



HEALING CULTURE, PEOPLE AND COUNTRY WITH THE KNOWLEDGE OF FIRE

# National Indigenous Fire Workshop

**Bundanon, 12-15 July 2018**



National Indigenous  
Fire Workshop



firesticks



# Welcome

Widthouw murrnyang, Ngia Nundhirra Dharnyang  
Gudthugal Dharrawal Ngura, Ngiugangguli  
Murra Ngala barumunbala orajungya banglipa  
Ngarawannyupa Waringulwundu Gaumbiwarra  
Narimung Bangliya.

Ngia Gumine Yindigung Murranyangpa  
Yindigungguli Magannda.

Ngia Gumine Ngiagungguli Magunnda bulliayupa  
Gunna bulliaya, Dharrawal murrjang Umbarra Yuin  
murringjang.

Murrjang burragu Ganamapa Ngura billa  
Ngundahmurra jang Gunmbi balawilia Dha Nia  
Ganmbi jang Ganama Dharan Dhurang.

Hello everyone, I see we all stand on Southern  
Dharrawal Country, my people stay between  
Crooked River to Shoalhaven River, the ocean and  
other side of Canbwarra Mountain further to the  
Shoalhaven River.

I acknowledge all you people and your old people.  
I acknowledge my old people past and present, the  
Cabbage Palm people, Black Duck Yuin people.

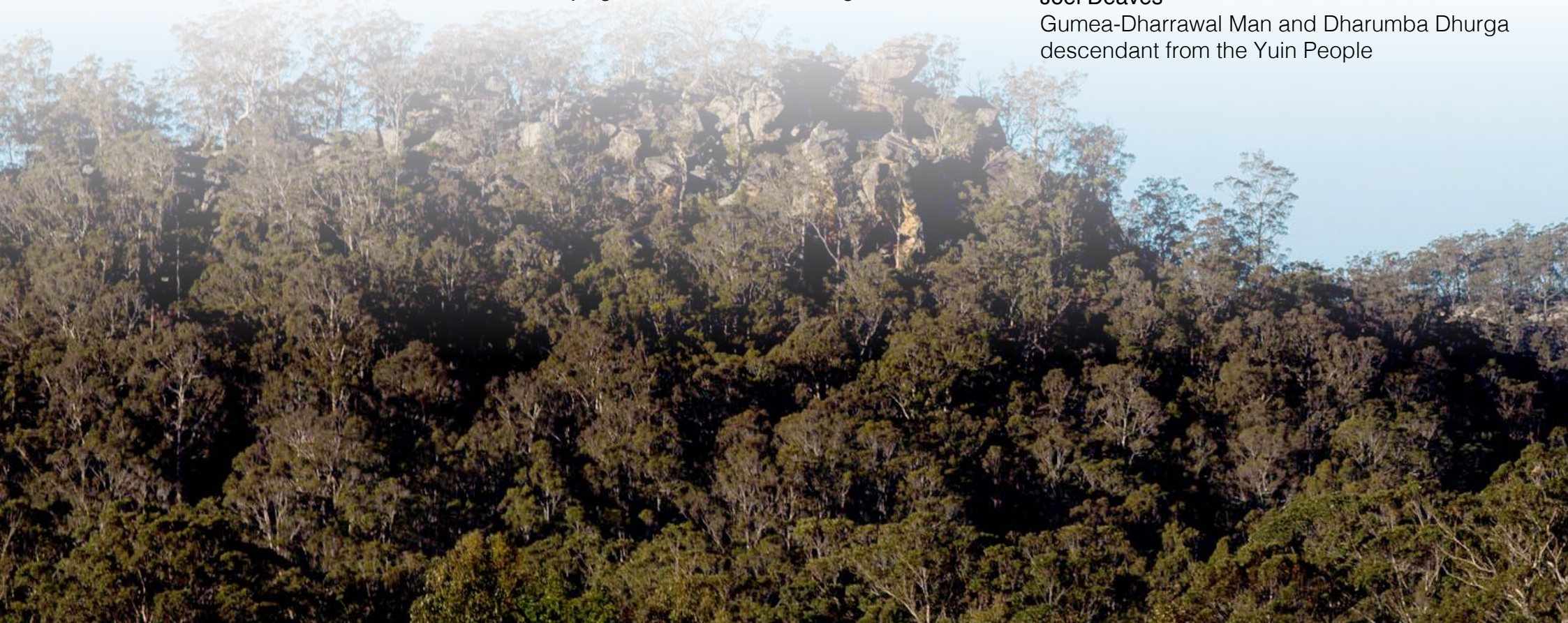
*The people gather and burn country again*

*The black fella fire returned*

*The good fire burns always*

**Joel Deaves**

Gumea-Dharrawal Man and Dharumba Dhurga  
descendant from the Yuin People



## *Welcoming the good fire to Bundanon*

Bundanon Trust has generously hosted the 2018 National Indigenous Fire Workshop (NIFW), partnering respectfully with local group Mudjingaalbaraga Firesticks Team, Firesticks Alliance to bring cultural fire workshops to the Shoalhaven.

Bundanon's Michael Andrews said the cultural strength of the Firesticks approach is what motivated Bundanon to open the property to the group and the Workshop.

"This sort of cultural aspect brings the good fire that heals Country, and it reconnects and builds strength of Aboriginal people through connection to Country."

Bundanon Trust's CEO Deborah Ely said the facility may be better known for its strong connections with Indigenous

artists, but the relationship with fire practitioners continues to uphold Arthur Boyd's vision of the property he gave to the nation.

"He really saw Bundanon as a place where people could immerse themselves in the bush and learn from it, and he very much saw it as a place to be shared," Ms Ely said.

"He respected those Aboriginal practices and values. He would have really loved the idea that Indigenous people would be coming here, wanting to spend time on the property, returning traditional practices to this landscape.

I have no doubt at all he would think that was a pinnacle of the kind of things he wanted to see happening here."



DHARRAWAL  
COUNTRY

# Hello

I would like to express my sincere gratitude, respect and thanks for the efforts and support towards our Firesticks group who hosted this year's National Indigenous Fire Workshop.

There are many people to thank, those who came, supported, sponsored, volunteered, planned, partnered and ran the event.

This is a big thank you to everyone that was involved; it was a very proud moment for me and our local community.

Healing of Country took place, and a special relationship with the landscape and Aboriginal communities from afar was

formed with the reintroduction of cultural fire on Yuin Country.

Our young fellas stood tall, and walked alongside with the fire from the first day of ignition on Sunday 15th until Sunday the 29th July, when the fire rested to acknowledge, reflect and allow the healing process to continue.

A total of 150 hectares was treated with fire over fourteen days. That is amazing when you consider there were only four community members walking alongside the fire, with no fire trucks or fire suppression resources to assist.

Challenging to say the least, the ecosystem way out of balance, carpeted with a continuous fuel load and testing weather conditions.

Over 35 years of fire fuel on the ground surface, and no native grasses to hold the moisture from the dew and frost to extinguish the fire with natural containment.

Walking alongside the fire was empowering, seeing light filtered through an unharmed canopy to open space to create a germination process for our native ground covers, thick blankets of leaf litter no longer suppressing the Earth or dominating landscape.



Unveiled through the landscape was a number of Aboriginal sites, sixteen previously unknown sites including grinding grooves, shelters, rock art, open sites, marker trees exposed by opening up Country and the creation of travel corridors.

Communities came together to share knowledge, stories and networks, strengthening cultural fire alliances across the country. There are so many great stories to tell as well as memories to cherish for a lifetime.

I am grateful to the Firesticks efforts that have provided me with the inspiration, drive,

motivation and passion to continue in my endeavours to have our cultural fire practices and knowledge well respected, understood and undertaken to heal people, communities and Country.

Walawarni (safe journey)

**Nook (Noel Webster)**

*Mudjingaalbaraga Firesticks Team*



# Executive Summary

On 12-15 July 2018, the four-day 2018 National Indigenous Fire Workshop was held at Bundanon property in Yuin Country on the New South Wales south coast.

Participants came from as far north as Napranum, Cape York in northern Queensland to Truwana in Tasmania, and from as far west as the APY Lands in Central Australia. The last day of the workshop was a Cultural Fire Day that was open to the public.

The National Indigenous Fire Workshop evolved from the Awu-Alaya speaking Elders, Kuku Thaypan Fire Management research project in Cape York along with the foresight and teachings of Cape York fire practitioners and respected Kuku Thaypan Elders, the late Dr George Musgrave and Dr Tommy George.

Their work is greatly respected and has gone on to inspire communities all over the country and brought people together to learn about Aboriginal fire management and appropriate research methodologies.

This was the tenth annual National Indigenous Fire Workshop and is the first time the event has left its birthplace of Cape York and travelled to honour other communities within the Indigenous fire networks.

Workshop participants learn first-hand how to read Country, animals, trees, seasons, and understand the cultural responsibility of looking after Country.

The 2018 Workshop masterclasses were delivered through practical demonstrations which focused on:

- Monitoring techniques and indicators
- Ethnobotany
- Understanding invasive native plants
- Traditional dancing and weaving
- Sharing of local knowledge
- Cultural burning of gum and sand Country
- Reflecting and planning for rebuilding cultural fire practice.



During the Workshop and over the fourteen days that followed, 150 hectares of surrounding Yuin Country were treated with the 'good fire'.

Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, with over 90% of respondents reflecting that the Workshop helped them connect to Country and community and increased their knowledge of Indigenous fire management practices.

Over 60% of participants said they are likely to change their fire management practices because of the Workshop, with another 30% unsure of their ability to influence current practices but still very supportive of the rebuilding of cultural fire management.

Each year the Firesticks Alliance will co-deliver the workshop in a different location to share this privileged event. The aim is to maximise the traditional learning of Aboriginal fire knowledge across Australia and to strengthen healthy people and Country through fire.

