

Notes from the Search Conference sessions

Two participants – Dr Sam Strong and Owen Gooding kindly took notes during the Search Conference and have agreed to share them. The first set are key points prepared by Owen Gooding. The second are detailed notes prepared by Dr Sam Strong.

Key points (Owen Gooding)

Forum Introduction: Chris Johnston

- Fire is thought of/experienced primarily as scary at this time of year. Need to establish a positive relationship with fire. Living with fire.
 - What do we know and don't know about Aboriginal fire use in this area?
 - How do we appreciate cultural fire use in deeper sense?
 - The Newstead Community Plan sets the scene for a landscape-scale approach to fire that respects community, landscape and biodiversity.
 - Interested in conversation about landscape, leading to conversation about fire, stories around the fire, fire as transformation
 - Grant from Mount Alexander Shire is supporting this event, and the talk last night by Scott Falconer.
-

Panel 1: What do we know from traditions, history and the landscape about fire and Indigenous burning in Central Victoria?

Questions to be explored could include:

- What do we know about Indigenous burning based on traditions, oral and documentary history?
- How was fire used by Aboriginal people? When did Indigenous burning stop in this region?
- How do our knowledge systems contribute to how we see fire? How are fire histories constructed culturally?
- What can be learnt from reading the landscape – vegetation communities and patterns for example – as to how fire was used?

Mick Bourke: District Planner, Forest Fire Management Vic (DELWP)

Sarah McMaster: PhD Candidate, Federation University

Dr John Morgan: Lecturer, Ecology, Environment & Evolution, La Trobe University

Facilitator – Paul Foreman

Paul Forman (Panel Intro)

- Suggest Aboriginal burning was not universal as Bill Gamage's work might suggest
- We can learn something by re-examining the historical records
- What do we know about Aboriginal fire in central Vic? Aboriginal people have been unable to practice for around 180 years

Mick Bourke: DDWCAC & DELWP/FFM - Traditional Owner perspective

- Dja Dja Wurrung Country Plan talks about what we want for Country

- Country is our mother, we are family
- What's missing in the landscape is the black fella
- Need to work with Country the way it is now. Needs a reset
- Cultural practice and ceremony has stopped
- We were punished in the mission day for practicing our culture
- Non-Traditional Owners – they are black fellas too. We need them.
- The mobs (Aboriginal people – clans, tribes, groups) are learning.

Sarah McMaster: PhD Candidate, Federation University - learning from settler observations

- Why do we talk about Aboriginal fire?
- A split. The normal way, and the Aboriginal way
- Why is it not singular way?
- Picture and words from the 19th century show fire was central to Aboriginal life.
- A difference in ethos between the settlers and Aboriginal relationship with fire. Settlers did not want fire to harm fences, buildings and stock –Aboriginal people did not have to worry about these things
- Settlers knew they had to control fire to control the land.

Dr John Morgan: Lecturer, Ecology, Environment & Evolution, La Trobe University – a botanist's perspective

- Eucalypts split off from rainforest ancestor 60 million years ago. Eucalypts are paraphytes and came to dominate in the increasingly arid Australian climate – eucalypts hand in hand with fire.
- Pollen and charcoal records from cores taken from peat bogs (etc) suggest arrival of Aboriginal people into Australia did not trigger a spike in fire frequency/extent. Aboriginal people adopted fire, directed it, at the same time as background wildfires dominated charcoal records.
- (Mick: Aboriginal people feel they have always been here)
- Australian plants have fire cues: heat or smoke.
- What happens when you put back fire after 200 years of European settlement?

Panel Discussion

- We need to describe a fire regime
- Mobs won't share sacred knowledge. Knowledge has been stolen in the past. Mobs are still scared
- How should we approach the problem? Involve the mobs.
- We need to use the settler observations of fire with caution because they were afraid of fire.
- Settlers gave no credit to the mobs for fire technology because they were trying to take the land
- Why burn infertile areas – burning was not everywhere especially in unproductive land. Don't over-apply fire use.
- Some sites you never burn. Sacred.

