

Cape York

Healthy Country Newsletter

2014 Indigenous Fire Workshop

Issue 20 - Special Edition

Driving through Cape York at the moment, and as happens every year, the devastating impacts of fire are evident. At our recent Regional Investment Strategy meeting in Cooktown, land managers continue to agree that fire is still the biggest issue for the Cape. Wildfires strip the land of vegetation, create erosion, release carbon into the atmosphere and reduce food sources and shelter for cattle and wildlife.

In July, Cape York NRM supported the sixth Indigenous Fire Workshop on Cape York. The implementation of traditional Indigenous fire regimes can provide an innovative response to the impacts of these devastating fires using old and proven methods passed down from fire knowledge holders for thousands of years.

This special edition of Healthy Country newsletter looks at why people from all over Australia travel to Cape York for this knowledge.



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Anthony Michael (Jack) and George Manantan, Taepithiggi Clan

Brothers Jack and George Manantan are from the Taepithiggi clan, Traditional Owners of the Country where the 2014 Indigenous Fire Workshop was held at Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve.

Both have been overwhelmed by how the workshop participants have loved being on their country. “Just look – everyone here is so happy” George said on the final day of the workshop. “It’s been great for the Taepithiggi mob, sharing our stories with everyone, we are all so similar like that. To have countrymen from different places come to our place, makes us so proud” he said.

Taepithiggi had their land returned around a year ago, and according to Jack it’s great to be back on country. He said the ancestral spirits are happy too, and that they were there to welcome everyone at the smoking ceremony.

“Everyone felt welcome, all good and comfortable on Country. They can see the respect we have for our culture and ourselves and how we look after people” he said.

Both Jack and George look forward to spending more time on their country. Jack reckons there is still lots to learn, but that there is no better place to be, while George said he was looking forward to future things like this (the workshop) happening on their land.

The brothers extended their thanks to Ronnie Guivarra and Dianne Nicholls, Cultural Rangers from Mapoon Land and Sea office for their help with ceremony during the workshop.

“I’m proud of Ronnie and Dianne” said George. “It’s well appreciated with what they did. I’m just happy that everyone is so happy. We are like a big family”.

“It’s been unreal to have this here” Jack said.



Photo: Lyndal Scobell

Above: Jack Manantan



Above: Cecil Arthur gives a Taepithiggi blessing at the closing ceremony

Cecil Arthur is from the Taepithiggi clan and has been working on Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve as a ranger for over three years. The fire workshop was a new experience for Cecil, and it meant a lot for him to learn more about fire, and how it works for people in other locations.

Cecil was incredibly proud to have the workshop on his Country and place of work, particularly in sharing the beauty of the Wenlock River and the pristine country.

“It is significant for Taepithiggi to have the workshop here as we are recognised as a Clan, with significant stories and connection to this country.

This event helps to showcase us on a bigger and brighter scale, and provides an opportunity for making new friends and networks” he said.

Cecil’s mother was removed from Mapoon in 1962 to New Mapoon, and still lives there. “One big goal is to bring the family back to country and get them to work here and care and sustain the country like the old people did” he said.

He sees an opportunity with Australia Zoo to keep the unique culture of the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve and Taepithiggi culture and run it together as a partnership.

Dianne Nicholls, Cultural Officer, Mapoon Land and Sea Office

Dianne is the Cultural Officer with the Land and Sea Office in Mapoon. Together with Ronnie Guivarra, Dianne was instrumental to the success of the 2014 Indigenous Fire Workshop, ensuring cultural protocols were followed, on behalf of the Taepithiggi Traditional Owners. Welcome and farewell ceremonies were held which included smoking and dance. These ceremonies helped settled the participants into the special Taepithiggi country for the duration of the event. This was particularly important to do because no one (Traditional Owners) had been at the site and walked the land for a long time.

Dianne said the workshop gave a bigger picture for the outside community about the work Rangers and Cultural Officers do by showing that Traditional Owners can manage on their own and have the capacity to walk about on Country. She said having the workshop provided an opportunity for knowledge sharing with other Traditional Owners groups.

July is always the month for burning in the country surrounding Mapoon, and the Mapoon rangers have a solid work plan around this, which is supported by Traditional Owners, Council and the community. The community have a strong junior ranger program, which helps the younger generations get ready to step up and take on responsibility for manage of Land and Sea into the future.

Mapoon's Healthy Country Plan has identified fire as the biggest issue in their community. Big fires have had a profound effect on community health and cultural sites as well as damaging the ecosystems they impact. Through their planning processes, the



Above: Dianne Nicholls
Mapoon community are responding to this through implementing fire management regimes in the areas where they can.

