

Cultural and Contemporary Fire Management Practices in Western Australia

Information Sheet, September 2021

Background

Fire is an environmental factor that has shaped Australian landscapes over thousands of years. It is also the main land management tool Aboriginal people use to manage and care for Country.

The use of fire is governed by the customs and 'lores' of Aboriginal people, which consider the natural laws of creation. They include weather and seasonal cycles, vegetation and soil types, water cycles and natural features or ecosystems in the landscape such as rivers, rocky outcrops, wetlands and water bodies.

For thousands of years, Aboriginal people have applied fire to natural environments at different intensities and frequencies to maintain diverse ecosystems and keep creation balanced and in motion. This includes environments where fire was not applied to protect plants and animals vulnerable to fire.

Due to these practices and the natural occurrence of bushfires, most landscapes have evolved in the presence of fire, and plants and animals have adaptations that enable them to co-exist with regimes of fire characterised by season, intensity, frequency and scale of burning.

Over the last 200 years, many of Western Australia's landscapes have changed significantly with the establishment of permanent communities, infrastructure, agriculture and other industries. This altered landscape means the traditional practice of cultural burning has evolved.

While contemporary burning practices have been adopted to manage these landscapes and reduce the threat of bushfire to people, property and the environment, DFES is committed to working with Aboriginal people and Traditional Owners, land managers and local communities to better understand, share and incorporate cultural fire knowledge.

DFES acknowledges that fire has been, and continues to be, an important part of the physical and spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal people and that many traditional practices, including the use of fire, have been significantly disrupted.



Mosaic burning of Pilbara spinifex. Image courtesy of Judy Dunlop, DBCA – Parks and Wildlife Service.

What is cultural burning?

Cultural burning describes burning practices developed by Aboriginal people to enhance the health of Country and culture.

Cultural burning is an important part of how Aboriginal people have practiced cultural land management for thousands of years, supporting the regeneration and management of flora and fauna and helping to prevent large, out of control bushfires.

As Traditional Owners, Aboriginal people have a cultural responsibility to care for Country. Aboriginal people bring unique perspectives and expertise to the tasks of caring for and conserving land and water.

Cultural burning is based on the caring for Country premise, and relies on the **Right People, Right Time, Right Way** principles according to lore. There are different kinds of cultural fire practices guided by lore applicable across WA.

Cultural burning may involve patch burning to create a mosaic of burnt and unburnt areas, which encourages regeneration of food sources and rapid recolonisation of fauna. Fire may be used to protect sacred sites and clear access to Country for cultural uses and responsibilities.

Many cultural burning practices undertaken today are increasingly incorporating contemporary knowledge and techniques to care for Country.

This information sheet has been developed by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in collaboration with the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions to help build understanding of cultural burning and traditional fire practices.

The Bushfire Centre of Excellence acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to elders past and present.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people are advised that this publication may contain images of people who have passed away.



Fortescue Solomon Mine planned burn. A collaborative effort by State and local government, local bushfire brigade and Fortescue Solomon emergency services.

What is contemporary burning?

You may have heard of ‘hazard or fuel reduction burns’, ‘burn offs’, ‘prescribed burns’ and ‘controlled burns’. These are all names for planned burning, which is the contemporary burning practice used in Western Australia.

Planned burning on public and private land is the cornerstone to protecting communities and the environment from damaging bushfires.

Planned burning describes deliberately burning a predetermined area under appropriate environmental conditions for a range of purposes including biodiversity management, forest regeneration, cultural heritage protection and reducing bushfire fuels. It is generally applied under mild conditions to establish a range of different fuel ages across the landscape.

Planned burning by land management agencies across Western Australia broadly follows principles of cultural fire management. Burning is conducted during cooler months at a size and scale that aims to promote and maintain a range and mosaic of fuel ages across the landscape, while cultural heritage values are managed through:

- physical exclusion of sites or individual assets;
- adhering to cultural customs; and
- application of low intensity fire.

Increasing engagement between Traditional Owners and other land managers is building an understanding of the nuances and the opportunities to improve fire management practices through a partnership approach. Importantly the two approaches are complementary and share the common goal to look after people and Country.

Who is involved?

