

# Traditional and non-traditional viewpoints

## Arnhem Land Fire Stories

*“The clans used to get together to hunt for kangaroos using fire. All of these things, making fire and hunting they are still controlled under our law.”*

Left Hand George Djanggawanga,

*“So that’s why bushfire is coming through anywhere. Someone else can burn it and that bushfire can go anywhere. You can’t stop a bushfire when nobody is there.”* Billy Yalawanga

*“I don’t like the fire going into the rainforest and going to where the old people used to get flying fox. So I stay there and look from my old place what’s going on with fire. Fire is travelling to my place where people used to get flying fox and where they use to camp but the flying fox are gone, finish and also emus got no fat on them, because they got no food. So I want to save that place and save the grass and fruit there. It’s made me think that I need fire breaks.”* Jack Namandale, Karnbirr

*“People are saying that the right people should be on their country looking after it to protect it from wild fires. If people are on the country and burning the country little bit by little bit, burning in patches, then these wild fires can’t come through travelling a long way.”* Dean Yibarbuk, Maningrida

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### Why traditional owners burn country

The reasons for burning by traditional owners were summed up by Yibarbuk (1998):

*“Aboriginal people burn to hunt, to promote new grass which attracts game, to make the country easier to travel through, to clear country of spiritual pollution after death, to create firebreaks for later in the dry season and a variety of other reasons which overall ‘bring the country alive again’”*

### Recent fire history in Arnhem Land

There is an increasing recognition of the soundness of traditional burning practices of Aborigines (Cooke 1998). In one area, where a family had unbroken occupation and unbroken practice of traditional fire management, a recent study found that these clan estates were being well managed to maintain ecological integrity (Yibarbuk 1998).

Satellite pictures show that there is now more early burning occurring in Arnhem Land than previously. The maps produced by the Northern Territory Bushfires Council show that 1996 was a terrible year for fire in Central Arnhem Land and the plateau. Large, late, hot fires burnt out most of the southern and eastern side of the plateau. People at Bulman noticed that the large fires chased a lot of their animals away.

In May 1998 the Jawoyn Association and the Northern Land Council’s Caring for Country Unit, with land-owners permission, carried out aerial controlled burning up the Cameco road and along the Mann River. This worked well as a firebreak but there were no big, late fires coming through that year. Not much of the plateau

burned in 1998. In 1999 there was a significant change in the timing of fires in the Bulman area. Bulman people burnt more than 2 000 square kilometres in early burning between May and mid-July to set in place big fire breaks to stop the wild fires coming in later from the east and south. However, the situation did not turn out as expected. A fire started near Cameco camp and burnt northward, burning out a lot of country on the upper East Alligator and over into Kakadu.

Another fire started in September, near the Goomadeer headwaters and burnt for weeks threatening some important areas of jungle. To stop this one spreading (with a north-east wind at its back), a large back-burn was initiated from the East Alligator River, which also burnt out a lot of country. While not perfect, the situation is getting better because people are becoming more involved.

### Bulman people’s fire management, 1999

People from Bulman were very busy in June and July of 1999 doing early burning. This early burning covered more than 2000 km<sup>2</sup> of land and was burnt to protect a much larger area from wildfires that potentially could have travelled from the south-east and easterly direction later in the dry season. These wildfires which burned through in 1996 and 1997 caused a lot of damage. They occurred late in the dry season when conditions were very hot, dry and windy. These late-season fires are a threat to plants, animals and people.

Most of the Bulman burning was done by CDEP workers (12) under the guidance of senior elders (six) as supervisors.

Detailed records using the Global Positioning Sys-





tem were kept of the areas burned and this information will be used in mapping for comparison with Bushfire Council maps and ground-truthing. Both CDEP and traditional owners are very interested in keeping track of the areas that were burnt this year. The information will also be used to better interpret firescar mapping and produce more accurate fire maps for use by land managers.

As a result of the information and education in regard to fire and burning, more landowners have taken steps to get back to their country during June and July to do burning.

### **Bininj and Balanda: “when some people see fire they just see red!”**

As non-Aboriginal fire managers understand better the basic principles of Aboriginal fire management, there is a tendency to try to emulate this through the use of helicopters and incendiary burning. This minimises the use of labour and provides greater economic efficiency. However it takes the traditional owner out of the picture to a large extent and may lack the finesse of burning carried out on the ground by people with an intimate knowledge of country.

Balanda (non-Aboriginal people) generally fear fire. It is something that is seen as destructive: it can destroy the environment, plants, animals and birds. When Balandas think about fire they think of the danger, but when Bininj (Aboriginal people) think fire, they think of it as a tool and a thing of comfort.

Yibarbuk (1998) expresses concern about the effects of the lack of fire management in western Arnhem Land.

*“We were amazed to see the effects of feral animals and weeds, and unmanaged fire in some places. We noticed that there was less variety, less biodiversity of both plants and animals in places that had been*

*having late hot fires every year for years. We also saw country where people were trying to protect it from fire, to have lots of fruit trees and shrubs for animals, like emu especially and people.”*

There is a need to fully understand the way traditional owners have burned the country so as to enable people to walk the country and burn in this way. It is also important to try, where it is not possible for Aboriginal people to do this, to emulate the best effects of traditional burning.

Bowman (1998) in his work in central and western Arnhem Land did some comparative studies of fruit tree density, as well as looking at the cypress pines in the area. It is preliminary work but has shown some evidence that huge hot fires destroy the trees, while the patchy, more controlled burning around outstations, does not.

### **Summary**

Aboriginal people as traditional landowners have practiced fire management over the millennia. Their use of fire for a variety of reasons has probably shaped the northern Australian landscape as much as the farming practices of Europe. A better understanding of these traditional practices and the ability of the people on the ground to manage them will help control the late hot wildfire that everyone fears.

### **References**

- Bowman, D., (1998), *Fire on the Savannas: Voices from the Landscape*, D. Schulz, (Ed), Cooperative Research Centre for the Sustainable Development of Tropical Savannas.
- Cooke, P., (1998), ‘Fire management on Aboriginal lands in the Top End of the Northern Territory of Australia’, *Proceedings from the North Australia Fire management Workshop*, Darwin, 24–25 March.
- Anon, (1999), *Looking after the Arnhem Land Plateau*, Internal Report, presented by the Northern Land Council, Caring for Country, Jawoyn Association, Djelk Rangers, Kunwinjku and Dalabon landowners.
- Yibarbuk, D., (1998), *Fire on the Savannas. Voices from the Landscape*, D. Schulz, (Ed), Cooperative Research Centre for the Sustainable Development of Tropical Savannas.

For more information about fire-management issues in northern Australia, go to the Savanna Explorer section of our website at <http://savanna.ntu.edu.au/> and choose the fire topics section.

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