

Submission

NSW Bushfire Inquiry
2020

ANTAR



About ANTAR

ANTAR is a national advocacy organisation working for Justice, Rights and Respect for Australia's First Peoples. We do this primarily through campaigns, advocacy, and lobbying.

Our current national campaigns include:

- Constitutional Recognition and Equality – for Constitutional change to recognise Australia's First Peoples and remove discriminatory elements from our founding document; and
- Advocating for treaty and agreement-making processes across Australia.

We also engage in national advocacy across various policy and social justice issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including anti-racism campaigns, native title, languages and cultures, economic and community development, remote communities' services and infrastructure, health, and human rights.

ANTAR is a foundational member of the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee, the Change the Record Campaign Steering Committee, and the Redfern Statement Alliance. ANTAR has been working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and leaders on rights and reconciliation issues since 1997. ANTAR is a non-government, not-for-profit, community-based organisation.

The search for true knowledge should begin with discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians’

Bruce Pascoe

Like their songlines, fire unified Australia.’

Bill Gammage, quoted by Bruce Pascoe in Dark Emu.

‘European settlers feared fire, for it could destroy their houses, their crops and it could destroy them. Yet the environment which was so attractive to them was created by fire’

Kohen quoted by Bruce Pascoe in Dark Emu.

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our position on bushfires management regarding the 2019 to 2020 NSW bushfire season, and provide input on lessening the impact of bushfires in the future.

We submit that this Inquiry must direct its minds to the following considerations when developing any future bushfire management practices:

- The importance of engaging with First Nations Peoples in this inquiry and beyond;
- The value in using traditional and cultural fire management; and
- Understanding the vulnerability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in high bushfire risk zones.

First Nations Peoples

For many thousands of years, the ability to naturally manage the Australia landscape through the use of fire, while also supporting healthy Country, has been part of Indigenous knowledge.¹²

Unfortunately, their voices are rarely heard in the development of such practices as shown in previous inquiries. For example, the Black Saturday Royal Commission and the 2003 Canberra Bushfires failed to adequately acknowledge First Nations People's advice in these matters, and as such the bushfire crisis continues to only get worse.

As custodians of the land, it is within Aboriginal knowledge how the land can be managed naturally and effectively. They look at the vegetation, the soil type and the moisture levels of the area. They know how to truly feel the grass and understand whether it will burn properly. They know what types of fires to burn for the land, how long to burn them and how frequently. Managers of the land need to understand these things, because when land is allowed to grow at the combustible rate that it has, the end result is that fires will continue to be an existential threat to communities, species and habitats.³

Oliver Costello, a Bundjalung man and the CEO of Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation, cannot overstate the importance of First Nations People having authority over cultural burning as it is based on their connection to the land. He stresses there are important cultural protocols for managing land and he wants local custodians, landholders and government agencies to work together to understand those roles and relationships.⁴

Senior Researcher and Program Manager with Firesticks, Dr Peta-Marie Standley encapsulates this perfectly in stating:

¹ [Traditional Aboriginal burning in modern day land management](#)

² [The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia](#)

³ [Australia's Indigenous People have a solution for the country's bushfires. And it's been around for 50,000 years](#)

⁴ [Drawing on thousands of years worth of knowledge to manage bushfires](#)

'It's about working together to have deeper understanding of Indigenous knowledge and practice and having a co-generative dialogue, where Indigenous people are empowered to lead in that space and we are working together on what seems an intractable problem around fire management.' ⁵

First Nations Peoples need to be an integral part of not only the bushfire management conversation, but in every conversation relevant to the future of this continent with their voices amplified through appropriate representation.⁶

Traditional Fire Management

Traditional bushfire management has been utilised across Australia to respond to the dangers posed by fire, and the ensuing damage it has the ability to cause, for over 50,000 years.

As colonisation unfolded into the twentieth century, Aboriginal traditional techniques of burning were almost stopped in their entirety. Western techniques like fire suppression were used instead, but those practices are suited to an environment very different to Australia, and are not effective long term. This has brought about severe uncontrolled wildfires sweeping across the country as shown late last year.

In more recent times, as the wider Australian community is starting to see the realities of ineffective western fire prevention methods, and there is also a growing recognition of the sophistication and sustainability of Indigenous practices, the increasing bushfire disasters are paving the way for reinvigoration and incorporation of traditional fire management techniques.⁷

⁵ [Drawing on thousands of years worth of knowledge to manage bushfires](#)

⁶ [1 in 10 children affected by bushfires is Indigenous. We've been ignoring them for too long](#)

⁷ [Indigenous Fire Management 2022](#)

Bruce Pascoe, Indigenous writer of Palawa, Boon wurrung and Yuin descent, has outlined in his best selling book 'Dark Emu' the five considerations for the Aboriginal approach to fire management. These include agricultural lands were fixed on a rotating mosaic, secondly fires were lit depending on time of year, type of country and condition of the bus, thirdly the weather, fourthly neighbouring clans were to be notified, and lastly the growing season of particular plants were to be avoided at all costs.⁸

