

Mick Bourke, Dja Dja Wurrung/
Yorta Yorta Fire Practitioner.
Photo by DELWP, Victoria.



How Self-Determination is Returning White Smoke to Country

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Cultural fire is a critical land management tool and a profound expression of ongoing connection to place for Aboriginal people. Empowering Traditional Owners¹ to manage Country² through traditional knowledge is a practical exercise in self-determination that will help safeguard Australia from a repeat of the 2019/20 catastrophic bushfires. It is also an opportunity for government to create meaningful relationships with and jobs for Traditional Owners.

Despite thousands of years of traditional land management practices, including the use of fire, cultural burning was lost to sight in Victoria—at least to European eyes. That was until 2017, when the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation led the first cultural burn on Djaara Country in 170 years. This momentous event that signalled the return of cultural fire in Victoria on public land, was the culmination of a healthy

partnership that had been established between agencies, including the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation.

Importantly, the return of cultural burning or *Djandak Wi*, as it is referred to in Dja Dja Wurrung (DDW) language, was led by DDW while being actively supported by agencies and fully integrated in the state's existing planned burning program.

In recent years, there have been several landmark books and other publications shedding light on the profound impact Aboriginal peoples in Australia have had in shaping and managing landscapes through the application of, what many of their Elders refer to as, the *right fire*.^{3,4} This attention is well overdue and there is now growing interest from the community and media in cultural burning.

“Without fire, water, culture—they are all knitted together—we're not healthy, and neither is Country. It's as simple as that.”

—Trent Nelson, Chair Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, 2019

Aboriginal peoples' application of fire was complex, systematic and purposeful and became a powerful *firestick technology*, enshrined in ceremonial practice deeply connecting them to the land and all living things in and around them in a *kincentric* ecological world view.⁵

Cultural burning, as it is often called, is,

*"Fire deliberately put in the landscape, authorised and led by Traditional Owners of that Country, for a variety of purposes, including, but not limited to: ceremony, protection of cultural and natural assets, fuel reduction, regeneration and management of food, fibre and medicines, flora regeneration, fauna habitat protection and Healing Country's spirit."*⁶

These are all positive steps forward, conducted in a genuine partnership approach to explore how fire may be managed differently, respecting Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), intellectual property and millennia of successful Country management.

The observations and policy recommendations in this article are based on recent experience in Victoria and lessons learned from a Churchill Fellowship trip to North America where Trent Nelson (Dja Dja Wurrung/Yorta Yorta man), Tim Kanoa (Kerrupmara man of the Gunditjmara Nation), and I went to study similar projects being implemented there. They apply primarily to areas where public land is under the management of governments and their agencies.

Policy Issues

There is growing acknowledgement of the importance of cultural burning both as an intrinsic right of Traditional Owners to express their culture and connection to Country and as a potential means of managing fuels.

In parts of Australia, particularly Northern Australia, large areas of land are owned and managed by Traditional Owners and this is where most cultural burning occurs, with 71% of all cultural burns occurring in the Northern Territory, Queensland or Western Australia.⁷

In stark contrast, Traditional Owners in other parts of Australia are only just beginning to reintroduce cultural fire. This is particularly true in the southern states that have large populations, fragmented natural landscapes and Aboriginal groups that felt the most severe impacts of colonisation. Many Traditional Owners in Victoria and elsewhere have expressed a strong desire to reintroduce cultural fire, led by Traditional Owners at all stages—from planning to implementation—adapted to a contemporary cultural and landscape context and applied wherever possible for healing and caring for Country.⁸



Trent Nelson (Dja Dja Wurrung), Scott Falconer (Churchill Fellow), and Mick Bourke (Dja Dja Wurrung/Yorta Yorta), on Dja Dja Wurrung Country. Photo by DELWP, Victoria.

Since this first historic effort, more than 30 Cultural Burns have been implemented in Victoria on public land and several on private land. More than 120 Cultural Burns are planned for the next three years by six Traditional Owner groups. In keeping with self-determination, all have been nominated and led by Traditional Owners.

Karen Patterson (Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation).
Photo by DELWP, Victoria.