Dianne believes there should be more workshops like the Fire Workshop, as it creates connection and unity.

“This workshop shows that we are all compassionate to the Country” she said.

Below: Uncle Tommy George with Ronnie Guivarra



Shelley Lyon, Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve

The workshop was held at the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve, which is managed by rangers Barry and Shelley Lyon.

Shelley said it was fabulous to see people come from all over, all here to share knowledge and to connect.

“This is a great venue for the workshop - we've been using traditional practices to burn here since Australia Zoo took over, so it's a great place to showcase traditional burning practices” she said.

“We work closely with the Taepithiggi mob, and offer employment, and share knowledge and resources”

she said.

Shelley said she is always hungry to learn and looked forward to acquiring knowledge from the workshop. “People will be able to improve their fire management practices from a workshop like this.

“And it is fitting for it to be here – Steve had a great respect for Traditional Owners and fire management practices, and was always devastated by the effects of hot fire on animals and country, so he'd be really happy this is happening” she said.



Fire is continually identified as the biggest issue for land managers across Cape York. Every year large, wildfires take out millions of hectares of country across the Cape, resulting massive losses in grazing country, enabling soil erosion, decreasing biodiversity and releasing large amounts of carbon into the atmosphere.

Cape York NRM's Peta-Marie Standley says coordinated and appropriate fire management regimes across Cape York would reduce these annual devastating impacts from hot fires, and that traditional Aboriginal ways of burning should be part of the solution.

In July this year, a gathering of over 120 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from around Australia, at Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve marked the sixth Cape York Indigenous Fire Workshop.

Hosted by Victor Steffensen in association with Cape York Natural Resource Management, the fire workshop is all about the traditional Indigenous ways of burning. The workshop draws on knowledge passed down from Elders and fire knowledge holders to address contemporary issues of fire management.

The workshop showed people how to undertake cool burns – fires which reduce fuel loads, burn patches of country rather than everything, leaving feed for cattle and wildlife, and burn slowly so that animals and insects have time to move away from the fires. These fires also leave tree canopies intact and enough ground cover to prevent soil erosion. The ash from cool fires feeds the soil, while the fires enable germination of all vegetation rather than only the fire-loving species.

Victor Steffensen and Peta-Marie Standley have been learning about Traditional Fire Practices for 16 and 11 years respectively and have spent countless hours with some of Cape York's fire-knowledge holders and Elders. Through their Indigenous led co-research project, KTFMRP* and *The Importance of Campfires*, Kuku Thypan elders old man Musgrave (20/11/1920 - 08/02/2006) and Tommy George were awarded honorary doctorates from

James Cook University giving western recognition to the knowledge held and shared by the brothers, passed down through generations for tens of thousands of years. Peta and Victor have learnt a lot from them and Old Man Musgrave and Tommy George encouraged them to share knowledge about traditional fire management practices broadly to help restore the land from poor management practices, and to bring balance back to country.

The sessions

At this year's workshop Victor and Mapoon Ranger and Thanakwith Elder Stanley Budby applied their knowledge to undertake burns of Messmate woodland adjoining significant bauxite spring communities, showing participants how lighting lots of small fires created the patchwork effect in burning, rather than creating a large fire front often associated with drip-torch burns.

In addition, scientists from James Cook University and the Australian Tropical Herbarium, Gerry Turpin and Mark Newton took people into the reserve to discuss the different vegetation communities and how fire affects them. They were accompanied by Mapoon Rangers Sarah Barkley and Judy Sagigi who discussed traditional uses for the plants.

Peta-Marie's workshop shared traditional fire management methodologies – discussing what to record before and after a burn is put in, and how to monitor the impacts of hot fires over time. She was supported by Mapoon Rangers Edwin Ling and Cecil Woodley.

Story-telling and the passing of knowledge are central to traditional Indigenous cultures. New technologies are helping to record traditional knowledge, and to monitor work on country. Ben Lister's session made this easy through film-making, enabling participants to record short interviews on film. Films are an effective medium for recording knowledge, monitoring burns and their impacts, and sharing information with a broader audience.

