



Northern Australia
Environmental
Resources
Hub

National Environmental Science Programme

Protocols for Indigenous fire-management partnerships

Summary Fact Sheet

The challenge

Australia's Indigenous people have a long tradition of systematically and purposefully using fire to manage the landscape, and the positive impact of this can be seen in the defining features and health of Australia's terrestrial biodiversity and cultural ecosystems. In regions across Australia, Indigenous communities are now applying, adapting and rejuvenating Indigenous fire knowledge and landscape-burning regimes through a range of land-management activities and partnerships. This has produced a diversity of Indigenous fire-management enterprises, each of which combines and adapts the material, cultural, ecological and economic significance of fire for Indigenous people in different ways.

There is strong evidence to suggest that Indigenous people across Australia are well placed to develop rewarding livelihoods and enterprises through payment for ecosystem services (PES) schemes and land management agreements that involve Indigenous landscape burning.

Indigenous people are already securing jobs and training—as well as cultivating new knowledge needed to burn contemporary landscapes—through a range of conservation, carbon offset and natural resource management agreements. Accounts from Indigenous people highlight the Indigenous values and benefits achieved through landscape-burning activities, provided fire knowledge sharing and land-management practices are supported by Aboriginal governance frameworks and land ethics. As these Indigenous landscape-burning partnerships and activities are mature, it is timely to reflect upon the range of cross-cultural, social, institutional and environmental factors that need to be considered in order to develop and sustain Indigenous community, public program and private investor support for efforts to prescribe landscape-burning efforts.

This fact sheet is a summary of the technical report *Protocols for Indigenous Fire-Management*.

Final report overview

- Outlines the relevant literature, highlighting some of the key aspects of Indigenous peoples' relationship with fire, as well as the implications of this relationship for wider Australian landscapes and biota, both past and present.
- Evaluates how Indigenous knowledge has been incorporated into northern Australian fire projects, charting the key methods, processes and protocols for sharing and incorporating Indigenous knowledge into environmental management, including fire management.
- Presents protocols that can be used to guide the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into fire management and carbon abatement planning nationally.
- Suggests key areas for future research into Indigenous fire knowledge and its incorporation into on-country fire enterprises and fire programs.



Bush tucker, photo: Michael Lawrence-Taylor

How was the research carried out?

The project was undertaken by a research team from the CSIRO, North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) and Allens, guided by a Steering Committee that represented a broad range of Indigenous fire-management contexts and project activities across Australia. During an eight-month period, the research team conducted a literature review, individual and small-group interviews, focus groups, regional workshops and a national fire forum with key Indigenous fire managers and partners, including Traditional Owners (TOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scientists and government agencies. The findings were then synthesised to generate the protocols presented in this brief and in the final report.

Indigenous fire knowledge and landscape-burning regimes

Fire has influenced the way Australian Indigenous people live on, with and through their land for millennia. Indigenous communities are aware of this significance, and this has underpinned their advocacy for supporting Indigenous fire regimes. Indigenous fire management activities have been implemented across northern Australia and have produced beneficial outcomes, including: providing income and employment opportunities for Indigenous people; creating suitable habitats for endangered species; and contributing to the abatement of greenhouse gases.

Although on-country fire enterprise opportunities have enabled some Indigenous groups to develop well-designed and strategic approaches to fire, there are a number of challenges associated with incorporating Indigenous fire knowledge and practices into contemporary fire regimes. Indigenous fire management partnerships sometimes ignore the

Indigenous knowledge and governance system that informs Indigenous fire management practices including the right time for burning; the kinship relationships that determine who can light fires for country; and the knowledge of cultural sites and cultural resources that influence the pathways of fire at a very fine scale. This can lead to regions being burnt incorrectly (damaging flower and fruit resources for animals and harming culturally important plants and animals) and/or disrespectfully (by not engaging the right Traditional Owners to direct fire management decisions).

