised in a special meeting of the Federation NRM Committee and Department senior staff in May 2017 and funding announced to support its development.

2. A Strategy Development Team was formed to enable the primacy and authority of Traditional Owners to fully guide strategy development.

3. The scope, roles and governance for Strategy creation were co-developed and agreed by all involved. The groups formed included a Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, a Traditional Owner-led Research Group, a Project Control Group with equal representation of Traditional Owners to non-Aboriginal people, and the Strategy Development Team.

4. A project management plan was co-designed, including the institutional arrangements for developing and finalising the strategy, identification of key audiences and how to engage with them, a monitoring and evaluation plan, roles for the strategy development team and a budget.

5. On-Country learning events were sponsored by Traditional Owners and discussions notated at these workshops that were attended by members of all groups involved. Updated accounts of discussions and learning from these events were shared at NRM Committee and Knowledge Group meetings and progressively incorporated into the developing Strategy. As such Elders and knowledge holders shaped the strategy and generated most of its content.

6. Various versions of the Draft Strategy were presented to the Knowledge Group and further comments incorporated into the next version.

7. The Draft Strategy was presented to Fire Knowledge Holder Group and the Project Control Group to test its alignment with the original scope and policy framework and to evaluate the feasibility of its recommendations.

8. The final step is for the Strategy to be finalised, presented to a wider audience and launched.

WE
ARE
HERE

PREAMBLE

It is becoming increasingly acceptable as a practice for public land managers to involve Aboriginal people in land management activities including the use of fire.

The Victorian government's fire management agencies have to date, applied a risk-based approach that emphasises the protection of life and property, and impeded Traditional Owner rights and obligations to care for Country.

The dominant view presented in peer reviewed literature is that up to 1788, and for a significant length of time prior, Aboriginal people across Australia were using fire as a tool to manage landscapes. Evidence of the cultural use of fire as crucial to maintaining a balanced ecological environment also exists, and departure from cultural burning practices after European colonisation has resulted in significant and detrimental changes to biodiversity and has inadvertently increased risk to life and property from wildfire.

Victorian Traditional Owners have strong aspirations to ensure cultural use of fire is re-introduced, adapted and applied wherever possible to allow for healing and caring for Country.

This Strategy articulates Victorian Traditional Owners' long term goals and objectives at State-wide and Country (regional) levels, and proposes sensible and achievable strategies and actions to achieve those over time.

We have also sought to clarify the roles of government, Traditional Owners and other partners to achieve a holistic approach to land and water management, we believe that this will benefit all Victorians by way of our involvement and leadership.

Victorian Traditional Owners are increasingly being recognised by the State as partners in land and water management and Traditional Owner groups are negotiating agreements to formalise this. Traditional Owners feel a deep sense of connection and responsibility to Country,

“it saddens us when existing regulatory frameworks exclude us from positively effecting sensible land management practice to reduce fire risk”.

An important part of this connection and recognition is authority to speak for and make decisions about the management of Country, including the application of cultural fire.

The directions in this strategy are therefore reflective of the voice of Traditional Owners, with decisions being made through a group of Victorian Traditional Owner Elders and Knowledge holders meeting as the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group. We unwaveringly support the constructive thoughts and actions of this group, we hope that others see the value of continuing to inform the development of cultural fire practice and share ongoing learning in partnership with Traditional Owner groups and the broader regional and urban Victorian communities.

We have no hesitation in commending this strategy to you.

“it saddens us when existing regulatory frameworks exclude us from positively effecting sensible land management practice to reduce fire risk”

Rodney Carter, Victorian Cultural Burning Project Control Group Chair and Group CEO,
Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and Djandak.



PURPOSE AND VISION

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy is to reinvigorate cultural fire through Traditional Owner led practices across all types of Country and land tenure; enabling Traditional Owners to heal Country and fulfil their rights and obligations to care for Country.

OUR VISION

Future generations of Victorian Traditional Owners will grow-up observing their Elders leading the use of the right fire for Country.

They will be trusted to know the special reasons why fire is used and how it brings health to the land and people.

Their children and grandchildren will see culturally valuable plants and animals return to Country and know their stories.

Victorian Traditional Owners wish to emphasise the inter-generational nature of this change, the fact that cultural fire is really about people and that trust must be given, placing authority in people's hands. The First Peoples of Victoria further stress that using fire to realise culturally meaningful objectives will also achieve risk reduction as a complementary outcome.



ENABLING PRINCIPLES

The principles presented here are specific to cultural burning and have been drawn from interviews and discussion with elders and fire knowledge holders. These principles build on those in other work focused on facilitating Indigenous involvement in land management.²



PRINCIPLE 1

Cultural Burning is Right Fire, Right Time, Right Way and for the right (cultural) reasons according to Lore. There are different kinds of cultural fire practices guided by Lore applicable across Victoria's Countries.

PRINCIPLE 4

Monitoring, evaluation and research support cultural objectives and enable adaptive learning. MER will be used to build a body of evidence that allows cultural burning to occur and grow.

PRINCIPLE 2

Burning is a cultural responsibility.³ Traditional Owners lead the development and application of fire practice on Country; the responsibilities and authority of Traditional Owners are recognised and respected.⁴

PRINCIPLE 5

Country is managed holistically. Traditional Owners manage Country holistically to address multiple values and objectives, healing both Country and culture. Partnership arrangements and management objectives are tailored to each regional and cultural landscape context. This includes analysis of the tenure, regulatory and operational arrangements to support cultural fire application, other beneficial Indigenous management practices, together with a process of learning to continuously improve planning, management and action.

PRINCIPLE 3

Cultural fire is living knowledge. Aboriginal fire knowledge is shared for continual learning and adaptive management. Traditional Owners will work together on each other's Country to heal Country and guide practice development. Knowledge and practice are shared.

PRINCIPLE 6

Cultural Fire is healing. There are substantial positive impacts to Traditional Owner wellbeing and confidence through providing access and authority to practice on Country.

² Such as Parks Victoria's *Managing Country Together*, CFA's *Koori Inclusion Action Plan (2014-2019)* and DELWP's *Aboriginal Inclusion Plan 2016-2020*.

³ Comment by the Traditional Owner Fire Knowledge Group, at a Reading Country event, Eastern Maar (Cape Otway), February 13-14, 2018.

⁴ Noting "Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs". Article 11.1 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-1> [accessed 04 Sep 2018].

WHAT IS CULTURAL FIRE?

Cultural burns are performed at the right time of the year and in the right conditions.

Aboriginal [cultural] fire is caring for Country⁶.

Cultural burns are used for cultural purposes - they are not simply about asset protection. Cultural burns protect sites and clear access through Country for cultural uses - hunting, access to fish traps, ceremony etc.⁷

Our vision for fire and as a cultural indicator is to see multiple plumes of smoke in the landscape, this is what the newcomers to Country saw and recorded. Cultural fire is a tool for gardening the environment.⁸

Cultural burning is about what fire brings back, the herbs and the grasses and what we can utilise.⁹

There is only one fire and that is Right Fire, fire for your Country.¹⁰

I like the word cultural fire. This is part of Lore. It's a cultural learning pathway. Healing Country and family. Fire is a tool to heal and bring back Right Way according to Lore. If you are doing the right thing (according to Right Way) you will get the right outcome.¹¹

Cultural fire is practicing my culture, more than just about burning.¹²

Prior to European contact, Aboriginal peoples across Australia used fire as a tool for managing Country. The cultural use of fire is a socially and ecologically complex practice, governed by kinship, eldership, spiritual connections to Country and environmental interactions with fire. Cultural landscapes that extend beyond and across western administrative boundaries imposed through colonisation are also considered. Aboriginal Victorians used cultural burning for a wide range of purposes, including protecting Country, providing habitat for wildlife and the harvesting of resources.

5 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group.

6 Gunditj Mara elder, at a meeting of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, February 2018.

7 Gunditj Mara elder, at a meeting of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, February 2018.

8 Dja Dja Wurrung elder, at a meeting of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, November 2017.

9 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, 28 March 2018.

10 Tagalaka man in discussion with Victorian Cultural Fire Knowledge Holders at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018.

11 Bundjalung man in discussion with Victorian Fire Knowledge Holders, Cape Otway 2018.

12 Wiradjuri man at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018.

STRENGTHENING CULTURAL BURNING IN VICTORIA

European colonisation has significantly impacted upon Traditional Owner rights and obligations to care for Country, including the practice of cultural burning. The departure from cultural burning practices has resulted in significant ecological changes to Victoria's natural environment and increased risks to life and property.

There is growing recognition of both the value of and need for Indigenous knowledge in natural resource management. Indigenous participation and collaboration in land management activities, such as cultural burning, is now common practice in many parts of the world and the ecological benefits of cultural burning are well recognised in scientific literature.¹³ The practice and impacts of cultural fire are also increasingly featured in interpretive information available to the general public.¹⁴

Here in Victoria, Traditional Owners have strong aspirations to increase collaboration with land and fire management agencies to facilitate the re-introduction of cultural burning in Victoria's natural landscapes; allowing for healing and caring for Country.¹⁵

The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy (the Strategy) provides a set of principles and strategic priorities to facilitate greater self-determination for Traditional Owners and provide a policy and practice framework for effective, Traditional Owner led cultural fire management in Victoria.