In other words, Indigenous fire management allows for the lighting of 'cool' low intensity fires in targeted areas in the early parts of Australia's dry season. These fires burn slowly, reducing fuel loads and creating fire breaks which leaves a mosaic of burnt and unburnt country. This method clears grass fuel such as scrub, debris, undergrowth and flammable grasses through small scale fires with minimal intensity to negatively impact insects and animals occupying the land.⁹

Bill Gammage, Australian National University professor and expert of traditional Aboriginal burning, has advised that the use of fire could be adopted across the country and used for a variety of land management problems. He asserts before colonisation, the landscape was managed through sophisticated, scientific and systematic way of using fire to prevent damaging bushfires, and naturally support a healthy Country. He states that:

'Fire can be used for one of three outcomes. The first, to encourage native grasses to regenerate and produce new feed, the second to reduce scrub and fuel to prevent intense bushfires, and thirdly to promote biodiversity.'¹⁰

In the Kimberley region, skilled Indigenous rangers administer traditional knowledge and techniques while also considering modern technologies such as satellite mapping, remote sensing and helicopters to control the likelihood of large uncontrolled wildfires. This use of fire in the early dry season is supported through the Kimberley Land Council's Indigenous fire management program, and are also

⁸ [Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of Agriculture](#)

⁹ [Indigenous Fire Management 2022](#)

¹⁰ [Traditional Aboriginal burning in modern day land management](#)

assisted by groups including the Department of Parks and Wildlife, Department of Fire and Emergency Services, Landcare groups, and Land Management groups.¹¹

The environmental landscape of northern Australia, such as that in the Kimberley region, is one of the most susceptible regions to fire damage in the world. The success of Aboriginal community-based ranger groups' use of fire management practices in this region, has led to one of the most significant greenhouse gas emissions reduction practices in Australia. In addition, despite severe conditions in the most recent bushfire crisis, the extensive fuel management and fire suppression activities undertaken in this region meant that the scale of destruction was less than that of southern Australia.¹²

Costello advises that traditional fire practitioners have previously worked alongside some state fire agencies on a small scale, but he is now experiencing a high level of interest from farmers, landowners and communities wanting to learn about traditional burning following Australia's most recent bushfires.¹³

A barrier to implementing these practices is the costs of funding low intensity fires as they require labour at a higher level than current practices. Though true at the outset, in reality it is costing more to fight the fires, let alone the cost of destruction to our communities and natural habitats, and Australians really need to learn what it means to be custodians over the land as the First Nations People.¹⁴

Vulnerability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

Many First Nations communities are located in remote regions of Australia, as well as recent studies showing that one quarter of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of NSW and Victoria live in fire affected areas. These areas

¹¹ [Indigenous Fire Management 2022](#)

¹² [The world's best fire management system is in northern Australia, and it's led by Indigenous land managers](#)

¹³ [Indigenous fire practices have been used to quell bushfires for thousands of years, experts say](#)

¹⁴ [Australia's Indigenous People have a solution for the country's bushfires. And it's been around for 50,000 years](#)

can be very dry and expose those communities to even more severe devastation from ineffective fire management than that experienced by more densely populated regions.¹⁵

Remote communities in Australia are more often than not characterised with vulnerabilities due to economic, environmental and social disadvantage. These disadvantages are directly related to poverty, isolation and lacking adequate access to health and other services. This essentially means that those communities in high risk bushfire zones do not have the same capacity as Australia's urban regions to deal with the impacts of high intensity bushfires, especially at the scale we have recently experienced. These impacts are not only in a physical sense such as rebuilding damaged infrastructure and destruction of the environment, but also the long term effects on the physical and mental health of community members.

Governments, agencies and communities fail to recognise these disproportionate impacts of fires on First Nations Peoples, and therefore addressing this in the development of bushfire responses and recoveries should be a paramount consideration.¹⁶

Access, equity and community engagement are important issues in these remote areas and are critical in supporting these communities not only in terms of preparedness for emergency management bushfires, but in every aspect of life.¹⁷ All fire affected lands have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ownership passed down through songlines, languages and kinship networks.

We submit that traditional fire management practices are essential for bushfire control in Australia for the future. There is now an opportunity for revitalising these ancient traditions that have been disrupted by European colonisation, and by returning to the way the land was managed before will result in measurable

¹⁵ [Drawing on thousands of years of knowledge to manage bushfires](#)

¹⁶ [1 in 10 children affected by bushfires is Indigenous. We've been ignoring them for too long, 2020](#)

¹⁷ [Remote Indigenous communities – a statement on research priorities for natural hazards emergency management in Australia](#)

benefits for fire management, biodiversity and the overall safety and health of not only First Nations communities, but also the wider Australian community.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a submission to this important review.

ANTAR offers our ongoing support to a process that meets the expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and we would also welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss any of the points raised in this submission.

Sincerely

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With thanks:

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**ANTAR is proud to acknowledge and pay our respects
to First Nations Peoples as the traditional owners
of the lands on which we work across the continent.**