*Kuku Thypan Fire Management Research Project

Mapoon Land and Sea Rangers



Photo: Lyndal Scobell

Nathan Newley "I had an amazing time with knowledge that was learned and being around fun people. It's incredible the knowledge they are all sharing. I learned a lot of new things, about fire, about trees and uses and bush tucker from Stanley. It's good to hang around with different rangers from different parts of Australia and interesting to hear about other rangers. I hope they do it again next year. Would come along again and stay a bit longer"



Judy Sagigi "It would be good to have another one – and go to similar workshop in other areas. Good and educational –we're learning from them and them learning from us. Good interactions" (Pictured with Sarah Barkley)



Stanley Budby "It's good to have workshop and learn something from us, up this way. It was good to show other people what we do up this end and show how we burn up here. It's nice for other people to see fire burning and for people to mix with other Aboriginal people from the north"

Edwin Ling "Nice to work with other people and talk about bloodwood and ironwood. I don't want to leave today. It's my first time to the workshop. I really enjoyed talking about our country, about burning, about bush fire. Highlights were the dancing last night, listening to all them stories and getting to meet them people from down south"



Cecil Woodley "People learned a lot and we learnt a lot from them too. I enjoyed it - it was good to be part of hosting it. Good to show them how we burn and learn how they burn. They haven't got the same trees down south as we got up here. Talking about the trees down there and talking about the trees up here"





Photo: Gus Amott

Damian and Di Cullenward are farmers from Eugowra in central NSW. Damian grew up in western NSW and still spends time there doing contract work on farms.

Damian has been drawing attention from his surrounding farming community lately, but it hasn't all been good. The property he owns had been intensively farmed for the decade before he took over. He said parts of the country were sick and were struggling with weeds, chemicals and from overgrazing.

As a kid, Damian grew up using fire as land management tool, but as Aboriginal people were removed from the land, fire stopped because there were not enough people left to burn. He says people have become scared of fire because they don't know how to use it.

So when he introduced fire as tool for managing weeds on his Eugowra property it was met with scepticism from surrounding farms. His first trial wasn't entirely successful, with some weeds returning, but he persevered and now the weeds have been overtaken by native grasses. Combined with fencing and controlled grazing, the erosion on his property has also stopped. His success drew interest from the Catchment Management Authority, who are now supporting Damian to spread the word about using fire as a land management tool.

Damian says that getting traditional fire management knowledge to landholders to use will be the biggest thing in land management. He says people are reticent to try things.

"People are happy to spray, use chemicals, to get country to do what they want but country is getting sicker and sicker. Country will look after itself with a bit of assistance, and getting back to nature is a big part of it. Everyone seems to be scared of fire. Respect it don't be scared of it" he says.

"The idea of burning country and completely baring it of ground matter, goes against the grain of most pastoralists, especially graziers. If burning is done in a mosaic pattern, cool burn at right time of year, it will recover within weeks.

"Fire can be used instead of chemicals to eradicate weeds you don't want. Fire is natural selection, native plants can handle fire. Especially when burning at right time with the knowledge known now and especially old farming country that's been farmed and farmed. Fire is a cheap and practical way of rehabilitating country that has been subject to intensive grazing and farming. Grazing sheep and grazing cattle can go hand in hand with burning, it's all part of the big picture" he says.

Prior to when Damian and Di took over, a 140 acre paddock on the property was farmed continually for at least 8 years. The paddock has been rested for two years since and Damian is amazed at how well native grasses and clovers have come back. He believes that the country will recover itself with a bit of assistance to eradicate the weeds and any possible lingering disease as a result of farming. He says that if there is enough carbon to go back in the soil from leaf matter etc., the need for soil health assistance is not as necessary. And while some land will be beyond the point of recovery on its own, especially some of the more fragile or eroded areas, over time these too can be bought back to health especially with the re-introduction of practices like traditional fire regimes.

Fire Workshop in Photos

Clockwise from right:

Rachel Steffensen makes a grass torch for the Springs burn

Australian Tropical Herbarium's Mark Newton showing vegetation communities on Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve

Napranum Rangers Teddy Barkley and Herbert Jerry shared local knowledge at the fire workshop

Rob Williams from Northern New South Wales tries his hand at the camera

Gerry Turpin shows how to prepare a specimen for the Herbarium

Tasmania's Mark Donald and Michelle McKemey from NSW starting a fire at the Springs burn

Djunbunji Rangers record data at the fire methodology workshop.



Photo: Lyndal Scobell



Cape York is a long way from the central wheat belt region in Western Australia, yet Oral McGuire was incredibly pleased to have made the journey. Oral's country is Ballardong Country in the Nyungar Nation, and his mob (Yaraguia Enterprises Inc.) got back 2100 acres of their country in 2008, through the Indigenous Land Corporation's land acquisition program. The country had been subject to intensive wheat and sheep farming (broadacre farming) for 180 years, and everything was cleared – trees, understorey and grasses.