Recognising the complex regulatory and operational environment in which contemporary fire management in Victoria takes place, the Strategy allows for a period of transition to better align current fire management practices and cultural burning.

13 For an introduction see Gammage, Bill 2011, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland, London; Gott, Beth 2005, 'Aboriginal fire management in south-eastern Australia: aims and frequency', *Journal of Biogeography*, Vol. 32, pp.1203-1208; Gott, Beth 2012, 'Indigenous Burning and the Evolution of Ecosystem Biodiversity', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, Vol. 124, No.1, pp.56-60; Hateley, Ron,

The Victorian bush : its 'original and natural' condition, 1st ed., Polybractea Press, South Melbourne, 2010; Jones, Rhys, 'Fire-stick Farming', *Australian Natural History*, Vol. 16, Sept 1969, pp. 224-228; Pyne, S. J., *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia*, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1991.

14 Victorian Cultural Burning Strategy Project Plan (2017).

15 *ibid.*

FIRE DREAMING - ABORIGINAL CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL INTERESTS IN FIRE

The cultural, social and spiritual meaning of cultural burning to Aboriginal Victorians is demonstrated in historical and contemporary accounts of Aboriginal dreaming stories. These stories date back many thousands of years and are firmly situated in the ecological and social contexts of South-Eastern Australia.

DREAMING STORIES CAN BE USED TO INFORM CONTEMPORARY POLICY STATEMENTS AS THEY SHOW US HOW TO BEHAVE TOWARDS EACH OTHER AND THE ENVIRONMENT.

These stories are integral to informing the way in which we understand the importance of cultural burning and how we develop frameworks that facilitate the cultural application of fire in the contemporary Victorian landscape.

The narratives presented here do not represent the breadth of cultural knowledge held by Aboriginal Victorians regarding fire. Dreaming stories about fire and cultural burning are numerous and diverse. Much of the knowledge about fire and Country is culturally sensitive and passed generationally within the context of a living culture and a landscape of spiritual power that must be navigated with care.

Historically, written accounts of dreaming stories can be found in amateur European ethnographic records from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Included in the text are a number of Dreamtime stories captured in ethnographic accounts that give a taste of how fire has been articulated.

A. L. P. Cameron provides an example of the central nature of fire in the lifeworld of Aboriginal people in the pre-colonial central Murray riverine. In his account of Wadi Wadi belief, a creator being in the form of a codfish called *Pandowinda* possessed fire which he used exclusively with the assistance of *Kerambin*, the water rat. The other animal beings, reportedly called '*bukumurri*' by Cameron's informant, grew increasingly angry at *Pandowinda* for keeping the secret of fire to himself and banded together to obtain it. After a long series of conversations in which various plans were put forward and rejected, *Keridka* the hawk determined to fly to the sun on his own and bring back fire for everyone.ⁱ

British Ethnographer James Fraser presents another account of the same story recorded by Cameron in which the Cod *Pandawinda* and the water-rat *Koorambin* were *Bookoomuri* – creator beings changed into animals. As in the previous story, *Pandawinda* and *Koorambin* jealously guarded the secret of fire until one day *Karigari*, the hawk, saw them in a reed bank cooking mussels and caused the fire they were cooking on to blaze out of control by flapping his wings and causing a whirlwind to scatter burning ashes and coals among the reeds. This not only gave the secret of fire to the other animals. It also resulted in a conflagration which burned all of the trees near the river and created the plains that surround the Murray River to this day.ⁱⁱ

He goes on to discuss a similar story from the Tati-Tati, neighbours of the Wadi-Wadi. In the Tati Tati version of this story recorded by Cameron, the water-rat, whom they call *Ngwoorangbin*, lived in the Murray River and had a large hut, where he kept fire to cook the mussels which he brought out of the water. He jealously guarded this fire. But one day whilst he was down in the river gathering mussels, a spark flew out and was caught by *Kiridka* (a small hawk). They say that the hawk then used the spark to burn down *Ngwoorangbin's* house and a large tract of forest. Thus, *Kiridka* also created the plains along which the Murray River now flows.ⁱⁱⁱ

The work of amateur ethnographer and pastoralist James Dawson, who lived for many years near Camperdown in Victoria, and was appointed Protector of Aborigines in the Western Districts, also reports of stories of fire. Dawson wrote that the crows inhabiting the Grampians were the sole keepers of fire jealously guarded it against all others. A firestick was taken from the crows by *Yuuloin keear* ('fire-tail wren') and was in turn stolen by a hawk called *Tarrakukk* who then set the country alight and brought fire to all.^{xi}

Squatter and grazier Edmund Curr partially recorded accounts of fire from central Northern Victoria and from Gippsland. Curr, who himself relied on information supplied by the Rev. John Bulmer, first manager of the Lake Tyers mission station, reported that the bringer of fire in Gippsland was *Bimba-mrit* ('the fire-tailed finch').^x Fraser linked Dawson's reporting and noted that these two accounts were very much the same.^{xi}

Squatter and pastoralist Peter Beveridge also recorded a Wadi Wadi story concerning the role of fire in how the *Mitthean* (the Robin Red-Breast) gained its distinctive markings. An account of this recorded in Aldo Massola's work^{xii} describes how *Mitthean* became angry and threw a burning coal on to the breast of his brother-in-law, thus giving him a distinct red mark on his breast.

Drawing on early Scottish colonial and missionary Christina Smith, Fraser presents a creation story about fire from the Maar speaking people of "the extreme south-eastern corner of South Australia".^{xiii} While Fraser, after Smith, identifies these people as *Booandik*, it is important to note that the following stories are more than likely also associated with the *Gundidj Mara*, the Maar speaking people immediately on the Victorian side of the border. In Fraser's version of Smith's account, *Mar* the cockatoo kept the secret of fire to himself but the secret was revealed after he was spied upon by his fellow cockatoos while lighting a fire to cook a kangaroo that they had given him. Later, the fire was stolen from him by one of the other cockatoos as he lay sleeping. In response to this, *Mar* became angry and "set the grass on fire, and burnt the whole country from Mount Schanck to Guichen Bay".^{xiv} *Croom* the musk duck then "clapped and shook his wings, and so brought the water that fills the lakes and swamps".^{xv} Fraser also reports another, more detailed, version of this story in which humans are transformed into animals by their actions and according to their intentions in the acquisition of fire.^{xvi}

Fraser reports the stories of the procurement of fire originating in Gippsland. In this story, fire, or *Toñ-er-a*, was in the possession of two women who guarded it very closely until it was stolen by a man who had feigned affection for them. The man brought a fire-stick from the women's camp to the rest of the people and afterwards turned into a little bird has a red mark over his tail, which is the mark of the fire.^{xvii}

Robert Brough-Smyth, Chairman of the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines presents a further two stories recorded from the Kulin people of the Victoria he came into contact with in Melbourne.

The first of these concerns the people of the Yarra River who we may well think of as Woiwurrung. In this account, the ability to make fire, or *Weenth*, was possessed by a woman called *Kar-ak-ar-ook*, who kept fire in the end of her yam-stick. In order to obtain fire from her, *Waung* the crow filled an ant nest with snakes and, when *Kar-ak-ar-ook* who attacked her when she dug into the nest in search of ant eggs. *Kar-ak-ar-ook* hit the snakes with her yam-stick and, as she did, fire fell onto the ground and was picked up by *Waung* who then coveted it as jealously as *Kar-ak-ar-ook* had done. This eventually came to the attention of the great being *Pund-jel* (or *Bunjil*) who encouraged the people to scold *Waung* for his selfishness. *Waung* then became angry and sought to burn them by setting fire to the country. The people were then able to obtain fire and use it thereafter.^{xviii} *Waung* was then burned to death by two young men, *Tchert-tchert* and *Trrar*, who were lost or consumed by the fire and now appear as two large stones at the foot of the *Dan-den-ong* mountain.^{xix}

The second concerns their coastal neighbours, the Bunurong. In this version, two women were digging for ant eggs when they were attacked by snakes. One of the women struck at a snake and broke her *Kan-nan*, or fighting stick, which then caught on fire. The fire was, however, then stolen by *Waung* the crow who was chased by two young men called *Toordt* and *Trrar*. During the chase, *Waung* dropped the burning stick onto the earth and caused a great conflagration in which *Toordt* and *Trrar* disappeared. *Pund-jel* spoke to the people and warned them that, now they had the fire, they should be careful never to lose it. He then showed *Toordt* and *Trrar* to them one more time before taking them into the heavens where they became stars.

