

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Why do we burn? Key themes for cultural burning in northern New South Wales

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[Link to slides](#)

I'd like to thank Den for that presentation; it's good to see a perspective about why you burn in the Blue Mountains. It's still really important for us to be getting that story out there.

I'd like to start by acknowledging country and paying my respects to elders past, present and future, the traditional custodians of this land where we meet today, and also the lands where I travel in my journey. This is a very important process about respect and responsibility that we have to each other, both the custodians of that place and myself as travelling through those lands, so I'd like to acknowledge that. Also I'd like to acknowledge Uncle Joel (slide 2) and a lot of elders from Cape York, Arnhem Land, New South Wales, and all through the country that have shared their wisdom and their guidance.

Miles couldn't be here today, so I'm going to give a bit of an introduction and then he'll speak to us through video.

So, we're going to speak about 'Why do we burn? Key themes for cultural burning in Northern New South Wales'. Mark Graham earlier gave a bit of an overview of the Healthy Ecosystems Programme, including a brief snapshot about where the NCC Firesticks partners are in the landscape. To provide some of the back story, I started working on Firesticks as a project and was looking at ideas about how we can learn and I met Victor (Steffensen), and he started talking. We started talking about fire, and that conversation started this journey. Part of that journey was about where I'm from, I'm from Bundjalung country, I've grown up learning about culture but I didn't learn a lot about fire. I was also living in the Blue Mountains and I'm learning about the issues there, and when Victor started talking about this stuff and I thought, "How do we build a pathway here?" So we set up Firesticks as a part of knowledge exchange around message sticks and sharing knowledge. It's all about engagement, so thinking about what's a meaningful process of engagement. I'm an Aboriginal person, but when I come on someone's country I'm respecting that place. I'm not here as a cultural authority, so thinking about those principles as Aboriginal people operating with Aboriginal people, and also as non-Aboriginal people operating with Aboriginal people. These are some of the engagement principles that Miles, I and others, within the group, worked up (slide 4). I won't go through them all now but it's a bit of a plug for our website. So if you want to go and check it out, www.firesticks.org.au.

I'll let Miles give a bit of an intro and frame up the discussion.

Dr Miles Holmes

Hello everybody. It's good to be here today. I'm sorry I can't be in there in person, but I'm sending this video from Iluka in northern New South Wales. So a brief introduction: Miles Holmes is my name. I've been working as a cultural anthropologist for the last 15 years in the Central Deserts of the Northern Territory, the Kimberley and New South Wales. I run a small consultancy that does a range of work, but one of our focuses is facilitating outcomes in terms of land management.

I'm an honorary research fellow at the University of Queensland, <http://www.socialscience.uq.edu.au/miles-holmes> and currently the coordinator of Ngunya Jargoon IPA, Indigenous Protected Area at Wardell in northern New South Wales <http://www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/ipa/declared/ngunya.html>. So I hope that sets a bit of background for this talk, the topic of which is to feed back some information from Firesticks Aboriginal partners about why they burn, their aspirations and motivations for cultural burning.

Let's first consider why it was necessary to ask that question; for me, there's really two reasons. The first, it was evident early on in the Firesticks project that the conventional reasons for burning the landscape were quite different from the values and motivations being put forward by Aboriginal people. The second reason is that I think the single most important aspect of a community engagement project is getting the governance right, the power relations. And by governance, I don't mean engaging effectively with government or project managers; I mean having the power to define the issues that are relevant and having the confidence and power to find the right solutions. That could be a committee or a board, but in many cases it's what the experts call "nodal networked governance", which is a much flatter, more diffuse structure. That's why we set about asking these questions, to find out why people wanted to burn and to start the governance story off on the right track.

To answer this question we started collating key ideas from the various Firesticks meetings, workshops and on-country planning sessions. In total we ended up with about 80 different statements for why people wanted to burn. I'll put them up on screen now so you can have a look while I'm talking (slide 6). The Firesticks partners who supplied this information were the Boorabee Willows IPA, the Ngunya Jargoon IPA, the Nimbin Rocks Working on Country Team, the Minyumai IPA, and the Banbai Working on Country team who manage both the Tarriwa Kurrukun and Wattle Ridge IPAs. We also collected information from the minutes of reference group meetings and from the Western New South Wales Cultural Fire Forum which was held in Walgett.

Before I go on I'd like to make a point, that these IPAs and Working on Country teams are all well-established projects; they're run by Aboriginal boards of management, they've got Ranger teams who have been a long time on country, they're often backed by strong community elders. Essentially I would like to make the argument that they're a special group of people. They have authority, both in Aboriginal law and also in the European notion of what is an expert. The comments that you can see on screen (slide 6) were primarily from observation; we didn't specifically ask people, "Why do you burn?" Instead we just noted the themes and comments that emerged in conversation.