The Yaraguia management plan has an environmental focus and healing country was a priority in first three years. It is now six years in, and the country is still healing. The group have planted 300 000 trees with an aspiration to plant one million.

Oral has been working with Victor since 2008, initially through a cultural knowledge recording program run by Wheatbelt NRM. Victor then re-introduced traditional fire management practices to the Ballardong mob. Oral says that rediscovering fire again with Victor was a perfect meeting. He says Victor was right guy, because of his contemporary approach to reintroducing something not done for years. Managing land is a massive responsibility and the Ballardong mob are environmentally motivated, and they want to use as few chemicals and artificial processes as possible. They have a 100% commitment to removing chemicals from their management and instead rely on natural and traditional processes.

As such, fire is now their key tool for weed management.

For Oral, the opportunity to work directly with and learn directly from Traditional Owners and Victor as a teacher of their knowledge, was the key motivation for attending the 2014 Indigenous Fire Workshop.

"I have come here to spend time with people of similar mindset in terms of values and exploration to use fire" Oral said. "To be around others gives energy and inspiration to go back and pass on knowledge. We are learning from Masters with first-hand knowledge – it's too good an opportunity to pass up".

Oral said it was his first Fire Workshop, and he was ready for the challenge of continuing the journey.

"There have been many highlights, but the main one was meeting the old man (Dr Tommy George), being in his camp, and those quite moments with him. We don't have an old fella like him at home" he said.

The other highlights for Oral included cultural exchange and cultural interactions, meeting everyone who attended, and meeting the local community people.

"The smoking ceremony and Welcome to Country gave a sense of peace for coming so far. I'd like to thank Taepithiggi people for the experience" he said.

Larry Towney, Senior Local Lands Services Officer Central Tablelands, NSW

It was just over three years ago when traditional burning was re-introduced to the Lachlan catchment in New South Wales by botanist Dr Milton Lewis, community officer Russel Hill and Victor Steffenson through a project with the Lachlan Catchment Management Authority. After attending a fire workshop as part of the project, Larry is now spreading the word about traditional burning regimes throughout the Lachlan Catchment.

Larry is helping people to adapt traditional burning practices throughout NSW through partnerships, workshops and practical application. Now there are many NSW agencies becoming involved with traditional Aboriginal burning regimes including NSW rural fire services, local Aboriginal land councils, Traditional Owners, Aboriginal community

groups, Landcare groups, landholders and local government.

Around thirty people from Central NSW attended the 2014 Indigenous Fire Workshop in July including members of NSW Rural Fire Service, farmers, Aboriginal Council representatives, Traditional Owners, NSW government representatives and Landcare groups. They came to expand their knowledge of traditional burning by seeing how the Cape York mobs did fire regime.

Larry reckons that while the landscape on Cape York is vastly different to where he's from, the methodologies for burning are similar, and need to be adapted for different landscapes. He says that the country has come under a lot of stress since colonisation, and it is struggling to adjust to

the pressures of development, introduced and invasive species, industry, farming and mining. However, Larry believes that the reintroduction of traditional land management practices such as fire regimes can help restore health to the land.

Left: Victoria's Brendon Kennedy (left) with Aunty Helen Riley (centre) and Pat French (right) from the NSW crew at the film workshop



Brendon Kennedy, North East Catchment Management Authority, Victoria

Brendon went to Hann River workshop in 2009 and attended the 2014 workshop to broaden knowledge learned at first workshop.

Brendon is based in Albury-Wodonga, and last year applied what he knows about fire by holding a fire workshop in his region. The workshop was supported by Cape York NRM's Peta-Marie, who took Cape York fire knowledge holders, Joel Ngalametta, Sharon Ngalametta, Dawn Koondumbin from Aurukun and Muen Lifu from Injinoo along to share their knowledge with the southern states, and show how traditional knowledge can be applied wherever you are. Other key supporters of the Albury-Wodonga workshop included well-known scientists, Bett Gott, Bill Gammage and Dr Fred Keeough. The event was also attended by Government and according to Brendon, they took on a new way of looking at fire, for example, to control weeds.

"What I value about the Cape York workshops is seeing how fire works in a different climate and different country" Brendon said.

"Here people talk the talk, and walk the walk. It will be sad to leave, when the old fellas (spirits) are reaching out and grabbing us and looking after us while we are here.

"A lot of bad stuff happened down south because people were taken off country. My great-great grandmother was last of Keewong mob to speak the language. That makes it important for young men to take on responsibility to people and country. When I get home, I will be telling my kids the stories from here" he said.



Despite the massive effort in organising and running the workshop, Victor Steffensen was still pumped when it finished.