The benefits of cultural burning are numerous. Two key benefits include:

- **Strengthening the identity of Aboriginal people.** Cultural burning will increase the presence of Aboriginal people on Country to practice laws and customs, to hear stories and language, and participate in ceremony to maintain connection to and knowledge of Country. It will restore the rights of Traditional Owners to fulfil their obligations to care for Country, strengthening their physical relationship with Country and building the health and wellbeing of their people through a living culture.
- **The health of Country is improved.** Cultural burning offers possibilities to heal the land in a holistic way, applying traditional knowledge to build resilience to natural disasters. Fire can play a significant role in regeneration and in restoring the balance of species and ecosystems. The right fire in the right place at the right time promotes the growth of native plants, inhibits invasive weeds and sustains the habitats of native animals.

In southern states of Australia, Traditional Owners have not had, and still do not have, easy access to managing Country—certainly on most of the public and private land estates—and have been unable to co-manage land and obtain equitable or timely access to government resources. Victorian Traditional Owners' access to Country has relied on partnerships and goodwill in most circumstances.⁹

The inability of Traditional Owners to practice customs and traditions due to lack of access to Country, and not being

acknowledged as co-managers or true partners in land and fire management is a significant problem. We observed a similar situation in the USA and Canada, where Traditional Owners said it was vital to reinstate healthy fire regimes to the land, however, most tribes were unable to access public land or undertake cultural burning.

In addition, a lack of capacity to lead and participate in cultural burning results in loss of cultural knowledge, language and the rights of current and future generations. Longstanding inequity in law, policy and governance has left Aboriginal people at a disadvantage in health, housing, employment and many of our other fundamental needs.

Loss of opportunity for social and economic gain on traditional lands due to loss of native plants, animals, food, fibres, medicine and ceremony reduces the capacity of Traditional Owners to be economically independent through a diverse economic base. Overcoming these problems and obstacles requires concerted and focused effort. Agency staff will need to go beyond their official roles to build ongoing relationships and build the requisite trust to sustain healthy ongoing partnerships and collaborations. To quote Darrel Cruz, Director of the Washoe Tribal Historic Preservation Office,

"Good leadership and a clear vision are needed so agencies and Tribes can work together".¹⁰

The impacts of colonisation must be acknowledged and understood to consider and understand aspirations, and to develop genuine trust and meaningful partnerships. It must not be used, however, as an excuse or reason not to progress self-determination.

In the words of Chook Chook Hillman from the Karuk Tribe of California,

"Collaboration is the key—we won't always agree, but we can focus on shared values, healing the land and the people".¹¹

At the heart of efforts to create genuine and meaningful relationships with Traditional Owners is the foundational principle that agencies must genuinely listen and allow Traditional Owner voices to be heard, and for their words to result in actions.

Self-determination is all about choice. In 2009, Australia became a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It describes self-determination as the ability for Indigenous people to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural equity, based on their own values and way of life. That means Traditional Owners have the right to make choices that best reflect them on their journey to self-determination and self-governance.¹²

The *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018–2023*¹³ sets out whole-of-government self-determination enablers and principles and commits government to significant structural and systemic transformation. Two of the self-determination enablers are: a) prioritising culture, and b) transferring power and resources to communities. The number of cultural burns conducted is identified as a measure of the framework's Goal 18: "Aboriginal land, water and cultural rights are realised". In addition, the *DELWP Self-Determination Reform Strategy 2020–2025*¹⁴ sets an outcome indicator to "Recognise and implement the decisions that Traditional Owners make over cultural fire practices," as well as four outcome measures regarding cultural fire management practices. These include: the number of cultural burns, partnership arrangements to support fire and other management practices, policies and programs that progress self-determination in cultural fire practices, and the Aboriginal workforce supporting cultural burning activities.

Efforts to reintroduce cultural burning on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, where most of the recent cultural burning has occurred in Victoria, commenced rather innocuously, but crucially with self-determination in mind. It started with an informal meeting at a café; I had an open and honest discussion about how DELWP could assist in enabling Traditional Owners to manage Country. The response from Rod Carter, CEO of Dja Dja

Wurrung Aboriginal Clans Corporation was simple yet powerful,

"We want to see white smoke across our Country and know that our people are using fire to garden the landscape once again."

