

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Aboriginal agriculture and land management

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I'd like to acknowledge the Cadigal country and the elders past and present, and I'd particularly like to acknowledge the large numbers of Aboriginal people here today by saying to some of the brothers that before 10 years ago this couldn't have happened and wouldn't have happened that so many Aboriginal people would be at a conference like this and speaking at it. A lot has changed. Ten years ago we wouldn't have had 'Redfern Now' on our television screens, we wouldn't have had 'The Gods of Wheat Street' being played in prime time TV. So Australia is changing. Sometimes it doesn't feel like it, especially when you compare the talk on the climate change before and what our Prime Minister says, but believe me, I've experienced enormous change for the good in my time.

The land at colonisation, this land, our land, was a far different place than that which I was taught about in school. The explorers' diaries tell a far different story about our land than any of those school books that I learned in primary school, secondary school, and university. When I went back to have a look at what the explorers actually said about our people and about the land, I read a number of things. Lieutenant Gray, the first European to walk through some parts of Western Australia came across a tilled paddock that reach to the horizon and it was full of yam. The next day, having walked around this field and come to a high hill he came across another one exactly the same, for the same plant, and it had been so deeply tilled that he couldn't walk across it. This is not hunting and gathering. This is enormous devotion of labour to a single crop.

When Isaac Batey first came to Melbourne soon after John Batman came from Tasmania to settle the banks of the Yarra River, Batey noticed that the hillsides of the Melbourne, right around to Sunbury, had been terraced. They'd been terraced by Aboriginal people cultivating yam, *microseris lanceolata*. And these hillsides had been terraced not just for the cultivation of the yam but also to stop erosion.

Sir Thomas Mitchell on the Barwon River came across nine miles of grain that reached as far as he could see and that grain had been cut and stoked. Mitchell didn't talk much about it, but the men on the same journey with him talked about it being like an English field.

If you go to the Cooktown Museum, you'll probably find a big knife like with a possum skinned handle, it's called a jua knife, j-u-a-n. Nobody knows that it's for. But if you think about Mitchell's grain fields, how that grain was stoked and you see the knife, they are all brothers and sisters of each other. And they've looked at those knives now and they can tell what it was used to cut, and it was used to cut stalks.

Charles Sturt on the Warburton River had been climbing sand dunes for weeks, all his men had scurvy, the pull was already dead, the horses could only walk in a straight line, they got over one last sand dune and tipped over the side and realised that they were tottering down this sand dune toward 400 Aboriginal people who were greeting them in language. Sturt said that if those people had had any ill intent toward them they were dead men. Instead, the Aboriginal people brought coolamons of well water to allow the men to drink, and then they turned these coolamons to the horses, an animal they'd never seen. And Sturt writes about the fear of the people holding out these coolamons to the horses. But once everyone had been watered, those Aboriginal people provided Sturt and his men with roast duck and cake. In the middle of the desert on the Warburton River in the dead heart of Australia, which is now called Sturt's Stony Desert, those people were harvesting grain in a river bed and providing a flour from which Sturt says he ate the sweetest cakes, the lightest cakes he'd ever eaten.

Sir Thomas Mitchell talks about the cakes from the Mitchell grass being of exactly the same quality. We know the Mitchell grass. No one has tried to create flour from that for 237 years. We also know that the grain grown on the Warburton River is unknown to us. I say to young Aboriginal boys and girls now going to university, "If you could do one thing for your country, if you could do one thing for your people, go and found out what that grass was. Go and find out how it can be milled into flour because it will be a great thing for your brothers and sisters; but it'll be a great thing for Australia and the chefs of this country will fall at your feet."

When Hugh Murray came to the plains around the Colac Lakes he couldn't ride his horses across them because the horses were sinking to their hocks in this ground. It wasn't wet but it was covered in orchids and moss. There were yam daisies in amongst it as well, but what Murray also noticed - that after his sheep had eaten all of the orchids, all of the yam daisy, and trampled the moss, the ground became hard and the dews stopped. Because as fire fighters, that change in the climate above that ground is hugely important.