As time went on, the people lost the ability to make fire and the country was infested by snakes (*Ood-yul-yul Kornmul*). *Pal-yang*, who had created women from water, sent *Kar-ak-ar-ook* down from the heavens to guard the women from the snakes. *Kar-ak-ar-ook* went around the country killing the snakes with a very long fighting stick, called a *nerrim-nerrim kan-nan*, which also broke and burst into flame. Again, *Waung* the crow stole the burning stick and flew away with it.

When *Toordt* and *Trrar* returned to visit the people, they were told of the story and that *Waung* had taken the fire to a mountain called *Nun-ner-woon*. They then flew to the mountain and took fire from *Waung*. *Trrar* brought fire back to the people by keeping the fire safely alive in the bark of trees he had pulled off in order to keep the fire, "as is usually done by the Aborigines when they are travelling".^{xx} *Toordt*, on the other hand, burned to death on a mountain called *Mun-ni-o* attempting to keep the fire alive. It appears he made the fire too close to a tree Brough-Smyth has recorded as a *Mello-an* tree and the inference is that the tree caught on fire and burned him to death.^{xxi}

Brough-Smyth added that some 'sorcerers or priests' claim *Toordt* was placed in the heavens by *Pund-jel* and is now the planet Mars.^{xxii} After all of this, *Kar-ak-ar-ook* again warned the women not to lose the secret of fire and *Trrar* took the men to a mountain where wood suitable for fire-sticks could be found and taught them how to make a fire of their own.^{xxiii}

Brough-Smyth also mentions a fire story, told to him by one Mr. Stanbridge, of the people of the Mallee near Lake Tyrrell in which the Boorong of the Mallee in the vicinity of Lake Tyrrell recalled that fire was brought to earth by *Waung* the crow (who is also the star Canopus).^{xxiv}

Finally, he relates the following of the story of fire from the people of Lake Condah in South-western Victoria in which fire was brought to earth after a man named *Eun-nerct* threw a spear into the sun to which a string was attached. The man then climbed to the sun and brought fire back to earth with him. *Eun-nerct* later transformed into a bat.^{xxv}

Importantly, dreaming stories are not simply narratives consigned to history. The cultural importance of fire is still alive in the knowledge and traditions of contemporary Aboriginal Victoria. As Traditional Owners were consulted throughout Victoria for the development of this document, stories of fire emerged from the many conversations had about the importance of cultural burning practices. A Ngintait elder of the Wergaia people (of Lake Cullulleraine in North West Victoria) shared a fire story that spans most of North-West Victoria. The narrative tells of how fire was used to create a fertile and fecund landscape capable of sustaining a considerable human population for many thousands of years without pause.

Although this account was recorded it cannot be shared publically due to the significance of the story for the peoples of that region and the shared ownership of such dreaming stories in Aboriginal societies. It is not within the scope of this research to seek permission from the many people who would rightfully be able to provide it from the many groups who share the story. It is, however, mentioned here in order to highlight the interconnected nature of Aboriginal knowledge of Country and the deep insight from which it comes.

This contemporary account demonstrates that, while many aspects of Aboriginal culture have been suppressed by the colonial experience, the stories and understanding of fire throughout Aboriginal Victoria have continued to be passed on generationally. It is imperative that people continue to tell dreaming stories about the cultural use of fire. An important outcome of this Strategy will be the promotion of opportunities to continue to share fire dreaming stories.

These narratives highlight the centrality of fire and practices relating to fire in the culture of the different Aboriginal societies in Victoria. In them, fire is life. It is a sacred thing that comes from the sky and must be carefully nurtured and controlled to manage Country. Dreaming stories about fire contain knowledge that forms the bedrock of cultural fire practices for Aboriginal people throughout Victoria.

Within the Victorian Cultural Fire Strategy Knowledge Group, these stories are shared and utilised to re-invigorate the practice of cultural burning throughout the many different Victorian ecological and political landscapes. This knowledge and these practices are now beginning to be pieced together to provide a platform from which all Victorians may benefit from a more sustainable, healthier and safer environment.

OBJECTIVES AND PROGRAM COMPONENTS

The Strategy outlines four objectives and corresponding program components with possible actions that will enable Traditional Owners to lead the practice of cultural burning according to the six principles described above and support them to meet their vision of healthy people restored to healthy Country.

Realising these objectives will require time frames that accommodate the need to pass cultural knowledge across generations and for the restoration of Country. Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation of these objectives will need to be conducted using timeframes, methods and processes that are culturally appropriate.

OBJECTIVE 1

Develop operational pathways that enable Traditional Owners to lead the planning and to undertake cultural burns across all land tenures and Country types according to their cultural obligations.

PROGRAM COMPONENT 1

Managing the transition to cultural burning and healthy Country.

RATIONALE

For the successful re-introduction of cultural burning in Victoria, Traditional Owners acknowledge that a period of transition is required to accommodate the contemporary regulatory framework surrounding fire management and the changed conditions in Victoria's natural landscapes. In many cases, Traditional Owners will need to adapt the thresholds and indicators for right fire (as part of Reading Country) and adopt an adaptive management approach. Where complementary practices¹⁶ can be established, this will facilitate a safe environment for Country, culture, life and property. These practices will enable cultural burning to *heal* or restore 'sick' Country (cultural landscape systems and processes currently imbalanced) and work towards creating an environment where cultural fire can be applied once again to *manage* Country (creation and maintenance of resilient cultural landscape systems and processes).

¹⁶ Complimentary practises refer to Traditional Owner led Indigenous and other contemporary practises aiming to create a safe environment for the reintroduction of cultural fire to the landscape, including water management, forest gardening (silviculture) and mechanical treatment.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Within the current regulatory framework in Victoria, there are a number of mechanisms that recognise the importance of Aboriginal involvement in fire and land management. These include:

- **Safer Together:** The Victorian Government's approach to reduce the risk of bushfire in Victoria. The approach has a strong focus on agency partnerships and community partnerships as well as stronger relationships with Traditional Owners.
- **The Code of Practice for the Management of Fire on Public Land:** adopts a risk-based approach to bushfire management and planning. While the Code offers protection in terms of bushfire risk to 'material' cultural heritage, it does not acknowledge that Right Fire can heal Aboriginal people and Country.
- At the federal level, the **National Bushfire Policy Statement for Forests and Rangelands:** promotes Indigenous Australians' use of fire and recommends, where relevant and possible, that traditional burning practices are integrated into land management to enhance bushfire management and risk mitigation in Australian landscapes.

Despite the existence of supporting statements and mutual objectives in current government policies, there are numerous policy and regulatory constraints. This means that Traditional Owners have limited authority, resources and capacity to develop and apply cultural fire practices on Country according to the principles described in the strategy. For instance, the process governing the development of Joint Fire Management Plans (JFMPs) for planned burning is still difficult for Traditional Owners to navigate and engage with. The JFMPs do not yet offer an easy way for Traditional Owners to nominate burns for cultural reasons e.g. community healing, restoration of culturally significant species. These plans also primarily adopt a risk-based approach to fire management; focusing on the protection of life and property. This approach offers limited scope for more nuanced reasons for the application of fire.

While there has been recent progress towards reflecting Traditional Owner priorities in JFMPs (e.g. the recent cultural burn at Mt Egbert near Wedderburn by Dja Dja Wurrung and the appointment of a Traditional Owner to a senior fire planning role), there is a need for fire agencies to adapt to the capacities and interests for a range of cultural fire development pathways of other Traditional Owner knowledge holders in fire management across Victoria. Collaboration with DELWP, including through appointment as staff, has been effective to meet Dja Dja Wurrung aspirations and needs. However at this time not all Victorian Traditional Owners want to appoint their countrymen and women as staff in DELWP to be able to practice cultural burning.

Land tenure also poses limitations on the ability of Traditional Owners to practice cultural burning. Traditional Owners have applied cultural fire over millennia without regard to tenure boundaries imposed during the colonial period. This enabled Traditional Owners to plan cultural burns within a *cultural* landscape context, assessing and managing Country in such a way that accounted for multiple values, including spiritual, social and environmental.

Currently, cultural burning in Victoria is undertaken on Aboriginal freehold land or private land (with permission of landholders), with CFA involvement.

CFA has also worked with Traditional Owners on a limited number of burns on Council managed properties¹⁷ and there has also been culturally informed burning in state forest reserves by Dja Dja Wurrung staff in partnership with DELWP. However, significant institutional and policy barriers still need to be overcome to enable cultural (Traditional Owner led) burning in all institutional and Country contexts. For example, where appropriate, Traditional Owners would like to practice some cultural burns under conditions of Country which are considered by Traditional Owners to offer extremely low risk –without the need for Personal Protective Equipment/uniforms/pre-burn training etc. and other overt signs of non-Aboriginal institutions at work.

¹⁷ Wurundjeri elder, Pers. Comm. 2018.