- Fire was not the only disturbance - Aboriginal people cultivated and native mammals (now largely absent) dug the soil
- Soil structure has changed – Europeans dehydrated the land – our challenge now is soil rehydration.
- How much do mobs know about forest burning? Mick: we burn in forest.
- We should be self-aware and study our biases and assumptions
- Biodiversity conservationists have been thinking about good fire for more than 30 years.

Panel 2: Adapting Indigenous fire management practices to today's landscape

Questions and topics to be explored could include:

- How and why to burn, or not burn? Learning from traditional indicators and decision-making processes.
- Fuel reduction strategies – why we do what we do now and how it would need to change?
- What is required to adapt to today's landscape and settlement patterns?
- Understanding and managing risk at the local level: the view from the brigade.

Scott Falconer: Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Loddon Mallee Forest, Fire and Regions, Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning

Doug Richardson: Brigade Captain, Newstead Brigade

Michael Sherwen: Statewide Cultural Heritage Adviser, CFA

Facilitator – Chris Johnston

Michael Sherwen: Statewide Cultural Heritage Adviser, CFA - Sharing fire knowledge

- Time was brought in for trains, for my people time just happens.
- How and why do we burn – need to acknowledge opinion and ideology influences.
- We all have a common link – fire. We are all custodians.
- Many Aboriginal fire stories but a different fire language to non-Aboriginal people. Our people have responsibilities for Wind, Water, Earth and Fire.
- Our knowledge is passed on. We are a continuum.
- We want to share. Respect our elders. Ask the right questions.

Doug Richardson: Brigade Captain, Newstead Brigade - perspectives from the brigade

- Newstead has not had bushfire in 50 years
- Most of our fires are in grass –but there is no planned burning program for grass
- If we burn around our town would it help?
- Our brigade prioritises education, passing knowledge on.

Scott Falconer: Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Loddon Mallee Forest, Fire and Regions, DELWP - lessons from international efforts

- A lot happening in cultural fire space in Victoria right now
- We are probably head of many countries
- Lesson from all the Indigenous peoples around the world: fire must be purposeful, fire has multiple purposes.

- Aboriginal people must lead the cultural fire use.

Panel

- Walk together
- Be kind
- How can we (community) become comfortable with fire?
- Cultural fire will not happen through government (it must be led by Aboriginal people)

Panel 3: Perspectives on risk

Questions to be explored could include:

- How do communities understand and respond to risk?
- How do governments – at all levels – perceive and respond to risk?

Matt Campbell: Senior Project Officer, Engagement, Policy and Planning, Forest, Fire and Regions, DELWP

Dr Blythe McLennan: Research Fellow in Emergency Management with RMIT University's Centre for Risk and Community Safety.

Professor Cristina Montiel: Visiting Academic, School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences, University of Melbourne. (Chair of Research Group, Department of Geography, Complutense University of Madrid)

Facilitator – Brendan Sydes

Matt Campbell: DELWP - Lessons from St. Andrews

- The thread of identity that binds us is our love of where we live.
- “You are not part of us, if you want to understand us, and work with us, you have to walk alongside us”.
- It's about relationships.
- We are hard wired for connection, our ability to cope is from our connections.
- We meet in dialogue. Meet with people before we meet as stakeholder.
- Focus on learning and sense making rather than decision making. Play the long game.

Dr Blythe McLennan: RMIT - studying interaction between people and place, people and government

- Emergency Management (EM) agencies are technical experts and believe community knowledge is subjective – therefore we give knowledge and people will change. Wrong!
- EM agencies are risk adverse – more than community.
- Trust is key.
- There must be a community voice, about what they value.

Professor Cristina Montiel: University of Melbourne/ Complutense University of Madrid - a European perspective

- European fire use goes back to middle ages.
- Fire as a rural practice.
- A difference between European fire use (Europeans fear fire) and Australian Indigenous peoples use of fire (fire as part of landscape and linked to spiritual understanding).
- European fire has a social and political meaning/ context.
- With the arrival of government and regulation of fire has pushed traditional uses of fire 'underground' in Europe.
- With introduction of government and forestry, fire culture has been lost (gone underground – become an illegal practice).
- In Europe we have rural exodus – therefore lost people, lost culture, changing landscape.
- Attention! understand the social conflict is the first step.

