

Empowering Indigenous leadership and participation in wildfire recovery, cultural burning and land management

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Summary

- The 2019–20 wildfires had a significant impact on Indigenous communities, estates, cultural heritage, landscapes and significant species.
- This chapter draws on material collected from submissions, workshops and interviews to describe the ways in which Indigenous cultural fire management currently reflect fire practices, relationships, and knowledge that are integral parts of Indigenous identity and governance systems.
- We summarise the persistent calls from Indigenous people to undertake cultural fire management and to support Indigenous leaders and fire practitioners to be involved in all aspects of landscape fire management, including planned burning and wildfire prevention, mitigation, response and recovery.
- Indigenous communities aspire to lead cultural burning and elements of wildfire recovery and related management activities, but continue to be hindered in their efforts. Reasons for this include inadequate decision making and resourcing, current regulatory and legal frameworks, disconnection with and lack of access to Country, conflicting views around fire regimes, fragmented partnerships, and a lack of information about Indigenous wildfire management.
- A key step in overcoming these constraints is to identify short-term goals to increase Indigenous leadership and capacity in fire management, as well as longer-term objectives that will establish a broader framework for empowering Indigenous decision making and involvement in all aspects of landscape fire management, including planned burning and wildfire prevention, mitigation, response and recovery.

Introduction

Indigenous people across Australia recognise that fire is both a threat to, and a healer of, Country. The specific effects of fire, whether wildfire or planned burning, on flora, fauna and ecological communities depend on the attributes of the fire and the ecosystem being burnt. Intense, frequent fires can have a negative impact on native species (Woinarski and Legge 2013; Connell *et al.* 2019) including priority threatened species identified in the Australian Government's Threatened Species Strategy (<https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/strategy-home>) (Connell *et al.* 2019; Wintle *et al.* 2020) and areas and species that are significant to Indigenous people and communities across Australia (Robinson *et al.* 2016b). At the same time, Indigenous fire and land management practitioners and ecologists recognise that fires can also be too infrequent, too mild or too small, and that some form of fire is critical to the health of ecosystems and biota across the country (Yibarbuk 1988). However, there is still much to learn about how the frequency, extent, seasonality and intensity of fire should be managed to support local habitats and species in contemporary and cross-cultural contexts (Cowley *et al.* 2014; Prober *et al.* 2016; Dickman *et al.* 2020).

Although there have been repeated calls to consider the particular circumstances and standing of Indigenous peoples, contemporary fire management activities and wildfire recovery efforts in eastern and southern Australia have only recently incorporated Indigenous fire and landscape management perspectives (e.g. Aboriginal Affairs NSW 2017; Aboriginal Victoria 2019). Recent investigations highlight that emergency events such as wildfires disproportionately affect Indigenous communities because of their relative remoteness in fire-prone areas and limited access to emergency services; as well as the deep trauma that many face due to the legacies of colonisation and discrimination that expose Indigenous people to ongoing vulnerabilities (Fogarty *et al.* 2018; Inspector-General Emergency Management 2020; Williamson *et al.* 2020).

This chapter aims to increase our understanding of what needs to be done to overcome obstacles to Indigenous involvement in cultural burning and fire management. We then use this understanding to identify a series of short- and long-term practical measures that can be implemented to enable Indigenous leadership in future fire management efforts. To do so we draw on research that sought to summarise the aspirations of Indigenous people to care for culturally significant and threatened species in fire-affected regions; and to assist with on-ground post-fire surveys, the monitoring of species recovery, and reviews of species and ecosystem responses to fire and management actions (Robinson *et al.* 2021).

Our research focused on the bioregions that were most heavily affected by the 2019–20 wildfires, to facilitate comparison with other chapters in this book (Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment 2020). However, this study region does not consider the geographical extent of Indigenous peoples' Country, the cultural heritage or song lines that connect species, kin and Country, and the geographical scope of the findings extend well beyond the 'fire-affected' regions (Williamson *et al.* 2020; Robinson *et al.* 2021).

