**Steffensen, Victor (2020) *Fire Country,* Hardie Grant Publishing**

**Chapter 3 - Pages 31-35 - The fire**

I will never forget the day that Poppy lit the first fire on country in front of me.

We were standing in the middle of a small community of boxwood trees about twenty kilometres out of old Laura town. The ecosystem was only as big as a couple of basketball courts and was surrounded by a small creek and stringybark country. The grass was quite thick, dead and dry, and we were standing in it up to our knees. ‘I’m gonna light the grass now, like the old people used to do’, Poppy said loudly and proudly. He walked over to the stringybark country and ripped off a long piece of bark from the closest tree.

‘You look now.’ He teased one end of the long piece of bark, lit it up and then walked through the boxwood patch in a repetitive, figure eight type movement. He was almost skipping as he dragged the bark along, making the fire follow him around. I watched him dancing through the flames like some kind of fire spirit sprinkling magic dust onto the land. I watched the fire go higher and the smoke fill the space around him until I couldn’t see him anymore. There was nothing but fire in front of me, but it was only seconds before it started to calm down. Then he reappeared in the middle of the fire, walking over the flames with his bare feet, giving me the biggest smile.

The fire soon trickled out, burning a perfect circle that outlined that little patch of boxwood country. I knew he was making fun and showing off in his humble way. ‘The old people use to burn the country all the time,’ he said, ending with his cheeky high-pitched laugh, which echoed through the trees. It was from that point that we started to focus more on fire and burning the country the old, traditional way.

Poppy was the main man for the fire, his understanding of fire and the country was a special gift. He made sure to teach me well at every opportunity we had together. From place to place, both old men would stop and tell the fire stories for each different landscape. They would talk about the right time to burn, how all the animals fitted in, what plants lived where, and the types of soils.

Trip after trip involved camping, fishing, hunting, and learning fire management lessons along the way. The only problem was we were not free to practise fire in many places. Laura was surrounded by cattle properties and national parks, and there was no talk of Indigenous fire at the time. The only fires were in the late, drier times of the year from pastoralist and national park fires. Poppy and our ranger crew would light small fires around the Aboriginal reserve from time to time, but there were no fire programs at all back then.

But that never stopped us from learning about fire through the indicators on country. You can learn so much about fire on country, even if you don’t have a fire burning. You have to know how to read the country and learn the knowledge before you can light a fire.

**…**

Because we weren’t doing any burns outside of Aboriginal lands at the time, we would stop and look at burns the cattle properties and national parks had done. The old men would tell me to stop the car when we came across any burnt country. They would then explain why the fires were wrong and point out the indicators. In many cases all the country was burnt black, sometimes scorched to nothing for as far as the eye could see. In most cases the trees were scorched, and the canopies completely destroyed. The old people were always pointing it out, complaining all the time with frustration on the boil. What they were seeing was not up to the standards of caring for country through Aboriginal fire knowledge.

The Western fire regimes are based on hazard reduction and they don’t see the layers of cultural and environmental connections that make up Aboriginal fire knowledge, which is based on all elements of nature living in harmony with one another. This misinformation about the difference between cultural burning and harzard reduction or back burning was becoming clearer and clearer every time the old people stopped to talk about fire on country.

But it wasn’t just the burnt country the old people would stop to look at. They would also do assessments on the country that hadn’t had fire in many years. Much of the country we were travelling through was thick with weeds and a mass of dead vegetation for the understory. The old men would comment on how the land was healthy and clean when they were younger. The country is suffering because no one knows how to look after the fire anymore. The more they opened up my eyes to it, the more saddened I became about the state it was in. Here were two of the most knowledgeable men in the region on their own country, and they couldn’t do anything about it.

**Steffensen, Victor (2020) *Fire Country,* Hardie Grant Publishing**

**Chapter 5 - Page 46-48 - The start of the season**

When we did get to light fires we would burn the country according to the old ways of each different place. Poppy taught me about the ecosystems that would burn from the beginning of the year right through to the end of the fire seasons. In the early months of the year, after the wet season, the country was all green and you couldn’t apply fire then. Even the storm burn country was too green to burn by then – if it wasn’t full with years of dead fuel, that is. People ate lots of fruit and plant foods at that time because they were plentiful. Kangaroos and other small animals were a little harder to catch because the grass would be too long. The animals were also scattered all over the place because there was plenty of water and greenery around the landscape.