Panel discussion

- Agency is technical professional fire = power. A 'Command and Control' culture.
- But our processes to engage community with risk – needs to be iterative not linear.
- Nothing happens without trust between government and community.
- Decisions made together is the only way.

Summing Up

- Question from the community: how do fire services expand cool burning? Barriers are questions of liability and lack of experience
- A shift is required to make create an enabling environment, to give us words to be able to ask the right questions
- Today is not about how to do it asking questions, giving participants confidence
- It's a conversation today about:
 - learning
 - finding out how we the importance of trust ad how trust is generated.

Detailed Notes (Sam Strong)

Session One: What do we know from traditions, history and the landscape about fire and Indigenous burning in central Victoria?

Mick Bourke, Sarah McAlister and John Morgan; facilitated by Paul Foreman.

Mick: 1851 Bushfire created impacts for Indigenous people after dispossession. The past damage, now returning people to the landscape for future generations. Working on and with Country, as it is now, p=for people. Plants and animals. Country is family, Mother Earth. Requires respectful treatment and the connections, since people have been missing.

Restoration of grasses, since the removal of fire from Country. The Country Plan- Nathan has worked on monitoring of grassy systems. Cultural ceremony had a huge impact on grassy ecosystems. Fire and healing are needed to get cultural practices back in these systems. Western Science can be matched to Elders' knowledge, to pas onto the younger generation.

They have revived cultural practice – framed as we “Walk Together”.

Fire is used in the right conditions- depending on if there is contiguous vegetation to carry fire/ or create patchiness. The important element is people, having the right for the right country; Have partnerships, and the mobs back in the landscape to carry the messages, heal the landscape and look after country.

Bush Heritage, Djandjak and DELWP partnership to get people in the landscape. The Dja have also worked in with Barapa, since they don't have RAP status- it helps them work on Country with fire. They are visiting everyone to educate neighbouring mobs. Using the materials in the landscape keeps the costs low. It is a 'relaxed' burning. IN the past 2 years they have grown from 6 to 30 trained Dja Warrung people in FOPs.

Sarah: Worked in recovery and in DELWP and wanted to explore how and why Aboriginal fire was depicted. Gammage's 'singular interpretation of Aboriginal fire' also stimulated the work, as to what other ways of interpreting early records- what they said that was more nuanced.

She has researched the 19th century records of colonial observations of Aboriginal Fire in painting, sketches.

The documents are Euro-centric, so the history of fire is very much as they saw fire. The records show what was perceived as 'normal' and the belief system that created these images- fire practices in contrast to European's use.

The records show that fire was central to life and used for many things, consistently and constantly for warmth, cooking, light (torches when fishing at night), fighting/warnings.

The fire depictions of hunting are limited to a more masculine use (i.e. women gathered tubers from burnt fields and cooked). They did not flush out animals in the bush, they lured them out to grassy pickings.

Stereotypes of fire- fire is to be feared by the Europeans as they did not know the landscape and had only had bad experiences in Europe that were related to shifts in power (i.e. houses burning down/

1820-30s arson in England and then the major bushfire of 1851). Therefore, Aboriginals are to be feared because they are associated with fire in the environment; the ethos of treating fire as the enemy. The research refers to the collective relationships with the land, of imposing European values of cleared, settled, safe solid landscapes; of removing the forests of fire and harm, to protect the landscape, which is at odds to what the landscape really needed.

John Morgan: His work uses objective scientific perspectives- ecology and fire.

The discussion in Northern Australia- that fire has been done for a long time, and cannot be directly transferred to the south. The current QLD bushfire prompts us to think about fire and climate change.

History – Eucalypts evolved 60 million years ago, according to fire and climate their distribution, prevalence and long evolution. They have a long history of adaptation; Banksias also have a similar evolution (65 million years).

Scientists refer to evidence of changes by referring to sites (i.e. the Prom)- such as peat bogs, pollen analysis. Evidence of charcoal. They have monitored changes to fire in relation to people, extinction of mega fauna- the change is not constant. Need to carefully interpret the results, as it is possible to misinterpret results to give different reconstructions.

