



Emergency Services Foundation (ESF) Scholarship 2017

“To research and investigate
Aboriginal Fire Management
and to make recommendations that can
improve fire safety and preparedness”

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aboriginal Fire Management has been around for as long as the indigenous Australians have inhabited the lands, but the knowledge is yet to be fully incorporated into the DELWP planned burn systems which I believe needs to change. The Indigenous Australians burnt all year around using specific techniques to shape and manage the land effectively and it was my goal to learn more about how this was carried out and then discuss how these methods could be integrated into DELWP burns.

To further my knowledge on the subject I attended a four-day workshop, the National Indigenous Fire Workshop ran from Melsonby, Cape York. The event was run by local tribe members and aims to share the traditional burning knowledge passed down from generations to participants, so their techniques can be better understood and utilized nationwide.

While at this workshop I discovered that burning using traditional techniques does in fact effectively lower the fire risk to the surrounding private properties as well as the local cultural sites. The year round burning demonstrated in the work shop also showed how fuel levels have been maintained in a way that they can stop a fast growing out of control bush fire in its tracks before it gets to the point of endangering community and assets.

From the work shop I am now hoping to pass on what was learnt about traditional practices to the appropriate DELWP staff members so that they can fully understand and trust in the traditional owners and allow them to run their own planned burns when appropriate. In doing so I am hopeful that indigenous burning can be bought back into Gippsland Victoria for good and the knowledge can be passed down generations to build back one of Aboriginal Australians proud traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout their entire existence, the aboriginal people of Australia have used fire to change the vegetation in an area to suit their requirements. Fire plays a huge role within a community and can include, communication through smoke signals, clearing of tracks and areas for habitation, used to bring animals back to the area for hunting and for traditional ceremonies such as a smoking ceremony. Over time it has developed into a method of clearing large areas of land for farming which in turn lead to changes in the landscapes. Due to aboriginal people living nomadic lifestyles that followed the seasons it meant that they were continually moving fire with them and this therefore led to large areas of controlled burning which reduced the risk of out of control bushfires threatening their lives. This method of lighting up and moving around is largely lost in Gippsland Victoria these days and that is why I wanted to investigate the methods that were so successful for thousands of years and see if they can be reinstated in the state through DELWPs planned burn system.

Being an Aboriginal Australian myself I am drawn to this subject as it is something my ancestors lived by but also through my involvement with modern planned burning methods through my employment with DELWP. Being able to see both sides to the topic is important to prevent any bias opinions but helps to bridge the gap between local government agencies and local aboriginal communities.

With all the information gathered and learnt on this workshop I hope to bring them back to DELWP and have the discussion on how the appropriate methods can be integrated into the DELWP burning procedures for future planned burns and work to create better partnerships between aboriginal community members, DELWP and Country Fire Authority (CFA).

WORKSHOP DETAILS

The first part of the workshop started with a traditional smoking ceremony and a welcome to country held by the host tribe. Following the introduction, we got straight into plant identification and how this can be used in everyday life, e.g. medication or food. The identification was used to give attendees a better understanding about the importance of continuous burning is for the survival of these plants that mostly require burning to survive. This exercise lead directly into studying the landscape and how the vegetation grows and changes with the different seasons. This information is crucial when planning out a burn as it can help with potential burn boundaries but also making a good judgement on whether it is appropriate to burn at the time of year. So, by looking at the plants condition and land aspects it can prevent a burn that it too hot and kills the plants or prematurely burning when vegetation is not in the correct stage.

It was also covered in depth how the local indigenous people believe it is their responsibility to make sure that all assets are protected which included rock art and settlements. The way this was demonstrated was by taking us to some local rock art that had been affected by fire in the past. The rock art is an extremely important artifact as it tells the stories of the ancestors and was a way of communication. It was also expressed that if the locals hadn't lost the right to their land after European settlement that the continuous fuel management through burning would have prevented an uncontrolled bushfire destroying the rock art years later therefore preserving the asset for future generations.



The second part of the workshop was based around fire behavior and the practical application of plant identification and landscape reading learnt the previous days through an attempted burn around a local cultural site. Due to the weather on this day and the high RH the fire didn't burn as well as planned but was still a successful burn considering and pieced together all the learnings in a hands-on manner.

A second burn location was established to have another demonstration on a larger scale later that day in a historical area known as Battle Camp. This burn was a much better success in that the fire didn't burn to hot or high and moved calmly through the bush in the lower storage, similar to how water moves around a rock. It was amazing to think that fire that is so aggressive can be calming and easily managed through the proper execution and sound knowledge of the area.



RECOMMENDATIONS

When it comes to burning off, we can start by putting together a plan to incorporate the community and teach the next generation how to read the plants and landscape, so we can conduct successful burns and get the outcome we want to see. In partnership with DELWP and CFA, combining western fire techniques and traditional fire practices we can come up with a whole new burning technique and lead the nation in fire prevention. Training specific people to combine these techniques and work between both the community and Emergency Services will make this idea a big success and will also work towards closing the gap between government agencies and indigenous people.

Moving forward I am hoping to work closely with the planning team in my district to develop burns in high cultural value areas that can be managed by the traditional owners with the help of DELWP and CFA, giving responsibility back to the indigenous community. Overtime I am hoping this will become a normal practice so that techniques can be mastered by the local indigenous people and fire management can be used the way it was thousands of years ago, with the main goal to protect assets and cultural sites.