The people would wait for fire season to start, the time when they could put in their first burns. The first ecosystem ready to burn on Awu-Laya country is the boxwood tree system. Poppy would point out signs of flowering trees that signalled the start of certain systems. He pointed out the bloodwood trees’ first flower of the year, which told him when the boxwood country was ready to burn. He pointed out many more interrelationships and signs that signified when animals were breeding, plants were fruiting, and when the seasons would come and go. These relational indicators are a very important part of reading the land and knowing when things are ready to burn and when they are not. It also helps to understand and adjust to climate and seasonal shifts each season.

So when it was time for the first burn in Awu-Laya country, we would go to the boxwood tree country. Poppy would jump out of the truck and walk into the country, always looking around with sharp eyes. He would say, ‘You have to take notice all the time, know all the trees, and know the country. So you don’t get lost.’ He then grabbed a handful of the long grass and ran it through one hand to feel the moisture, to see if it was ready to burn. If the grass felt cold, there was too much moisture. If it felt warm and dry, it was ready. Then he showed me how to visually read the curing of the grass and when it was ready to burn. The grass was about half green and half dry when it was ready. All the seeds on the grass had already fallen off and settled onto the ground.

If the grass didn’t have all of those signs, he wouldn’t even bother striking a match. The time boxwood country is ready can be between late March and early May, depending on how good the rain season was. When we burned boxwood country at the right time, no other system would burn because they were still too green. They act as firebreaks, and the same rule applies to all the fire ecosystems if you burn them at the right time. The later burns would then stop where the earlier burns were done, and so on.

It is also extremely important to look for the right ignition point and light up respectfully. ‘Don’t put too much fire in this one, just enough to let it burn.’ The boxwood fire was slightly bigger than most other burns because it is a very grassy system. Fire travels well in this country so you don’t need too many ignitions. But still very cool and low, so that the trees and the canopy are not scorched or burnt.

…

In the old days the Elders would say, ‘Right, it’s time to burn all the boxwood country.’ A small group would go for a walkabout around their country and burn all the systems that were ready. The rest of the mob from the main camp could see their smoke and know where they were travelling. Seeing the smoke in the distance was a sign that the traditional firemen were doing their job in a certain selection of country all over, roaming from place to place, getting it ready for hunting and gathering grounds for later on.

**Steffensen, Victor (2020) *Fire Country,* Hardie Grant Publishing**

**Chapter 6 - Page 56 - Mixed Tree Country**

When spring comes along, the climate starts to heat up a bit. By October it was known to be too hot to burn in most places in Awu-Laya country. But, of course, the burning windows are different now and shift a little depending on place and climate. Burning time is over when the heat kicks in, and if you haven’t burnt the early season country in time, then it must wait until you can do careful storm burning, or until the next winter season. You generally can’t burn country if you have passed its proper burning time. Otherwise you will do more damage than good to the country. This means that the country misses out on its burn, but it is not a bad thing if it is healthy country.

But if it is neglected country, with a build-up of lots of fuel, then there are problems in many different ways. The worst thing that can happen is a wildfire setting off an accumulating, ticking time bomb. If that doesn’t happen, in the long run it means a lack of food and medicine plants due to oppressive, dry fuel loads.

This is why it is important to burn at the right time, knowing that you have to be on country all the time to read the indicators. The burning window for all the winter fire season in Thaypan country can go from April to August, which can mean up to four to five months of looking after the country. When you burn this way, the fires are smaller, lower in intensity, and there are many more of them. If you manage all your country properly, then there should be an abundance of food and healthy country.

The important part to understand is that it is harder to manage the country like this if it has years of fuel and weeds dominating. Different burning styles and work will be needed when the land is sick like this. Getting the country healthy will make the diverse curing of the landscape more visible, making it easier to know when to burn and contain the fire next time. In the long run, fire management should become easier and the burns a lot safer if the curing knowledge on timing is correctly followed.

