

## Submission to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

### **This submission, relates to terms of reference**

6. Land use planning and management and building standards, including appropriate clearing and other hazard reduction, zoning, and any appropriate use of indigenous practices.
7. Appropriate action to adapt to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems

### **Presenters:**

Christine Quinton

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I identify as being of aboriginal descent. Due to the fact that the Assimilation Policy was in place in Australia for generations, and because of the Stolen Generation, my culture has been lost. So too have my connections to my people and my country. Still, I sense my indigeneity within. I am currently studying a Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) Special Education at UNE and have many years' experience working with Children's Services. I spent 6 years, 1989 to 1994, living and working in the Northern Territory with outback indigenous communities and schools. I have lived in the Bega Valley since 2000. I advocate that aboriginal people be heard in the care of the environment.

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I am a retired Teacher Educator, deeply committed to the development of scientifically sound and socially just policy for land and water management. I have a teaching and action-research background in science education and philosophy of education, with particular interest in the empowerment of women and of other socially and economically marginalized groups. I grew up in rural northern Victoria, lived through the 2003 fires in Canberra, on high alert. I have owned an alternative residence at Tathra for 22 years and lived there through the beginning of the trauma on the Far South Coast in late December as well as the aftermath of the 2018 fire, which stopped at the edge of my property.

We wish to show that

**Indigenous fire practices, particularly cultural burning, are important tools in the restoration of devastated landscapes and in future bushfire prevention in Australia**

### **Introduction by Christine Quinton**

Aboriginal dream time stories speak of Aboriginal people's involvement in the care of the eco-system. How the land, sky, people, bush and animals are all one, working in harmony. As a person who has lost Aboriginal culture connection, due to the Assimilation policy, I feel empowered to request that you read this information that links Aboriginal culture to country. I grieve for the land especially the bush and wildlife lost in the 2019 and 2020 bushfires because of my connection to country. I feel strongly the need to be aware of the traditional Aboriginal practices and to connect with country and its care in the future. I believe that the ongoing care needs to go back to the traditional owners as being the caretakers of this amazing land we call home.

**Summary:** Over tens of thousands of years, using cultural burning practices Aboriginal Australians created the landscape recorded by European colonists. Fire was an important tool, used in both

crafting and maintaining the health of the country and preventing the out break of bush fires. The reintroduction of traditional aboriginal land management practices, in particular cultural burning, can both heal destroyed ecosystems and make future wildfire less likely. Hazard reduction burning is not a viable alternative and can be seen as counterproductive. The involvement of Aboriginal women and men in developing and implementing these cultural burning practices in partnership with other agencies, can help to heal and regenerate our devastated landscapes, and enable more of our First Nations people to connect with country and culture in an empowering way. Support at all levels of Government and through their agencies to make this possible should be of the highest priority. The involvement of aboriginal leadership in all decision-making is crucial. As many Aboriginal elders have uncertain health the passing on of their knowledge to younger generations should be seen as urgent.

### **Central Points and Recommendations**

- 1. Aboriginal Australians used cultural burning to craft the Australian landscape as seen by the first Europeans**
- 2. Cultural burning is not just about fire. It is to be respected as cultural knowledge, under the control of its owners. Aboriginal people must always be involved in leadership regarding its use.**
- 3. Cultural burning is a practice that protects and regenerates local flora and fauna, which have evolved to be adapted to cool burning. In contrast, hazard reduction burning, a hot burn, destroys local plants and encourages species that thrive on hot burns, which create future fire hazard.**
- 4. Traditional aboriginal land practices, such as cultural burning, because they were used to ‘create’ Australian ecosystems, can be used both to heal our destroyed ecosystems and to protect them from future wild fire, simultaneously providing valuable employment for aboriginal women and men in a culturally empowering manner.**
- 5. The systematic expansion of cultural burning practices across Australia, with full involvement of aboriginal men and women should be seen as a matter of urgency for important ecological and socio-cultural reasons. Let us endorse the invitation of our First Nations people to work together with fellow Australians to make sure such a catastrophe as the 2019-20 bushfire conflagration, does not happen again.**
- 6. The elders are dying, so these policies must be enacted urgently.**

### **FULL SUBMISSION**

**1. Cultural burning used by to ‘create’ or craft the Australian landscape.** Over tens of thousands of years, using cultural burning practices Aboriginal Australians ‘created’ the landscape recorded by European colonists. Fire was an important tool, used in both crafting and maintaining the health of the country and preventing the out break of bushfires. **Aboriginal Australians used cultural burning to craft the Australian landscape as seen by the first Europeans** Bruce Pascoe (2013), in *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture*, and Bill Gammage (2011)(*The Greatest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia*) have vividly shown, using early European accounts, that Aboriginal Australians were the first agriculturalists. Over thousands of years, using *cultural burning*, they crafted Australia to be the beautiful, productive landscape it was when the European settlers/colonisers arrived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They developed a complex system of land, water and fire management, a holistic way of “caring for country”, which was

deeply culturally embedded, connected with every aspect of life. **Fire was an important tool, used in both crafting and maintaining the health of these ecosystems** and hence to produce food.