As part of this effort, perspectives offered by Indigenous and non-Indigenous fire experts and partners in submissions to wildfire inquiries, interviews, small discussion groups and workshops were collected, collated and analysed. Excerpts from some interviews are given below: in some cases, with the interviewee being anonymised. Participants were chosen using the following process. First, the study team conducted an online search of Indigenous Traditional Owners, organisations and corporations that have the potential to be involved in fire management and/or cultural burning (e.g. National Indigenous Australians Agency rangers, and Indigenous Protected Area rangers) or had recently

received funding (e.g. <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/bushfire-recovery/activities-and-outcomes#a10>). Next, for each state in the study region (Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania), the study team searched for fire authorities, government and non-government agencies and Indigenous corporations that have been involved in fire management and/or support cultural burning (e.g. Supply Nation, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Rural Fire Service, Country Fire Authority, Country Fire Service and government environmental departments).

Key findings

The impact of wildfires on significant species and cultural heritage has been challenging for many Indigenous groups in the study region. Cathy Thomas, Women's Cultural Education Officer from the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (2020), described the effects of wildfires on species and the environment:

Impacts on flora and fauna, it's part of our environment and our ecosystems and it's quite significant to Aboriginal people and not to mention our totems. Also, our waterways include our water species and food source in lakes, rivers and the ocean, our food source is almost scarce from fires upstream, our beaches covered in debris from fires and affecting our fish and other species in the waters.

Wildfires can also cause considerable damage to Indigenous cultural heritage. Indigenous leaders, land managers and fire practitioners note that, while it is important to protect tangible sites that reflect cultural heritage, intangible heritage values exist across the landscape, connecting places, species and kin to other places, species, and kin. As an Indigenous representative from the Victorian Department of Primary Industries, Parks and Environment explained:

Heritage is the whole landscape; this is not just about fire. Fire practice is also about caring for heritage—not just about places and species. It's about why we do fire and how we do fire and this needs to be cared for. (interview, March 2021)

In addition to the effects of wildfires themselves, submissions from Indigenous organisations reported that wildfire suppression efforts have resulted in damage to cultural heritage. Recognising that 'mechanical suppression activities generally have the most devastating impacts on sites', the Victorian Post Wildfire Indigenous Heritage Survey report cautions that 'it should never be assumed that, because a place or landscape is a known Aboriginal spiritual or named place, that it is not associated with material remains which could be damaged'. The report adds that even 'if a place has no remains, damage to the "sense of place" may occur anyway when disturbed by fire or suppression activities. Only Aboriginal people, particularly those with knowledge about a particular place, can assess whether damage has occurred', regardless of whether that damage is 'physical or less tangible' (Freslov 2004).

Managing the impacts of wildfire and wildfire suppression activities can be particularly complex in places that contain sites that may be unknown to local Indigenous communities (Tasmania Fire Service interview, February 2021; NSW NPWS interview, March 2021; National Bushfire Recovery Agency interview, February 2021) or where cultural

protocols and/or lack of trust make it difficult for Indigenous communities to share the locations of sites with non-Indigenous people. Ensuring that wildfire suppression and fire-fighting activities provide a culturally safe space in which local Indigenous Elders can share the location of heritage sites has been raised as a key issue.

Core to this effort is recognition that fire has influenced the ways in which Australian Indigenous people live on, with and through their land for millennia. Indigenous leaders and fire practitioners are aware of this significance, and this has underpinned their advocacy to direct and practise cultural burning and land management activities in order to protect, heal and nurture Country (see Box 33.1).

Box 33.1. Culturally significant species: koalas

The effects of wildfires on koalas (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) provide a useful example of the impacts of wildfires on culturally significant species. In addition to being recognised as a national icon (Environment and Communications References Committee 2011) and listed as a species of national environmental significance under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (DAWE 2020), the cultural and historical importance of koalas for many Indigenous people is well documented (Schlagloth *et al.* 2018; Cahir *et al.* 2020). In submissions relating to various wildfire disasters, it has been noted that koalas form an integral part of spiritual and cultural life and are central to many Dreamtime stories and cultural landscape features of importance to Indigenous people (see Costello 2019).