Another source of evidence/information is rock art to show the migrations of Aboriginal people- use these places as reference points. The charcoal in analysis shows it was there before Aboriginal people's arrival in Australia. Fire has allowed Eucalypts to proliferate since 70,000+ years.

Europeans used more big fires to remove vegetation, which ties in with more major wildfires since their arrival.

Reference: Scott Mooney (2011). Orbital timescales Harness fires specifically so no long-term major change... Learn to use fire over time. Fire was used for many reasons- food production, promotion of plant growth, species distribution, smoke for seed germination, ash and heat. Fire cycles nutrients.

Fire regimes rule: Fire regime= pattern of recurrence/ dependent on frequency, intensity and season. Need to ask what the goal of fire use is in systems that are no longer burnt- biomass/temperature/regimes/severity and the compatibility of these elements.

Panel:

Mobs won't share knowledge (IP is very scary for mobs) since it was stolen from them, so how do you then share it with others is important. Mick said to get involved with mobs early to get answers.

Sarah was hesitant to say the documentary evidence is instructional on how 19th Century Aboriginals used fire since it is an interpretation by Europeans who feared fire and the people who used it. The imagers are skewed and prejudicial. Not purposively done, but would have influenced the way they presented their experiences with fire. They needed to control fire, but couldn't credit Aborigines for this skill. The 'vacant land' theory was powerful and motivational. Use the records more for revealing the ethos around fire interps of 19th Century WHITES. It was a tool for power/political expression and fear. Need to read between the lines as to what is missing and how people are presented.

John suggested you can read the history of the landscape via own background- ecology and the distribution of plants. Some areas would have been burnt often, others not so frequently. Gammage over-stressed the extent. John said to be wary of over-applying its presence. Resource rich areas are likely to have been burnt frequently for food, habitation.

Mick: Spiritually important areas were not burnt. But they traded goods, ceremonies, developed resources and shared this with other mobs.

David Cheal: How did the early records represent the disrupted Aboriginal settlements post small pox etc? The early settlers in the 19th century were seeing this (60% death rates in some areas). Exclusion occurred early, so the records refer to the past. I.e. Curr. What did he really see? If these people had been removed? The significance of records, when fire was NOT there, can infer what fire did. i.e. veg types where movement was difficult= less fire there. What aren't they saying in the records (that we could anticipate being there?)

Panel 2: Adapting fire to today's landscape

Scott Falconer, Doug Richardson, Michael Sherwen.

Michael: There are different opinions and ideologies, but fire is a commonality, which is being respected at the forum. There is a continuum of community- resilience from being on country.

There is truth about land management/fire methodology coming from other media sources that is not always observed- i.e. the Martu in the Western Desert. The desert people are working with fire in a time of climate change. Applying fire for achieving different responses, and adapting land for a purpose.

A changing mindset is still to occur- there are now ambassadors in ACFO, Dja Warrung, so this is good time for sharing expertise.

Presently it is hard to burn because people are scared of fire. There is a lack of engagement with local people and knowledge holders that represent a continuum. We have to deal with limitations of the mindsets which restricts what we listen o or refer to from history. There are generations of change and knowledge

Also, legislative constraints and changing policies within and between governments.

Another restriction- There is also outdated fire management systems, in terms of timing and use of fire.

Social norms need to change- where we can learn for the future.

The interconnection of knowledge bases (places and people) and referring to them

The history of major fires, i.e. 1939, 1903- and how land use change is linked. Impacts of hydrological changes, industry, greed- the hunting for what is for 'now'.

Understand the inputs and outputs of the systems

Respect one another and each other's knowledge. Sharing knowledge means you need to connect authentically to Aboriginal people- genuine. They are protective over lone held practices.

The Joint Fire Management Plan is no longer target based- supports partnerships between the CFA, FFMV to achieve adaptive management goals.

Safer Together – funded until June 30 2019, with round 2 being prepped. There is a suppression focus by CFA- whereas there can be fire for the right landscapes- partnerships with key people, that involves listening, removing biases to get mutual respect. Used the playschool windows as an analogy for fire approaches we traditionally rely upon- no overlap.