Aboriginal communities need to follow cultural protocols and break down government and structural barriers to enable communities to conduct burns as they once did in Victoria, and as they still do in other parts of the country.¹⁸

Ngintait Elder talks about having controlled burns backed up by the CFA and the fire brigade and the use of wind breaks and other standard fuel reduction burn techniques. When it is pointed out that this is not cultural burning, [Ngintait Elder] responds:

*Yeah but it's still protecting the country.
So you gotta look at it both ways sometimes.*

When asked about how country would be transitioned to a state in which regular cultural burning could occur, he said further:

You're gonna burn it regularly ... nor are you gonna burn the country that you don't want to burn, you know what I mean? Just the sites where the rubbish are. But first up you have to do something to protect the other ones. I mean you don't want those big old gum trees burning for a month or so.¹⁹

When asked if [Ngintait Elder] thought there was a space in which Traditional Owner fire management practices and State fire management policy could work together, he replied:

The government one I feel would control it because that's their way on the political side of it. But the TO's, if we took it outright and did a cultural burn off, we'd have better control of the country ... I know we can't burn the country on our own. I know we still need the CFA firetruck and bla bla bla before we start, but, as for that, I'd rather see the TOs doing it than Government staff [Here [Ngintait Elder] is talking about TOs manning the trucks] ... If we do it the Government way, they just burn the country down. It doesn't mean a thing to them in the cultural sense of things. We're doing it for a reason. We're looking after country.

A Tagalaka man, in discussion with Victorian Fire Knowledge Holders at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, said:

There is a huge gap in [the] knowledge of the management of National Parks. They have been locked up for 50 years.²⁰

The excerpts of research notation below provide examples of the complexities involved in bringing country back to health and the depth of understanding needed to navigate both fire safety management and cultural burning regimes:

... any shift from a fuel reduction to a cultural burning regime needs to be done over the course of about 10 years because the Country needs to be prepared for that change. At the moment it is not ready to respond properly to cultural burning because fuel reduction burning has affected it so badly. Hence there needs to be a change from one regime to another.²¹

.....suggested transitional arrangements for healing Country [as align to existing approaches e.g. Healthy Parks, Healthy People] are needed over a 10 year period. That after a period of fuel reduction burning (say 3 years), when fuel loads are down, we can transition into cultural burning (fire stick farming). The community is then not so nervous. Community safety needs to be at the forefront [of the fuel reduction burning phase]. We can start to take control after.²²

We're gonna need to do some small burns to clean up the years of litter and weeds first, before we can get back to doing proper cultural burning. This is a process of decolonising the land.²³

With fire, we are not going to get it right every time and we need to re-learn what to look for to tell us the right time to burn.²⁴

18 Dja Dja Wurrung man.

19 Ngintait Elder, key informant interview, Lake Cullulleraine, 20 May 2018.

20 Tagalaka man, in discussion with Victorian Cultural Fire Knowledge Holders at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018.

21 NRM Committee, 2017.

22 NRM Committee, 2017.

23 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, February 2018.

24 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, February 2018.

Country is not the same due to the introduced species [and changed fuel and fire patterns] and adapting this knowledge will take time.²⁵

There was [a] discussion about procedures to protect cultural places as part of Fire Operations Plans. That we need to put something in the framework [cultural burning strategy] to make sure Traditional Owners are consulted and to say how cultural sites can be identified and protected [with Right Fire].²⁶

With fire we are not going to get it right every time and we need to re-learn what to look for to tell us the right time to burn.²⁷

Country is not the same due to the introduced species [and changed fuel and fire patterns] and adapting this knowledge will take time.²⁸

A Wurundjeri elder brought up the fact that a cultural burning regime can only be conducted on Country that had been brought back to health. Until the Country was in a place where a cycle of fire farming practices could be used annually, it could not be the subject of a cultural burn. In this, [Wurundjeri Elder] was calling for a raft of appropriate remedial burns to be taken to first bring Country back to health.²⁹

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- Identify, establish and grow key partnerships with fire agencies and land managers
- Identify pilots over the next five years to showcase and test different institutional arrangements that enable Traditional Owners to lead practice and develop proof of concept on different Countries.
- Identify regulatory barriers to practicing cultural burning and workshop and trial methods of removing these barriers in partnership with relevant agencies and stakeholders.
- Monitor and evaluate the process of resetting and healing in different types of Country through cultural burning.


SICK COUNTRY		HEALTHY COUNTRY
Landscapes with high fuel load.	Creation of firm policy and structural governance relationships reflecting partnership, with appropriate bodies (DELWP/CFA/Parks Victoria etc.).	Landscapes with normal fuel load.
Public safety is the first consideration.	Development of complementary practices and processes.	Public safety is the first consideration.
Management to largely a single objective (fuel reduction).	Reducing harmful effects on Country due to 'hot burns'.³⁰	Management to multiple objectives and values (healing Country and culture).
The risks of introducing a cultural burning regime are high.	Development of culturally appropriate learning (education, training) and research relationships.	The risks of introducing a cultural burning regime are low.
Practices need to be developed in order to reduce fuel load while lessening the impact on Country.	Development of practices in order to transition to cultural burning whilst working with fuel reduction regimes.	Authentic cultural burning on a Country level involving groups of Traditional Owners as part of a Community of Practice.

Figure 1. Transitioning to cultural burning in Victoria

25 NRM Committee, 31 May 2017.

26 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, November 2017.

27 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, February 2018.

28 NRM Committee 31 May 2017.

29 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, Cape Otway, 2018.

30 Traditional Owners consider some Government planned burns to be too hot i.e. Not Right Fire – the fire behaviour may be too intense and can be damaging to Country. To some extent this is also a consequence of a changed environment, making initial conditions difficult to effect a cool burn.

OBJECTIVE 2

Build Traditional Owner governance and capacity in cultural fire knowledge and practice.

PROGRAM COMPONENT 2

Restore and protect the knowledge system.

RATIONALE

The transitional arrangements developed under Program Component 1 must be undertaken in parallel with Traditional Owner governed knowledge development and training. Traditional Owners will decide how consent to share knowledge is given. This is important to protect the influence (legitimacy) and integrity of the Strategy (both in development and as an end product).

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

The protection and management of Traditional Fire Knowledge is critical as knowledge has been stolen, misappropriated and disrespected in the past. In particular, Traditional Owners express three types of concerns regarding the misuse of Traditional Fire Knowledge:

- Practice is taught widely, it is incorrectly applied without authority by non-Aboriginal fire agencies under the guise of cultural burning;
- The protection of Intellectual Property associated with fire practice in Victoria is at least partly about commercial value. Some Traditional Owner groups may wish to generate commercial outcomes through contracting of Aboriginal fire crews to undertake cultural burning on private land and also for emergency management; and
- The sacred nature of Intellectual Property associated with fire.

Need a 12-month course on different types of Country. To build [a cohort] of 50-100 Indigenous scholars.³¹

On the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, Aborigines (historically) burned 2-3 paddocks with lines of trees between as a 'template' and harvested the game).³²

Puunyart (Dianella spp.) was burned in Autumn.³³

Don't teach a young person how to fight [a] fire before they've learned how to work with fire.³⁴

[We need to] teach and share knowledge through the kinship system and throughout [Australia]. [It's about] Rebuilding their [TOs] knowledge system.

[Need to] restore [rebuild] the knowledge system. The land is the boss. [you can see] the evidence in the landscape [and] the happiness and kinship [that comes from managing the land].³⁵

A community of practice to be developed, with 'regional fire circles' [as Country level clusters of practitioners].³⁶

....the challenge has been in the last fifteen years for me was applying actually traditional knowledge into contemporary landscapes.³⁷

Teaching should be On-Country. Sharing principles across landscapes. [The] Landscape is [the scale on which] where our knowledge lies and comes from. Reading Country [is part of the practice]. Shared knowledge is not sacred e.g. [knowledge of how to manage] gum tree Country, grass Country. It's OK to share [this knowledge]. [Knowledge includes] parent trees – what should be in that landscape. Includes the breeding time [and habitat requirements] of animals.³⁸

Fire promotes yam production, [its] like a warm blanket.³⁹

[But] We cant open all those doors of knowledge until the land is healthy [we will need to employ fire differently now as compared to when the land is healthy in 30 plus years time].

Fire indicators of good application of cultural fire practice include fire Scorch height less than a foot [is ideal]. Post fire assessment includes plants coming back. We never burn the canopy.⁴⁰

31 Wurundjeri Elder at a meeting of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, Cape Otway, 08 March 2018.

32 Gunditj Mara elder at a meeting of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, Cape Otway, 08 March 2018.

33 Gunditj Mara elder at a meeting of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, Cape Otway, 08 March 2018.

34 Wurundjeri Elder at a meeting of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, Cape Otway, 08 March 2018.

35 Tagalaka man, in discussion with Victorian Cultural Fire Knowledge Holders at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018.

36 Bundjalung man, in discussion with Victorian Cultural Fire Knowledge Holders at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018.