Co-author Oliver Costello notes that while wildfires are devastating to koala populations and habitats, these animals are also part of the Indigenous biocultural landscape in coastal regions of New South Wales that needs appropriate cultural burning and land management practices in order to flourish:

[K]oalas – we call them budabe or burbi in our language – are a really important dreaming story for our Country. A koala is an important totem for our Country. We have many different values. ... Koalas are just one of many culturally significant species that we burn for. We need to make sure the canopy is healthy and safe. The pathways are also important. At home there are stories about the koalas and their songline pathways. They are pathways that we share as well. We burn to keep the pathways open. (Costello 2019)

In 2019–20, the wildfires affected koala populations and their habitats, including areas where koala populations have been introduced (Fig. 33.1). Legge *et al.* (in press) estimated that the overall koala population suffered a population loss of 7% immediately after the 2019–20 wildfires, increasing to 26% loss three generations later (see also Chapter 16). This decline requires urgent attention (DAWE 2020). The National Recovery Plan for the Koala recognises the importance of supporting Indigenous land managers and respecting Indigenous knowledge as part of koala habitat recovery efforts (DAWE 2022). This will require locally specific approaches. On Kangaroo Island, for example, cross-cultural and collaborative approaches to koala recovery efforts are challenging in a region where there is no active Indigenous ranger group and koala populations are introduced (interview, Local Council of Kangaroo Island, May 2021). In New South Wales and parts of Queensland, Indigenous leaders

are progressing pathways to provide and resource a culturally safe space for Indigenous leaders to engage in cultural burning, koala monitoring and caring for Country efforts that seek to reconcile the ways in which significant plants, animals, sites and ecosystems are identified and conserved.

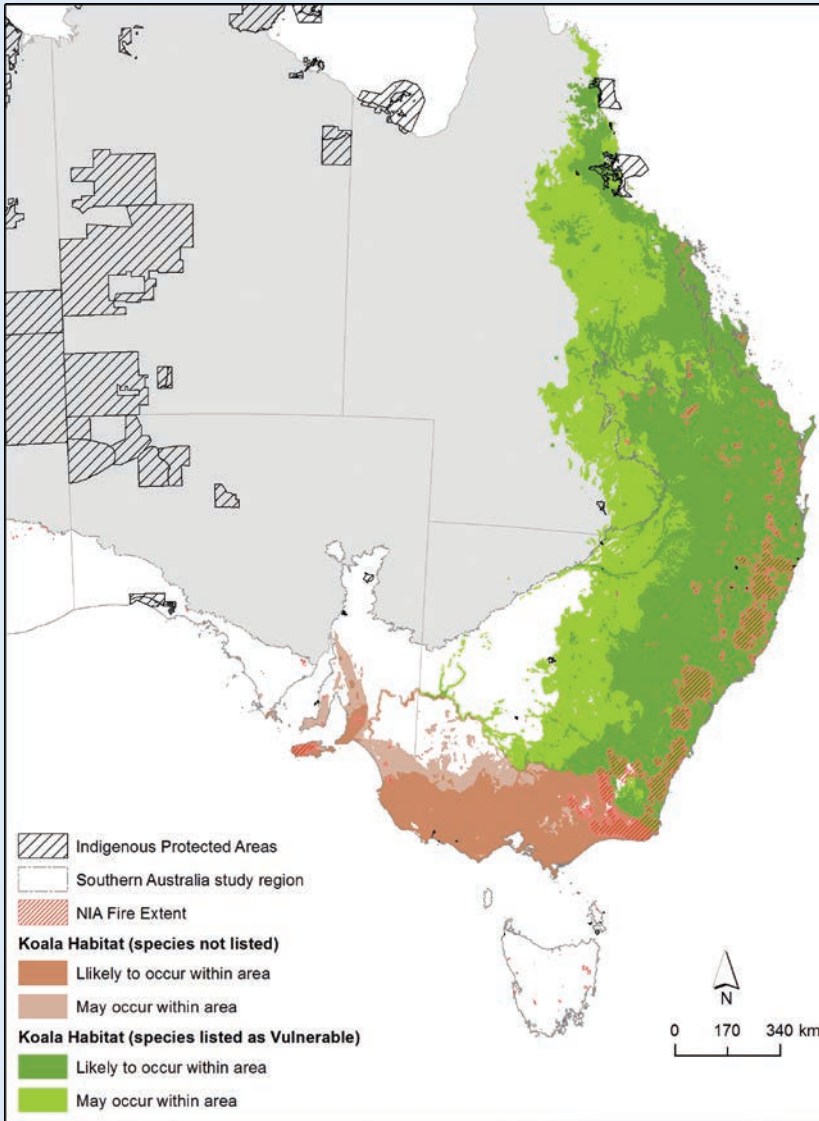


Fig. 33.1. Koalas are one of the many culturally significant species that were impacted by Australia's 2019–20 wildfires. The portion of the koala population that is in New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Queensland was listed as nationally Vulnerable before the fires, but was up-listed to Endangered in February 2022. Koalas in South Australia and Victoria are not listed as threatened; koalas have been introduced to some places, including Kangaroo Island.