In the next stage we collated those comments into key themes; I'll put them up on screen so you can have a look. There's 18 in all (slide 7). We brought together 26 indigenous Rangers, IPA coordinators, elders, staff from OEH Cultural Heritage Unit, and Victor Steffensen from Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways. At two events in Boorabee Willows IPA and Wattle Ridge IPA we discussed cultural burning

and we asked the participants to add any themes they thought were missing from this list. They did that in groups, and then we asked each person individually to vote for their top five.

While you're looking at that list on screen hold in your mind what you think perhaps the top three were, and here's the results (slide 8). So while you're looking at that I think each of these elements has a story to tell, but there's a few significant points: The first one I want to note is that this result from northern New South Wales is much the same as we'd see in the Kimberley, in the Central Deserts or in Arnhem Land. The reason why is that across the country there's a fundamental assumption, I would say an expectation really, in Aboriginal land management that there's a link between the health of social systems and the health of environmental systems, that is, when you improve the country you also improve the people, who in turn are better able, more aware, more motivated, more skilled to improve the country, and the cycle continues. Notice the majority of these answers are aimed at improving parts of the social and cultural systems; seven out of the top 10 are social or cultural values.

To pick up on a few of them. We can see that in this sense fire is improving people (i.e. Improving the social systems) by:

- teaching youth, that's the number one reason.
- As a way to create connection to identity, which we know is a driver of wellbeing in all humans and in the case of Aboriginal people a strong motivator to work on the land.
- Fire is used to feel a connection to ancestors, which we know fosters respect for self and the land,
- and fire is used as a catalyst to cause people to observe and monitor country.

All these human-based outcomes create more capable land managers who can then realise some of the ecological values of fire, such as reducing the weeds, promoting bush tucker and, protecting against wildfire. Therefore, the healthy landscape that comes from fire is in turn better able to support the physical and non-physical health of its custodians and the cycle goes around again.

The final point I'd like to make is that these reasons for burning are quite different from what you might normally see in a Rural Fire Service (RFS) burn plan or a National Parks burn plan, but that's okay, this is the work that Firesticks projects are doing, and they're having some success building understandings within this space.

Okay, let's finish up there and I'll hand it back over to Oli who can continue the discussion and take some questions. Thanks very much.

Oliver Costello

Thanks Miles. I'd like to take that opportunity to thank Miles and also the Firesticks community of practice which includes the NCC Firesticks Project, Blue Mountains Fire Sticks, Yellomundi, a whole range of individuals and organisations such as OEH, National Parks and RFS, that are supporting that process and are having these conversations. That's where it starts, having the conversation, having an open mind. We're all struggling with all the values and ideas; let's share them, let's have that conversation. That's what it's all about, that's why we're here today.

As a part of that process which Miles has articulated, by collating these ideas and thinking about how it's relevant to the project, we came up with these three principles: recognition, respect and responsibility. Recognition is about embedding cultural connection within contemporary natural resource management practices and implementing good training, strong partnerships, on ground practices and

appropriate techniques. Recognition means recognising knowledge, recognising those connections to country is essential. We can debate technique and we can debate adaptation, and as things change; let's just recognise what's there, not just Aboriginal knowledge, all knowledge. Let's recognise it.

Responsibility is about ensuring the right people are involved in planning and implementing fire based on their cultural connections to the land. It's about teaching young people and passing down knowledge. I'm here today because of the responsibilities that I've taken on, that people have handed on to me, just as my ancestors and all our ancestors wherever we come from, pass on responsibilities and obligations to us. We can choose to take them or not; I've chosen to take that stuff on, and other people have. Let's build that responsibility into actions and into outcomes. Respect is about being on country, learning by observation and sharing. It's really important to consider this principle. Wherever we go, whatever we do, just start with respect. Give trust and then build relationships from there. These are the three principles we're using in our Firesticks work. Today and yesterday we heard about a whole range of other groups and projects that are using all these similar principles as well.

I'd like to share about what is cultural burning to me. Cultural burning to me is about cultural learning pathways, it's about the pathway that we're on. That involves maintaining our cultural practices and obligations, as Uncle Den was talking about just before. This is based on our connections to country and the cultural lore of that country, and that's why it's important that it's about local perspectives, it's about the plants, the animals that belong there and the relationships between those. And it's about the kinship roles and relationships between native species, including people as a part of the healthy country, healthy people relationship. When I'm talking about country I'm talking about everybody we see here today; plants, animals, people, it's relationship, and that's that understanding about this holistic connection. We can't remove ourselves from that, but what we need to do is look at each other, look at country and understand those roles and those responsibilities that we have to each other, and the opportunity that we have to facilitate that peace making between friends, between colleagues, between plants and animals. We all have a place, we all understand that we have a role, and it's not that a weed or a native species in the wrong spot has something completely wrong with it, it's just maybe in the wrong spot, and we need to think about that, what that means. That's just how I see it. There's a lot of cheeky things; my kids are cheeky some days, and some days they're really good. How do we deal with that in the landscape?

