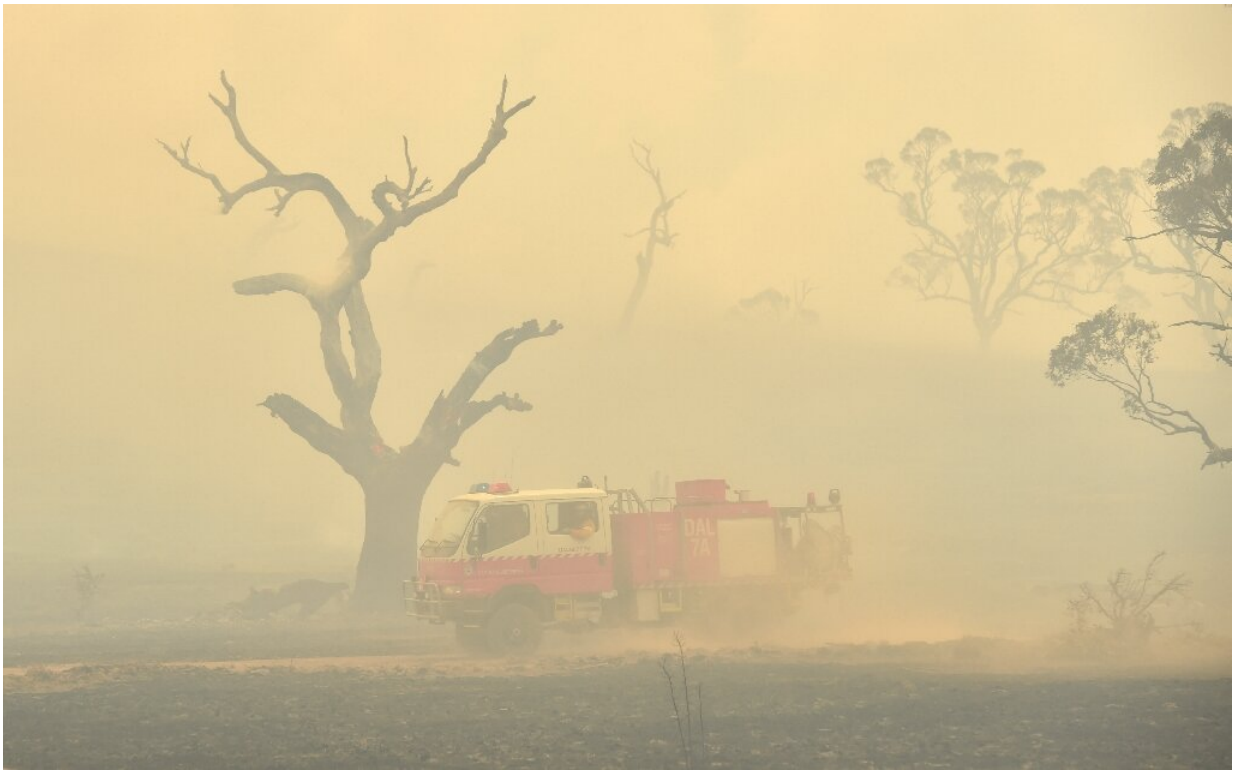
Australia bushfires ignite calls for indigenous fire practices

February 12 2020, by Holly Robertson



Bushfires have scorched large swathes of Australia in recent months

For tens of thousands of years, Australia's Aboriginal people have used fire to manage the landscape, and after a summer of raging bushfires the practice is increasingly being seen as a way to help stem future disasters.

The unprecedented scale of the latest bushfire season—made worse by hotter and drier weather brought on by climate change—has prompted calls for greater integration of ancient land management techniques into bushfire prevention efforts.

Months of uncontrollable wildfires have scorched more than 10 million hectares (25 million acres) in the country's east and south, killing at least 33 people and an estimated billion animals while destroying more than 2,500 homes.

Heavy rain along the east coast in recent days has extinguished most of the fires in the region but scientists say rising temperatures will see bushfires occur more frequently.