However, several factors continue to frustrate efforts to translate these aspirations into reality, at least in some parts of Australia. These include the need for appropriate governance arrangements to support Indigenous engagement in national, state, regional and local fire management decision making. To date, this has been given limited material support. Federal and state agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) have increasingly resourced and supported cultural burning workshops, cultural burning activities and networking opportunities to enable peer-to-peer learning. Interviewees welcomed this growing support, but they also pointed to an ongoing challenge that was succinctly summarised in an interview with a representative from the Taungurung Land and Waters Council Aboriginal Corporation (Victoria):

No one is employed to apply cultural burning. We need this. We need them [government] to give us time, space, and empowerment. We need Aboriginal communities to come together to answer these questions. Give us the time to flesh it out. (interview, May 2021)

Many of the cultural burning workshops and gatherings that have taken place across Australia rely on Indigenous volunteer or day-labour funding models. While there are some notable examples of the efficacy of this approach, particularly during the early stages of re-establishing cultural authority, knowledge and support for cultural burning activities, partnerships and training are needed (see Maclean *et al.* 2018). Indigenous group interviewees noted that it is difficult to sustain community interest in cultural burning, and to grow capacity to undertake and lead landscape burning activities, without employment and training. This contrasts with some northern Australian and desert Indigenous ranger groups who have negotiated funded positions to deliver fire management programs that support locally led cultural burning and land management practices (Robinson *et al.* 2020).

The plethora of regulatory and legal hurdles that are part of contemporary fire management is also a barrier. These hurdles are ubiquitous for all local fire management and hazard reduction groups, but Traditional Owner groups may need extra support to navigate them. Wildfire codes of practice require a high level of management training and qualification, and the need for accredited training and insurance disadvantages Indigenous cultural burning (10 Deserts Project, interview, February 2021). The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group (2019) reflected on these barriers, noting that ‘despite the existence of supporting statements and mutual objectives in current government policies, there are numerous policy and regulatory constraints’. This means that Traditional Owners have limited authority, resources and capacity to develop and apply cultural practices on Country (Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation 2020). Indigenous groups who practise cultural burning also lack necessary legal protections, including insurance, particularly where structures and processes rely on the volunteer model (NSW Banbai Rangers, interview, May 2021).

Input from representatives of Indigenous organisations to recent fire reports and commission inquiries has also reflected on the barriers and obstacles imposed by fragmented partnerships and burning regimes that now exist across tenures and government agencies (Firesticks 2020; Robinson *et al.* 2020). Many Indigenous groups in the study region also do not have access to their Country and have limited mechanisms available to them to engage in and lead cultural burning and land management. As a Banbai Ranger reflected:

Not everyone can burn Country, or they might not have Country to look after. They are missing that. Get rangers and IPAs up and running to get those people back looking

after Country, to hear stories from the old people to the young people—language, dance, this all needs to be done to avoid disconnection. (interview, May 2021)

As a result, Indigenous rangers in some regions noted that they have not had first-hand experience of burning. In other regions, Indigenous fire practitioners had not had the necessary access to land to undertake burning. Fragmented fire management regimes, resourcing opportunities and partnership arrangements also mean that Indigenous fire crews in the study region have been confined to working in patches where they are allowed to burn; during times deemed appropriate by prescribed burning regulations and protocols; and only in association with government agency, NGO or private landholder partners, who may have different (conservation or hazard reduction) fire management capabilities and agendas.