**2. Cultural burning is not just about fire. It is to be respected as cultural knowledge, under the control of its owners. Aboriginal people must always be involved in leadership regarding its use.**

Cultural knowledge is holistic with spiritual, moral and systematic aspects and must be respected as such. It has been acquired and passed on through the generations and so is always under the direct control of its owners who are always able to withdraw consent. Victor Steffensen in Fire Country, tells of being taught the practice of cultural burning by elders, the traditional knowledge-holders in North Queensland. As well, fire management is always based on local knowledge, hence **local aboriginal people must always be involved in decision-making**. Without this there is always the danger of the appropriation of First Nations' knowledge.

**Recommendation:** That cultural burning always be respected as cultural knowledge so cannot be practised without aboriginal leadership, and local indigenous participation

**3 Cultural burning is a practice that protects and regenerates local flora and fauna which have evolved to be adapted to cool burning. In contrast, hazard reduction burning (which is ineffective and counterproductive: )a hot burn, which destroys local plants and encourages species that thrive on hot burns and create future fire hazard.**

**Mozaic burning**, was finely controlled to be at *the right time* of year for *each particular country* or ecosystem, each distinguished by its vegetation and soil type, and by regulating the *amount* of fire and *where it was lit* hence *its intensity*. Fires would be lit and allowed to burn gently outward in a circle so animals and birds could smell the smoke and escape. Ground cover was burnt in a way to also protect the forest canopy, which was never burnt, keeping to a minimum the sunlight available for the growth of any ground vegetation, which in turn minimised wild fire outbreaks. Such cool fires promoted the growth of fire-dependent plants and herbs native to the area, keeping the soil cool, moist and refreshed rather than destroying organisms within it.

**Native flora and fauna with fire-related properties and behaviours thus evolved through tens of thousands of years of such cultural burning. Cool burning is essential for their health and regeneration.**

**Cultural burning is a practice that protects and regenerates local flora and fauna, which have evolved to be adapted to cool burning. In contrast, hazard reduction burning (which is ineffective and counterproductive: )a hot burn, which destroys local plants and encourages species that thrive on hot burns and create future fire hazard.** Hazard reduction burning thus destroys ecosystems that have been created and maintained by cultural burning

**Cultural burning and hazard reduction burning compared**

Cultural burning heals the land and generates and protect local plant life, and animals. Hazard reduction burning is destructive of local flora and fauna, ultimately ineffective and counterproductive. In contrast, to cool burns, which destroy weeds and flammable undergrowth, but do not damage plants native to the area, current land management practices like large-scale hazard reduction burning, is a hot burn like wild fire. This destroys the indigenous plants of an ecosystem, enabling plants like bracken, which flourishes after hot burns, to crowd out native vegetation. This bracken in turn becomes a flammable fire hazard in the next fire season

**Recommend** The development of hazard reduction methods less destructive of the canopy, and hence of local native plants and animals and the organisms in the soil than hazard reduction

burning. See Victor Steffensen, Video: *Could cultural burning save us next bushfire season*

#### **4 Traditional aboriginal land practices provide valuable employment for aboriginal women and men in a culturally empowering manner.**

Aboriginal cultural burning can both, heal and protect from future fire. Areas burnt using traditional cultural burning practices, carried out by aboriginal rangers after the Tathra Aboriginal Land Council gained land rights in 2016, did not burn in the Tathra fires in 2018. There are now many examples in Qld, NSW and Victoria of similar projects: the training of aboriginal rangers to work alongside non-aboriginal workers under the direction of local indigenous leaders. As Steffensen and others have emphasized, such projects must involve aboriginal leaders, and local indigenous people. . In a time of increasing warming with climate change, this work is becoming increasingly urgent as the period of time between bush fire seasons is shrinking. (See Tathra videos) While such practices may not be not applicable in all contexts, the importance of such work should not be underestimated.

#### **5. The systematic development of cultural burning practices across Australia, with full involvement of aboriginal men and women should be seen as a matter of urgency for important ecological and socio-cultural reasons.**

**Ecological:** to save our remaining forests from further fire and to regenerate damaged forests and bushland wherever possible restoring habitat for wildlife and insects and damage to our essential waterways.

**Socio-cultural:** The damage that has been done by European colonisation to the cultural and ecological systems the first Nations people had crafted across millennia can never be repaired. Those who have survived the destruction and neglect of Country, Aboriginal land, its wild life, its rivers, its trees and plants, its sacred sites, the genocide and brutality to their people and continuing injustice, live in almost unbearable grief at this further destruction. This an important opportunity to support them in their healing of Country; for all of us to work together to create a more ecologically sustainable and socially just society together.

**It is essential that aboriginal women and men be involved in cultural burning workshops** held on their own country. Such involvement provides opportunity for employment, enables important traditional knowledge about country to be retained and passed on.

While there is now official support from Country Fire Authorities in many states, it has often been held back by lack of official support and essential funding. As Steffensen recommend s such engagement of young (and older) aboriginal men and women in such holistic traditional practices led by their traditional knowledge keepers enables them to reconnect with Culture at the deepest level and gives them a reason for living, overcoming alienation and despair and can contribute to reducing the rate of youth suicide and incarceration.