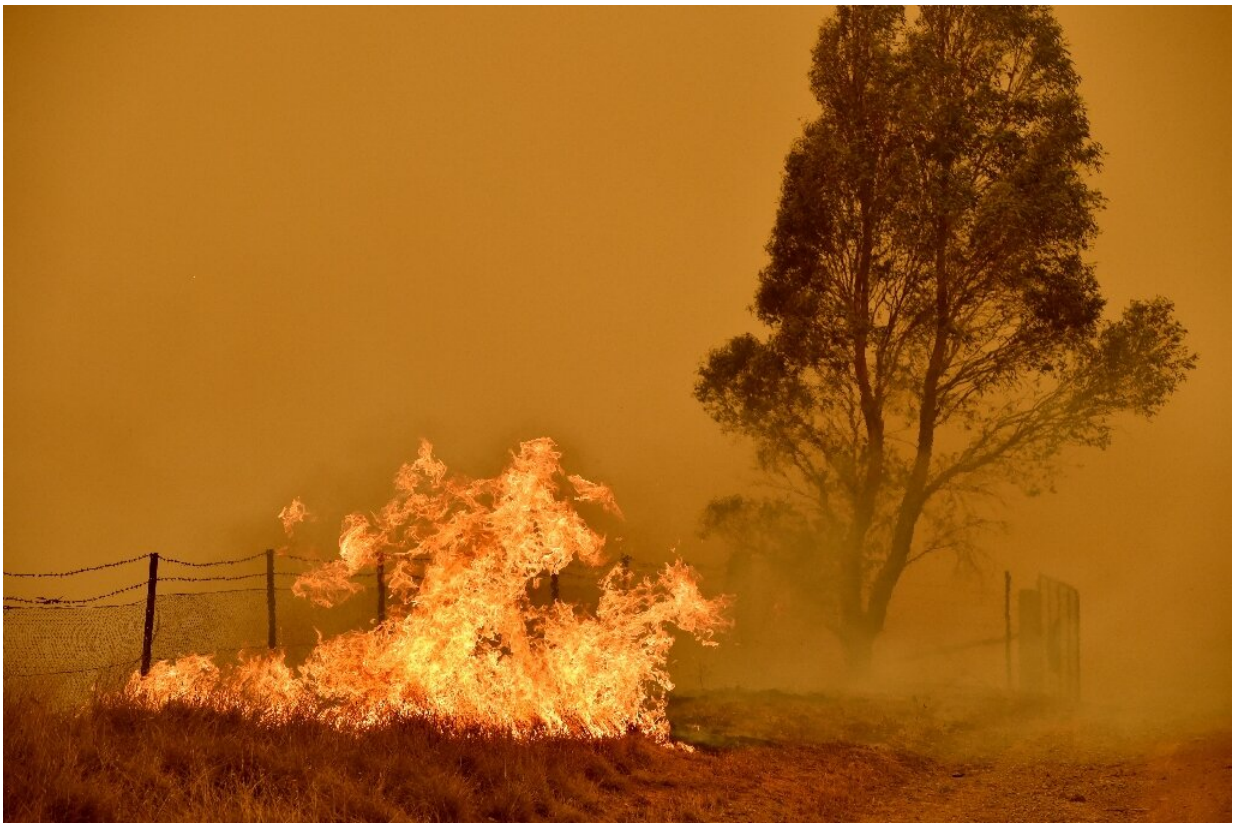
Aboriginals have long lit small, so-called "cool" blazes by hand and closely monitored the flames to ensure only undergrowth is burned.

The fires are controlled so they move slowly and preserve the tree canopy, allowing animals a route to escape.

Known as "cultural burning", it clears pathways through the scrub, promotes new growth in plants, and rids the land of undergrowth that acts as fuel in bushfires.

Firefighters across Australia undertake their own hazard reduction burning to reduce the likelihood of major fires, typically using hand-held drip torches that release flaming fuel onto the ground, or helicopters that drop flammable materials from above.

But longer bushfire seasons brought by a warming climate are shrinking the window in the cooler months to carry out hazard reduction work.



Scientists say rising temperatures will see bushfires occur more frequently Bushfires burn near the town of Bumbalong south of Canberra on February 1, 2020.Authorities in Canberra on January 31, 2020 declared the first state of emergency in almost two decades as a bushfire bore down on the Australian capital.

These burns also have the potential to morph into out-of-control blazes, and doubt has been cast over their effectiveness in preventing larger fires.

"The fuel loads are so high they're creating their own fire storms," said Terry Hill, head of Merrimans Local Aboriginal Lands Council in New South Wales, the state hardest hit by the recent fires.

Colonisation

"Planes and helicopters with buckets of water are not going to put these fires out. We've got to look at the prevention side of things," he told AFP.

Though fire services around the country already collaborate with indigenous Australians on cultural burns, the ancient practice is employed on a much larger scale in the Northern Territory than anywhere else.

Dean Yibarbuk, chair of Warddeken Land Management, helped formalise an indigenous fire prevention programme in a remote part of the state's Arnhem Land more than a decade ago.

Colonisation had forced many Aboriginal communities from their homes, he explained, meaning Warddeken's 14,000 square kilometres (5,400 square miles) of indigenous protected land was being neglected.

Warddeken teamed up with scientists to combine ancient and modern fire practices in a comprehensive initiative that now employs up to 150 indigenous rangers and includes measures such as feral animal control and cultural heritage protection.

"We changed the whole system by putting people back on the landscape," Yibarbuk told AFP.

The bushfires in Australia this year have killed a billion animals by some estimates

"Not only just ourselves but the whole of north Australia took part in it, because they too were struggling to see the country being burned."

The schemes have had the added benefit of cutting carbon emissions —allowing indigenous communities to sell the resulting carbon credits and pump those funds back into community projects.

Shaun Ansell, the non-indigenous chief executive of Warddeken, said the rest of Australia could learn lessons from the north but he cautioned against simplistic attempts to replicate the approach across the giant country.

"The landscapes in northern Australia are much vaster and much less densely populated, which means the risk to infrastructure and burning down people's houses in many places in northern Australia is much lower," he told AFP.

David Bowman, a bushfire expert and professor of environmental change biology at the University of Tasmania, said a large-scale return to traditional fire management would not be possible in southern Australia because non-indigenous people now occupied most of the land.

"It can't be the only solution to the bushfire problem but it has a really good role as part of reconciliation to respect and honour the ancient tradition of indigenous fire practice," he said.

But Yibarbuk called on the government to "start listening" to those urging more widely integrate cultural burning into bushfire prevention.

"They need to start engaging with us from this end," he said.

"When we hear what's happened down in southern areas it's quite devastating. We want to see the fire managed according to the land, according to the traditional people of that area."

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