**Steffensen, Victor (2020) *Fire Country,* Hardie Grant Publishing**

**Chapter 8 - Page 63 - No-fire Country**

When it comes to Aboriginal fire management, the old people didn’t burn every ecosystem. Many people think that Aboriginal people burnt everything and applied fires that scorched large tracts of land. They also think it is like Western hazard reduction, but it is all far from the truth. How could they maintain the diversity of ecosystems and natural resources for thousands of years through the careless application of fire? Aboriginal fire knowledge is based on country that needs fire, and also country that doesn’t need fire. Even country we don’t burn is an important part of fire management knowledge and must be within the expertise of a fire practitioner.

You can find country that doesn’t need fire in just about every region of Australia. Country we don’t burn can be found in dry country, wet country, up in the mountains, and down in the valleys. There are so many places that don’t need fire and we protect them by burning the places that need fire. To look after any ecosystem, you need to manage all the different country around it. If you don’t manage the places that need fire, then the no-fire systems come under threat.

One of the obvious landscapes where people think fire is not so popular is the rainforest country. Much of the wet rainforest is no place for fire and it doesn’t need burning to stay healthy. But there are types of rainforest country where Aboriginal people did apply fire. These types are more the dry rainforest, rather than the thick, wet forests. They tend to have more of a sandy soil and are mainly found in the lower river and coastal areas of the country. The fires I have experienced in these areas are among the slowest fires. They take off the cool, moist fuel loads to allow fresh vegetation to grow.

A dear old lady I know from the rainforest told me how her Elders burnt this type of dry sandy-soiled rainforest country. The last time she saw this type of fire happen was when she was a little girl. She took me for a walk, pointing out the way we were crunching on a blanket of dry leaves that she believed should be a mixed, sandy soil. As a little girl, she remembered when there was grass and other small plants that used to grow there. Her Elders burnt the area regularly to maintain the green vegetation for rainforest wallabies and tree kangaroos. There used to be plenty of those animals, but today she rarely sees any, since their Elders stopped managing the land.

**Steffensen, Victor (2020) *Fire Country,* Hardie Grant Publishing**

**Chapter 9 - Page 79 - Through the trees**

When country burns, it is lore to make sure not to burn the canopy of the trees. Poppy would always tell me that the canopy was sacred, another world that is above us and we must respect. It is the place where certain birds and other animals live, as it provides much-needed shade, shelter, water and food. Even the animals that live on the ground depend on the shade, food and medicines from the trees. The practice of burning to protect the trees come in respect of looking after all of the plants and animals.

Poppy would also say that we need to look after the trees to protect their totems that belonged to their people and themselves. All of the animals and plants are skin names, sacred, a totem to Aboriginal people today, and their ancestors. The trees play an important role for the people and have done for thousands of years. Looking after the trees and landscape meant looking after the animals and plants that were special to the people culturally. It is another level to cultural burning that connects people to the landscape in ways that adds more responsibility to look after the land properly. For Aboriginal people, a grandmother could have a totem from a certain bird, or a brother could have a goanna totem, and so on. It is another way in which people were one with the country and equal to each other through natural lore and spirituality.

The shade from the trees shares a role in creating a certain condition that combines with the rain, sun, dew, soils, and seasons to provide life. Many animals and people sleep in the shade on hot days. Kangaroos spend most of their time resting in the shade during the day. You don’t see many of our land animals running around in the hot sun. They are resting in the shade until the cooler afternoons, evenings and mornings come to give them better conditions for their usual routines.

Certain trees were popular for the old people to set up camps under as well, keeping cool in the hotter times of the year. It’s no doubt that the most important thing needed in a country with lots of sun is shade. Shade is as important as food and water, and it only makes sense to protect and respect the shade trees offer in every way possible. If the seasons get hotter then we need to ensure the trees are protected so that they can protect everything else. If we look after trees, we have a better chance of a long, sustainable life on Earth.

The trees were managed to stay on the country, to grow old and become the Elders of the landscape, maintaining their gift of providing life and prosperity for every other living thing within their environment. Aboriginal land management ensured that most of the trees lived to be hundreds or even a thousand years old. They populated the country in plenty, drawing and giving goodness to the ground to provide the essentials for a healthy landscape. The trees are so special, they are the lungs of our Earth. They are the providers of everything we need in more ways than anyone can imagine. They are the key to understanding how we apply fire to the landscape. If you don’t know the trees then you will never know how to apply fire the way Aboriginal people have done to look after the land.