Edmund Kerr, who is a man who actually hated Aboriginal people, crossed ground toward the Murray River and with every turn of his cartwheel he described bushels of murnong or yam being turned up as if it were a plough. This is a mono culture of yam daisy across this ground. And the yam grows about that high above the soil, it's green and grown over extensive ground like it was, it must have been an incredibly efficient fire tool.

When surveyor McCabe in 1846 came to Mallacoota he drew a map which showed that all the flat land was covered in either herbs or bracken. He describes them as herbs - they're probably murnong, and combined with orchids and moss. McCabe was describing areas of agriculture - this is the best ground around Mallacoota where Bill Gammage says you would expect to find the biggest trees, but instead you have no trees and these mono cultures.

Last year two archaeologists found a grinding dish just near Kakadu, just south-east of Kakadu, and they analysed that dish and found that it had been used to grind grain for 32,000 years. Being a very modern man, I Googled the bread and flour, and found that the next people to convert grain into flour were the Egyptians 17,000 years ago. That means our people were growing grain 18,000 years before - my maths is probably a bit wonky there, but you know what I mean - long before anyone else in the world. This is a triumph. This is something we should say when we travel overseas. We should say, "We come from a country that grew grain to make flour to make bread - we were the world's first bakers."

There is a lot to be learned about Aboriginal fire regimes, most of them are on a five year rotation, but they vary according to the country. And you know, I beg you to - when you're thinking about fire

regimes to continue to include Aboriginal people and to continue to think about what was there earlier and what that meant for fire. We can't restore the past. There's two facts about Australian history that won't go away, Aboriginal people will never leave and neither will white people. It's what we make of those two facts which will ensure our future. And it also will direct how we treat the land. And we must treat the land with respect. And you've got to admit that we're not treating with that respect at the moment. Thank you.

Questions from audience

Q – A question for Bruce and Neil - are there differences between the cultural knowledge for the northern areas where both of you learned about burning and what would be done in our areas?

BP - Well, it depends on the country, not on the people. The country tells you what needs to be done. So it does vary. There are 460 different language groups in Australia, each of them a sovereign nation. Those people had been on their country for a long, long time because the language tells us that. So the burning regime was specific for that country and had to be negotiated with the surrounding countries. The governance of fire was incredibly complex and was a part of spiritual life of the people. I hope that answers that question.

Q – Well, I was really wondering, if you're learning stuff and you're using stuff up there, how this can be applied to different country when you've moved somewhere else, when you're trying to import a concept from one area to deal with management on an area thousands of kilometres away.

BP - Well, they've got the credits in the film from the presentation by Neil and Michelle showed you that one of the consultants for the Orange mob and the Tablelands mob came from Cape York, so that knowledge, to a certain extent, is transferrable.

BP - We don't have a magic wand and we don't have all the answers. So all those questions, it's really just a trial and error. Every country is different. So our approach is really just to experiment, and we've been using different methods of trying to control the weeds. And at the moment, that's what we're doing, we're in that process of trial and error, and once we get the solution for it, we'll sell it back to you.

Q - Have any of you guys, or any of the firies in here, had any knowledge of cultural burns in the deep urban landscape? Like, I'm in Parramatta, central Sydney, and we have cultural smoking ceremonies for a lot of things. But I also do broad acre burns even in Parramatta, and I'm just wondering if there's been any sort of precedent of Aboriginal groups taking a lead role in restoring that country through urban hazard reduction burns.

BP - I avoid urban areas if I can. But I am in the CFA, and my wife and I were recently involved in a burn at Mallacoota, which we had to negotiate for three years with the community just to quieten people down about the smoke that was generated. But that burn was quite extensive and went into a region of quite old forest. One of the firies found a canoe tree that had never been registered. When my wife and I went to find this tree, we found that one of the firies had rake hoed all the way around that tree to save it. So what I was going to say in my talk earlier and didn't, was that that was someone - we don't even know who it was - with a yellow suit on and a drip torch, had decided that this was important. This was a non-Aboriginal person with some cultural knowledge who'd gone out of their way to save a bit of country and we're very grateful.