There are also concerns that landscape-burning regimes focus on efficient pathways, rather than the multiple benefits locally driven fire regimes can and do provide. As one participant who attended the national fire forum explained: 'Fire using helicopters may be efficient, but it is also important [for] Aboriginal people [to] get out on country so we can adapt our fire-management practices based on how country is responding to our burning.' For many Indigenous communities, 'dollars in the bank are the co-benefit, caring for country and passing on knowledge are the main game.'

This review highlights that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians conceptualise and use fire differently, and this should influence policy approaches and risk assessments in project partnerships. Non-Indigenous fire managers need to understand Indigenous fire-management priorities, and vice versa. Ignoring these differences and adopting a 'one size fits all' or 'lowest cost' approach challenges the feasibility of such projects. Instead, collaborative and adaptive approaches are needed to build landscape-burning governance and management regimes that respect the priorities of all partners.

Controlled burn, photo: Jaana Dielenberg. Front cover: ranger conducts a controlled burn, photo: Glenn Campbell



Protocols for Indigenous fire-management partnerships

Indigenous participants involved in this review noted that protocols should be specifically designed to suit local on-country activities and partnerships. There was a consensus that a generic set of protocols could be useful for communicating (1) the importance of Indigenous fire-management priorities, and (2) how partners can ensure that fire activities are appropriate, legal, safe and endorsed by the community. Five key protocols have been developed with these goals in mind, drawing on data collected through the literature review, interviews, focus groups, workshops and national fire forum. These protocols are detailed below.

Knowledge recognition

Fire-management partnerships must recognise and support Indigenous fire knowledge and fire management as part of local Indigenous governance systems.

Australia's Indigenous people have a long tradition of working collectively, systematically and purposefully to use fire to manage the landscape. Their complex and nuanced systems of knowledge are the product of varied collaborations over time, and they remain the intellectual property of Indigenous people. Fire is crucial to the way that Indigenous people live on, with and through their land, and determining its timing and its location is an important part of Indigenous people's rights to be on, care for and govern their country.

Learning and sharing knowledge

Partners that wish to support Indigenous fire-management activities and enterprises need to pursue the best methods for learning, sharing and passing on fire knowledge. Although other tools are needed to manage large areas, walking the country together is the best way to learn about Indigenous fire knowledge.

Effective and appropriate landscape-burning regimes are based on high-quality information, built through collaborative knowledge-sharing partnerships. Indigenous communities need to be empowered to build collaborative knowledge that respects Indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous fire managers also need to be trained to appropriately integrate Indigenous and non-Indigenous fire-management methods to help make good decisions about where to burn, how much area to burn, and what transport methods to use to access and burn places on country. Information from Indigenous communities shared by Indigenous fire experts, combined with information obtained from scientists, can guide this effort.

Partnerships

Place-based partnership approaches are needed to design and deliver Indigenous fire-management programs across Australia.

Legal and policy developments often respond to Indigenous initiatives and leadership in a narrow manner. Over time there has been growing recognition that Indigenous rights and knowledge are critical to successfully managing biodiversity, Indigenous livelihoods and on-country enterprises. Indigenous communities are now assisting the evolution of legal and policy frameworks by applying, adapting and rejuvenating Indigenous fire knowledge to guide a range of landscape-burning regimes, including conservation and carbon abatement programs and agreements. Practical efforts to incorporate local Indigenous fire knowledge, practices, priorities and techniques have demonstrated that agreeing on the times and places for burning can be challenging, but this should not prevent collaborative and adaptive approaches to landscape burning.

Governance

Partnerships that are established to support Indigenous fire knowledge and management activities need to work within contemporary institutional and governance arrangements.

Indigenous fire knowledge and management is influenced by an array of governance arrangements, including Indigenous customary governance regimes; co-managed or agency-driven government fire institutions and programs; and market-driven fire agreements. The rules and purposes of each fire governance regime influence the burning regimes and the management issues facing Indigenous fire-management partners.