“It was a fantastic workshop, it went really well” he said. “It’s great to see that after all of these workshops people are still coming back. It has evolved with the communities, and people look forward to this” he said. “Some communities are here for the first time, other communities are here for their third or fourth time - sharing their projects, and what they’ve learnt”.

It is the Indigenous teaching methodology which keeps bringing people back. “It’s different from a conference” said Victor. “It’s real teaching, learning first hand. People come here with different concepts of fire and walk away with the same understanding”.

Victor believes the days of meetings and conferences are over and it’s time for action. He said fire problems can be solved by empowering communities.

“It works due to practical engagement and methodologies, seeing the land, reading the land and practical experiences. There is no way this could be down through PowerPoints” he said.

The workshops are designed for people to enjoy time on country and have fun. “People can come together as family and friends, as people who are connecting no matter what nationality or colour” Victor said.

“People come here worried because Country under threat, they leave with hope knowing they can do it, and there is help from the fire workshop and from practitioners” he said.

A contingent of 30 people from New South Wales attended the 2014 workshop. With the support of the NSW government, representatives from Rural Fire Services, government, catchment authorities, farms, Traditional Owners, local governments and community groups took part.

“What we do is invaluable – there are countless outcomes achieved on country: changing people, changing lives, white and black working together as one, calling each other family, farmers all working together. I didn’t think it could happen 10 years ago” Victor said.

Victor said that acknowledgement and respect for the old people who did it first was fundamental to the workshops.

“Evolving culture is an important result of the work and ensures the legacy of the old people continues and that the knowledge is not lost” he said.



Cape York NRM's Operation Manager, Peta-Marie Standley has a long history with traditional fire management practices spanning 11 years. Peta learnt about burning country and about plants and animals on Kuku Thypan country, north-east of Laura working alongside Tommy George and old man Musgrave.

Peta has been instrumental in developing a methodology for planning and monitoring fires through an Indigenous led research project, and it's this methodology that she shares at the fire workshops, and with groups around the country.

Peta said the 2014 Indigenous Fire Workshop was brilliant. She is continually amazed at how people from all over Australia come together on Cape York to learn about fire so they can better look after country. She says fire is an important tool in land management and learning how to use it confidently is really important for all Australians.

"Workshops like this provide an opportunity to learn how to use fire properly and safely, and learn what to do when you put in into the bush" she said.

"Traditional fire regimes will help return the health of the landscape. For example, it's a way to manage the weeds without using chemicals all of the time. If country is healthy we are all going to be healthy and our children will be healthy" she said.

A highlight of the event for Peta was being able to bring Tommy George to the workshop, from his hospital bed in Cooktown, all the way to Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve.

"His health improved daily while he was there on



country" she said.

"The respect everyone has shown to the old man and how they thanked him for helping them start their projects has been beautiful. For him to see how his work has helped people all over the country has been a real highlight for me."

Holding a large event in a remote location such as the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve is an extreme logistical and financial challenge, but Peta says it's all worth it to see the number of people who can now pass on that knowledge back in their communities.

"We try and keep track of how many people have been influenced by this work but it's practically impossible. It's like a movement of people now - like a fire, it spreads and it is spreading more and more" she said.





Photo: Lyndal Scobell

Steve, Mark and Tulsa - Ewamian Aboriginal Corporation, Tullaroo Station

This wasn't the first time Steve Wargent from the Ewamian ranger group in the Gulf of Carpentaria had been to a fire workshop. Steve attended the Hann River workshop several years ago, and has found great value in coming back for a second time.

"It's a good opportunity to get different ideas and to meet other ranger groups" he said. "This workshop has been awesome, it's a great turnout and it helps to know others are having the same dramas with weeds and feral animals as us".

It was, however, the first fire workshop for Mark Wargent and Tulsa Lacey. For Mark, learning more about fire methodology was a highlight.

"To come here and see the different layers of fire is a real eye opener" he said.

For Tulsa, it was the experience of being at the workshop which meant the most. "Learning more from people out here, swapping ideas, connecting with everyone – I would definitely do it again" he said.

Ewamian Aboriginal Corporation have put their hands up to host the next fire workshop at Tullaroo Station. "We'd love to see one at Tullaroo" said Tulsa.



Above: Tulsa Lacey from Ewamian Rangers with Ambrose MacDonald from Risdon Cove Parks in Tasmania

Top of Page: Mark, Tulsa and Steve, Ewamian Aboriginal Corporation

Ewamian Rangers are keen to host the 2015 fire workshop at Tullaroo Station. Stay tuned...

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