

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Culture, burning and bush regeneration on Garby Country

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[Link to slides](#)

Thank you, it's inspiring to see so many Aboriginal people at this forum, it's great. In relation to the work that other communities are doing around the state, keep up the good effort.

Firstly I'd like to acknowledge country. I show respect for the traditional custodians of this land, to elders past and present of Country on which this conference takes place. I acknowledge traditional custodians whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land. We've come to learn the acknowledgement of country is such an important aspect of Indigenous Australia, its unique and special, in essence a respectful gesture from the traditional people to all people, visitors and friends.

I'd like to overview the rationale behind this particular project. Since the '80s Yarrowarra Aboriginal Corporation has undertaken many projects with a cultural focus on Garby Country. To give you an understanding of where Garby Country is, it's on the Mid-North Coast 40km North of Coffs Harbour, on some pretty unique country - estuarine-type systems. It's coastal with diverse vegetation types, short heaths, tall heaths and a range of sclerophyll forests, coastal lowlands, and headlands. Garby Country has rich cultural and heritage assets and its resources provide habitat to a suite of coastal and flood plain ecologically endangered communities.

Inappropriate fire regimes pose a threat to culture, heritage assets and resources on country. This particular project was quite exceptional – its something that hadn't been done in this realm before. So it came about from the Hotspots project that was delivered in the Upper Corindi area. From this workshop it flowed on to the Community – the Community sought to be engaged in the project back on their homelands. Yarrowarra Aboriginal Corporation become involved in the project and the Giriin Team, which is a team of Repair to Country Rangers, who are working on country conducting weed work and other bush regeneration and conservation land management work.

National Parks and Wildlife have a number of sites that they've identified where burns could be implemented and the local Aboriginal rangers were engaged to assist with these burns and prepare monitoring sites on NPWS tenure.

Envite are involved, training the Rangers on weed identification and treatment and delivering ChemCert training and native plant identification to the teams. The Rangers want to learn and walk back on country. All the teams are a mix of guys and girls.

The New South Wales Rural Fire Service came on board to help deliver the training component for Bush Fire Fighter. The teams had not had anything to do with fire in the past at all, so the Rangers had very little or no fire knowledge and the knowledge holders are no longer with us to pass on their knowledge.

This project provided some meaningful employment opportunities as well. The teams are enrolled in TAFE going through conservation land management training. The Rangers are really motivated to get back out on country and carry out work to protect their community and country.

So the mission is to maintain and share a cultural identity and integrity, respecting and preserving our heritage. Heritage scar trees, midden sites, ochre sites, quite a large ochre site, and other scar trees were identified during the survey effort before we conducted the burn.

Empowering traditional custodians is very important too by building their capacity to participate and getting them thinking about what else they can do on their country.

The Rangers were eager to get involved with the prescribed burning, planning, preparation and implementation. They set up monitoring sites where transects were established to identify what plant species were there in the way of weeds, bush tucker plants and medicine plants. These species were all catalogued from within the plots. Photos were taken of each plot and fire was then introduced. There will be follow-up monitoring taking place within these plots to gauge the recruitment of species.

There was a steering committee formed which met regularly to work out what sites were to be burnt, how we were going to burn them, the management behind it, who was going to implement, whether it was going to be the Rural Fire Service, the rangers, or other agencies. Traditional ecological knowledge, scientific research and current best practice were delivered.

On the coastal lowlands there's quite a unique vegetation form. When we implemented the burn we found: Christmas bells, which hadn't been seen here for about 14 years; all the *Xanthorrhoeas* flowered along with other species; and it rejuvenated the whole system. It's quite unique with the headlands and estuaries, this particular headland here is a men's place. The men wanted that site protected along with other cultural sites that they wanted to look after.

Training and support was part of the project and we were pretty lucky to have a great training facility in our Fire Control Centre in Coffs Harbour. The RFS delivered theory sessions to the rangers with training being run at Yarrawarra Conference Centre which is located on Garby Country which is very close to the burn sites.

A relationship between the Ranger teams was developing and this had not happened before. It's been encouraging to get Ranger teams connecting and having a yarnup amongst one another about what they're doing on country.

Personnel Protective Clothing has been issued to all Ranger teams who have completed the RFS training.

There is a need for Aboriginal people to be back on Country and managing country how it was managed by our Ancestors if there are knowledge-holders out there, where possible it would be great for their knowledge to be passed on.