The excerpts of research notation below provide further advice about how to codify practice:

Think about keeping knowledge alive through [oral transmission of] practice and in that way TOs are in control and can't have knowledge taken inappropriately.⁴¹

One of the key concerns that emerged was the potential for the state and state-led organisations to document and codify TO knowledge about Country and turn that into courses that could be taught to non-Aboriginal people. While everyone in the room recognised that this would not result in the same level of care, they all understood that this might be something attractive to governments and local agencies that do not necessarily want to deal or make agreements with TOs.⁴²

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group act as a Victorian Community of Practice (Victorian Fire Circle) to facilitate the implementation of the Strategy.
- Develop partnerships with other knowledge holders and practitioners across jurisdictions (e.g. National Firesticks Alliance, Indigenous People's Learning Network, The Nature Conservancy (USA).
- Invest in Aboriginal and Traditional Owners fire practice networks.
- Invest in Traditional Owner led research that seeks to restore fragmented 'sleeping' fire knowledge and that builds a body of evidence of the environmental, social, economic and cultural benefits of cultural fire.
- Investigate and understand the timing of burns in different types of Country and explore options for adapting to contemporary landscapes.
- Seek opportunities to restore food, medicinal plants and fibre to Country through cultural burning.
- Align Country fire strategies with Country Plans.
- Work with Traditional Owners to ensure institutional frameworks enable and facilitate cultural fire practice across tenures.
- Develop formal training programs at a School or Academy for upskilling people on topics including Indigenous Land, Fire and Water.

37 Tagalaka man, in discussion with Victorian Cultural Fire Knowledge Holders at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018.

38 Tagalaka man, in discussion with Victorian Fire Knowledge Holders at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018

39 Yuiin Elder, at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018.

40 Tagalaka elder in discussion with Victorian Traditional Owners at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May

41 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, February 2018

42 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group 2017

OBJECTIVE 3

Improved management of state forest reserves and private land through the application of collaborative management to heal country and build resilience in people and landscapes.

PROGRAM COMPONENT 3

Holistic land management for healthy country and healthy people.

RATIONALE

Collaborative management is an administrative and cultural process that strives for transparent and equitable agreement about natural resource management. This approach incorporates a variety of partners and roles working towards multiple environmental, social and cultural goals. Collaborative management approaches have successfully been applied in many different contexts around the world.⁴³ In Australia, a key example is in the establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas.

Traditional Owners approach land management with a holistic set of practices that link the management of conservation and productive values to the environmental and cultural services upon which they depend.

Partnership arrangements and management objectives will need to be tailored to each regional and cultural landscape context. This includes analysis of the tenure, regulatory and operational arrangements to support cultural fire application, other beneficial Indigenous management practices, together with a process of learning to continuously improve planning, management and action.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Institutional arrangements for the management of public land are complex and compartmentalised. The management objectives for a particular area or reserve may be too narrow to realise all the natural and cultural values inherent in that asset and may result in unintended outcomes when other Department or agency policies, research and programs are focused on, for example, threatened

species protection, recreation or commercial timber production.

Some contemporary fire management practices can also pose risks to cultural and natural heritage. For instance, concerns have been raised by Traditional Owners regarding certain fire suppression activities, such as the use of mechanical methods to create fire breaks and the use of high impact machinery in sensitive wetlands or areas that may contain artefact scatters (close to the soil surface). The implementation of the Strategy provides an opportunity to improve land management in this regard and apply holistic land management principles and practices to protect cultural heritage.

Just as contemporary fire management practices may pose risks to cultural and natural heritage, the cultural use of fire may need to be adapted in areas where high fuel loads exist in close proximity to communities to reduce the potential risks to life and property. While cultural burning is an effective management tool in healthy Country, fire management practice in landscapes with high fuel loads will need careful two-way capacity building between Traditional Owners and contemporary fire managers until Country health is restored and associated risks lowered.

Fire gives us an opportunity for reconciliation.⁴⁴

We didn't want big bulldozer tracks [creating risks to cultural heritage.]⁴⁵

Vegetation removal and [cool] burning around aboriginal art sites are undertaken to protect them. Hotter fires can slough off the [granite] rock faces and destroy the art.⁴⁶

...they could've kept it [wildfire] under control. Even now you've got ... You're overstocked ... millions of trees around everywhere. There shouldn't be. They should be burning off first ... that way you get better growth too. That applies to this country here too. It should be no different here. Even down that Lindsay way [Lindsay Island], you know, the flats and all that. I wouldn't mind doing a cultural burn off down there some day. Or we could head out to Lindsay Island, cross Harling Bridge and Brecament Bridge. Head out on my old stamping roads and all that there. All that area needs burning, and we can come back and get it.⁴⁷

⁴³ Under many guises, including the Indigenous Protected Area program in Australia. For example, see R.J. Fisher Experiences, challenges and prospects for collaborative management of protected areas: an international perspective. In Louise B. Buck, Charles C. Geisler, John Schelhas and Eva Wollenberg (eds) *Biological Diversity: Balancing Interests Through Adaptive Collaborative Management*. CRC Press: Boca Raton, Florida, 2001.

⁴⁴ Bundjalung man, in discussion with Victorian Cultural Fire Knowledge Holders at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018.

⁴⁵ Gunditj Mara Elder at Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group meeting, Cape Otway 2018.

⁴⁶ Wiradjuri man at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018

⁴⁷ Ngait Elder during a key informant interview at Lake Cullulleraine, 20 May 2018.

*At the end of the day, that's what we're trying to do – Heal the country, coz it's sick, and we're sick and we gotta heal the country.*⁴⁸

Can we achieve a landscape burning methodology that will be conducive to more food and fibre in the landscape? Need to understand if macropods are encouraged in [by cultural burning or the hybrid methods used at the moment].⁴⁹

[Gunditj Mara man] pointed out that traditional burning practices are all about food – resetting the country to the right conditions for it to flourish with the different varieties of flora and fauna used by Aboriginal people to survive and thrive. He also said the country produced signs that could be read that would indicate when it was ready to be burned:

*“You see it in the country when it's the right time to burn.”*⁵⁰

[Need to] asses what Country should be like and heal it with the application of knowledge, not research.⁵¹

Fuel [burning] burns too hot and is too toxic for a healthy environment. Monitoring is essential in order to build a body of data that shows cultural burning is better for the environment and safer for people generally.⁵²

Importantly, [Gunditj Mara Elder] notes that TFMPs [Traditional Fire Management Plans] still have to be conducted in the contemporary world with the restraints that that imposes:

*But then you've got all of this infrastructure – we got fences, we got poles, we got houses, we got everything. We can't do burns like we used to. So we have to adapt and move forward with that adaptation.*⁵³

[Ngtait elder] makes the point that, before any burn, Country has to be walked over by TOs to ensure that nothing of cultural heritage significance, particularly human remains, will be disturbed or destroyed in the burning or in the creation of fire breaks. This means also that, where burning is necessary, there needs to be thought given to protecting significant sites, artefacts and areas while still allowing the burn to go ahead.

When asked if walkovers are definitively a TO led process even now, the [Ngintait elder] responded:

*See when we interpret that thing; we get to look at what's your criteria and what's our criteria. Then we work together in discussing it, you know what I mean? It can't be a one-way street. It has to be a joint adventure. It's a collective. That's the only way we're going to get through this sort of stuff.*⁵⁴

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- Identify and progress a minimum of five pilots in a more collaborative, true partnership approach to both planning, resourcing and management.
- Conduct joint walkovers of planned burn sites and develop more sensitive measures for fire protection (e.g. creating breaks to protect heritage sites using a wet line, a small burn or by using rake hoes).
- Investigate the potential impact of cultural fire in restoring ecological functions and reducing fuel loads.
- Apply the full suite of Indigenous land and water management practices to heal and manage Country.
- Ensure institutional objectives and settings capture the contribution of cultural burning to Aboriginal health and well-being outcomes through Caring for Country.

48 Dja Dja Wurrung man at an NRM Committee meeting, 15 November 2017.

49 Dja Dja Wurrung elder at an NRM Committee meeting, 10 May 2017.

50 Gunditj Mara man at a meeting of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, Cape Otway, 08 March 2018.

51 Tagalaka man in discussion with Victorian Cultural Fire Knowledge Holders at the South East Aboriginal Fire Forum, 11 May 2018.

52 Dja Dja Wurrung woman elder at a meeting of Victorian Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, Cape Otway 08 March 2018.

53 Gunditj Mara elder at a cultural burning event, Wurdji Youang Indigenous Protected Area (Little River), 6 May 2018.

54 Ngintait elder, key informant interview, Lake Cullulleraine, 20 May 2018.

OBJECTIVE 4

Facilitate the development and strengthening of institutional frameworks that support cultural fire practice.

PROGRAM COMPONENT 4

Embedding cultural fire practice.