**Steffensen, Victor (2020) *Fire Country,* Hardie Grant Publishing**

**Chapter 12 - Page 102-104 - The Obstacle of Man**

Based on my experiences, the hardest thing to deal with when putting Aboriginal fire management onto the landscape is people. It’s straightforward to get out there and start managing the land, but too often people seem to get in the way, regardless of who they are or whom they represent. But let me get one thing straight before you continue to read this very difficult but important chapter: I have much respect for modern humanity. It’s just that so many people are separated not only from the land, but also from each other.

It seems that many people don’t understand certain knowledge values that come from our ancient cultures of the earth, and this absence has created a majority of humans who are unconscious of the natural world we live in. When you really think about it, it seems so dangerous to have the majority of mankind heading in a direction where they are disconnected from the land.

It is now time to start educating our massive disconnected population to change their ways, now that critical environmental disasters are starting to occur. How do we get people to shift their ways and create change that is going to lead us to the solutions we need? It’s like we need to reset and decolonise our society to make us in tune with our Mother and each other. No doubt there will be values to adopt from all Indigenous knowledge systems, which can be joined together with Western influence to help guide us along on a safer road. If this is going to happen, then it might pay to go back a few steps to regain what was lost in the past. To get people on the same page and in sync, with the same respect and understanding of the adaptation needed ahead. So far, based my own experiences, it does seem possible, but what a hell of a mess we need to start working through.

As we all know, there are so many views of the world that are mainly based on human interest and not the land. When it comes to understanding natural concepts like fire alone, it is so often misunderstood. And there are many communities and government agencies that don’t work together. Implementing Aboriginal fire knowledge into a society like this comes with so many challenges.

You have to deal with politicians, government workers, rural fire agencies, forestry, corporates, councils, scientists, universities, national parks, greenies, private landholders, not to mention people in general, who are either terrified of fire or just don’t care at all. Overall, the Western vision of fire is all about life, property, fear and fighting fire. If it is not about that, then it’s suppressing fire from the land altogether, thinking it’s entirely bad for the environment. As a result, we have ended up with disharmony, in terms of the different mindsets within our society, and in our country.

One time I was invited to attend and speak at an international fire conference in a capital city. The venue was a huge building in the CBD and hundreds of delegates were walking around wearing name tags. There were presentation rooms everywhere, including one massive hall full of displays and stalls. I soon realised that it was a big showroom representing the fire culture of the modern world. There were big fire trucks and all kinds of the latest firefighting equipment out for display and on offer. It was good to see that they had so much safety equipment to assist in aiding disasters, that was for sure.

I wanted to see what else they had in that massive room that was of interest to me. I set off to take my own personal tour of what was going on. I got about three stalls through when a guy walked over to greet me. ‘Hey, take one of these empty shopping bags and fill it up with all the merchandise you can find. There’s free hats, pens, t-shirts, and if you’re quick, you can even get oven mitts made from the latest fireproof material.’ I took the bag and thanked him as I walked down the aisles to check it all out.

As I browsed along, I met a happy man with a big come-to-my-shop smile on his face. ‘Come and have a look at this’, he said. He showed me what he called a fireproof guttering system for your house. If that wasn’t good enough, then you could buy a bunker for your backyard. ‘All you have to do is run into the bunker and you’ll be safe from the fire.’ I asked him a few questions about the features out of interest and we broke into a small conversation.

He saw that I didn’t have a name tag and asked what brought me to the conference. I told him I did Indigenous fire management and he paused for a moment. He soon ended the conversation, slowly walking away, saying, ‘That’s wonderful, you have a nice day.’ It was clear that my occupation was of no interest in his world. Out of all the stalls there was nothing that represented Indigenous fire management, or looking after the land. No doubt we need the firefighting equipment to fight fires and save lives and property, but we also need to look after the land too. Why isn’t the subject of prevention and proactive measures being shared too?

**Steffensen, Victor (2020) *Fire Country,* Hardie Grant Publishing**

**Chapter 13 - Page 117 - Science or oppression?**

The way Western science communicates knowledge is to separate everything into different categories and names. Separating knowledge is done by breaking down the values to give them their own separate findings. For example, Aboriginal fire knowledge is applied to the landscape to maintain the health of animals and plants. Science takes this aspect of Aboriginal fire knowledge and creates a new category called ‘burning for biodiversity’. As a result, people think burning for biodiversity is different to Aboriginal fire practices. Some ecologist would come to three or four of our workshops and learn about fire from Aboriginal people, then go off and create their own project called ‘ecological fire’ and sell it differently.

