

# Cultural Burning

Fact Sheet, September 2021

## What is cultural burning?

Cultural burning describes burning practices developed by Aboriginal people to enhance the health of Country and culture.

## Why is cultural burning important?

Cultural burning is an important part of how Aboriginal people have practiced cultural land management for thousands of years – supporting the regeneration and management of flora and fauna and helping to prevent large, out of control bushfires.

Cultural burning involves the application of fire using culturally informed knowledge and ecologically sensitive techniques that are locally appropriate for the diverse range of landscapes and ecosystems that exist in Western Australia.

Fire is an important mechanism for enabling Aboriginal people to care for Country, return to Country, maintain cultural and spiritual connections and for inter-generational transfer of cultural knowledge.



A burnt patch after cultural burning in the Gibson Desert. Image courtesy of 10 Deserts Project.

## Cultural burning

Fire applied in the right season, at the right time and in the right way to ensure:

- flames stay low, preserving the canopy of trees
- the fire burns slowly
- only some fuels are burnt, creating mosaics
- insects and animals can move away from the fire
- nutrients in the soil aren't affected
- seed germination is supported
- flowering and nesting seasons are considered

Fire is **ecologically** used to support the cultural burning principles, control invasive weeds and clear access to Country for cultural uses and responsibilities. It also protects sacred sites and has an important spiritual and practical function:

- **Spiritual**  
Fire connects Aboriginal people to Country, and supports healing of the mind and body. It is used ceremoniously when storytelling and singing and is part of the knowledge-sharing process.
- **Practical**  
Fire serves the basic functions such as cooking food, keeping people warm and hunting animals for food.

Cultural burning also includes protecting certain areas of Country for the health of plants and animals. This technique involves patch burning to create a mosaic of burnt and unburnt areas, which encourages regeneration of food sources and rapid recolonisation of fauna. This is because different species relate to fire in different ways and understanding their relationship with fire allows the application of fire in the right way and at the right time.

This resource was developed by the DFES Bushfire Centre of Excellence Cultural Fire Program.

The Bushfire Centre of Excellence acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to elders past and present.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people are advised that this publication may contain images of people who have passed away.

## Caring for Country

The integrated, sustainable practice Aboriginal people use to promote spiritual, practical and ecological health. It encompasses a reciprocal relationship between the land, sea and people.

### A changing landscape

Western Australia's landscape has significantly changed since fire was first used by Aboriginal people.

Key changes include:

- Climate change
- Introduced flora and fauna and fragmented bushland
- Urban sprawl, asset development and a more static population

This landscape requires a diverse land management approach using a hybrid of traditional and contemporary techniques. Across Western Australia, this integrated approach is already being used with great success.

DFES is working to ensure the transfer and application of cultural burning knowledge well into the future, to reduce bushfire risk and protect cultural and environmental values.



Aboriginal rangers, land managers and fire practitioners working together to plan an upcoming burning season. Image courtesy of 10 Deserts Project.



Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (KJ) Rangers using fire to care for Country. Image courtesy of KJ.

### Our commitment

DFES through its Bushfire Centre of Excellence is committed to working with Aboriginal people and Traditional Owners across Western Australia. DFES recognises the importance of continuing to grow these relationships to enhance our knowledge of cultural fire and traditional practices and how these principles can assist in guiding the use of fire in the context of today's landscape.

### Further information

Bushfire Centre of Excellence – [dfes.wa.gov.au/bushfirecoe](https://dfes.wa.gov.au/bushfirecoe)

DBCA's Parks and Wildlife Service – [dpaw.wa.gov.au/management/fire](https://dpaw.wa.gov.au/management/fire)

Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience – [knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/traditional-owners-and-cultural-burning/](https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/traditional-owners-and-cultural-burning/)

## Considerations for a cultural burn

### Right People

Traditional Owners must make decisions on who looks after Country and must give cultural authority to burn on their Country.

### Right Time

A fire must be lit at the right time of year. This means the fire will be manageable, reducing the danger of an out of control bushfire.

### Right Way

By applying fire in the right way, intricate mosaic patterns will occur, reducing ongoing bushfire risk and encouraging diversity in flora and fauna.