Dja Dja Wurrung people have lived on their traditional lands and cared for Country over thousands of years. Over the past decade, they have achieved significant milestones in securing rights to manage Country, including the *2013 Dja Dja Wurrung Recognition and Settlement Agreement*, which established the legal partnership between the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and the State of Victoria.

Formally acknowledging Dja Dja Wurrung legal rights and connection to Country was a crucial first step in developing a meaningful partnership. It elevated Dja Dja Wurrung to a genuine partner rather than a stakeholder. This legal agreement also means that Dja Dja Wurrung can hold DELWP and other agencies accountable if their legal rights and other obligations of government are not met. Acknowledging legal rights extends to recognising Aboriginal sovereign jurisdiction regarding TEK, including protection and management of cultural fire knowledge.

Working together, Dja Dja Wurrung and DELWP have identified practical measures that further promote opportunities to reintroduce cultural burning, both on Dja Dja Wurrung Country and more broadly throughout Victoria. These include:

- Creation of the first Aboriginal Burn Planner position with DELWP, who works at a local level with Traditional Owners to nominate and plan cultural burns;
- Creation of an Enable Cultural Burn position at DELWP. This state-wide role will identify and remove institutional, regulatory and social barriers to Traditional Owners' ability to heal and manage Country using fire; and
- Numerous designated Aboriginal positions at operational level to implement cultural burns.

In four short years, cultural burning has increased the presence of Traditional Owners on Country in Victoria. It restores the rights of Traditional Owners to fulfil their obligations to care for Country and build the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people through a living culture. Through genuine efforts to enable self-determination, white smoke is visible across Victoria, and Aboriginal people, including Elders, women and children, are "gardening their landscape" once again.

Policy recommendations

1. Partnerships managing Country

Self-determination should be a driving principle of collaborative initiatives returning cultural burning to Country. This means agencies must explicitly acknowledge and respect that Traditional Owners want to lead this process, at their pace, with sustained resourcing from governments and their agencies. The legal rights and connection of Aboriginal people to Country must be recognised, and formal partnership agreements established between government agencies and representative Aboriginal parties to create equitable and accountable relationships.

2. Policies and regulations

Establish both state and national Indigenous Policy and Partnerships groups to bring together representatives from fire and emergency management agencies to work with Traditional Owners and agencies to help:

- Identify institutional, regulatory and social barriers to Traditional Owners' ability to manage Country and develop recommendations to remove or reduce these barriers.
- Develop, pilot and support culturally appropriate training pathways for Traditional Owners to lead cultural burns on both public and private land.
- Support the development of Aboriginal cultural safety programs for all staff with a specific focus on cultural fire.
- Develop and/or revise standard operating procedures, codes of practice and work instructions to reduce barriers to the application of cultural fire and provide physically and culturally safe working environments in which Traditional Owners can apply cultural fire.

3. Funding for developing cultural fire

Commitment to empowering Traditional Owners as leaders in the management of their Country must include providing sustained and appropriate resources directly to Traditional Owner groups.

- These resources, which may be used to develop employment pathways and economic opportunities in cultural fire, should be controlled by Traditional Owners and used as they deem appropriate (see recommendation 1).
- Agencies should support Traditional Owners to develop and lead a science-based research program that aligns with their cultural fire aims and initiatives.

4. Support knowledge exchange and networking

Create a national Indigenous-led network of Indigenous fire practitioners supported with funding from land and fire management agencies. This group would bring together both volunteer and paid practitioners engaged in collaborative land and bushfire management initiatives with Traditional Owners. The ideal location for this network would be within the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council structure.¹⁵

Stakeholder consultation

The following groups have been consulted:

- Aboriginal Victoria
- Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council
- Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Office of the Chief Fire Officer/Aboriginal Self-Determination Reform Branch
- Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation

Additional groups to be consulted include:

- Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation
- Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Bhiemie Williamson, Research Associate and PhD Candidate, Australian National University and Tim Kanoa, Executive Director, Aboriginal Victoria who provided invaluable expertise, advice and insight through their peer-reviewing of this article. I would also like to thank Rodney Carter, CEO, Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and Trent Nelson, Chairman Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation for permission to use their quotes and their insights and feedback regarding Djandak Wi. Any errors or admissions are my own.

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