

What is cultural burning?

Traditional fire management practices have a range of different names, such as cultural burning, cool burning or traditional fire knowledge. It is important to note that none of these names captures the complexity or richness of the knowledge and connection to Country behind this knowledge and these practices.



Cultural burning is a traditional practice that has been used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for over 60,000 years to care for their Country and its people. It involves the controlled use of fire to nurture the environment. It is a practice deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of First Nations Australians and is guided by their intimate knowledge of the land.

Purpose and techniques

Unlike common hazard-reduction strategies that focus primarily on reducing fuel loads to prevent bushfires (or wildfires), cultural burning serves a range of interconnected purposes. These include:

- protecting native wildlife
- regenerating native plants and preventing scrub from taking over
- maintaining habitat health
- stimulating seed germination on the ground to improve soil health
- making the land more resilient
- conducting ceremonies
- strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' connection to Country
- preserving traditional knowledge of Elders to pass on to younger generations.

Cultural burning is a traditional fire management technique often carried out more frequently during certain times of the seasonal calendar. It typically involves using smaller, 'cool' fires that burn at a much lower heat intensity than contemporary hazard and fuel reduction burns. This means cultural burns are less likely to harm mature trees and the canopy, which are crucial for maintaining biodiversity. The burns are carefully timed and executed in patterns that protect the ecosystem and allow animals to escape from the flames.

Regional practices

Contemporary cultural burning programs are widely established in northern and central Australia. For instance, in the Great Western Woodlands of Western Australia, the Ngadjju Nation performs cultural burns at specific times, such as after rain or when certain plants are less flammable, to ensure the effectiveness and safety of the fire.

Cultural significance and benefits

Cultural burning is not only about managing vegetation and preventing wildfires. It is a significant cultural expression that connects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their ancestors and their traditional roles as Custodians of the land. This practice allows them to clear paths, manage vegetation around significant sites, and ensure the growth of native plant species that are beneficial for the ecosystem and their cultural practices.

Challenges and contemporary value

Cultural burning faced a decline due to the dispossession of land and suppression of First Nations practices following European settlement. However, there is a growing recognition of its role in sustainable land management and its value in reducing the effects of climate change-induced bushfires. Cultural burning offers a model of environmental stewardship that blends traditional knowledge with contemporary ecological practices, emphasising the need for fire management that is adapted to specific local conditions and cultural contexts.

Cultural burning reflects the sophisticated ecological knowledge of First Nations Australians and their enduring connection to Country. As we face global environmental challenges, integrating traditional First Nations practices like cultural burning with modern conservation efforts is essential for the sustainable management of Australia's diverse landscapes.

For further information, visit:

<https://www.firesticks.org.au/>

<https://www.countryneedspeople.org.au/>

<https://culturalburning.org.au/>



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