Significant differences between Indigenous, historical, academic and non-Indigenous fire practitioner understandings of fire knowledge and landscape burning practices are also a challenge (see review in Robinson *et al.* 2016a; Box 33.2). Local Indigenous and non-Indigenous fire practitioners who were interviewed as part of this study also discussed the cross-cultural challenges of working with fire officers who have limited appreciation or knowledge of Indigenous cultural burning protocols and practices, including those who are brought in from other areas and are not knowledgeable about local species or weather patterns. A Ngadju ranger in Western Australia described the consequences of these challenges:

Back burning is done in an efficient manner that does not consider local values and details of the local areas. This issue was amplified last year when back burning was being done quickly, with fire crews who didn't know much about the area, and which resulted in some important areas and species being damaged through fire. (interview, February 2021)

Box 33.2. Cultural burning and biocultural landscape management

Local groups and regional alliances have articulated various strategies to empower Traditional Owners and Indigenous fire practitioners to rejuvenate or expand cultural burning as part of Indigenous people's land management activities and responsibilities. Numerous submissions, reports and interviews that were collected as part of this study described cultural burning, highlighting the intimate connections that exist between cultural burning and Indigenous landscape management (Elone *et al.* 2018).

Three key features that characterise the purpose, practice and governance of cultural burning were illuminated. First, cultural burning is a means of expressing Indigenous governance and Indigenous rights to, and responsibilities for, Country. Second, cultural burning represents a holistic approach to managing the Australian landscape that draws on the cultural authority, knowledge and customs of local Indigenous communities, including their knowledge and understanding of the nuances and needs of local landscapes. Third, cultural burning is an evidence-based approach to land management. Indigenous people manage fire using techniques that have been developed over long periods, based on observations, experience and an understanding of whether, when and how fire can maintain, benefit and heal different landscapes.

This evidence-based approach continues in contemporary fire management. This includes finding culturally safe ways to rejuvenate, share and build new knowledge to guide cultural burning in contemporary landscapes.

Non-Indigenous partners can facilitate collaborative knowledge-sharing with local communities that recognises the value of Indigenous knowledge and the practices that sustain this knowledge. For example, partners can adopt landscape burning decision and evaluation approaches that value and respect Indigenous knowledge, and recognise the biocultural features of Australia's local landscapes. Knowledge sensitivity and privacy practices should be maintained as part of this effort, as different perspectives regarding the significance of a species or habitat – and the role of fire in damaging or healing Country – can be challenging to negotiate in cross-cultural settings. Non-Indigenous partners and on-ground managers need to be mindful of ethical issues when navigating how to heal Country, so that culturally significant species can survive and thrive with fire. It is vital to negotiate with Indigenous communities regarding any new knowledge that is needed, as well as the practices that are deemed helpful or harmful for significant species, sites and habitats (Robinson *et al.* 2021).

Many Indigenous fire practitioners agree that landscape burning or fire suppression efforts that are conducted without local knowledge and appropriate Indigenous engagement can lead to poor decisions. Indigenous fire practitioners who were interviewed for this study reported that non-Indigenous fire crew assumptions about Indigenous people and their relationships with fire also create tensions in on-ground efforts. Interviewees described some of the challenges facing local Indigenous rangers, including tremendous pressure to perform cultural burning activities when they may not have sufficient capabilities, resources or capacity to undertake cultural burning in a safe or appropriate way (10 Deserts Project interview, February 2021; NSW NPWS interview, April 2021). In other cases, Indigenous rangers and fire practitioners described not feeling 'culturally safe' to participate in mainstream fire crews or fire management activities with long-established fire management decision making protocols and practices.

Conclusion

The holistic and long-term impacts of wildfires on Indigenous communities and Country provide important context for recommendations to empower Indigenous leadership in fire management decision making and activities, both in the short term and in the longer term. These efforts have primarily been driven across Australia by Traditional Owners, who assert that cultural burning is part of Indigenous people's rights and responsibilities to care for Country. With this comes the requirement to be informed about and involved in cultural burning and wildfire recovery protocols, as well as mainstream decision making processes. It is important to recognise that Australian Indigenous culture is not homogeneous and there may not be cultural consensus regarding what cultural burning entails, even within the same community group. Each region across Australia is unique, and non-Indigenous fire partners need to recognise local diversity in Indigenous fire management knowledge, capacity, priorities and techniques (Fig. 33.2). This requires careful cross-cultural collaboration based on trust, as well as recognition that the journey for Indigenous-led cultural burning across the country is far from complete.



