



Cultural and contemporary burning in Western Australia



Fire is an environmental factor that has shaped Australian landscapes over thousands of years.

Fire is the main land management tool Aboriginal people use to manage and care for country. The use of fire is governed by the customs and Lores of Aboriginal people, which are dictated by weather and seasonal cycles, vegetation and soil types, water cycles, and natural features or ecosystems in the landscape such as rivers, rocky outcrops, wetlands and water bodies.

For thousands of years Aboriginal people have applied fire to natural environments at different intensities and frequencies to maintain diverse ecosystems and keep ecosystems balanced and in motion, including environments where fire was not applied to protect plants and animals vulnerable to fire. Due to these practices and the natural occurrence of bushfires, most landscapes have become established in the presence of fire, and plants and animals have adaptations that enable them to co-exist with regimes of fire characterised by the season, intensity, frequency and scale of burning.

Over the past 200 years Aboriginal traditional burning practices have been severely disrupted, and many of Western Australia's landscapes have changed significantly with the establishment of permanent communities, infrastructure, agriculture and other industries. In many regions, the bushland is fragmented and affected by invasive species placing constraints on how, when and where fire is managed.

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) acknowledges that fire has been, and continues to be, an important part of the physical and spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal people. DBCA also respectfully acknowledges all Aboriginal people as the traditional owners of the land and water it manages, and recognises their continuing connection to land, water and community.



What is cultural burning?

Cultural burning is a term that describes burning practices developed by Aboriginal people to enhance the health of country and culture. As traditional owners Aboriginal people have a cultural responsibility to care for country, bringing unique perspectives and expertise to the tasks of managing and conserving land and waters. The principles of cultural burning are based on the **Right Fire, Right Time, Right Way** and for the **Right Reasons (cultural)** according to Lore. There are different kinds of cultural fire practices guided by Lore applicable across WA.

Fire is an important mechanism for enabling Aboriginal people to be back on country, caring for country, and for the inter-generational transfer of cultural knowledge.





What is contemporary burning?

Prescribed or planned burning is the contemporary burning practice used in Western Australia (WA).

Prescribed burning on public and private land is the cornerstone to protecting communities and the environment from damaging bushfires.

Prescribed burning describes deliberately burning a pre-determined area under appropriate environmental conditions for a range of purposes including biodiversity management, forest regeneration, cultural heritage protection, and reducing fuels to protect life, property, infrastructure and environment from the impact of bushfires.



Prescribed fire is generally applied under mild conditions to establish a range of different fuel ages across the landscape. Contemporary fire practices include the application of fire at varying size and frequency to meet diverse environmental, community, asset protection and cultural needs across WA.

While contemporary burning practices may differ from cultural burning practices, increasing engagement between traditional owners and other land managers is building an understanding of the differences, and is providing opportunities to improve fire management practices through a partnership approach. Importantly the two approaches are complementary and share the common goal to look after people and country.

Who is involved?

In WA, prescribed burning involves many organisations as part of a shared responsibility. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES), DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service, State Government entities, local governments and private property owners conduct prescribed burning on land that they manage. Traditional owners manage country through initiatives and practices that are led by their knowledge of country and fire and support these organisations through a range of State Government initiatives and employment programs.

DFES	DFES conducts prescribed burns on unallocated Crown land and unmanaged reserves in the metropolitan area and all town sites in WA on behalf of the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage (DPLH).
DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service	DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service is responsible for prescribed burning on land vested in the Conservation and Parks Commission, such as national parks, State forests, nature reserves, and conservation reserves. The Parks and Wildlife Service also conducts prescribed burns on unallocated Crown land and unmanaged reserves outside of gazetted townsites on behalf of DPLH.
Local governments	Local governments (including volunteer bushfire brigades) are responsible for prescribed burning on land under their management.
Private property owners	Private property owners are responsible for management of their fuel loads and use of fire as an essential agricultural tool to grow our food.
Non-government Aboriginal organisations	Non-government Aboriginal organisations, such as the Kimberley Land Council, oversee a network of Aboriginal land managers with responsibility for fire management.

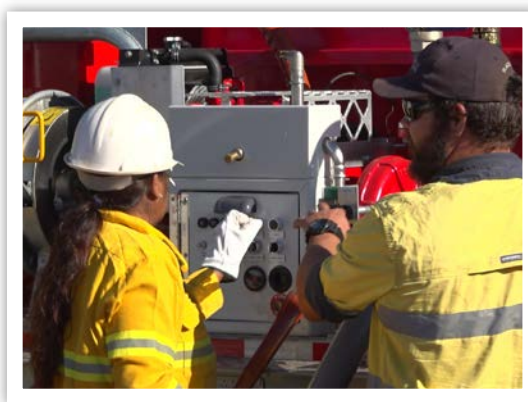


How we're working together

The WA State Government is committed to engaging with traditional owners to help share (two-way learning), connect and strengthen Aboriginal peoples' connection to country.

Across WA, there are a range of State Government initiatives that are elevating cultural fire and land management practices and facilitating training and employment opportunities. Some examples include:

- In the Kimberley and the western desert areas, Aboriginal communities, often working with fire and land management agencies like DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service, have maintained cultural burning practices supported by modern technologies. In addition to social and cultural benefits, burning has also mitigated the damaging impacts of bushfires and benefitted local ecosystems.
- The State Government's Aboriginal Ranger Program is empowering Aboriginal people to learn and share knowledge about cultural fire management practices and participate in contemporary prescribed burning. Shared knowledge and involvement of Aboriginal people will provide benefits and opportunities for all parties.
- Cultural burning in parts of the Kimberley has shifted bushfire patterns from late dry season to early dry season, which has reduced the severity of bushfires.



Our commitment

The DBCA Parks and Wildlife Service is committed to working with Aboriginal people and traditional owners across the State through joint management and customary activity arrangements, and recognises the importance of continuing to grow these relationships to enhance our knowledge of cultural fire practices, and how these principles can assist in guiding the use of fire in the context of today's landscapes.

More information

For more information about DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service fire management program, contact:

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