

How do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples use fire to manage country?

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in the tropical savanna have been looking after and caring for their country for tens of thousands of years. One of the ways they look after this landscape is through the practice of cool burning.



How does cool burning work?

After the summer rains everything is green and the grass is thick and tall.

In the dry season the grass dries out and becomes brown.

The longer the savanna is dry, the hotter and the more damaging fires become.

By choosing a time shortly after the wet season the grass burns slowly and is cool. The cool fire helps the savanna and does not destroy it. The grass and other small plants need to be dry enough to burn slowly and not too dry to become really hot and kill or damage the trees and animals.



By having many small cool burns, there is much less chance of having big fires later in the year when it is much drier. The weather is chosen so there is just enough wind. By the time it is evening and it cools down, the fires will stop spreading and the dew will put out any remaining flames.

A cool burn does not affect the trees. The bark is not burnt and the leaves on the trees and bushes are not damaged.

Flames don't move quickly. Small animals can escape the flames even if they can't fly.



The logs on the ground don't burn. The animals that live under the logs don't lose their homes.

This photo was taken a minute after the fire. The ground does not get hot. Seedlings and seeds are not burnt. The remaining green grass wasn't burnt.

With lots of small fires, there are still plenty of plants for cattle, wallabies and other wildlife to eat.

The knowledge of the traditional custodians is very important in managing landscapes through cool burning practices. Anyone using this practice needs an intimate knowledge of the land, the plants, the animals, the weather and the climate.

Warning – Fires can be extremely dangerous and can easily kill people and destroy habitat. Only people with expertise and with the appropriate permissions should ever light fires.