**Recommendation: Cultural burning training projects, led by aboriginal men and women, be implemented across NSW in all appropriate areas, as soon as possible**

**6. The elders are dying:** There is a further reason for urgent expansion of such transmission of traditional aboriginal practices. The elders, the custodians of this traditional knowledge, are near the end of their lives and must pass on their knowledge while they can. If we do not act soon, it

will be lost. Many fear that their elders, their cultural knowledge- holders, their “universities,” will not survive the corona virus pandemic.

**Recommendation: These policies be enacted urgently**

## REFERENCES

### Videos:

- Bruce Pascoe, *A real history of Aboriginal Australians, the first agriculturalists*:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqgrSSz7Htw>. TEDx Sydney, July 24, 2018. 12.33 mins.
- **Indigenous fire methods protect land before and after ... - ABC**  
[www.abc.net.au › news › indigenous-burning-before-a...](http://www.abc.net.au/news/indigenous-burning-before-a...)

Sep 18, 2018 - Six months after the *Tathra* bushfire, a pioneering *cultural burning* project reveals how traditional Indigenous fire methods can heal and protect ...

- **Aboriginal communities call for ongoing funding of cultural ...**  
[www.abc.net.au › news › aboriginal-cultural-burning-f...](http://www.abc.net.au/news/aboriginal-cultural-burning-f...)

Jan 29, 2020 - The blaze that tore through *Tathra* in 2018 burnt around land where traditional *burns* had been carried out, but Indigenous *fire* crews say they ..

- Victor Steffersen, Australian Story, April 13, 2020, Fighting Fire with Fire - Australian Story -  
[www.abc.net.au/austory/fighting-fire-with-fire](http://www.abc.net.au/austory/fighting-fire-with-fire)
- Victor Steffersen, April 13, 2020. [ABC News](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=763122464220941). *Could cultural burning save us next bushfire season?*  
/ <<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=763122464220941>
- Firestick Alliance Indigenous Corporation <https://www.firesticks.org.au/>
- Right Country Right Fire - Podcasts at <http://www.firesticks.org.au/right-country-right-fire-podcast-series/>
- **Strength from perpetual grief: how Aboriginal people experience the bushfire crisis**  
Authors: Bhiamie Williamson (Affiliated with the ACT Bushfire Council; Jessica Weir funding from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC); Vanessa Cavanagh funding from The NSW Bushfire Risk Management Research Hub Affiliated with Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation.

### Books:

- Bruce Pascoe (2013) *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture*
- Bill Gammage (2011) *The Greatest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia*
- Victor Steffensen (2020) *Fire Country*

**"Bushfire-Bubble "( 22/2/2020) Christine linn Quinton.**

Doctor give me drugs .

I'm tired. Adrenalin, pumping.

Fear racing, smoke filled dreams.

Hours days on days, weeks.

Meditate, sleep, relax.

Red sky, black sky..... day-night.

CLIMATE ACTION fire burning.

Land, trees, animals, scorched dying dead.

Help water, help burning !!!!!!! Stop.

Roads blocked, traffic stopped! Calm.

Fire stay or go flight, fight mode.

Sudden, Urgent, alarming no warning.

No power? No phone? Radio!

Supplies short, diesel, tents, roads blocked .Survive.

Apocalyptical NOW.

Dozens of people dead; hurt.

Safety! life threatening, situation.

Planes crash sadness grief, pain.

Houses burnt, fences roads sheds

Livelihoods income jobs money GONE.

Devastated black burnt graveyards.

Funding fire trucks high ALERT.

People power, community exhaustion TRAUMA.

Around the clock, time repeats.

No alcohol, need to drive

Stay alert, intense, car packed.

Oooooo..... How I long for BLUE SKIES.

Stories told one and all.

Flight, flight, freeze do we run.

Traffic jams coming going again.

## Evacuation

Show grounds, rec grounds, civic, plaza, Beach

Waiting in no-mans land.

Canberra, Sydney Melbourne tourists leave.

Gather everyone, people, friend, neighbours, relatives strangers.

Together; dogs, cats, chocks horses.

Windows shut! smoke filled air.

2pk masks, shallow breathing. Coughs ...

Smoke skys, no outside time.

Make sandwiches, cut ham.

Make beds make pavs / meals nurture the workers.

Sleep floormats, no showers.

Ladders ready, check the gutters.

Block the downpipes, pray for rain.

What direction will it come?



Australia burns the world watches.

WE were forewarned, action wasn't taken.

Give us back "dream-time".

Check radio, app social media !

Where's the wind , fires, people, safety ....Aid

Embers jumping, Amy clean-up trucks.

Paint, Talk, Feel, Think, Reflect.

Women, meeting, air conditioner.

Establish routine, peace, in chaos.

Doctor sorry NO drugs

Its situational, everybody evacuate or stay.

Dear God give me hope.

Red sky, lost trees, animals dead.

Make a Big Blue Bubble shelter there.

Because we all really do .....CARE.