



PHOTO: WILLIAM VERDON

One mob doing it together

Paul Huntingford went along to learn about cultural burning and, with little help from his friends, provides this recollection

Den Barber raises an arm with his thumb and index finger 1cm apart and says, 'this is how much I know. And what there is to know goes to the sky.' This puts everything in perspective right away. He says he's a 'learner.' An appropriate word or finger measurement may not exist for my own knowledge level.

Den did not intend this to be daunting. In fact, it was just the opposite. Quoting his most senior Aboriginal Cultural Teacher and Elder, "knowledge is only powerful when it is shared," he says soon after. This makes the oncoming day inclusive. The group of 30-40 attendees, very keen to not just observe but implement millennia old indigenous burning practices to help avoid another 2019-20 black summer, are ready to listen and learn pragmatic

guidance from Koori Country Firesticks Aboriginal Corporation.

But this isn't going to happen until important business is attended to. The Koori Country mob remove shoes to touch with mother earth and invite us to connect with the energy and spirits of the land we are about to put fire on. Green eucalyptus leaves are placed on a small amount of coals and those who had not been part of a smoking ceremony shroud themselves with white smoke to connect with the spirits and purify the intent of the day's activities. This seems a completely relaxed and natural approach to land care through my western eyes. As Den says, "nothing is owned, not the land or trees or animals. We look after our mother and she'll look after us".

After the ceremony we trek upwards

following the metre wide track that also is acting as a fire containment line to the country we are going to work in, about 930m high. We pass areas that have been burned in the previous days or weeks: ashen to the left of the track and fuel laden to the right. When we arrive at the next area to burn the Firesticks crew give us a quick demonstration of producing flame with a grass tree stalk on a cottonwood base. The group is not discouraged by this for good reason – down the hill a short time earlier we were given complimentary Koori Country lighters.

The flame is used to light a small pile of leaves and twigs with the intent of burning from a central spot known as mosaic burning. The burning is done slowly, always careful to maintain the white smoke of a cool fire. Den en-

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courages a holistic approach to bush management. Important factors to consider include ongoing cycles to keep fuel loads down, the right time of year to burn for the specific area and flora, using existing fire breaks where possible such as wet areas or rocks, never let the fire get into the canopy and always be considerate of fauna. Ground fuel in the environment can be managed in various ways, actions as simple as using sticks and logs in camp fires as well as mosaic burns help lower fuel loads and encourage bush foods.

We split into three groups of a dozen and spread out across the gully. Everyone has a small patch to burn. The leaf litter is damp, restricting the fire from spreading outward, so we are indeed building our own personal campfires and feeding them with nearby litter. Other options are to build small fires under fallen logs. A good tip from Den was to use a Lomandra bush as a starting point if the leaves are equal amounts of brown and green. White smoke fogs its way up the hill. We observe the fire choosing its path and creeping slowly despite a decent breeze. The mood and process is gentle and respectful.

Five members of the Mongarlowe bush-fire brigade were sponsored to attend the cultural burning workshop – William (deputy captain), Angelo, Dave, Roderic and myself. William's view of what the greater RFS and government could do with these practices could potentially be state mitigation crews working with Indigenous fire practitioners, with a rolling program of burning. And even bring back the Green army program with a Firesticks army as well. In his words:

'It is time to see and treat our environment more holistically. Using the rationale that an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.'

Some of Dave's recollections confirm the need for continuous management, 'land that is hard to travel through is called closed land - too much fallen debris, too dense shrubbery, too many closely spaced saplings,' with a view to burning, 'small areas with greater frequency, burn lines not a priority rather smaller circular mosaic that joins up over time.' The strongest feeling for me was the common sense of it all. Looking after our land is an ongoing

process. Gone are the days of ignorance and neglect if we wish to avoid future catastrophic summers.

Although Den Barber has transitioned from his government gig to cultural practices, he is not entirely dismissive of the skills he learned while he was with NPWS. He sees the benefits from both areas and how they could work together successfully. But he is protective of these indigenous practices for good reason – so cultural burning remains attached to the land that it serves and not appropriated for gains outside of this purpose and also that they be taught or lead by indigenous practitioners.

Caring for and safeguarding our environment against wildfire catastrophes depends on vigilance and inclusion. It is heartening to see included in the job description for the expansion of state-wide RFS mitigation crews, in June 2020, is the callout for new indigenous members. Perhaps this is an indication of expanding mitigation techniques. And perhaps the RFS is making this happen because Den has spoken to them in the recent past. Speculation aside, the workshop group sits inside a shed at the end of the second day and discusses ways of making cultural burning a reality to a larger audience, the inconsistencies of current bureaucracy and the philosophical and historical implications of the word 'wilderness'. Den suggests communities can be proactive in their area with guidance from Cultural Fire Practitioners such as Koori Country Firesticks.

The day finishes with Den recalling the very recent vision of us all on that hill up the mountain burning patches and working to look after our custodial land. It brings a tear to his eye. 'One mob doing it together,' he says.

The Cultural Burning Workshop at Birkenburn Farm at Bungendore, NSW, was organised by Den Barber (Yarrabin Cultural Connections & Koori Country Firesticks) & Martina Shelley (Birkenburn Farm). Den spent over 12 years working for NSW Parks and Wildlife Service in and around the Blue Mountains area as a professional firefighter. In 2010 he started to think differently about bush burning practices and the depths fire intensity effects flora, fauna and the long-term future of each specific region. His quest took him to Cape York to learn from Kuku Thaypan Elders associated with the Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways project. He is the founding director the Koori Country Firesticks Aboriginal Corporation who perform cultural burning programs on private and public land throughout NSW.

kooricountryfiresticks.com.au/
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Wynlen House Artisan Village Farm Winter Workshop Classes

All Season, Cool Climate, Organic Vegetable Growing

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Sunday 16th August, 2020

9.30 am - 3.30pm, Braidwood NSW
\$175 Lunch and morning tea provided.

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Keeping Chickens is a delight. They give you delicious eggs, great company, and all you have to do is look after them. This isn't difficult...but would it surprise you to know that many people who keep chickens don't feed, handle or manage their health or welfare properly? It's just because people don't know enough about health, feeding, handling & treating common chicken ailments to do the right thing by their flock! Spend a half day with us and discover how to care for your chicken flocks well.

Sunday September 13th, 2020,

9.15am - 1.15pm Braidwood NSW,
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Sunday, October 11th, 2020,

9.30am - 3.30pm, Braidwood NSW.
\$175 Light Lunch provided.

Biointensive Poly culture: The Science of Growing More with Less.

Sustainable home or small commercial market gardeners who want to produce more with less; who want to develop a unique range of vegetables and achieve environmental sustainability by building soil health and conserving resources will be excited by the techniques delivered in the workshop. This is for experienced vegetable growers only.

Sunday Oct 25th, 2020,

9.30am - 1.15pm, Braidwood NSW.
\$135 Morning tea provided.

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