**Oliver Costello**

*Director, Firesticks Alliance*  
[www.firesticks.org.au](http://www.firesticks.org.au)



A person wearing a dark jacket and pants is seen from the side, walking through a forest. The forest has many tall, thin trees. In the background, there is a large fire burning, with a lot of white smoke rising into the air. The scene is lit with natural light, possibly from the sun being low in the sky, creating a hazy atmosphere. There are some faint, stylized circular patterns overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

## *Introduction*

This report covers the 2018 National Indigenous Fire Workshop held on 12-15 July 2018.

The event was attended by over 300 workshop participants along with an additional 80 Day visitors for the Cultural Fire Day.

The workshop came together under the coordination of the Firesticks Alliance with event logistics mentorship provided by Cape York Natural Resource Management and Mulong Productions.

It was hosted in Yuin Country, NSW, by the Mudjingaalbaraga Firesticks Team and Bundanon Trust.



# Objectives

## *Report Objectives*

This report has been written to strengthen:

- Evidence – to provide documentation of the Workshop to organisers, participants and sponsors
- Learning – to provide participant feedback to inform future planning
- Influence – to share messages from the Workshop and continue the rebuilding of cultural fire management practices to heal Country and people.

## *Workshop Objectives*

The objectives of the National Indigenous Fire Workshop are to:

- Connect to Country - to help heal and care for Country
- Connect to Community - to help heal and restore communities through mentorship and shared understandings that improve fire management.



# History

Australia's First Peoples have a deep understanding of how to care for Country with the right fire.

A good, nurturing, beautiful fire. A cool fire, burned at the right time, in a way that protects parent trees, seasonal plants, animals and the canopy.

## *The Good Fire on the South Coast*

With a culture enduring since time immemorial, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia developed a sophisticated and complex understanding of how to care for Country.

In comparatively recent years, when European forces first observed the Country they were impressed with how healthy the land was, with short grasslands afoot, clearings between trees and rich green canopies overhead.

The land was kept healthy by the use of Aboriginal fire practices, and being burnt in the right way at the right time.

Within the last 230 years, many of the traditional caretakers of Australia have been taken off Country, unable to openly practice cultural burning.

The results have been devastating to plants, animals and people with heavy fuel loads prone to damaging bushfires and sick Country thick with invasive species, but the knowledge of cultural fire practice which forms an integral part of connection to community and Country has been threatened.

Thankfully, these complex cultural fire practices are starting to be reapplied across the Australian landscape. A reconnection is occurring for Country and her people through the work of the Firesticks Alliance, the Mudjinggaalbaraga Firesticks Team and other cultural fire practitioners and groups across Australia.

## *The National Indigenous Fire Workshop*

The National Indigenous Fire Workshop has evolved from the Awu-Alaya Elders fire management project in Cape York that began in 2004, the Kuku Thaypan Fire Management Research Project (KTFMRP).

Their work has gone on to inspire communities all over the country and led to bringing people together to learn about Aboriginal fire management.



Kuku Thaypan Elders, the late Dr Musgrave and Dr Tommy George

These on-Country Workshops have been held annually since 2008 and have been developed over the years to strengthen culture and share the importance of getting traditional fire regimes back on Country.

Each year the Workshop has been hosted by a different Cape York community with different landscapes and in 2018 the opportunity was created to share this amazing community-led initiative in other parts of the continent.

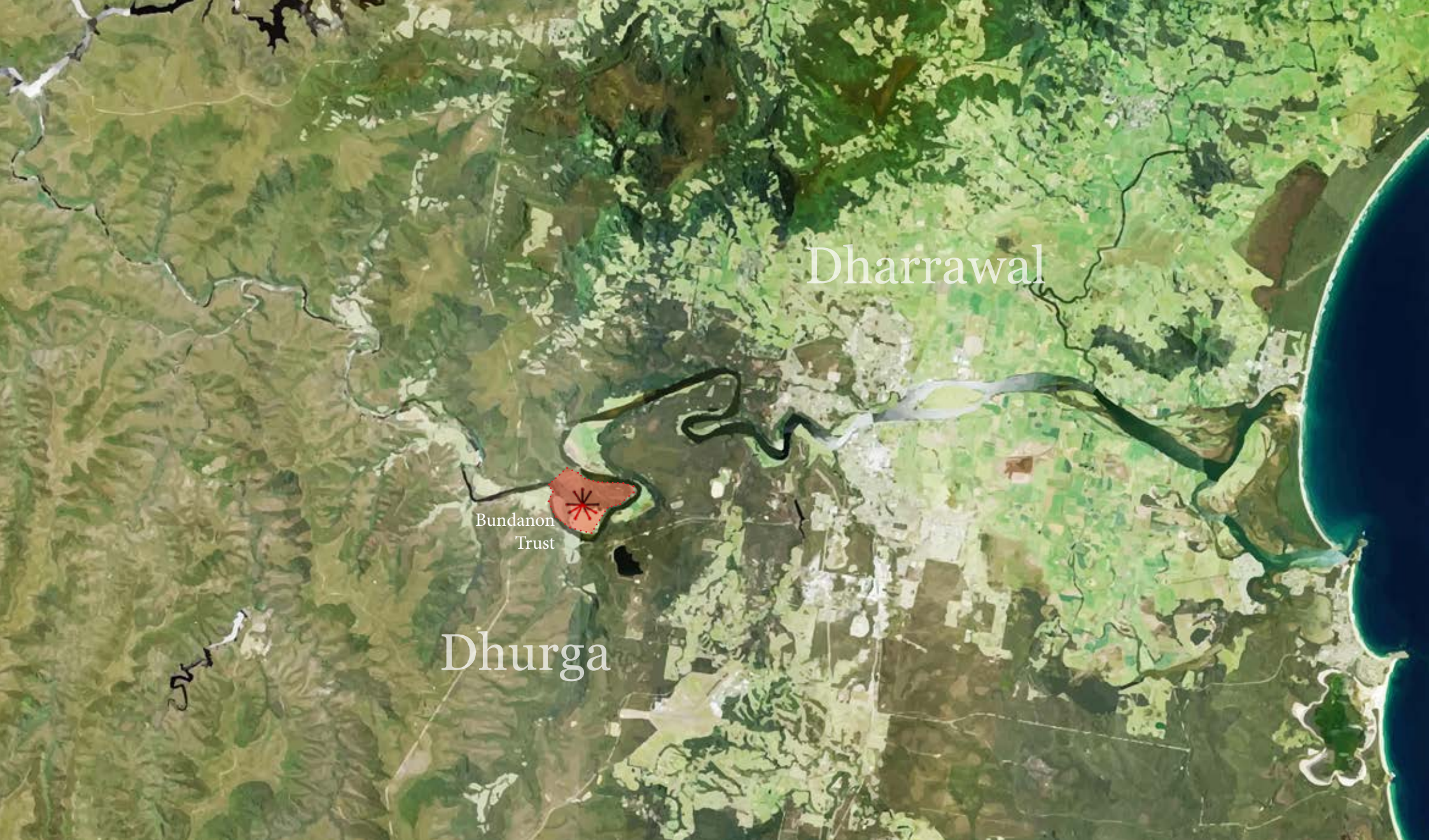
Mulong and the Elders fire research project supported by The Importance of Campfires research developed and delivered these workshops until 2011.

In 2011, Cape York Natural Resource Management was formed and began to support delivery of the workshops from 2011, supporting Mulong and The Importance of Campfires until the mentorship to the newly formed Firesticks Alliance in 2018.

The workshop is now led by Mulong, the Firesticks Alliance and supported by The Importance of Campfires and Design Collaboration and Country (University of Technology, Jumbunna and Firesticks).

The vision is to bring Indigenous fire practices to the forefront of looking after our communities and environment.





Dharrawal

Bundanon  
Trust

Dhurga

*Country*

*This year's Workshop was held in Yuin Country on Bundanon Trust estate, 20 minutes' drive south-west of Nowra, NSW.*

# Logistics

The National Indigenous Fire Workshop was held over four days. The coordination that went on before the event cannot be overstated.

From organising workshop leads, key speakers, performers, volunteers, transportation, participants' registration packs, communications and media, food, cooks, camping logistics, marquees, river sand for a dance circle, transporting in large amounts of firewood, through to marking out the large wombat holes in carparks for drivers to avoid.

These are but just a few of the logistics that went into organising a smooth event.

On the day before the workshop started, a huge central fire was lit in the middle of the campground to warm and cleanse the space, and welcome people who arrived for early camp-set up.

Most of those early arrivals were volunteers and people holding specific roles at the workshops.



# Ignition

## *Welcome and Smoking Ceremony at Bundanon*

The welcome dinner and smoking ceremony were preceded by a beautiful rainstorm that brought everyone into the main tent to register and meet.

Rainbows filled the sky at the Bundanon property as workshop participants moved to the main stage to enjoy a Welcome to Country in Dharrawal language by Jacob Morris and Joel Deaves.

Land acknowledgments, introductions and acknowledgments were given by event organisers Noel Webster, Victor Steffensen, Oliver Costello and Bundanon Trust's Head of Operations, Richard Montgomery.

A stunning smoking ceremony was performed by the Gulaga dancers from Wallaga Lake, led by Yuin/Monaro man Warren Foster, using native cherry branches on the central fire of the river sand dance circle.

Two young local girls, Yuin and Thunghutti sisters Colleen and Dakota Callaghan sang to the audience in their language.

Colleen and Dakota come from a very large family that continue their cultural practices through song, dance, storytellers, language and living off and caring for land.





# Workshops

## *Workshop Masterclasses*

Over 300 participants joined eight masterclasses over a two-day intensive. Workshop participants were divided into groups and each group rotated through four workshops per day.