Doug: Area has a history of pasture fires, but no major fires for 50 years. Does this represent good management, or a move away from how to deal with fire? Aboriginal grass burns have not been done in the area for a long time. Areas where no stock could use Indigenous burning.

No \$ for doing burns on hazardous areas, like roadsides.

The topography is diverse in the area, in terms of the role of fire too. Suppression of wildfires- involves rocky access, access to land, wind direction, roads etc. Last one was at Campbelltown in rocky paddocks.

Fire risk at a local level- important to understand it. In forested areas the dynamics vary- could Aboriginal burns be done on a trial and error basis to learn and explore the results?

Township- access if a fire occurs; vegetation is mostly grasslands that are grazed, slashed or cropped. The community is responsible, but do they understand the consequences on the town from a major fire? So, what do we want to see done? Prevent the community being impacted? Need to identify the steps to take and discuss them, in terms of a common goal being needed, or stay in the current status quo of not knowing.

Each is responsible for their own care of the land. It is a jig saw puzzle where each can have a piece to fit into a bigger whole; small fire is not used for 6-70 years- as it is too dangerous, nor do people want a role (?).

The context of climate where fire can burn anything fast, depending on the vegetation and type of fire.

Community needs to understand what impacts of fire are- reduction of risk, understand the real impacts; other forms of fire- good and protection oriented (by CFA), schools to get the young to learn and be involved, relate to fire as they won't have the experience/knowledge of someone like Doug- pass this onto families.

The brigade is progressive- take part in outcomes and ideas of the search conference to be part of the change and strategies for the future.

Scott: Importance of meaningful conversations; he was aware that the community was being left behind.

Have a partnership focus, as he now has- northern Australia is very different, in terms of access issues. We live in a fire prone area with dense populations.

Earlier fire was Purposeful burning- what is wanted/ needed and done was nuanced, timelessness, specific and according to songlines. The challenge now is to work from what was in the contemporary context. It won't be easy.

Cultural Burning Strategy by DELWP has shown it must be led by Aboriginal people, with cross-overs with research and agencies to facilitate the cultural revival with TOs and TEK. It is important to work on the IP and who owns the knowledge. "Walk Together" acknowledges the threat and tension points- be kind/ consider ecologists' knowledge whose knowledge is also respected.

Panel 3: Perception of Risks

Cristina Monteil, Matt Campbell and Blythe McLennan.

Matt: Making sense of how people make sense- the relationships with us/one another and place/ fire. Ask who we are as individuals, and in terms of safety/risk across the global scale in terms of the range of experiences there are.

Refer to threads that tie us together and where we love being- where we live. These threads are part of us- past, present and future. Uncertainty is something we live with and provides big questions.

Concepts in the St. Andrews Conversations- of how it links to Newstead. Considering the psycho-social recovery that is still going on in that community post 2009. That community said, "You're not part of us...if you want to understand and work with the community you have to walk alongside us to be part of us" So, be different but part of if the walk- however- what elements are humanising (in the work we do?). They worked on relationships-not the type of information being 'brought in' by the agency- sharing and interpreting. It was not about activities or who were the agencies, but the relationships- of being people with other people.

1. We are hard-wired for connection- physically, mentally, metaphysically. This helps us cope with change and risks- and this coping is linked to our connections- own it and understand it.
2. Space to make sense- no end point in sensemaking- take on views that are not your own, to get closer.
3. Meet in dialogue- face-face to make sense. Reconciling how to do it authentically; who is who/what.

The challenge for government is to create the breathing room- their/his approach is iterative/ cumulative conversations to find out what matters to community. Embrace the principles, create opportunities for the invitation 'in'; meet as people, rather than stakeholders to explore what else can be offered; focus on learning, rather than decision making. Play the long game!

St Andrews program was not educative- it was about creating a sense-making space in which to learn, and that naturally emerged from the relationships, as an outcome. The process tapped into the community's knowledge.

Blyth: Social context matters. Risk construction as a social construction. As a product of social/government interactions. Emergency Management observations of risk to compare and contrast risk

Community vs. the “government” as separate entities. Whereas there is diversity across a spectrum.