Fig. 33.2. Widjabul Wia-Bal Country, Dorrobee Grass Reserve, Dunoon, New South Wales. (Photo: M. Lockwood)

Local cultural burning regimes now practised across the nation are dynamic, adaptive and subject to change over time, reflecting the needs of Country and its local Indigenous culture. In some cases, cultural burning may persist, become dormant or be displaced, or it may develop into new landscape burning regimes that replace former practices that are no longer present or relevant. Over the past few hundred years, Indigenous landscape burning has been suppressed in many parts of Australia. The history and contexts of local communities, and the nature of Indigenous legal rights and interests, mean that these recent wildfires had impacts and consequences that differed among Indigenous rights-holders, non-Indigenous landowners and Indigenous community members. As a result, there are now highly variable levels of interest, capacity and cultural authority to support and reintroduce cultural burning within these areas.

Across Australia, there is a diversity of skill, expertise and capacity among Indigenous people who wish to conduct cultural burning and undertake land management in local regions. Efforts to support and sustain this interest and capacity can build on existing land and ranger activities and partnerships led by and involving Indigenous managers and communities. To ensure long-term success, collaborative partnerships must support Indigenous-led pathways to build and assert cultural authority and the capacity to direct and implement cultural burning regimes.

Recommendations

- *Empower Indigenous rights and authority*, by supporting local Traditional Owner groups to maintain, re-learn or resurrect their cultural fire knowledge, and practices. In the longer term, formal recognition of the rights and interests of Traditional Owners in land and fire management – regardless of current land tenure – is a neces-

sary step to ensure cultural burning is central to Australia's landscape burning regimes.

- *Support collaboration and reconciliation.* With additional resourcing, Indigenous engagement and collaboration strategies and protocols can be further developed, based on initiatives that are already in place in some agencies and jurisdictions. In the longer term, existing fire management operating procedures need to incorporate locally informed Indigenous engagement processes to employ Traditional Owners in the preparation, response and recovery phases of wildfire management. These processes should be routinely reviewed to ensure communication remains appropriate and effective.
- *Empower and support Indigenous-led wildfire planning and recovery.* Indigenous leaders need to be empowered and supported to be more involved in local, regional and national wildfire recovery strategies. This includes involvement in all emergency disaster planning and strategy development, habitat and species restoration activities, rehabilitation activities, and efforts to identify and protect cultural heritage sites. At the policy level, this could include listing culturally significant species as matters of national environmental significance; at the local level, this requires ensuring that wildfire recovery practices and priorities recognise and respond to culturally significant sites, species and landscapes affected by wildfires. Cultural heritage site and asset information should also be included in wildfire management plans and, where possible, treatments should be identified to mitigate against wildfires.
- *Empower Indigenous rights and authority to care for Country through fire.* With increased investment and support, the incorporation of cultural burning into Australia's disaster risk reduction and conservation regimes has the potential to improve fire management. To achieve this, fire management partnerships must recognise the complexity of cross-cultural engagement and interactions, and respect Indigenous knowledge, know-how and protocols. These partnerships also need to provide space and opportunities to support Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to develop new knowledge and skills in their own timeframes, and they facilitate two-way knowledge exchange. Finally, testing the impact and effectiveness of cultural burning under different governance arrangements and fire management settings can help to identify what best enables Traditional Owners to lead the practice and timing of cultural burns in different contemporary landscapes, further empowering their rights and authority.

These recommendations focus on recognising Indigenous rights and interests; recognising and supporting Indigenous knowledge rights and governance; supporting Indigenous-preferred approaches to learning, sharing and passing on relevant fire knowledge; establishing place-based partnerships that enable holistic landscape burning regimes across tenures and between institutions; ensuring that Indigenous fire knowledge and management activities can safely and legally work within contemporary institutional land governance arrangements; and delivering environmental, social, cultural and economic benefits for local Indigenous people. Translating these recommendations into practice will require the resolution of institutional and cross-cultural challenges that hinder Indigenous-led efforts to re-build or expand cultural landscape regimes that reflect the contemporary cultural and biophysical landscape of Australia.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge and are thankful to all those Indigenous and non-Indigenous fire managers and researchers who shared insights about their important work. This research

would not have been possible without their input. We would also like to thank the NESP Threatened Species Recovery Hub Indigenous Reference Group and the Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment (DAWE), who supported this research. This chapter draws on material outlined in our detailed report at <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/projects/indigenous-aspirations-and-capacity-for-bushfire-response>

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