Due to the wet weather on the opening day, the gum tree and sand-ridge burns did not commence until the third and fourth day. As the fourth day was an open day, all participants had the option to attend the cultural burns.

### Workshop 1: Monitoring Techniques & Indicators

Peta-Marie Standley & Noel Webster

### Workshop 2: Botanic & Cultural Walk

Vikki Parsley & Gerry Turpin

### Workshop 3: Gumtree Country Burn

Victor Steffensen & Adrian Webster

### Workshop 4: Sand-Ridge Country Burn

Joel Deaves

### Workshop 5: Invasive Natives

Jacob Morris & Dan Morgan

### Workshop 6: Firesticks Gathering Workshop

Oliver Costello

### Workshop 7: Traditional Dancing & Weaving

Veronica (Ronnie) Jordan & Warren Foster

### Workshop 8: Cultural Water Tour

Russell Brown



5

4

2

1

3

campsite

6

7

wombat  
country

8

Approximation of workshop locations and pathway

# Monitoring Techniques and Indicators Workshop 1

## Facilitators

**Peta-Marie Standley** has worked in government, community not for profit and Indigenous organisations in North Queensland for the past eighteen years, focused on Community Natural Resource Management.

She is close to the completion of a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Environmental Science at James Cook University, on The Importance of Campfires.

Peta has been part of the Indigenous led co-generative action research team for the Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways Kuku Thaypan Fire Management Research project since 2004.

Her work promotes the use of connected and collective action learning, multiple knowledge sets and collaborative spaces on and off Country and undertaking respectful solutions generation for solving complex social-environmental problems.

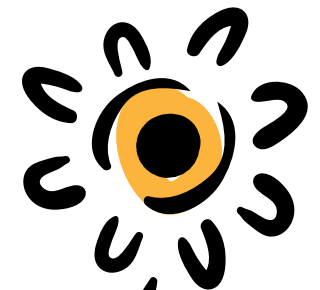


**Noel Webster** is a Yuin Walbanja saltwater man from the New South Wales south coast.

Commencing in 2018 as an Aboriginal community support officer for South East Local Land Services, Noel's passion is working together respectfully with other community members.

His aim is to unify Aboriginal men in creating a brotherhood built on revitalising and sustaining Aboriginal culture through the revival and sharing of knowledge.

It is hoped that through this work Noel can be an agent for change through strengthening and empowering Aboriginal communities in the Shoalhaven area.







# Monitoring Techniques and Indicators Workshop 1

In this workshop participants were exposed to the complex traditional knowledge that enables People to read Country and know the right places and times to practice cultural burning.

Participants were also taught how to record cultural indicators on Country for monitoring cultural burning and were exposed to elements of the fire knowledge system of the Kuku Thaypan Elders.

They were also taught the differences between cultural burning, hazard reduction burning, environmental/ecological burning and savanna burning methodologies.

As we stood in Gum Country, Peta and Noel brought to our attention to the large amounts of leaf litter and fallen timber that indicate the poor health of the Country.

They shared that fire needs to be a part of the cycle of the ecosystem here. Gum trees shed their bark, and burning needs to follow shortly after, removing litter from the ground.

Fire can be used to destroy or 'move back to where they belong' the trees and vegetation that are not native to that ecosystem. Throughout Country, different ecosystems are made clear by the line of differing vegetation.

The interaction and segregation of neighbouring ecosystems is an important factor in knowing where and when to burn.


Which vegetation belongs in an ecosystem can be deciphered through the observation of 'parent trees'; these are the largest and oldest trees that are within the ecosystem. They indicate which type of Country the land should be, for example spotted gum, mixed gum and sand-ridge.

Cultural burning uses small, traditional, 'single ignition point' burns which are significantly safer than alternatives such as aerial incendiary bombing which produces such heat intensity that the canopy can often be burnt. Traditionally, in Kuku Thaypan lore, the canopy has always been protected.


Burning at the right time where moisture is present is important for correct recovery. After a burn, you can often see recovery in the growth of grasses, orchids, mosses and liverworts, depending on the specific ecosystem.

Utilising Indigenous methodologies allows for the development of a more in-depth understanding of Country, what our Elders have already been saying and practicing for millennia.






Western science tools can be applied to support the documentation of cultural fire and indicators read in the landscape; however this documentation, monitoring and analysis should be led by Indigenous people.




Noel shared how his mob started connecting back to cultural burning a year ago. He pointed out a patch of land which they burned the month before. The area was clear of debris and bright grasses were popping out of the soil.

Noel and his people are starting to see how it all works as they piece back together the fire calendar in this region of Yuin Country.



Peta shared examples of tools that can be used to document those cultural indicators. Noel and Peta worked with groups to help them read what they were seeing in the landscape and pointed out the recovering native species, grasses, lilies and orchids that are right for that ecosystem type, a result of the earlier cultural burn conducted in April, 2018.

Peta reflected on the privilege of working alongside the Elders and Victor, documenting the traditional fire knowledge of the Kuku Thaypan Elders, the late Dr Musgrave and Dr Tommy George.



As Noel and Peta shared with us, we carried that feeling of sacred gratitude for the snapshot into the complex knowledge systems around cultural fire practices which “cleanse the earth and heal Country.”



# Botanical and Cultural Walk Workshop 2

## Facilitators

**Vikki Parsley** is a cultural heritage consultant and Yuin Wiradjuri woman from the Yuin area. Her grandfather's mother is a Wiradjuri woman.

She grew up and had her early education in the Shoalhaven before undergoing a Bachelor of Applied Science in Parks, Recreation, and Heritage at Charles Sturt University.

Vikki has a background in government natural resource management projects and programs working with communities combined with a passion and love for Country, working outdoors, and plants.

Vikki, in her own words, was fortunate enough to grow up with Elders within her family, primarily her grandparents who were her teachers and offered her early exposure outdoors on Country, and around the plants she would grow to work with.

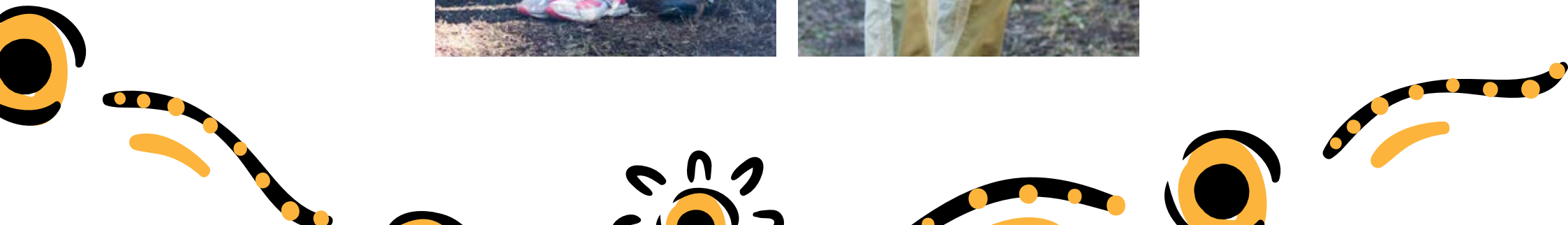


**Gerry Turpin** is a Mbabaram man with links to the Wadjanburra Yidinji of the Atherton Tablelands and Kuku Thaypan people of Cape York.

He is an ethnobotanist and manages the Tropical Indigenous Ethnobotany Centre housed in the Australian Tropical Herbarium at James Cook University, Cairns.

He works closely with a number of traditional owners on the Cape and around North Queensland, with the main aim of the centre to collect and record the ever-precious knowledge of the Elders.

He has done this while remaining involved in state government for over 30 years.





# Botanical and Cultural Walk Workshop 2

In this workshop participants learned about the surrounding Country and the multiple uses of plants growing within the area.

As Vikki, a local Yuin woman shared with us her botanical knowledge it was hard not to notice in the way she talked and relayed stories that she has a deep connection to Yuin Country.

Coupled with Gerry's reflections from his knowledge in ethnobotany (the study of plants through culture), we were exposed to rich insights into traditional knowledge of plants as well as the science behind this knowledge.

Vikki reflected that, "For thousands of years' people used knowledge that has been built up, as the environment changed, that knowledge was used to adapt to change."

There is an underground network of communication between plants similar to the sharing of knowledge between plant groups; they're all interconnected.

When looking for natural medicines, Gerry shared, "The remedy grows where the problem is." Some plants can be used to fill holes in teeth, to treat stings, or for flavouring foods.



Calendar trees may indicate a separate occurrence in the environment, for example one flowering tree indicates that the mullet are fat and ready for eating, and another flowering tree indicates the whales are returning from migration.

Vikki described how changes in environmental practices have caused issues with the accuracy of indicators. She also reflected how most of the traditional rock art in the area is on sandstone and how chemical changes and unmanaged burns can destroy sacred rock art sites.

Gerry raised another issue of the significant intellectual property concerns for the traditional knowledge surrounding plant species. The rise of antibiotic resistant bacteria has seen pharmaceutical companies take interest in pursuing and exploiting traditional knowledge of natural medicines.

"Tea tree oil is an example where Aboriginal knowledge has been taken and very little benefit has found its way back to the traditional knowledge holders," Gerry explains.

As we observed the variety of plants around us, Vikki and Gerry's botanical knowledge left us humbled. Their insights gave us new eyes in understanding how rich our surroundings are.



# Gumtree Country Burn

## Workshop 3

### Facilitators

**Victor Steffensen** is an Indigenous fire practitioner, film maker, musician, and consultant reapplying traditional knowledge into the changing world and today's society.

Victor has been interested in traditional knowledge since he was a boy. He was inspired by his mother and grandmother's heritage, the Tagalaka people of Northern Queensland, and their struggles of losing family through the stolen generation decades.

Victor's work started in 1995 when he realised the urgent need to record the invaluable wisdom of the Elders before it was lost.

