

## Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

### Blue Mountains Fire Sticks

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Blue Mountains Fire Sticks, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service

[Link to slides](#)

I am here to present a very small story which is part of a much bigger story that is thousands of years old in this speed talk and I only have 6 minutes to do it. So please bear with me.

I acknowledge Country and pay my respect to Elders past and present, Our Sky Father creator, the good Ancestral Spirits and Mother Earth. Our Mother provides us with everything that we need.

In particular, I wish to acknowledge and thank Auntie Sharyn Halls who is a Gundungurra Elder with us here today. Auntie Sharyn is our Blue Mountains Fire Sticks Patron. Thank you for your ongoing support Aunt!

So, who am I? My name is Dennis Barber or Den to my friends. I am a descendant of the Wiradjuri people from Mudgee (NSW), I am also wearing two hats being the Aboriginal Co-Management Officer for NPWS and in my community role, I am the Blue Mountains Fire Sticks Holder and Coordinator. Many Aboriginal people, particularly who work in Government have to wear many hats.

First, what is Aboriginal cultural fire? And, what does it mean to me?

- Cultural fire + Cultural practice
- Corroboree Fire
- Smoking Ceremony fire: Fire helps to cleans me and keep me safe
- Camp Fire: Fire provides light, keeps me warm and cooks my food
- Family Fire: Fire brings my family together and helps us to talk and share.
- Country needs Fire!: Fire 'cleans' Country and brings new life and sustains life. .

Country needs fire; that's a simple message. So this speed talk fits under the conference theme Where dowe go from here? I believe that to answer this question we first need to look to the past, then where we are now, and indeed, where do we go from here? So let's have a look at the past.

Here's a -timeline of significant seasons fire events recorded for the Blue Mountains (slide 14), at least since 1957, and there's some pretty tragic statistics in amongst that lot of lives and homes lost, right up to more recently in 2013 where we experienced the Winmalee, Lithgow State Mine, and the Mount Victoria, Springwood, Linksvie fires. I'm sure many of you would have seen that on the TV around the country; more than 200 homes destroyed, etc. Here are some images I took from Glenbrook when I was working that day of the fire that was coming off Linksvie (slide 16-17); I also took some video footage as well. It was quite graphic.

Aboriginal people have used and lived with fire in the Blue Mountains for thousands of years (slide 18). Bruce Pascoe was talking earlier about Mitchell's accounts of what he saw in the landscape of Aboriginal people burning country – here is an excerpt from this (slide 19). We're familiar with Bill Gammage's book and the images that were drawn by early people, settlers, etc. Here is an image of some Blue Mountains Aboriginal participants with elders at Bizant Fire Management Workshop held in 2010 (slide 22), and that was the start of cultural fire for me. I was lucky enough to go with some Darug and Gundungurra people including Aunty Sharyn Halls and Chris Tobin up the back here, and some others from community. I was witness to a week of cultural burning and some magic that was happening before our very eyes, and we returned back the Blue Mountains and we were asking ourselves, "Well, how can we apply those principles that were given to us about burning in the savannah grasslands, how could we apply that back in the Blue Mountains?" From that point we started to ask some questions and look into it, and Blue Mountains Fire Sticks was born. Victor Steffensen then reciprocated and came down to the Blue Mountains and we took him to some sites throughout the Blue Mountains, including Kings Tableland, an endangered ecological site near Hazelbrook, and Yellomundee Regional Park.

So let's look at what's happening right now for Fire Sticks: the question to be asked is, can cultural fire be used as part of contemporary conservational land management and fire management to restore country? There are two types of fire we're used to seeing in the Blue Mountains: wild fire and hazard reduction burning. But more recently we've had Yellomudde Fire Sticks happening down in the Hawkesbury, just at the base of the Blue Mountains, and that's up and running at the moment. More recently we did some Aboriginal site protection works under the Blue Mountains Fire Sticks banner. Land Services gave us some money, and National Parks let us come onto park to clean around Aboriginal sites in Gundungurra country and the Kings Tableland. From the earlier works, Mike Jackson, an archaeologist, has put together a report about that very thing. So Blue Mountains Fire Sticks now continues that work. Here's an example of some vegetation that was cleared from a shelter site, and that's at the end of our project (slide 32). It was a beautiful day, clear weather for five days and as we were walking up away from our last site it rained on us, and the black cockies flew and landed in the trees over our heads; it was quite nice.

So the future, where to from here? Who are Blue Mountains Fire Sticks? We are a community initiative of Fire Sticks. We want to practice cultural fire as part of Aboriginal people's self-determination in caring for country; a collective of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and representatives of various organisations and institutions who support the use and acceptance of cultural fire as part of contemporary bushfire management, and an Aboriginal cultural-based group. It is not owned by or affiliated with any one individual, group, organisation or institution. Blue Mountains Fire Sticks is open to everyone interested.

So here's a vision that I personally have for Fire Sticks' future in New South Wales; an adapted logo, and I'm proposing the Koori Country Fire Sticks Fire Service. Maybe it's a future movement where we'll have Aboriginal people equivalent to the RFS doing ecological or cultural burning on country. It's not beyond the realms of possibility; lots of Aboriginal people are looking for something to do with their lives and a way to connect to Country. I think it's something to give serious thought to.

So in the short-term what do we want to achieve? We want to engage community, build relationships, gain support and keep the conversation going. These are the medium-term aspirations and our more

longer-term aspirations (slide 39). But right now of course we want to inform, participate, share and learn at forums just like this one.

I'd like to thank the elders, the communities, Fire Sticks and Nature Conservation Council for leading this work in New South Wales. Here are some potential partners that we've earmarked, part of a Fire Sticks, hint, hint (slide 40). Rather than creating a committee, we like to call it a "circle", the Blue Mountains Fire Sticks Circle, so anyone can come to that circle.

I want to leave you with this dance, you probably need a bit of waking up after lunch and my droning voice, so we'll run that please (slide 42 video). I wanted to show and emphasise the fact that cultural practice, yes, that it is about doing fire, but it's also about dancing fire, about telling the story of fire. For those that may be sceptical that culture and ceremony and law has diminished in this part of the world, I want to tell you it certainly hasn't, it is being practiced, it is an important part of culture, and it is what will take Aboriginal people forward. So thank you for your time.

### **Questions from the audience**

**Q** - Thanks for a great talk. Do you see any potential for ecotourism where you sort of get the city slickers off their bums and out into the bush, and essentially show them fire ecology, but as a way of engaging the broader community?

**DB** - Wow, that's a pretty novel idea; I like the sound of that. How much would you pay to come along to something like that?

No, it's a brilliant idea. I mean people, to have that connection to coming out and engaging with traditional custodians or Aboriginal people in general, and being on country, looking at sites but also looking at how country was managed. Fire is just one of those things, so yeah, cultural tourism has a lot of potential. It just needs the will, the commitment and the support to make it happen. But there certainly are segments of that happening, I can tell you that.