

About Cool Burning

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have actively managed the Australian tropical savanna areas using fire. Their knowledge of the seasons and local conditions enable them to manage fire effectively. They traditionally burn country to promote the growth of bush tucker, to improve access to certain areas and to protect important sites from destructive wildfires.

Cool burns are a land management technique. Started soon after the wet season, before the grass completely dries out, cool burns do not damage plants, seeds or animals to any significant extent. During a cool burn the grasses on the ground burn slowly, allowing most of the small animals to escape. Seedlings, green grass, tree trunks and fallen logs are not burnt or damaged. The rising heat from the burning grass usually won't singe the eucalyptus leaves above. Overnight, the cool moisture in the air will put out any remaining fires before the morning.



However, once European contact began, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were no longer able to manage their land. A series of devastating disease epidemics killed many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those who remained were soon displaced from their land as it was carved up for agriculture.

After Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory were unable to look after the savanna, the country became more vulnerable to hot fires. These wildfires can burn for days or even weeks. Hot fires can cover vast areas of land, causing significant problems for our environment and the pastoral industry. In some areas, over half of the land gets burnt by hot fires every year.

Without cool burns at the start of the dry season, hot burns can get out of control, consuming vast areas of accumulated fire fuel. Recent work between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land managers and scientists has shown that the reintroduction of traditional fire management practices - such as cool burning at the start of the dry season - can dramatically reduce the incidence and intensity of hot wildfires later in the dry season.

Following the recent Black Summer (the 2019/20 Australian bushfire season), there has been a huge growth in interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fire management practices ([source](#)), both in Australian and around the world. Managing landscapes using these practices can help to “prevent significant amounts of greenhouse gases from entering the atmosphere, reduce destructive fires, promote a productive landscape (and) increase biodiversity”.

It is important to note, however, that all fire is dangerous, and that these practices can only be successful with an intimate understanding of landscape, climate and weather.