Over many years, through his love of the arts, film making, culture and environment, this has developed into Victor's life's work of re-engaging traditional practices through creative community projects.

Victor co-founded the Firesticks Alliance and has co-convened the National Indigenous Fire Workshop for the past decade and co-founded the Firesticks Alliance.



**Adrian Webster** is a saltwater man descending from the Wandrawandian Walbanja Djiringanj and Thunghutti people.

He has spent his whole life growing up on the south coast of NSW where he has inherited a deep connection to his culture and Country.

He devotes his time to Elders and community, and to learning Dreaming stories, language, bush foods and medicine.

Adrian (Ado) is highly grateful for everything around him and enjoys giving back and paying respect to Country by spending copious amounts of time outside.

When Adrian is on Country he enjoys walking, swimming and regenerating the landscape with traditional burning practices handed down from his Elders.





# Gumtree Country Burn

## Workshop 3

In this workshop participants learned about the surrounding Gum Tree Country. They observed the current degraded state of the area, learned how to read signs of where to start a burn and observed cultural fire management in action.

As we stood underneath tall gums, our guides Victor and Ado drew our attention to the lack of grass underfoot. Victor stated that the Gum Country we are standing in should usually have grass.

Grasses in Gum Country should be very dark and green, and far healthier than the grassland nearby. No matter how much rain there is, grasses won't come through without being managed by the right type of fire.

Victor shared, "Trees are indicators of when to burn, the grass makes that more exact, but there's no grass here."

Traditionally, at the right time all Gum Country is burnt and the fire will go out at the other environmental boundaries but this isn't possible when the country has different health levels.

"This leads to people monitoring and researching Country that's sick, thinking that's what it's supposed to be like."



Culturally, "You burn every year for gum. They shed bark indicating when to burn, which adds fuel and shows that the rain is coming", said Ado.

He continued, "Now (July) is not usually not the right time to burn, but it is for this sick Country. That's why we're burning in July instead of April as it's far cooler and protects the soil."

**"We're always following and reading Country."**

"Over thousands of years, grasses take shape to Country," Victor explained. "Creating big healthy trees is a prime goal for management; most introduced grasses won't grow in the shade below these trees," reflected Ado.

Grass makes seed and is collected as food by people and animals, and then the grass is burnt off. The timing of burns yields different results.

Through traditional food and medicine knowledge we can burn correctly and move the ecosystems back into equilibrium.



Through this knowledge, we know what should be where. “Old people wouldn’t let this (environmental imbalance) happen as food would not be available in sick Country,” said Victor.

“They know what Country to burn and what Country not to burn.”

It’s not only the plants that tell this story. “The animals are in sync with the landscape, people learnt this and became part of Country, becoming managers and mediators of elements.”

As Elders pass away and new people are introduced into unhealthy Country, the knowledge gap grows.

Victor and Ado opened our eyes up to a clearer way of fire management.

“It’s not about cycles, fuel load. It’s about the Country. It’s not making the decision, it’s Country making the decision.”

There is so much for us to relearn and the natural lore for us to connect back into.



# Sand-Ridge Country Burn Workshop 4

## Facilitator

**Joel Deaves** is a Gumea-Dharrawal man and Dharumba Dhurga descendant from the Yuin people. Joel's earliest memories are of playing with his cousins in the bush, following their Nan around while learning how to make gunyahs (traditional shelters) and eating the freshly picked berries of the Native Cherry and geebung trees.

As Joel began his schooling, he and his brother were interested in Aboriginal dancing, asking to join an emerging local dance group.

From Year three to high school, Joel and his brother enjoyed dancing and learning songs from Aboriginal men belonging to the South Coast community.

Growing up, Joel became more aware of the diversity that exists in the different tribal groups, from language to songs and dance. Consequently, Joel had a thirst to learn more knowledge and culture of his direct family and tribe.

A few years down the track, Joel heard the language of his tribal group from his Uncle who was the last speaker of the Gumea Dharrawal dialect. Joel then began learning the language from his Uncle with his cousin Jacob, setting him on a path from which he hasn't looked back.

From the learning of his language Joel's passion for continuing and returning his culture grew, not just for himself but also for his family.

Not long after, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) employed Joel where he gained experience in land management as well as cultural interpretation, carrying out guided bush tucker tours.

Noel Webster (Nook) has supported Joel through his employment at NPWS, introducing him to cultural fire through organising the 2016 Falls Creek burn. This was an important occasion for his family as it was where his grandmother lived and spent most of her time.

Joel not only understands the importance of learning his culture but also living it by continuing the cycle of learning and teaching, ensuring that there is a healthier cultural foundation and a brighter future for the upcoming generations.

In his spare time Joel is with family, speaking and restoring the Gumea Dharrawal dialect with Jacob and Adrian, or walking on Yuin Country with his cousins continuing their connection to the land just as their old people did.





# Sand-Ridge Country Burn Workshop 4

In this workshop participants learned about the different terrain and the health of sand-ridge Country. Participants learned about parent bloodwoods and stringybark trees attempting to reconstruct a canopy, the variety of plants that could be used for food and medicines, and witnessed a cultural burn of the terrain which will slowly bring health back to Country.

Sitting on top of the ridge, our guide Joel gave us an awareness of the different sorts of Country we'd passed through to arrive here. From Rainforest Country, Gum Country, and now here we were in Sand-Ridge Country with its sandy soil.

This Country is the pharmacy of the Yuin people, a sandy Country holding medicinal plants within the seedbank. Currently, the Country is sick and the pharmacy is low in stock as people have continued to be disconnected from their Country.

Through correct application of cultural fire, Joel showed us how he and his community are beginning to regenerate Sand-Ridge Country and its role in providing abundant medicine.

"We burn at the right time because the Country tells us when to burn, how to burn and where to burn. The trees are the Elders in the community.

The stringybark and the bloodwood go with a certain soil type. They are the Elders of this system. If we look after the parent trees then they will look after everything else underneath." These parent trees will tell you if the Country is sick.



Joel drew our attention to the canopy, observing the lack of leaf cover. These trees were of good size, but there was hardly any shade. As the cool burn went on around us a white smoke rose, food and medicine for the canopy leaves.

**"The more you burn, the more you bring back the grass, the more you burn the grass, the more the canopy grows. These are all relationships."**

The top soil was peaty, dark and unhealthy with 35 years of built-up leaf debris. As Joel dug through it, he revealed the sandy soil underneath. Joel pointed out the lack of young casuarina, banksia and stringybark coming up. These trees have been missing the right heat for their growth.

Country tells us when it is the right time to burn, with Joel explaining that when the bloodwood gives us the right sign we know that the possums have finished having their babies and it is now safe to burn.

The traditional people are key because we hold this fire knowledge. When rural fire services burn they don't see that.

**"The Country needs its people. Take out the people, you take out the fire, you take out the balance."**

“Blanket burns may apply the same burn to several different ecosystems. Leaving Country is bad, but burning Country (through intense blanket burns) and then neglecting it is even worse.”

Our workshop over, we walked back down the ridge, leaving the young Yuin man to continue the healing fire.

Moving through the gentle white smoke, we couldn't help but feel that we had witnessed something deeply intricate and sacred.



# Invasive Natives Workshop 5

## Facilitators

**Jacob Morris** is a Gumea-Dharrawal man, part of the Yuin Nation. Growing up, Jacob learned to love and have fun in the bush while his Nanna taught him the words of his great-grandmother. Jacob's uncle, a linguist, continued to fuel a hunger in Jacob to learn his people's language.

Through language, Jacob has learned about artefacts, plants and now fire. Uncle 'Nook', Noel Webster, got Jacob into fire. His first cultural burn was in 2016 in Falls Creek, south of Nowra, on land that is a special place for his family.

At the age of sixteen, Jacob worked as an Aboriginal Discovery Ranger with National Parks and shared knowledge of Country to young people in schools up and down the Yuin coast.

In that role, Jacob kept learning so he could share more but discovered that he learned because he loved it, not just for the job. That passion is clear in the way Jacob speaks and shares about culture.

Jacob feels a deep sense of cultural responsibility and where some people may feel overwhelmed with how dense the path to healing Country is, Jacob is full of energy and drive to make that path clearer for the next generation, who will make it clearer yet for the next.

These days you will find Jacob passionately restoring fire pathways in Yuin Country and in the evenings, you will find him with his cousins, learning and documenting family language.



**Dan Morgan** is a Djiringanj man of the Yuin Nation. Having worked for eighteen years with National Parks, Dan joined South East Local Land Services as an Aboriginal Community Support Officer in February 2017.

Dan is passionate about cultural burning and was first inspired by Victor Steffensen at a cultural burning workshop he attended in Cape York ten years ago.

While on the Biamanga Board of Management, Dan spent six years trying to influence National Parks to consider cultural burning, making little headway.

In 2016 Dan experienced a significant cultural burn with the Mudjingaalbaraga Firesticks at Falls Creek, and was reminded of the importance of caring for Country through this practice.