In Western Australia, planned burning involves many organisations as part of a shared responsibility. DFES, Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions’ (DBCA) Parks and Wildlife Service, State Government entities, local governments, private property owners and industry conduct planned burning on land that they manage. Traditional Owners care for Country through initiatives and practices that are led by their knowledge of Country and fire, and

support these organisations through a range of State Government initiatives and employment programs.

- **DFES** conducts planned burns on unallocated Crown land and unmanaged reserves in the metropolitan area and all town sites in Western Australia on behalf of the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage (DPLH).
- **DBCA’s Parks and Wildlife Service** is responsible for planned burning on land vested in the Conservation and Parks Commission, such as national parks, State forests, nature reserves, and conservation reserves. The Parks and Wildlife Service also conducts planned burns on unallocated Crown land and reserves outside of gazetted townsites on behalf of DPLH.
- **Local governments** are responsible for planned burns on land vested with the Shire.
- **Private property owners** are responsible for management of their fuel loads and as an essential agricultural tool.
- **Aboriginal Organisations** such as the Kimberley Land Council, oversee a network of Aboriginal land managers with responsibility for fire management.
- **Industry** such as mining, forestry and agriculture utilise planned burns to protect assets.



Incendiary Machine Operator course run in Nifty in northern Western Australia involving 20 rangers and coordinators from five different desert ranger teams. Image courtesy of 10 Deserts Project.

How we're working together

The Western Australian State Government is committed to engaging with Traditional Owners to help share, connect and strengthen Aboriginal people's connection to Country.

DFES and DBCA are gathering, incorporating and advocating cultural burning knowledge about traditional fire practices with contemporary techniques. The aim is to create a hybrid of these principles to make best use of this knowledge in the context of today's landscape.

Across Western Australia, State Government initiatives are also elevating cultural fire and land management practices and facilitating training and employment opportunities.

Some examples include:

- In the Kimberley and the western desert areas, Aboriginal communities have maintained cultural burning practices supported by modern technologies. In addition to social and cultural benefits, burning has also mitigated the damaging impacts of bushfires and benefitted local ecosystems.
- Cultural burning in these areas has shifted bushfire patterns from late dry season to early dry season, reducing the severity of bushfires and benefiting flora and fauna.
- The Kimberley Land Council has adopted the DFES Planned Burning Assurance Program. This program supports land management agencies and organisations by providing oversight and ensuring risk management processes and practices align with ISO 31000 Risk Management.

- The State Government's Aboriginal Ranger Program is empowering Aboriginal people to learn and share knowledge about cultural fire management practices and participate in contemporary planned burning programs. Shared knowledge and involvement of Aboriginal people will provide benefits and opportunities for all parties.

In addition to these collaborative activities, DFES has established a Cultural Fire Program within its Bushfire Centre of Excellence. The program will:

- Support communities to develop, implement, and promote cultural fire programs and activities.
- Draw on experience and expertise by engaging with Traditional Owners, land managers and local communities to better understand the role, application, uses and cultural connections with fire.
- Consider the cultural protocols and connection to Country to identify knowledge and cultural practices that can be shared and promoted across the bushfire sector.
- Support knowledge-sharing opportunities for Aboriginal people to become more involved in bushfire management activities.
- Include traditional and cultural fire knowledge, understanding and practices in the development and implementation of training programs and initiatives.
- Provide guidance on opportunities to integrate cultural fire techniques and activities into contemporary fire management planning processes such as local government developed Bushfire Risk Management Plans.



A Ngurrara Ranger checks the weather conditions prior to burning. Many Aboriginal rangers are blending cultural knowledge with modern technology. Image courtesy of Chantelle Murray Ngurrara Rangers.

Our commitment

DFES through its Bushfire Centre of Excellence is committed to working with Aboriginal people and Traditional Owners across Western Australia. DFES recognises the importance of continuing to grow these relationships to enhance our knowledge of cultural fire and traditional practices and how these principles can assist in guiding the use of fire in the context of today's landscape.

Further information

Bushfire Centre of Excellence –
dfes.wa.gov.au/bushfirecoe

DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service –
dpaw.wa.gov.au/management/fire

Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience –
knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/traditional-owners-and-cultural-burning/