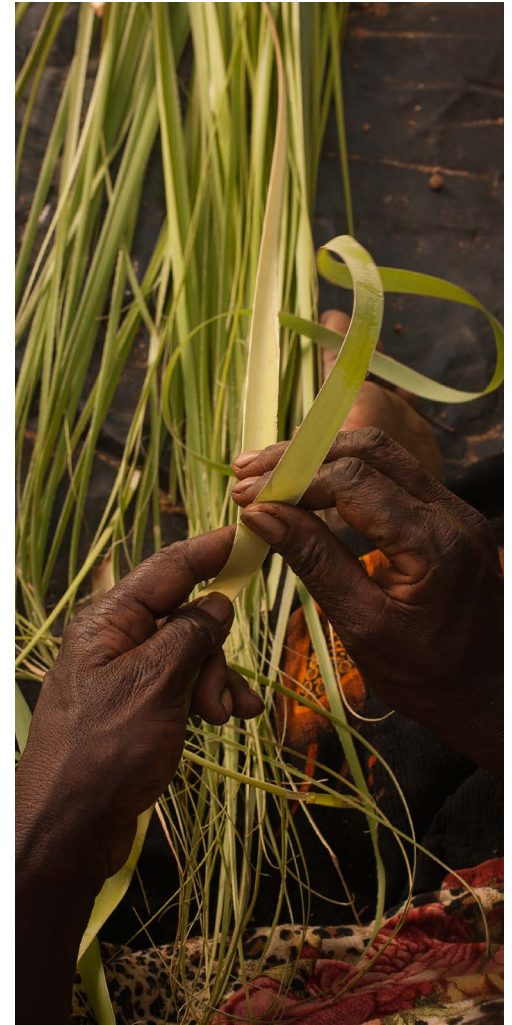
Benefits

Indigenous fire-management programs and partnerships can and should deliver environmental, social, cultural and economic benefits for Indigenous people.

The ability to apply local fire knowledge is a crucial and ongoing aspiration for successful Indigenous carbon abatement, conservation and other PES programs, primarily because of the substantial array of benefits delivered by such engagement. It is important to recognise, support and record the multiple environmental, economic and health benefits from Indigenous fire-management activities and partnerships, but these benefits are often hard to balance and achieve. There are also concerns that the institutionalisation of Indigenous fire management leads to the simplification and diminution of local knowledge and practices.



Controlled bush fire, photo: Jaana Dielenberg. Right: traditional resources, photo: Glenn Campbell.



Conclusion

This review has distilled key lessons learned from existing Indigenous fire-management partnerships and activities across northern Australia, highlighting the critical issues associated with incorporating Indigenous knowledge into fire-management programs and activities. It has also identified five key protocols for effectively and appropriately incorporating Indigenous knowledge into fire-management goals and practices, and it is hoped that these protocols help to guide efforts to incorporate Indigenous fire knowledge into fire management across Australia. Further work is needed to translate if and how proposed Indigenous fire-management partnership protocols can be applied into practice. It is clear that this effort will need to be collaborative, involving Indigenous people in research design, implementation and analysis, and protecting their expert contributions and intellectual property.

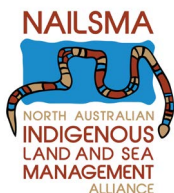
Protocols will also need to be supported by monitoring, evaluation and Indigenous 'peer-peer' knowledge sharing frameworks that track the co-benefits and return on investment from Indigenous fire-management programs and management activities. The process will need to balance tensions between inclusive, participatory engagement with Indigenous people, the need to provide certainty and clarity to industry and the broader Australian public, the need to maintain the lowest possible transaction costs for all parties involved, and the need to create landscape burning regimes that are appropriate for sustaining local cultural-ecological systems.

Further Information

This project was led by Principal Research Scientist Cathy Robinson from CSIRO. Dr Robinson was supported by Marcus Barber, Rosemary Hill, Emily Gerrard and Glenn James.

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You can view the full technical report, *Protocols for Indigenous Fire-Management*, by visiting www.nespnorthern.edu.au



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