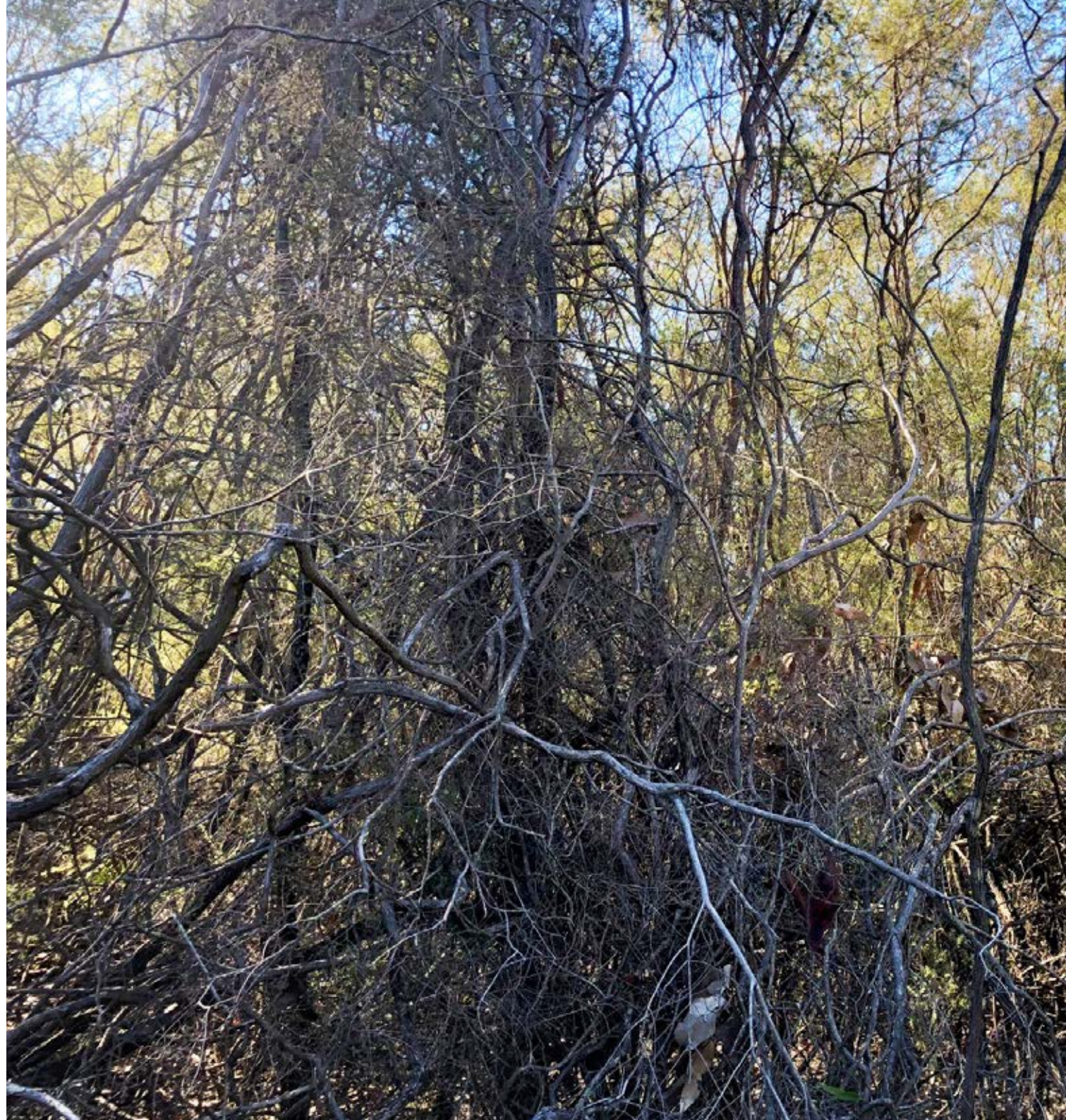


Dan is dedicated to working with community through traditional land management to care for Country and bring back this deeply complex and restorative practice of cultural burning.

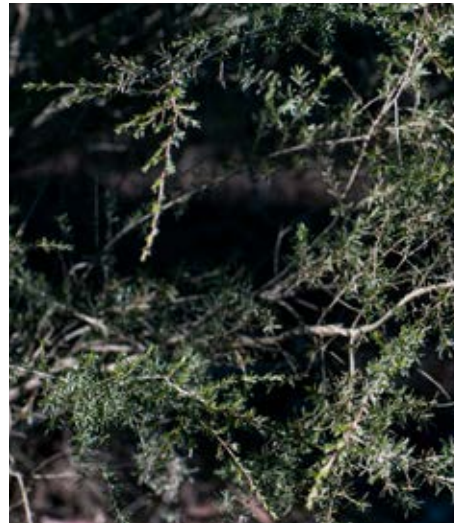
In his recent role with South East Local Land Services, Dan has found the freedom to achieve these outcomes. He has since worked on cultural burns with the Bega Land Council Koori work crew at Wallagoot Lake and Tathra.

What drives Dan the most is the next generation's passion to be a part of this important learning and to pass on the spirit of cultural fire into the future.

When Dan's not out working with community you can find him at one of his favourite surf breaks in southern Yuin Country, where his connection to Country merges from land to sea.



## Invasive Natives Workshop 5



In this workshop participants were taught about native species that have become invasive within the local landscape. Discussions occurred about the reasons behind this imbalance and how Country can be restored.

Some participants shared examples of successful invasive native management practices they have used back on their own Country.

Many people will tell you, at first glance they didn't notice it. The density of the bush. For tens of thousands of years, it was healthy and clear enough for kangaroos and wallabies to graze on the grass between the trees. Clear enough to throw a spear through.

Now so much of the Country we saw was overgrown, not just with introduced species like lantana, but also with native species; an upside-down landscape where healthy overhead canopies have been replaced by an out of place mid-story and the smothering debris below.

Our workshop guides, Jacob Morris and Dan Morgan, showed us bush dense with tea tree. With its origins closer to the coastline, tea trees now over-populate the hills at Bundanon, squeezing out the parent gums.

A huge fire went through the area decades ago and the visiting tea trees took their chance in the regrowth to overpopulate within Gum Country. The build-up of debris ever since means that this



bush is at high risk of going up in flames again, in a potential firestorm.

“We need to put fire to the Earth, put fire to the Mother,” said Jacob. “Wombats and kangaroos can’t get through here - they are locked out of their own Country. The land itself is starting to lock itself up - it looks like a jail here. Fires like the Black Sunday firestorms are preventable.”

Jacob pointed out the overgrown bush that goes on for kilometres, saying it will take generations to heal. “It’s bad enough that we’ve lost our identity. This used to be Gum Country, but the land is losing its identity, just like us.”

**“The land is a reflection of the people, and people are a reflection of the land. If Mum’s not good, we’re not good.”**

Not one to focus on loss, Jacob shared, “The land is messy, but helps us heal too. We are so happy to be getting back this knowledge. We are the first ones doing cultural burning here in more than 100 years. It’s a generational job.”

“We need to keep on teaching our young ones to be guardians and custodians. The seeds are still there, they are just waiting for us to wake them up.”

With greater connection back to cultural burning comes an opportunity for young people to learn ancestral knowledge while being employed to practice culture and care for Country. That’s the vision of our workshop guides.

As Jacob and Dan spoke, we couldn’t help but be moved by the depth of hurting Country we saw before us and by the opportunity our two guides see for generations of healing that will come from the revitalisation of restorative fire practices.



# Firesticks Gathering Workshop Workshop 6

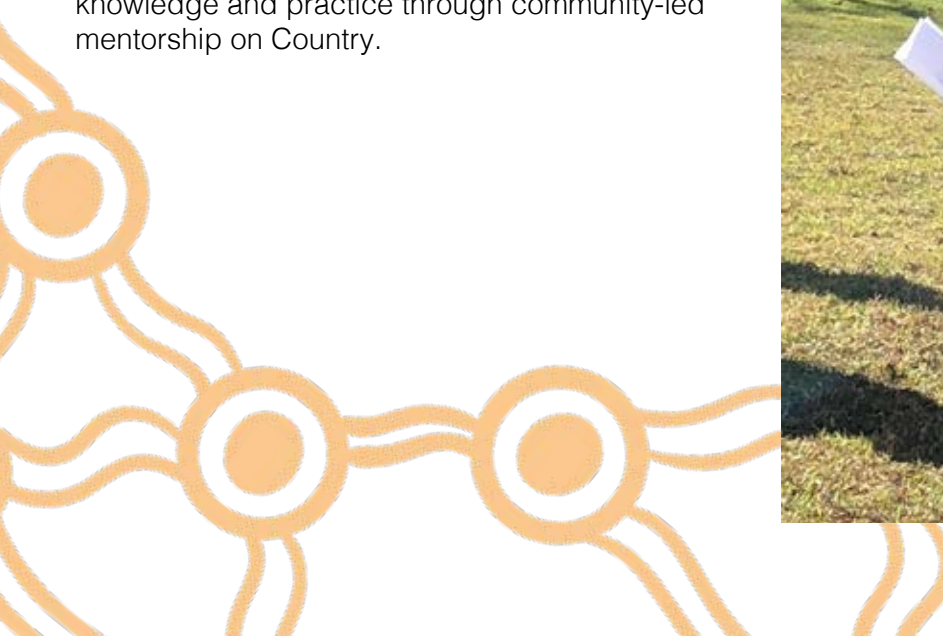
## Facilitator

**Oliver Costello** is a Bundjalung man from Northern NSW who co-founded Firesticks in 2009, the Jagun Alliance in 2016 and Firesticks Alliance in 2018.

He has a broad range of experience from the community, private and public sectors in Indigenous cultural fire practice, Aboriginal Joint Management partnerships, Indigenous natural cultural resource management and Indigenous governance.

Oliver coordinates, advises, facilitates and directs several organisations and projects in this space.

He is passionate about Caring for Country, Indigenous leadership, empowerment, partnerships and recognition of cultural knowledge and practice through community-led mentorship on Country.





# Firesticks Gathering Workshop Workshop 6

In the Firesticks Gathering workshop participants were given a broad understanding of the work of the Firesticks Alliance and community of practice, along with a connection building exercise and focus group sessions to explore questions on cultural burning, working together and vision.

Participants were asked to place dots on the Firesticks Alliance approaches and aims that they thought were most important for them or the Firesticks Alliance to focus on over the next 12 months.

As we huddled into the tent, with the winter afternoon sun descending we learned about how we came to be here at the National Indigenous Fire Workshop, and the work of the Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation.