RATIONALE

While it is likely that there are sites where the application of cultural fire poses little risk to life and property, Traditional Owners will need to be trained in fire and natural resource management for safety reasons. Fire and natural resource management training could also offer opportunities for the commercial contracting of Indigenous emergency crews; providing Traditional Owners with a potential source of employment. This is especially true during the transitional phase from Sick Country to Healthy Country where a range of culturally appropriate Natural Resource Management 'interventions' may need to be applied (e.g., thinning and slashing in very sick high fuel load Country).

..... we have people working on Country. Our problems are not [getting authority and organising] burning. We need our language and protocols to be brought back (including in Department led burns). We need to break down barriers in the Department and have a say in how that Country is burned. It's all on the FOPs (Fire Operations Plans) at the moment. We need our kids, aunts and uncles to be brought back⁵⁵

[We need to] build frameworks to support the practice. You [Agencies] need to authorise employed staff to do things the Right Way.⁵⁶

That 6-month seasonal appointments were not enough. Field Service Officers (FSOs) should be made permanent [positions]. The FSOs should be educated on the right time to burn. We need training in fire behaviour⁵⁷

In re-constituting fire practice, we need two main pathways – one is on private land where restrictions are less. The other is with government agencies on public land, so we can influence the system from within.⁵⁸

Incorporate learning into Safer Together; code of practice to acknowledge cultural burning.⁵⁹

...talked about the need for a cultural burning pro-forma (protocol) to be developed and gazetted. We need to be clear which type of burn is being undertaken. We need to get accreditation (accredited training) for each type of burn: ecological burn, fuel reduction burn and cultural burn. We need to work with members of the Department so that we can apply our cultural burns within their guidelines and seek to influence and change them (including not to have such hot burns).⁶⁰

[it was] explained that the cost to acquire the capital equipment compliant with these types of works and to resource a few people over the weekend with the appropriate insurance, training, policy and procedures as a business activity which centres on cultural obligations is at a substantial cost. He emphasised the need for Traditional Owners to be resourced to ensure a properly integrated approach and support for investment in capital purchases is critical.⁶¹

We need to be empowered to deliver this [current] legal framework [for fire], including SMEAQS etc.⁶²

55 Dja Dja Wurrung man, Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group Event, February 2018.

56 Bundjalung man, Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group Event, February 2018.

57 Yorta Yorta man, Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group Event, February 2018.

58 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, on-Country Event, February 2018.

59 NRM Committee 31 May 2017.

60 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, November 2017.

61 NRM Committee meeting 31 May 2017.

62 Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Holder Group, on-Country Event, February 2018.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- Develop partnerships through existing relevant projects (e.g. Safer Together).
- Support cultural burning practices that meet cultural and ecological objectives while also reducing the risk of damaging wildfire.
- Integrate and embed cultural burning principles into fire sector processes (including planning, monitoring, management/response) to drive and enable cultural fire.
- Establish agreed roles and responsibilities for all partners and a system for review.
- Embed cultural aspects into the existing DELWP monitoring and evaluation framework for fire management.
- Build two-way capacity between agencies and Traditional Owner fire managers; providing opportunities for Traditional Owners to serve as advisors in all aspects of fire management.
- Provide employment, equipment, accredited training and career development for Traditional Owners.
- Establish and embed processes and standards for a culturally safe working environment.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

For the Aboriginal peoples of the lands now known as Victoria, the cultural, social, ritual and spiritual significance of fire cannot be overstated. The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy offers a way forward where Traditional Owners can practice cultural burning within the contemporary Victorian landscape.

In order to realise the ambitious vision and objectives in this Strategy, the following next steps have been identified:

- Development of scenarios or examples of different conditions for undertaking cultural burning, so procedural pathways and practice can be developed.
- Development and implementation of a Strategy Implementation Plan (including resourcing).
- Building two-way capacity through the development of more effective ways to link modern fire management with traditional burning practices.
- Understanding the role of science in supporting the re-emergence of a sophisticated and evolving knowledge base capable of adjusting to climate change and its many challenges that are beginning to be seen and felt across the country.

The Native Title Act (1993, *Cwth*) and the Traditional Owner Settlement Amendment Act (2016, *Vic*) provide an enabling legal framework to support Traditional Owners to fulfil their aspirations in healing and managing Country, as part of being formally recognised in their respected place in regional communities.

The actions outlined in this Strategy will complement and support that broader process of reconciliation as well as leveraging significant environmental, social and economic benefits in regional Victoria.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Aboriginal Victorian/s: Aboriginal person/s residing in Victoria

Country: Country is more than a place. The Indigenous relationship between people and Country is deep and intimate. From an Indigenous perspective, one belongs to Country and there is a reciprocal relationship that exists between people and Country. Country includes all of the sentient and non-sentient parts of the world and the interactions between them, according to Aboriginal lore. Indigenous lore and life originates in and is governed by Country. Country must be respected.

Traditional burning: the application of fire knowledge and practice prior to European settlement.

Cultural burning: as cultural fire (verb form).

Cultural Fire: Fire deliberately put in to the landscape authorized and led by Traditional Owners of that Country, for a variety of purposes, including but not limited to: ceremony, protection of cultural and natural assets, fuel reduction, regeneration and management of food, fibre and medicines, flora regeneration, fauna habitat protection and healing Country's spirit.

Dreaming stories: According to Aboriginal belief, all life as it is today - Human, Animal, Bird and Fish is part of one vast unchanging network of relationships which can be traced to the great spirit ancestors of the Dreamtime. The Dreamtime is the Aboriginal understanding of the world, of it's creation, and it's great stories. The Dreamtime is the beginning of knowledge, from which came the laws of existence. For survival these laws must be observed. Aboriginal Dreaming stories speak of events from the time of creation. These stories have been passed on from one generation to the next for thousands of years. Dreaming stories are also preserved in our songs and dances. These stories give us understanding of the past and have helped us survive through the laws and morals that lay within them.

Fire and land management agencies: includes agencies that participate in fire and/or land management practices including but not limited to: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Country Fire Authority, Parks Victoria, Catchment Management Authorities.

Indigenous knowledge: the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. For rural and indigenous peoples, local knowledge informs decision-making about fundamental aspects of day-to-day life. This knowledge is integral to a cultural complex that also encompasses language, systems of classification, resource use practices, social interactions, ritual and spirituality. These unique ways of knowing are important facets of the world's cultural diversity, and provide a foundation for locally-appropriate sustainable development (UNESCO⁶³).

Self-determination: All Aboriginal peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development (*article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and article 1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*⁶⁴).

Traditional Owner: Aboriginal person claiming Traditional Owner Status over a particular Country with cultural authority to act on their rights.

Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group: Traditional Owners who are the custodians of fire knowledge and practice in Victoria.

⁶³ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/priority-areas/links/related-information/what-is-local-and-indigenous-knowledge/> [accessed 03 November 2018].

⁶⁴ <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/right-self-determination> [accessed 03 November 2018].

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

Through true partnership and a co-design process, the Federation and government partners took the opportunity to demonstrate best practice in engaging Traditional Owners in strategy development to create the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy.

A collaborative governance model was created that outlined the roles of five groups involved in different aspects of strategy development (Figure 2).

The five groups were:

1. Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group.
2. A Project Control Group.
3. A Research Advisory Group.
4. The Natural Resource Management Committee of the Federation.
5. A Strategy Co-ordination Team.

The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group was empowered to operate as the institutional custodian of cultural fire knowledge and practice and as such, were at the centre of strategy development. This ensured the strategy was informed by the knowledge and practice of those at the forefront of re-establishing cultural fire in Victoria. At every meeting of the Knowledge Group notes were taken and later analysed to capture common themes that would eventually become parts of the strategy.

This thematic analysis was presented back to the group at each successive meeting to check the accuracy of interpretation and to provide opportunity to iteratively build on the material with further detail or new ideas. In this way the strategy was built around identifying the enablers and constraints on re-establishing cultural fire practice and the firsthand experiences of Traditional Owners of what helps or hinders their ability to apply cultural fire.

Focus group and key informant interviews with Elders who are the custodians of dreaming stories then enriched the Strategy. Connections between Fire Law and practice in historic and contemporary settings were revealed and better appreciated through these interviews. This strategy and its policy directions interpreted directly from the voices of Elders and knowledge holders, were confirmed and strengthened by the sharing of these stories.

A Project Control Group (PCG), made up of Traditional Owners and Agency Representatives provided oversight to strategy development, strengthened relationships with partner agencies and evaluated and attempted to resolve issues that were beyond the influence and scope of the Knowledge Group. For example, the PCG took up the matter of how to enable Elders to attend the fire ground without having to undergo the rigours of bushfire awareness training, which is currently a requirement.

A Research Advisory Group was newly formed that included members of the Knowledge Group, Strategy Co-ordination Group and research partners from Deakin University's Institute of Koorie Education. This Group designed a set of research principles to be applied in Traditional Owner-led research looking at the impacts of cultural fire. The group extended invitations to researchers across Australia to engage in research partnerships on the basis of these principles and look at the impacts on cultural, environmental and health and wellbeing outcomes.

