

# **Taking Fire: Understandings of Indigenous Burning and Environmental Politics in Australia and the United States, 1910-2015**

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Non-Indigenous understandings of 'fire-stick farming' have historically existed not as anthropological curiosities but as political incendiaries, as competing interest groups have attempted to publically appropriate or deny Indigenous burning in environmental debates and discourse. My PhD research investigates the political and cultural influence of these understandings of Indigenous fire-use in Australia. My work focusses on case studies that include royal commissions, public policy programmes, and national park land management schemes across South-Eastern, Northern, and South-Western Australia, along with the Western United States. In these case studies, understandings of Indigenous burning influence a number of policy areas, including prescribed burning for fuel reduction, livestock grazing in alpine areas, and fire management for carbon abatement. This article focusses on my South-Eastern case studies.

## **1. In what specific ways was the subject of your research a problem to be addressed by policy, and what kind of policy resources were available to address it?**

Debates around prescribed burning for fuel reduction have a very long history in south-eastern Australia. The political aftermath of catastrophic firestorms has involved processes such as Royal Commissions or Parliamentary Committees, with terms of reference that nearly always include investigation into assessing or improving policy processes. Following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, a Royal Commission was established which, among other measures, resulted in a State-wide 5% target for prescribed burning. This has recently been quietly abandoned in favour of a more targeted or tactical approach.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, most arguments to the Royal Commission in favour of or opposing greater prescribed burning drew upon Indigenous burning in some fashion. Interest groups such as the Stretton Group of retired foresters and the Otway Rangers Environment Network presented accounts from European explorers, palaeoecological studies, and Indigenous oral histories to establish or dispute Indigenous burning as relevant to modern prescribed burning.<sup>2</sup> Very few of these groups noted in any more than a cursory fashion that similar arguments over prescribed burning and Indigenous burning themselves have a history, and have occurred at least following the 2003 Canberra fires, the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, and 1939 Black Friday fires.

Similarly, during the political aftermath of the 2003 and 2009 firestorms, the issue of whether cattle grazing in alpine regions had the same effect of fuel reduction as Indigenous burning also occurred.<sup>3</sup> This also particularly seems to crop up around elections – perhaps unsurprisingly.

Government organisations such as the CSIRO, or the then-Victorian Department of Sustainability and the Environment, have generally provided detailed submissions to these inquiries, often in defence of their own policies. These submissions often include expert opinion attempting to reconstruct the precise nature of Indigenous burning and dispute its relevancy, or to point to the ecological uncertainties and risks of changed fire

regimes in a post-colonial environment.<sup>4</sup> Again, these government organisations never explore in depth the motivations or histories of other groups attempting to influence policy outcomes.

## **2. How would you see the specific focus of your research fitting within a longer-term pattern or process of policy intervention?**

As Tom Griffiths and Stephen J. Pyne have argued, there is a long pattern of firestorm inquiries investigating prescribed burning, of which politicians and policymakers are reasonably aware. During the 2003 fires which burnt both Canberra and large parts of NSW and Victoria, Premier Steve Bracks took home a copy of Judge Stretton's Report on the 1939 Black Friday fires for his weekend reading.<sup>5</sup> Most of these committee or royal commission reports include a section on Indigenous burning, and there's plenty of evidence to show that these reports influence policy. Pyne has argued that the 1939 Black Friday report helped institutionalise prescribed burning in Australia,<sup>6</sup> and the 5% Victoria-wide target was implemented as a consequence of the 2009 Royal Commission. One of my case studies is the 1961 Rodger Royal Commission which followed the fires in Dwellingup in Western Australia; given that the practice of prescribed burning (especially aerial prescribed burning) appears to have been favoured from the 1960s I plan to determine whether it was the more important causative factor than the 1939 Report.

Given the growth of interest in Indigenous burning following the publication of Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, I can only see the influence of understandings of Indigenous burning increasing. We know Prime Minister Abbott was very familiar with the concept and the argued link to modern prescribed burning.<sup>7</sup> Another factor behind the increased political and cultural prominence of Indigenous burning is the growing wave of 'cultural burn' movements across the southern states, where local Indigenous groups seek to burn 'country' in accordance with their cultural and spiritual obligations.<sup>8</sup>

## **3. In what ways can your research inform current debates about policy formulation/implementation/reform?**

The purpose of this project is not to make recommendations around prescribed burning projects, nor am I primarily looking to re-establish Indigenous burning patterns prior to the arrival of Europeans. Instead, I'm mostly interested in how non-Indigenous people have conceptualised and understood Indigenous burning. My work will expose the rhetorical strategies and political fault lines of the interest groups attempting to influence policy determination. Furthermore, I will take this beyond the contemporary, to explain how the composition and positions of these groups have evolved over time. While not a major focus of my thesis project, the story of the 5% target will serve as a nice post-script for my case study on Black Saturday; the policy was quietly abandoned recently under the cover of the release of the inquiry into the Lancefield fire – a prescribed burn that went wrong.<sup>9</sup> This project will show that Indigenous burning is an increasingly powerful political weapon, and has been used in an ill-informed and even disingenuous fashion.

## Further reading

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Note: This is an edited version of a presentation given to a workshop of the Australian Policy & History Network on 1 November 2016 at the Australian National University.

<sup>1</sup> Trent Penman, "Saving Homes, Saving Wildlife: Victoria Ditches Burnoff Targets." *The Conversation*, 25 November 2015, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://theconversation.com/saving-homes-saving-wildlife-victoria-ditches-burnoff-targets-51114>.

<sup>2</sup> Submissions to the 2009 Black Saturday Royal Commission can be accessed through 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, "Public Submissions", 31 July 2010, last accessed 18 December 2016, <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/96781/20100923-0223/www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Submissions/View-Submissions.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Examples from the political aftermath of the 2003 Canberra and Alpine fires include: Victorian National Parks Association, Submission in House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires, "Submissions", last modified 2 April 2014, accessed 18 December 2016, [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_Representatives\\_Committees?url=bushfires/inquiry/subs.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=bushfires/inquiry/subs.htm); Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria, Submission in *ibid.*.

<sup>4</sup> See Mike Leonard's (Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment) comments in Melissa Fyfe, "A Necessary Part of the Natural Landscape," *The Age*, 23 January 2003; CSIRO, Submission No. 119 in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Conservation, "Bushfires and the Australian Environment, 1983-1984 : Transcript of Evidence", 1/2: 65-97.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Griffiths, "From the Ashes." *Inside Story*, 12 October, 2011, accessed 3 May 2014. <http://insidestory.org.au/from-the-ashes>.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen J. Pyne, *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia*, New York: Holt, 1991, 309-314.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hartcher, "Barbed wire fence tangle for PM", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 October 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Examples of cultural burn movements in both Southern and Northern Australia are described in Neil Cooper. "Indigenous Fire Management." *Fire Australia*, Winter 2016, 18-19; and Charlie McKillop and Phil Staley, "Traditional Fire Knowledge Thrives on Country." *ABC News*, 5 September 2016, accessed 5 September 2016 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-05/traditional-knowledge-a-pathway-to-safer-healthier-country/7814628>.

<sup>9</sup> Inspector-General for Emergency Management, "Government responds to Lancefield and sets out future of planned burning", 19 November 2015, accessed 29 November 2015, <http://www.igem.vic.gov.au/home/reports+and+publications/media+releases/government+response+to+lancefield+and+planned+burns+review>.

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