Our workshop facilitator, Oliver (Oli) Costello, explained how the Firesticks initiative emerged in 2009, bridging fire and cultural knowledge from Elders of northern and southern Australia.

This year in February, the Firesticks Alliance was incorporated with a vision to work with groups throughout the country. This is the first national workshop to be held away from Cape York and the vision is for other nations to host the workshop from year to year, reigniting that knowledge across Country.

Oli is a firm believer in the need for people to connect not only to Country, but to each other.

“People working on cultural burning need to know each other better and think about where they’re coming from with their practice.



We need to build synergies and support each other in a respectful way.”

In the spirit of building connection Oli took us through a group activity, placing kinship/totem symbols on each of our backs. We were told to not look at the symbol on our own back and to communicate with each other without using words.

The objective of the exercise was to help each other figure out which group we belonged to. As we each walked around looking, guiding, misguiding and trying to figure out our groupings, Oli asked us after fifteen minutes if we wanted to give up and be told the answer. With one final try our group eventually figured out the simplicity of the activity.

Oli reflected how sometimes we can feel like that in life, unsure of where we stand, where we belong. “I spent a lot of time not knowing who I am, but to know who you are, where you belong, what you need to do and when you need to do it is so empowering...”

“Sometimes you need someone to share knowledge with you, that’s what community mentorship is.” With guidance and connection, we can all find our place at the right time.

With that connection established, we moved into focus groups to reflect on key questions Oli posed, including a reflection of where we were from, the benefits of cultural fire practices, working together and visions for the future.

Participants' visions included 'healing Country, healing people, culture and community', 'finding what we have lost', 'putting functional landscapes together', 'unity between nations with a common goal', 'trust between agencies and developing partnerships', and 'training the next generation to maintain Country'.

Participants were also asked to vote on which elements of the Firesticks Alliance approaches and aims they felt were the most important. HEAT – Facilitating Action and FUEL – Reading Country were the most popular fire triangle approaches.

While there was support across the board for all the aims, the aim to 'empower the local community to take an active role in decision-making by building community skills and capacity and providing a greater sense of custodianship' was seen as especially important by participants.

More information on the Firesticks Alliance can be found at [www.firesticks.org.au](http://www.firesticks.org.au)



# Traditional Dance & Weaving Workshop 7

## Facilitators

**Veronica (Ronnie) Jordan** is a Kalkadoon women from Mt Isa who teaches and works with her culture.

She is a proficient trainer specialising in traditional Indigenous games, traditional painting techniques, traditional coil basket weaving and also shares her expertise on bush tucker plants.

Ronnie has taught Indigenous cultural practices to a wide range of people; from children to the elderly, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

She has taught other Aboriginal women traditional weaving techniques which assisted them to reclaim this knowledge and reinvigorate culture.

Ronnie currently teaches weaving at the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT).



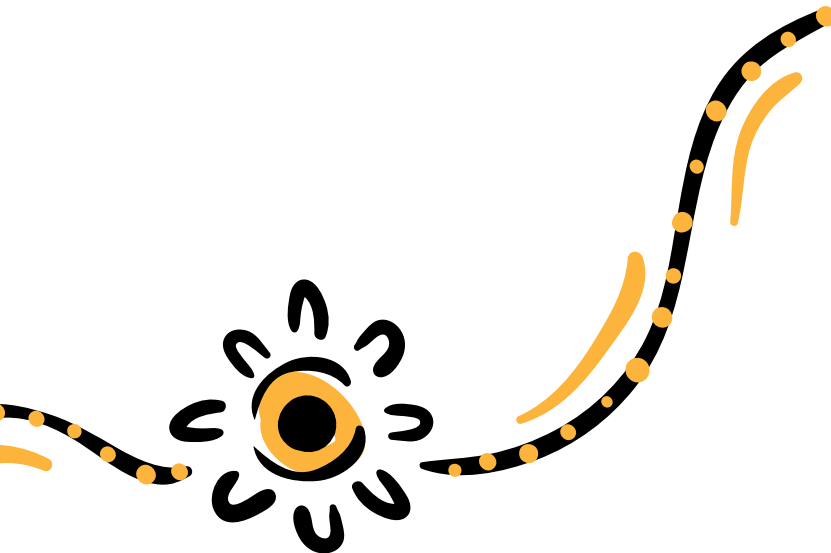


**Warren Foster** is a Monaro-Djiringanj man from the Yuin Nation and Wallaga Lake. He is a dancer, musician, actor and writer.

Warren founded the Gulaga Dancers, a traditional men's dance group who have performed nationally and internationally for the past twenty years.

He has worked as a cultural teacher and tour guide in south east NSW for many years including teaching dance to children in schools up and down the Yuin coast.

Warren has written fifteen traditional Dreamtime stories from Yuin Country.



# Traditional Dance & Weaving

## Workshop 7

In this workshop participants learned about the various grasses used for weaving and the multiple uses that woven works have across different nations. Participants were then taught a basic weave which they used to make their own jewellery. Participants also learned about the significance of cultural dance and participated in local dances on the river sand dance circle.

As we sat down on mats in the sun, our facilitator Ronnie Jordan shared her story and showed her wide range of woven pieces. Ronnie uses a diverse range of grasses and natural fibres such as riverweed, flax leaf and pandanus to make baskets, fish-traps, dilly bags and woven necklaces and bracelets.

Traditional basket weaving can take months, with the process of creating a functional material extremely time consuming.

As we gently passed around the woven pieces to each member of our group, we examined the intricacies, creativity and functionality that has gone into each piece. Ronnie told the group how the older women passed down the traditional knowledge of weaving to the younger women.

Bringing out piles of raffia, Ronnie demonstrated a coil weave technique. Soon both women and men in the group were making their own bracelets and necklaces, with Ronnie rescuing anyone who was lost in the process. There was a beautiful sense of calm that came from the looping and pulling of fibre, watching it take form.

The group members expressed gratitude for having been taught a technique that has been passed through generations.

Ronnie assured us, "I've shown everyone the same way, but each person's weave will come out unique." Sitting in our circle, there was a sense of kinship, mutual respect and family.



Moving over to the sandy dance circle, we were drawn by the stories of Warren Foster. Warren said, "Why we dance is the same reason why we burn, to bring life back into Country, to bring our ancestors... we dance for the land, our ancestors, and ourselves, to build our spirit up."

Dancing is for everyone, even the elderly get involved as they can sit back and clap with sticks while the younger are often more able to join the dance circle.

Warren pointed to the land and the trees around us and said that these trees have heard their names in the local language for thousands of years: when these are sung, it is special, continuing that connection.

"It doesn't matter which tree, they're all sacred trees. When you name them, talk to them, you can hear them, they have spirits in them; all the land does. Every tree has a story, a song, a purpose, like every one of us."

"Getting people out on Country and learning, that's how we heal, that's how we move forward together. So that we can walk into the future together."

With that inspiration, Warren had us stand up, take our shoes off and let our feet connect with the soft, cold sand. We joined in with a bird dance which included the black duck, emu, and sea eagle.

Men and women each had their own specific movements. He shared with us the importance of each of these birds, especially the black duck

which is a special totem to his people at Wallaga Lake. The men were then taught a spear fishing dance.

Warren pointed to the sandy dance circle we danced on, saying "Our time, we don't have a line like white man, we have a circle, and that circle represents the circle of life... when we have the circle, we have before we were born, our life, then we go back to Dreamtime when we die; that's the circle."

Warren had us dancing anti-clockwise. He shared, "Whenever we dance in this circle, corroboree, we move in an anti-clockwise direction, back in time, because we're going back to Dreamtime."



# Cultural Water Tour Workshop 8

## Facilitator

**Russell Brown** (Wulgaan Bunyarinarin) is from (paternally) the Dhurga and Dhawarral speaking peoples of the Djuwin Nation.

Djuwin or Yuin encompasses some thirteen Clans from Georges River in Arncliffe, Sydney, to the Murrumbidgee inlet on the Victorian border.

Maternally he is from the Gittabal/ Witabaal Peoples of the Western Bundjalung.

His Budjaan (meaning all bird life) is Bunyarinarin the Yellow Crested Lapwing Plover (his family totem).





# Cultural Water Workshop 8

**In this workshop participants were taken on the Shoalhaven River for a river boat cruise to listen to local stories, learn about “Yuin Ngurra” (spiritual, political, judicial and ecological beliefs) and be challenged to contribute to healing of Country.**

As the boat left the riverbank, we were guided along the Shoalhaven waterways towards the sacred Cullunghutti Mountain, our breath stolen completely by the local landscape.

Our cultural water tour included an interpretation of the landscape by our facilitator Wulgaan, who carried stories that his family totemic had directed him to share with us.

These were precious stories of cultural knowledge on what the Country needs to make it well again, knowledge passed down from parent to child over millennia. Lifetimes of ecological management experiences through cycles dispensed as collective wisdom.

“This is sick Country, this is rubbish Country,” said Wulgaan as he pointed to the riverbank.

**“This riverbank used to be thick with medicine plants – and that has all changed within my lifetime.”**

Wulgaan inspires self reflection through “Gadawahl” the Honeybee Dreaming and compared this to the way we need to work together to heal the Country.



“One bee is not going to save the hive - we need the collective. The collective wisdom is the honey, created by the collaborative efforts of all the bees. Our bees have no stingers – when they attack, they mob them by the thousands and that’s what we need to do to have impact.”

We can exchange those yarns and learn from each other and move forward with other clans and nations. No one bee can save that hive – we must come together. To search for that knowledge and experience and share it with the hive. For the benefit of all and our joint survival.”

Wulgaan reflected how we need to get back to being fire managers, fire practitioners rather than fire fighters to truly understand fire as an essential element in caring for Country.

He included how vital it is that women are active in cultural burning practices. “We need specific women’s teams, as only women can go to certain sites; we support them.”