Emergency managers are ‘objective, in contrast to the ‘community’

Risk can be understood technically, subjectively and as constructs. Risk perspective within government- has a legal risk and responsibility/ reputational risk and response to risks/ public and political scrutiny. Government cannot be risk averse.

Social negotiation of risks/responsibilities- the benefits and trade-offs.

Emergency Managers- has fewer trade-offs/capacity. i.e. pets/livestock. Has to be flexible/ duty of care and deal with complexities

“Agency” – consider the choices/capacity to influence something, i.e. motivation/costs/ restrictions/age/access/ trust & knowledge/ social groups.

All this makes it a challenge for government and support. No one player has all the information/knowledge on their own. Community voices are needed along all the way, as part of the broader discussions/ planning.

Cristina: There are common aspects between Spain and Australia: Rural activities in a young country. The cultural connections of fire and people in Spain are not as long as elsewhere. The Middle Ages are when fire arose as a management tool. IN the 19th century it was common practice for traditional rural activities.

With the imposition of new thinking and policies/ forestry practices, considered as the ‘right’ way of thinking, fire was excluded. Fire was seen as problematic, so was blocked out from the land and social culture. Problems then arose, conflicts with on-ground practices and reforestation (resulting in high biomass when left unmanaged).

Disruption of the ecological and cultural systems; people, culture, ecology. Fire history is documented as being local in scale in every country across many activities. In Europe fire use is now but an illegal practice. Slash and burn (Nordic)/ grazing/ agroforestry.

While the temporal scales may differ, policy and fire use are similar to Australia in terms of the 19th century removal of fire.

Referred to a scale of trust- will to learn/unlearn to reintroduce fire and a sense of responsibility when talking with people. Involves power.

Discussed the interpretative process for action within a framework (Legal and planning).

Question time:

Matt- Indigenous Cultural Burning is a different set of questions than dealt with in St. Andrews. But it still required us to go outside our own worldview to be empathetic, to step outside the paradigms

that we have, to learn, giving permission to be learners, rather than experts. View risk differently as a consequence.

Blythe- A leap of faith is required /involved for volunteers/ government partnerships- where trust of the risks required to take; “in it together” is a shift.

Cristina: no-one is an expert. The new reality of wildfires/ different landscapes/ climate changes- we all have to deal with these- so learn and talk together.

Fritz: Risk- a world view. All assessment is human centric. Acknowledge other risks, to the environment, to mother earth. Biodiversity risk is not being acknowledged in the discussion. How do we deal with risk assessments, human absence from the landscapes?

David C: DELWP – input for action is not two-way re biodiversity risks- it a command and control approach.

Blythe: Shift to local, place-based assessments for risk. Sharing the positive learning for sifting how risk is assessed, to move away from a command and control approach.

Cristina: Need to acknowledge policies of the past have been wrong, and start afresh, to then unlearn to relearn.

Matt: Predetermined decisions are done, so there is no way talk can occur. Different sectors of the department do have different views/roles/methods, but he can see opportunities arising and that cultural change is occurring (away from the Command and Control).

Owen: Agencies had it run (?). Cultural fire needs to be led by Community Trust- and relationships, which would be radical.

Paul F: Perceived risk/actual risk- need resources in the right place for reduction of risk.

Blythe: What is accepted? In terms of the subjective nature of risk acceptance. What is valued? Resources? Need risk planners to give their knowledge too, to inform community.

Saide: “Participatory action”- a decision jointly made, so all voices are heard.

Matt: Use Methodologies to help collaborations, leveraging off who is best placed; facing challenges of legislative compliance to balance the separate identities within community. DELWP is a compliance organisation, so faces ‘dualism’- it is acknowledged, but not acted upon.

Blythe: Citizens Juries- are existing and successfully trialled. Public Authority deal with expenditure and are representative voice/ decision maker is also a challenge. Who has authority? The shifting of staff means a loss of skills and relationships.

Cristina: Trust – needs permanent dialogue. Policy sharing and responsibilities/ expectations of government are too high. Co-decision making is not really done in Europe. So hopefully here there is a chance to do so in Australia. We don’t wait for government to take care of us, we are our own decision maker.