

## Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

### Lighting the Path – An application of Indigenous Traditional Burning Techniques in the control of serrated tussock (*Nassella trichotoma*) and 'bringing back country'

**Uncle Neil Ingram and Michelle Hines**

Gaambuwananha Ngurambang Team, Orange LALC and Central Tablelands Local Land Service

[Link to video](#)

First of all, I'd like to show my respect and acknowledge Brother Alan Madden for his warm welcome to country. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Gadigal people. Also, thank you very much for inviting us to share our story. I'm not used to standing in front of so many people, so many highly educated people.

But we have a video to present shortly. All I want to do is just talk a little bit about who we are. My name is Neil Ingram, I'm the mentor support coordinator for our program; we are employed by the Orange Aboriginal Land Council, and our program is called Gaambuwananha Ngurambang, in Wiradjuri it means Bringing Back Country. The boys that are sitting over here consist of eight very experienced and highly qualified guys. Our work is to work on country; we've got country in Orange to control weeds and pests, it's on country and bringing the land back to its natural state.

Two points I just made a note of, that we are returning some trees to land management practice including fire to restore country and also our culture. But the most important thing I believe is that work in partnership with quite a few agencies, especially the Local Land Service, National Parks and Wildlife, Orange City Council, universities, the school, and whatever. So what we do - when do things we look through black eyes. And that black eyes is to look at the things that are important to us. So we don't tick the little boxes to achieve outcomes for government; it's time for us to achieve our outcomes. So the most important thing that we believe is working in partnership with others because good results can be achieved when different groups work respectfully to achieve great outcomes.

We've actually spent eight days at the Cape learning traditional fire burning. That was a wonderful experience for us. So the old fellas up there told us there's an obligation to come back, share that responsibility, and continue with our cultural practices. Remember, this country was managed by our people for 60,000 years. Somehow we managed to work and live in harmony with the land and also with our people. The reason for that, there was one law - one law only. And like brother Bruce said over there, this label of hunters and gatherers, we need to rip that from our way of thinking, it didn't exist. But the most important thing is that this country was built on a lie and our future is to ensure that only the truth will set us free. So we need to be honest and up front about this country and we need to work in harmony.

Two of the most important - years ago I used to protest land rights, but the most important thing I believe is that the environment and land will unite our people. Like Bruce said, we can't do with this alone, but we can achieve great outcomes by working together.

First of all I also want to acknowledge Milton Lewis who was assigned from Local Land Services to put our video together. He did wonderful job. And I hope you enjoy the video. It's our story. I'll just hand over to Michelle.

### **Michelle Hines**

I'm not sure that there's much left to say - I'm from the Central Tablelands Local Land Services working with Larry Towny and Milton Lewis and these guys from Orange. And we're a deadly partnership, to be honest. We do good things. So we'd like to share with you our video that we made, because we're all too scared to speak - well, he said he was. And it's our story of using fire for restoration. So I hope you enjoy it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhAAJPKFpo8>

### **Questions from audience**

**Q** - I'm just interested to know what your method is after you've burned the serrated tussock. Do you do any other control besides burning, because I know it responds quite well after fire? So what do you do after you do your regular burns? Do you have any other control techniques that you put in place?

**NI** - I think the most important thing for us is really just a trial period. The follow up is very important, that's seems to be what we're trying to do. But the most important thing is try and measure, get results and evidence to support what we're trying to do. So at the moment it's experimentation. And the other thing is in those areas that we've fenced off we've got to try and stop the other seeds from blowing in, that seems to be our biggest challenge at the moment is the seeds blowing back on those areas.

**Other Orange LALC rep** - It takes a long time for it to get like that, so it's going to take a long time to overcome it. So we're going to have a lot of strategies in place. Putting little things in, like your kangaroo grass and then trying other things as well. So I guess it's a work in process.

**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?

**Bruce Pascoe** - 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.

**Other Orange LALC rep** - And also with your knowledge that you trial, you've got the same kind of species of trees and you also have a look at the soils in different areas and by that method of being that type of soil. There's over a thousand methods of burning and you can use similar methods in similar places, but you have to have the same characteristics in those areas and you've got really diverse country.

**MH** - Can I also add too, that the landscape that you saw in the film - it's already very sick and very modified. So noting some principles and some methodologies and then bringing back. You know - the link's been lost down here anywhere, the country needs help and like you say, it speaks back too. In terms of history here, species to species, we've lost a lot of that, and so you try to get whatever you can.

**Q** - Thank you. I'm from Crown Lands, from the Riverina area, but I had a question probably for Neil and Michelle in relation to more south-eastern New South Wales. Some of the trees in that clip looked as though they might have had some die-back issues. And I'm just wondering, is die-back, as we see it in its extent today, is that a traditional issue that's been encountered before? And could frequency or reduced frequency of fire have an impact on that? And if that's something that your work is looking at or might look at in future?

**Milton Lewis** - Die back is a symptom of a sick country, country that has lost a lot of past management systems. As you could see there, the way they manage, you can't do anything wrong to that country any more. It's so sick. It really - where we stand with this is that we are opening up that grassland again to give it space for new things to come back. We know that, yes, there is good evidence to say that serrated tussock does well with fire, but also previous experiments have not taken into account the influx of seed from neighbouring populations of serrated tussock that blows in. My gut feeling at the moment, as an ecologist, and that's why we're running a fairly lengthy experimental part, is that when we've put in these cool burns, we've opened up the spaces between tussocks without touching the neighbouring populations of the grass, and that's allowed the seed to blow back in to the current space, and therefore you get an even thicker layer. What that then does is choke out the trees in the surrounding area.

There's also been a large amount of grazing there. And nutrient flow into that system has also impacted on those trees and it's just a circular problem. So you have to break that circle. And the die back is just one of the many things that we see when we're reading country.

**NI** - 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.

**NI** - Well, we really do have a good partnership with the Rural Fire Service, quite a number of guys went from Victoria, New South Wales, to Cape York last year. And we stayed there for eight days. But in our region, what we do, and we always include the Rural Fire Service in terms of what we do, it's just a partnership. Their percept is that we don't start fires, we put fires out. So we're in the process for trying to break down the differences. At the moment we get a lot of support from the Rural Fire Service. I know in Victoria, their CMA have put a website to promote the work they're doing within cultural communities. So at the moment, we're, sort of, trying to work together. It's taken off now and there seems to be a lot of respect to what we're doing. So the partnership is starting to work out really well. I don't know if that's the answer to your question or not. But we're starting to work in partnership through respect.