**“It is not a job, it is a shared responsibility to care for Country.”**

Wulgaan shared with us valuable and ancient stories of local lore and ecological knowledge. He encouraged us to reflect on our own lore and how we can come together to connect back to and heal Country.

He also expressed the need to take action to heal Country and share knowledge for the survival of all, lest we create our own ecological hell through inaction and bureaucratic paralysis.









# Cultural Fire Day Community open day

The fourth day of the workshop was set aside for a cultural fire day open to the public.

Day visitors and workshop participants witnessed cultural burns on the adjacent ridge, learned about monitoring techniques, participated in weaving and dancing, travelled along the Shoalhaven River, and attended group presentations.

## *Kup Murri Ground Oven Cook-up*

Several members of the Murrumbung Rangers and other workshop participants volunteered their time to prepare a large Kup Murri.

A range of meats were used including wild kangaroo from Bundanon, pork, beef and lamb generously donated by the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria.

There was also large quantities of vegetables including potato, sweet potato, carrots and onions.

The meat was prepared using native herbs picked onsite including lemon myrtle, and thyme and rosemary picked from Boyd's Homestead garden.

The Kup Murri pit fire was lit the night before, with the food going in early in the morning. It came out perfectly cooked just in time for the lunch break, and was served to around 400 people.





# Women's Gathering Cultural Fire Day

Women of the workshops came together to meet and share their stories about their fire practice and their personal journeys.

They wanted to have a women's only space to discuss issues specific to women, as a high percentage of the workshop attendees were male.

Many women who participated worked in fire services or as rangers. There was a strong and dynamic range of voices from around Australia (particularly the east coast). Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women were welcome in the space and shared their experiences and challenges of their work with fire.

## *Key messages*

Some key messages that came out of the discussion included the observation that few women are working in National Parks, Rural Fire Services or on planned present day cultural burning.

The gender disparity ratio is even greater internationally, with Australia taking a leading role in creating an improved gender balance in fire management.

Men and women's roles are an equally shared space with burns and each have a responsibility to gender LORE. Women are the givers of life and

the essence and also carry the fire. This is why the importance of women burning on Country is vital for the continuance of culture and cultural practices.

Women who are on Country are there to protect and care for sacred sites as part of their cultural practice and obligation.

Women need to be more present on Country to protect their women's areas and bring back women into this knowledge and these spaces. Women reflected that cultural burning is healing for women as well as men.



It was expressed that while there has been research undertaken in Northern Australian Aboriginal land care practices, there is still little available in South East Australia. It was also noted that the knowledge of cultural burns belongs to Aboriginal people, and not to government or others.

The women appreciated the space being created at the National Indigenous Fire Workshop to discuss cultural fire and women's place in it.





## Sharing Song

Throughout the workshop entertainment included cultural dancing from the Djaadjawan Dancers, a women and girl's dance group from Yuin Country, as well as singing, music, bands, a presentation on Arthur Boyd's artwork, a spear throwing competition and a Kup Murri ground oven cook-up.



*Sharing Story*

# Bundanon & Arthur Boyd

## Presentation by Jim Birkett

A generous presentation of Arthur Boyd's artwork and legacy was shared by Jim Birkett, local artist and former Education Officer at Bundanon.

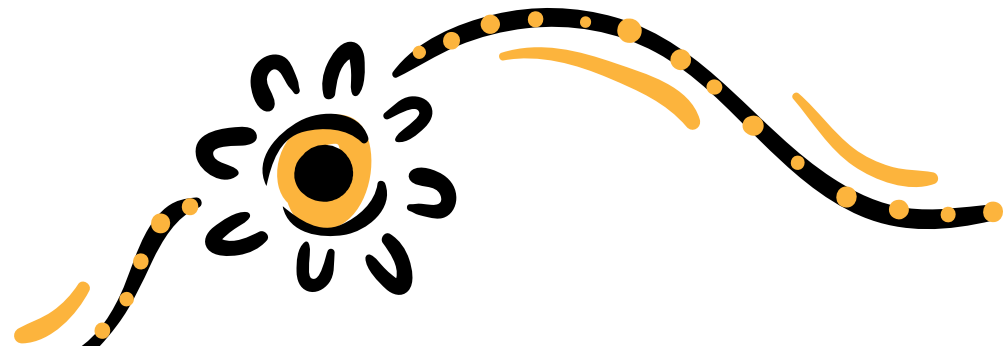
Introduction and thanks to host organisation Bundanon Trust given by Victor Steffensen.

"My presentation will aim to place Arthur Boyd in the context of Bundanon, his relationship with Indigenous culture, Australian landscape and his protection of the land through his artworks.

The imagery will reference Boyd's Bundanon landscape paintings, his Bride series of artworks and a brief reference to Boyd and Fire through his Nebuchadnezzar paintings."



Arthur Boyd, Earth and Fire, 1995, photo lithograph







# Response

**Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, with over 90% of respondents reflecting that the Workshop helped them connect to Country and community and increased their knowledge of Indigenous fire management practices.**

**Over 60% of participants said they are likely to change their fire management practices because of the Workshop, with another 30% unsure of their ability to influence current practices but still very supportive of the rebuilding of cultural fire management.**

## Community Feedback

“The confidence young practitioners have based on ancient knowing is strong and will build trust amongst many.”

“The workshop was helpful because I didn’t know much. Only white man’s fire management.”

“Incredible information, enthusiasm and knowledge covering a wide variety of situations.”

“Through the diversity of workshops, mix of listening/absorbing knowledge, yarning and doing. I thought there was an excellent mix of style of teaching/learning in the workshops.”

“[The workshop] has certainly increased my knowledge of different indicators in different types of Country.”

**“Appreciating a whole new way of looking at the world and fire management. Fantastic knowledge of Indigenous presenters and leaders.”**

“This workshop increased my knowledge for sure as we can pass it on to future generations. It is most important for our kids not to lose connection after previous bad practices by European settlers. If they only listened to our people.”

“We feel more confident in being able to start implementing fire management practices on our property.”

“The workshop gives us information and practices to better undertake conversations with higher level staff to change policy and look at wider inclusion of traditional burning.”

“Current practices with our agency won’t allow me to change decision making at an incidental/HR but will use this knowledge if approved.”

“From my agency, we need more decision makers - chief fire officer, deputy secretaries, regional fire managers and also key delivery staff (burn OIC’s) to understand fire and why we need traditional owners to deliver it.”

“Appreciated the ongoing commitment by NSW RFS to have as many members as possible learn, listen or come in contact with authentic cultural burning practices.”

“We will look at the whole picture - it’s not just about the burning but the whole situation/ environment - the workshops were excellent in sharing that is extremely important.”

“I found that the chance to meet with many like-minded people who share a passion for cultural burning was the most valuable part.”

“Everyone coming together from all across the country to focus on the most important thing called fire and the importance of keeping Country alive with cultural practices. Fire is life not death.”





# Reflection

## Leeton Lee

My name is Leeton Lee and my mob is from the Thunghutti / West Bundjulong and Mualgal nations. I live in Tamborine Mountain.

My son, Kingsley, and I participated in the NIFW Firesticks workshop where we had the opportunity to learn about many things from local knowledge on plants and animals, local history and types of Country.

We also participated in a number of workshops to understand the relationships between plants and animals and the indicators for seasonal burns as part of the importance of seasonal calendars.

Kingsley enjoyed meeting and playing with other kids throughout the week also.

There were many highlights for us including:

- Time around the campfire to have cultural discussions and get to know mob from other parts of the continent
- Spear throwing competition
- Kup Murri
- Workshop rotations
- Listening to Victor speak about Country on Country was always engaging and hearing his passion for how we can look after it draws your attention in.

There was much care taken to accommodate and look after Elders wherever possible and the men's group and staff from Bundanon Trust were always happy to assist in any way without hesitation. We look forward to attending next year's workshop.



## Hamish Martin

My name is Hamish Martin. I have been working in forest fire management for the past fifteen years, and now have a focus on monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

As a non-Indigenous Australian I have found this workshop really enlightening, especially the monitoring techniques session.

The western model of burning I've been working with still takes a coarse approach, with the subtle landscape changes within a burn area not being managed differently from a timing and fire regime perspective.

The Indigenous model started to show me not only the importance of recognising the finer scale subtleties driven by canopy type, but also the myriad of intangible cultural inputs which western measures just don't consider.

I work at the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and within my region I am hoping to embed Traditional Owner involvement in the planning and delivery of the monitoring program.

I hope our linkages to Aboriginal communities and their wealth of knowledge can grow and that monitoring objectives of Aboriginal peoples can be part of what we use going forward.





# Reflection

## National Parks and Wildlife Service

"I attended the National Indigenous Fire Workshop in Nowra, representing National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) for the South Coast.

I was impressed with how the workshop was run, in terms of both content and delivery. Equally, a lot of people attended from across Australia and were comfortable in sharing their knowledge with others, including land management agencies such as NPWS.

Cultural burning in national parks is important, and this workshop provided NPWS a greater understanding of how we can support the needs of the Aboriginal community in looking after Country.

It was a privilege to witness knowledge being shared and passed on from one generation to another, there was much to gain and I believe everyone walked away with a sense of purpose."

### Kane Weeks

Director South Coast Branch  
National Parks and Wildlife Service



## Office of Environment & Heritage

"Attending the National Indigenous Fire Workshop gave me a new understanding of how Indigenous people read the health of the Country by observing different environmental indicators.

We were also shown how the use of ongoing low intensity cultural fire can change and protect the environment by opening up choked vegetation, protect fire sensitive areas, promoting the flush of green growth, providing protection against wildfire and reducing monocultures created by wildfire germination events.

The yarning circles were a great way to hear and share stories, ideas and solutions cross culturally and across organisations. It was great to see and hear about how much the Firesticks project is connecting local Indigenous communities to their culture and connecting other organisations with local Indigenous communities to work together on fire projects.