The Natural Resource Management Committee of the Federation hosted many meetings and provided facilitated forums for strategy discussions. NRM Committee offered a ready forum, to host events and strengthened this important network by demonstrating its value to a wider audience.

The Strategy Working Group provided support to all groups, organised events, took notes and recorded stories, wrote drafts of the strategy and integrated feedback after each discussion, and managed the budget. Members of the Team came from FVTOC and DELWP who met many times over the period of strategy development, forged stronger appreciations of the operating environments of both organisations and opened up extra opportunities, such as additional funds to support over 30 Victorian Traditional Owners to attend the National Firesticks Conference in Nowra, July 2018.

Intellectual property protocols have been tailored to reflect the custodianship and authority of the Knowledge Group. All intellectual property of fire knowledge and practice is vested upon creation in the Knowledge Group. New intellectual property created through Strategy development is vested in the Federation and shared with the Department, so it can be presented as a public policy document (The Victorian Cultural Fire Strategy).

GOVERNANCE GROUPS AND PROJECT RESPONSIBILITIES FOR DEVELOPING VICTORIAN CULTURAL BURNING STRATEGY

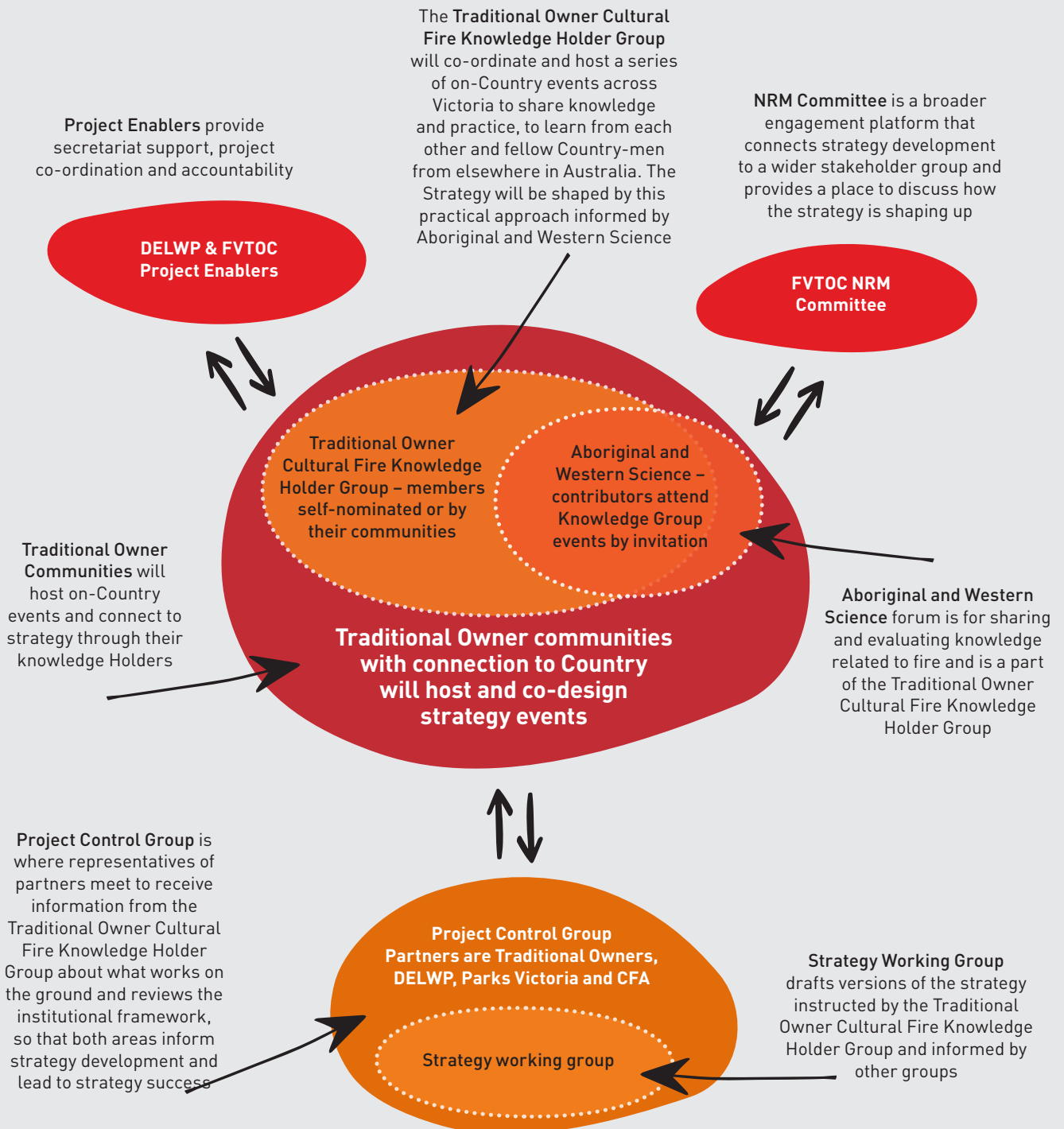


Figure 2. Governance Groups and Project Responsibilities for developing Victorian Cultural Burning Strategy

ENDNOTES

- i Cameron, A. L. P., 'Traditions and Folklore of the Aborigines of New South Wales', *Science of Man and Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Australasia*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1903, p. 46.
- ii A. L. P. Cameron, "Notes on some Tribes of New South Wales," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, xiv. (1885) p. 368, in, Fraser, J. G. (1930) *Myths of the Origin of Fire: An essay by Sir James George Fraser*. McMillan & Co: London, p: 8.
- iii A. L. P. Cameron, "Notes on some Tribes of New South Wales," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, xiv. (1885) p. 368, in, Fraser, J. G. (1930) *Myths of the Origin of Fire: An essay by Sir James George Fraser*. McMillan & Co: London, p: 8.
- iv Beveridge, Peter, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina, as seen by Peter Beveridge*, M.L. Hutchinson, Glasgow Book Warehouse: Melbourne, 1889, p. 111.
- v Beveridge, Peter, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina, as seen by Peter Beveridge*, M.L. Hutchinson, Glasgow Book Warehouse: Melbourne, 1889, p. 111.
- vi Beveridge, Peter, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina, as seen by Peter Beveridge*, M.L. Hutchinson, Glasgow Book Warehouse: Melbourne, 1889, p. 111.
- vii Beveridge, Peter, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina, as seen by Peter Beveridge*, M.L. Hutchinson, Glasgow Book Warehouse: Melbourne, 1889, p. 111.
- viii Beveridge, Peter, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina, as seen by Peter Beveridge*, M.L. Hutchinson, Glasgow Book Warehouse: Melbourne, 1889, p. 111.
- ix Dawson, J. (1881) *The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria*. George Robertson: Melbourne, p: 54.
- x Curr, E. M. (1887) *The Australian Race: Its origins, languages, customs, places of landing in Australia, and the routes by which it has spread itself over that continent*. John Ferres, Government Printer: Melbourne, vol 1, p: 548.
- xi Fraser, J. G. (1930) *Myths of the Origin of Fire: An essay by Sir James George Fraser*. McMillan & Co: London, p: 5.
- xii Beveridge, Peter, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina, as seen by Peter Beveridge*, M.L. Hutchinson, Glasgow Book Warehouse, Melbourne, 1889, p. 71, cited in Massola, Aldo, *Bunjil's Cave: Myths, Legends and Superstitions of the Aborigines of South-East Australia*, Landsdowne Press, Melbourne, 1968, pp. 462-463.
- xiii Fraser, J. G. (1930) *Myths of the Origin of Fire: An essay by Sir James George Fraser*. McMillan & Co: London, p: 10.
- xiv Smith, C. (1880) *The Booandik Tribes of South Australia: A Sketch of their Habits, Customs, Legends and Language*. E. Spiller, Government Printer: Adelaide, p: 21, in, Fraser, J. G. (1930) *Myths of the Origin of Fire: An essay by Sir James George Fraser*. McMillan & Co: London, p: 10-11.
- xv Smith, C. (1880) *The Booandik Tribes of South Australia: A Sketch of their Habits, Customs, Legends and Language*. E. Spiller, Government Printer: Adelaide, p: 21, in, Fraser, J. G. (1930) *Myths of the Origin of Fire: An essay by Sir James George Fraser*. McMillan & Co: London, p: 10-11.
- xvi Smith, C. (1880) *The Booandik Tribes of South Australia: A Sketch of their Habits, Customs, Legends and Language*. E. Spiller, Government Printer: Adelaide, p: 19-21, in, Fraser, J. G. (1930) *Myths of the Origin of Fire: An essay by Sir James George Fraser*. McMillan & Co: London, p: 13-15.
- xvii Smyth, R. B. (1878) *The Aborigines of Victoria with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*. John Ferres, Government Printer: London, p: 458.
- xviii Smyth, R. B. (1878) *The Aborigines of Victoria with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*. John Ferres, Government Printer: London, p: 459.
- xix Smyth, R. B. (1878) *The Aborigines of Victoria with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*. John Ferres, Government Printer: London, p: 459.
- xx Smyth, R. B. (1878) *The Aborigines of Victoria with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*. John Ferres, Government Printer: London, p: 459-460.
- xxi Smyth, R. B. (1878) *The Aborigines of Victoria with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*. John Ferres, Government Printer: London, p: 459-460.
- xxii Smyth, R. B. (1878) *The Aborigines of Victoria with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*. John Ferres, Government Printer: London, p: 459-460.
- xxiii Smyth, R. B. (1878) *The Aborigines of Victoria with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*. John Ferres, Government Printer: London, p: 459-460.
- xxiv Smyth, R. B. (1878) *The Aborigines of Victoria with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*. John Ferres, Government Printer: London, p: 460.
- xxv Smyth, R. B. (1878) *The Aborigines of Victoria with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*. John Ferres, Government Printer: London, p: 462.