I'd like to finish by coming back to the theme Where to From Here? I think it is about us sharing why we burn and how we can work together. I've got motivations to burn which relate to my own understanding of country and my own relationships to country, to plants and animals and places. I can sit there with my father and my brothers and uncles, and we can be looking with similar relationships with the same country and asking different questions, providing different responses; that's important, that's what it's about, sharing that knowledge. There's a whole framework that's existed for thousands of years within people's own understanding of their identity and connections to country that relates to that application of knowledge.

Let's reflect on that, and let's think about that. Let's join together in that conversation about how we can work together, what are those different value judgments. I don't see cultural and ecological completely pinned together. I see a lot of cross over and a lot of relevance, but it's about those values, it's what's driving those objectives, that's what we need to be thinking about. If we don't talk about it we all just use the language and we go out and we do things, and then we may create the problems and

that's where the conflict arises. So let's build that language together, share those stories and then we can go from there.

Questions from the audience

Q - Can you explain the main differences, if there are differences between the Hotspots programme and the Firesticks programme, because they seem to be dotted all over the state doing the same sort of thing?

OC - Hotspots has been around for a long time and when I started working on Firesticks it was an obvious kind of opportunity to talk to Hotspots around, you know, how can we embed and build on Hot Spots around the cultural learning and the cultural awareness and stuff, processes. They are different projects and there is cross-over, but I guess the key thing is that it's similar intent around sharing awareness and building capacity within communities. Hotspots is working in a broader community context generally; Firesticks is much more focused around Aboriginal communities, but that said, a part of that story is sharing that with the broader community. But there's a whole process, an internal process which I think is really necessary for communities to be able to take ownership of their knowledge because there's been a long history of displacement and adoption of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and practice. I see a lot of fire management today, a lot of techniques and a lot of stories that people talk about; that's coming from cultural practice, but there's no acknowledgement of that. So it's important that we build a space that represents Aboriginal authority and values, and then support everyone else's approach to doing this, essentially achieving the same outcomes, which is about healthy country. We might have some disagreements on the edges but essentially we're all in agreement, that's what it's about, productive, healthy landscapes that we can engage in and we can have an economic relationship with so that we can be sustainable.

Q - Oliver, I'm so impressed with what I've heard, I'm excited. I really think the next five or 10 years is going to be fantastic for Firesticks and I really want to see it go. I think what you said about giving our Aboriginal brothers and sisters a connection, a material practical connection, I can see it working, I really can. Go for it.

OC - Thank you. It's recognition. There's a whole heap of programmes that government and communities are running around that same area, it's about building that recognition and that capacity. It's not just capacity for Aboriginal communities to engage in fire management, it's capacity for agencies and community organisations to engage with Aboriginal people, because we have these shared objectives, but for some reason we're not able to get to the place where we understand how to actually support each other to the extent which we need in a landscape.

I walk on a lot of (sick) country and it makes me feel very sad because that's that relationship that we have with country, and I'm sure everyone agrees; it hurts, it hurts a lot and that's what motivates me and a lot of other people to get out there and make sure that we're actually trying to overcome these challenges. Our old people adapted through all sorts of climate change and all sorts of social change, for thousands of years to provide a way of living in a landscape which was sustainable for them. I think there's an opportunity for us to learn from that and to seek those outcomes. I'm not pessimistic about the future; I think we have got a bright future if we harness the opportunities that are right there. There's a lot of knowledge, there's a really good quote from an elder and I don't think he'll mind me

sharing it with you, about, "it's about our ancestors" and it's not just the old people, the physical people, it's the trees and the animals, it's about that. To be able to achieve those outcomes "we need to look back before we can go forward", and then there's a lot of new things that we need to do; we need to be at the edge of evolving and taking on those new challenges, but we don't need to be wasting our time overcoming the things that we've already worked out, and we tend to do that over and over again. I don't think it's about having all the resources there and all the collation, it's about following the right intent and understanding, and that information will come to you if you follow that process. That's what the old people teach us about being on country, it will come to you. Follow the process, follow the intent, do the right thing and it will all work around you. So we have these opportunities and we just need to take that opportunity.