We have promoted the Firesticks program and other local Indigenous fire groups within the 'Glossies in the Mist' Glossy Black Cockatoo conservation project, sharing firesticks with over 120 landholders, and are in the process of engaging with Gundungurra locals to see if there is already a fire team in the Southern Highlands and how the community would like to be involved with the project."

### Lauren Hook

Threatened Species Officer  
Office of Environment & Heritage



## Office of Environment & Heritage

“The 2018 National Indigenous Fire Workshop was a tremendously rich and powerful experience. The event provided an increasingly pertinent opportunity for Indigenous individuals and communities to express the personal rejuvenation and deep cultural healing acquired by caring for Country with fire.

For western style land managers and fire practitioners like myself, the event provided the chance to observe Indigenous fire practices and assessments of Country, and to revisit the paradigms in which I carry into my own land management approaches.

This first hand experience allowed me to better understand Indigenous yearning to heal Country with autonomy, which is so often suppressed by the bureaucracy and politics of contemporary land management.

I will be using the powerful and emotive experiences from the Workshop to build on old and new relationships, hopefully leading to the strengthening of Indigenous land management practices in the projects and programs I am involved in.

The healing of Country and people which took place at the Workshop was evident in the proud and empowered manner in which all participants took to the event, none more proudly than local Dharrawal hosts, the Mudjingaalbaraga Men's Group.



It was an honour to be invited and hosted by this strong community, and impressive to witness the confidence and openness in which young people like Jacob Morris and Joel Deaves carried into their communication and sharing of culture.

Huge credit is owed to the Firesticks Alliance, Bundanon Trust, South East Local Land Services and the Rural Fire Service for fostering this movement and building confidence in young Indigenous people to pursue this practice for the healing of Country and communities.”

### **Simon Tedder**

Community Engagement Officer  
Office of Environment & Heritage

“Fire brings people together. Firesticks gave those young Aboriginal people confidence and experience to talk about Country, fire and its practice in the landscape. It was so inspirational (great job).

More opportunities to practice cool fire, connect with and be ABLE to talk FOR Country needs to be created for our people across the nation.

Fire, Country and Culture is THE potential growth economic industry for our people to create and be involved in, addressing lower Aboriginal employment participation rates through CULTURE (this is MEANINGFUL employment for our people).”

### **Geoff Simpson**

Senior Scientist Community/Aboriginal Engagement  
Office of Environment & Heritage

# Reflection

## Natural Resource Management

“2018’s National Indigenous Fire Workshop was my second attendance. After attending in 2017 I was ready to sign up for another.

The confidence and wisdom displayed by the young Yuin ranger teams after working with Oli & Victor and the Firesticks crew in preparation for the workshop was so exciting and empowering to witness.

You could feel the passion the rangers held for their Country and their commitment to bringing it back to health through the use of the right fire.

Hearing the stories from the Yuin rangers on their journey to where they are today, at a point where they can act on their cultural responsibility to care for Country with the tools that their old people used was very powerful.

The narrative that the NIFW paints has left me with confidence that I can continue on the same journey and heal my Country in the right way.”

### Matthew Shanks

Policy Advisor

Natural Resource Management



## NSW Rural Fire Service Association

“I attended the Nowra workshop as a minor sponsor of the event. Not being brave enough to face the cold I stayed in town and admired the campers who stayed on site.

Apart from the cold weather the whole event was a well-run and inspirational event. It was great to see Indigenous practitioners from across the Country come together to share their experiences with those attending.

The mixture of sessions provided an education and appreciation of Indigenous culture. The presenters showed great knowledge of their subjects and it was a delight to see people of all races and walks of life come together and share their experiences.

The venue and catering were fantastic and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the organisers on a first-class event.

There were many highlights, but one that stands out was an Indigenous attendee of middle age announcing it was the first time he had danced. Well done team.”

### Brian McDonough

NSW Rural Fire Service Association





## NSW Rural Fire Service

“Please pass on my congratulations to your team on what was a very successful fire workshop at Bundanon. The NSW Rural Fire Service is proud to be a supporter of the workshop and will continue into the future to provide resources to help make the workshops a continuing success.

It is vitally important to the NSW Rural Fire Service that the fire workshops continue into the future so we can continually learn better ways to manage the environment and protect the community from bushfire.

Since the introduction of the fire workshops, the NSW Rural Fire Service has sent people along to learn more about cultural burning

and each year our members return with new enthusiasm to implement these practices into the landscape.

**Learning to put fire into the landscape when it needs fire rather than to a predetermined fire frequency is a practice that fire agencies are starting to understand and support.**

I suspect major policy changes will occur in the future regarding fire frequencies due to your cultural burning workshops such as Bundanon.

The workshop at Bundanon highlighted the cultural connections to Country and from the moment I arrived the genuine coming together

of people illustrated that cultural burning is so much more than looking after Country.

It is also about looking after people and the enthusiasm and the willingness to learn that I experienced was addictive.

This workshop reached new heights in engaging communities by making it accessible to all cultures.

The learning from the workshop I experienced and the new friends I have made in this journey is something I will take away and cherish.”

**Simon Curry**

State Indigenous Program Coordinator  
NSW Rural Fire Service

# Bundanon Trust

“Bundanon Trust were exceedingly pleased to host this significant event. When we first started to yarn to Nook (Noel Webster) and his team about the idea a while back, we could see that it would prove to be an immensely rewarding experience for the organisation, for our team and importantly, for the Country.

It was clear from these early discussions that the health of the natural environment was the shared aspiration. We have, for some time now, been striving to bring back Indigenous land management practices to the Country. For its good.

The sheer generosity of the event organisers and the participants themselves, reinforced the reason for joining forces in these critical environmental efforts.

We have made many great friends and will now move forward in ensuring the good fire remains as a vital part of our efforts.

We are all stronger for our combined efforts – the Country will benefit.”

**Richard Montgomery**  
Head of Operations  
Bundanon Trust

“We learned at a workshop in Bombaderry last year that the Mudjingaalbaraga team wanted to re-learn and practice traditional skills to care for Country.

We invited them to work on Bundanon, and now we’ve welcomed 300 people to this significant Indigenous cultural event – it’s been very rewarding.

**We’ve watched young Indigenous men, women and children learn about this Country, seen them grow stronger in their knowledge and confidence.**

We’ve witnessed their obvious respect for their Elders and teachers and we’ve learnt the same respect.

We have joined them in laughter and enjoyed developing strong friendships and trust.

The good fire has allowed Bundanon’s Natural Resources team to discover previously inaccessible Country.

We can open some of these areas to our site visitors so that they may gain an even greater appreciation of this spectacular landscape.

We believe that we are now positioned to provide even greater ecological opportunity for native species.

We have cemented strong and ongoing partnerships with local people and a national network committed to caring for Country. The future looks bright.”

**Michael Andrews**  
Natural Resources Manager  
Bundanon Trust





## *Going Forward*

Going forward, we hope to be able to gather the right resources and people to bring fire stories back to all the Country that needs it, and restore the fire circles that once existed throughout our cultural landscapes.

In the short term we are focused on building a sustainable and regenerative business model and mentorship program that can expand with the overwhelming demands of Country and aspirations of people.

Hopefully you will help light some fire with us.



# Thank you

Firesticks Alliance, Mulong Productions, and Cape York Natural Resource Management, along with our fantastic hosts Mudjingaalbaraga Firesticks and Bundanon Trust, would like to extend our sincere thanks and gratitude to the many people who contributed to the 2018 National Indigenous Fire Workshop.

We would also like to thank and acknowledge our partners and sponsors, whose strong support helped ensure that this year's NIFW was such a successful event.

This year's National Indigenous Fire Workshop has been an incredibly positive way to share stories, learnings and connections, and to build momentum and knowledge about the environmental and cultural importance and community benefits of cultural fire.

There are simply too many people, organisations and community groups to thank individually, but for all of those people or groups who played a role either large or small, we acknowledge your generous contributions and assistance.

## Message from Victor Steffensen, Mulong Productions

"To the Yuin Nation - I take my hat off for you, you truly represented proudly through your men, women, and children.

This workshop worked because your community and people are totally outstanding and that has inspired all the communities that attended.

The Bundanon staff were incredible and we appreciate the generosity and hard work from all of their team. It has been an honour.

To our partners and sponsors, we are so happy to have had you working with us all on the initiative and we look forward to the future.

To the rest of you, you all know who you are, thank you, you are an amazing group of people that keeps growing and growing.

I want to thank you for your efforts and spirit from the bottom of my heart and to let you all know that this cannot happen without every one of you.

Keep that good fire burning in all of your hearts for our old people and Country."

## Report authors

**Lead author:** Rebecca Lyngdoh Reye, with thanks to Indigenous Community Volunteers (ICV)

**Report co-authors:** Ruth Gilbert, Leo Goddard and Joshua Gowers

**Report contributors/editors:** Oliver Costello, Peta Standley, Victor Steffensen, Noel Webster, Ruth Gilbert

**Design credits:** Wantok Designs, Joshua Gowers

**Workshop photographers:** Sarah Pulling and Heidrun Lohr. All images are © Firesticks.

*Our thanks to all other report contributors, including those people who have provided quotes, feedback, and text.*





**FIRESTICK  
CREW**

# Sponsors



PROUDLY SPONSORED BY  
BUSHFIRE RISK MANAGEMENT  
RESEARCH HUB



PROUDLY SPONSORED BY  
SAVING OUR SPECIES



Local Land  
Services



National  
Landcare  
Programme

# Partners



Cultural burning: healthy communities, healthy landscapes



A sincere thank you to all our sponsors and partners who made the 2018 National Indigenous Fire Workshop possible.



## WALAWARNI – SAFE JOURNEY

Healing culture, people and Country with the knowledge of fire