Environment,
Land, Water
and Planning





Traditional Owners from across Victoria have gathered to take stock of Australia's unprecedented bushfire disaster which has caused so much hurt across the state. Together they have delivered this statement:

With 34 people having lost their lives, over 6,500 buildings destroyed and 18 million hectares of Country incinerated, families and communities are hurting.

Not least of all, Aboriginal communities and Traditional Owners.

We have a deep spiritual connection to - and cultural obligation to care for - Country.

When we say Aboriginal people are a part of Country, what we mean is that we belong to the natural landscape rather than it belonging to us. It is our Mother and it nurtures us.

Our ancestors proudly maintained land, water, language and culture for over 60,000 years.

Through many changes to the climate and environment, we have learnt in great detail, the natural processes of Country, it's many seasons and the behaviours of its plants and animals.

But never has it changed as dramatically as it has over the last 200 years and never has it changed with such threatening consequences as we have all experienced in recent weeks and months.

When you smell smoke in the air this bushfire season, it's not just the scent of a looming health hazard for Victoria's young and elderly, but also, you are smelling the destruction of our cultural heritage and the beautiful Country that we belong to and have Cultural Obligations to care for.

So when we look at what has been lost this bushfire season, we despair. We despair, but don't we surrender.

Last week Prime Minister told the National Press Club that "We must learn from the Indigenous Australians and their ancient practices and how to improve our resilience to these threats. They know more about this than we ever could and they stand ready to work closely with us" and on this, he's absolutely right.

Australians are at a major turning point in the way we look at our amazing continent. The way we place ourselves in the landscape, how we care for our Country and how we need to come together to create a safe and prosperous environment for future generations.

Amidst the shock at the devastation, it could be easy to jump to rash conclusions that provide a short-term reprieve. But we Traditional Owners hold a longer-term perspective which must be heard.



Governments need to change their way of thinking about land management. Simple, crude, per-hectare fuel reduction targets have the very real side-effects of stripping the land, rivers and streams of their moisture and the soil of its nutrients, threatening biodiversity, making way for pests and contributing to making future bushfire conditions worse.

Aboriginal Cultural Fire practice is not simply about fuel reduction, although fuel reduction is a key part.

Instead, cultural practices are applied all-year-round, adapting to changing seasons and climates, because its focused on a detailed, on-Country understanding of the diversity of plants and animals present in the landscape and holistically manages and cares for Country on an on-going basis.

To the Premiers' credit, the Victorian Government has been proactive, even long before this fire season, in partnering with Victorian Traditional Owners. The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Parks Victoria and the Country Fire Authority supported Traditional Owners to develop the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy, launched in May 2019. An enabling piece of work, the Strategy communicates our future together managing 'right fire, the right way'.

The strategy lays out in more detail how Traditional Owner knowledge's and systems can be respectfully integrated with contemporary practices across the state to finally see Aboriginal Country Management practices contribute to the health and safety of the whole Victorian community.

It's time to deliver the resources needed to put that strategy into action.

Empowering and resourcing Traditional Owner knowledge systems would help address the effects of climate change on the land, through practices of care and custodianship. But it must not perpetuate well-established systems of exploitation. It must happen in true partnership.

As the state and federal recovery effort continues, we hope governments take the right lessons from this disaster and that Traditional Owners' voices will be heard, because when we empower Traditional Owners, we tap into ancient knowledge systems which can help us create a more harmonious, safe and prosperous future for all Victorians.



Media Release

21 January 2020

MINISTERIAL ROUNDTABLE ON THE BUSHFIRE ENVIRONMENT RESPONSE

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, with environmental and Traditional Owner groups from around the Country, yesterday attended the Bushfire Environment Response Roundtable held by the Federal Minister for the Environment, the Hon Sussan Ley.

The meeting was a positive opportunity to strengthen Indigenous cultural knowledge and practice in landscape-level responsiveness and on-going management of Country.

The Roundtable highlighted the growing recognition of traditional knowledge and the need for collaboration across both public and private landholders as well as natural resource managers and environmental groups.

Jason Mifsud, Chair of the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, said that the Roundtable demonstrates the importance of traditional knowledge in the broader system of managing Country.

“The Federation will be working closely with Traditional Owners across the State over the coming weeks to further embed their critical role in local, State and Federal strategies and responses. We need transformational change to meet these unprecedented challenges” he said.

The Federation acknowledges Minister Ley’s constructive approach with the sector and in particular her support for greater integration of indigenous fire knowledge and practice into contemporary land management and landscape-level responses to the bushfires.

Rodney Carter, Chair of the Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy Project Control Group said, “the significant work undertaken to develop the 2019 Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy provides a strong foundation and framework for agencies to support Traditional Owners to lead the reintroduction of cultural fire in caring for Country.

“The implementation of the Strategy will need long-term support and resourcing for further development of knowledge, practice and capacity to ensure operational feasibility in a changed environment.”

Encl:

Statement to the Ministerial Bushfire Environment Roundtable 20 January 2020.

For further information or comment about this media release please contact: Matt Landolfo matthew.landolfo@fvoc.com.au or 0466 343 000.



Statement to the Ministerial Roundtable with Minister Ley

Monday 20 January, 2pm-3:30pm

Introduction

Like many, we are deeply saddened and concerned about the ongoing impact the bushfires are having on our Country and Communities. All groups are affected, it may largely be the South East this year, but all groups have concerns that their Country is equally at risk.

There can be little doubt that there is a growing interest in, and recognition of, the need to build on and invest in the Indigenous knowledge of fire for managing Country. However, we emphasise that the rights and views of Traditional Owners must be respected and understood. Aboriginal people are part of their Country and we have a deep spiritual connection and responsibility to care for Country.

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations works across Victoria with Traditional Owner organisations.

In 2019, in partnership with the State government, the Federation led the development of a State-wide Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy, which sets out a pathway for strengthening Traditional Owners' role in managing Country.

To our knowledge this is the only example of a strategic State-wide approach, and the Federation is currently developing the associated implementation planning with Traditional Owner groups.

Importance of Cultural Fire practices

Cultural Fire has a range of associated outcomes including; hazard reduction, protection of life and property and ecological regeneration. However, we underline that Cultural Fire is not a silver bullet. It is not the simple answer to this complex question. But it is part of the long term transformational change to the management of Country. We exist in a changed environment and must draw on the 65,000 plus years of Traditional Owner experience managing Country combined with the modern tools and systems available today.

We strongly believe that working together with other Land managers and communities we can influence and improve how Country is managed, including how fire is used on Country. Caring for Country is an obligation that is handed down generation by generation. Adequate resourcing and authority is needed to give effect to this and to contribute to the sustainability and productivity of all Country.

Our Focus

A key focus for us in the coming weeks is to hold a forum of Victorian Traditional Owner leaders, to build on the work to date and develop a range of strategies and options. It will look to the transformational changes required, as well as the immediate needs of communities.

There needs to be long term transformational change in practices, decision-making infrastructure and integration of indigenous knowledge systems and western science towards holistic management of Country.

Some Traditional Owner groups have established crews that contribute to the emergency response, as well as the on-going management of Country including through cultural burning. The implementation of the Strategy will need long-term support and resourcing for further development of knowledge, practice and capacity in Traditional Owner groups to undertake cultural fire practice and to ensure operational feasibility of cultural burning in a changed environment.

There also needs to be resourcing now to enable each group to engage and support the planning of future pathways forward. There is a concern that groups may not be in a position to respond to the immediate need for information and contribution to on-going inquiries or government program and policy considerations, and will not have the opportunity to bring their perspectives to the table.

Embedding cultural burning practices needs government agencies to better understand, recognise and work with Traditional Owners, as authorities in their own regions on their Country. This needs to be systematic and there is now an opportunity to develop the authority and organisational infrastructure that can integrate and collaborate with broader agencies to evolve practices that improve the resilience of Country.