Another value of Aboriginal fire practices is ensuring the country avoids major wildfires. It is a key goal of burning to keep the land and waters clean, to ensure the natural resources are not destroyed by mega-fires. The Western agencies have a fire they call hazard reduction or prescribed burning. This is where the land is burnt purely to avoid wildfire destroying the life and property of people.

The only component of Aboriginal fire they can’t categorise is the spirituality side of the knowledge. Aboriginal fire management is then seen rather as a traditional hunting practice or ceremony. When knowledge is separated into different categories it becomes watered down. It also ricochets into forming divided mindsets and creates a fragmented knowledge base. A confusion of the right information that encourages the wrong application and interpretation, in this case of fire.

I’ve often been warned about sharing knowledge with Western institutions by many concerned people. But what can we do besides educate and involve everyone on the basics, in good faith, in hope that they do the right thing? Of course, I have seen countless researchers attend the workshops, write everything down and then disappear. Some don’t even say hello or goodbye – just turn up, write everything down, and then go. Some will say, ‘We’re here to help you. Give us your information and we’ll publish it and apply for funding for you.

’It’s kind of the same as changing the patent of Aboriginal plant properties. Dissecting original knowledge until it comes out the other end with a different application and name. Maybe you can call it theft or a breach of protocol against the intellectual property rights of the knowledge holders. But in the end the watered-down version will have difficulties playing out the knowledge process; it usually does not provide all of the information or benefits compared with the original application. It is one thing to write Indigenous knowledge down, but there is a whole other process involved in applying the action.

The original application of Aboriginal fire knowledge requires you to learn about the country. To activate the landscape in a way that opens the doors to many other practices and opportunities. To be on country all the time in order to do the work of healing unbalanced landscapes. You can’t be that culturally flexible and intimate with the land through the current Western burning programs.

Indigenous knowledge systems continue to be suppressed under Western control, unable to fully demonstrate their values right across the board. The effects this has had upon Aboriginal cultural responsibilities and aspirations are obvious to see. It’s quite a scary situation, not only for Aboriginal people, but for non-Indigenous people as well. I refer to it as the knowledge gap.

**Pascoe, Bruce & Gammage, Bill (2021) *Country: Future Fire, Future Farming*, Thames & Hudson Australia**

**Land Care - Page 28**

The east-coast fires during the summer of 2019–20 were accelerated in the forests created to feed the woodchip mills. The layout of commercial forests means that a large number of same-size trees are grown in close proximity, often no more than 2 metres apart, which ensures quick fire spread into the crown. In combination with high fuel loads in unkempt national parks, the forests of small silvertop ash were guaranteed to turn a fire into an inferno. Nothing could be done to prevent it.

These small-tree forests were created by repeated logging over the last 230 years and have allowed us to believe that what we now see, crowded and tangled commercial forests and national parks, is the real Australian wilderness. But the old Aboriginal forest of ten to twelve massive trees to the acre has largely disappeared. The demand for paper and packaging has turned our forests into a commodity, and the failure to keep the forest understorey controlled has meant that we are now in danger when we live anywhere near a commercial plantation. We need to staff and maintain national parks with a view to safety and care, and our forests must be managed so that Australia gets both economic and environmental benefit from them, not just a quick injection of funds to large companies in a fire sale of national assets.

Aboriginal people had a burning regime that produced fewer but bigger trees. The crowns of these massive trees were never in contact and forests were maintained as places to grow grass and vegetables, graze game animals and make travel comfortable for humans. Fire in such forests is controllable.

**Pascoe, Bruce & Gammage, Bill (2021) *Country: Future Fire, Future Farming*, Thames & Hudson Australia**

**Friendly Fire - Page 74**

In 1788 the people of this land were fire farmers. They made and maintained Australia by using fire and no fire to nourish and distribute plants, and plant distribution to locate animals, birds, reptiles and insects (hereafter animals). They made a plant community such as grass or open forest a favourable habitat, associated communities to link feed to shelter, and used associations to lure target animals. They put every species on ground it preferred, while they knew where resources were, and subject to Law could harvest them as they chose. They made paddocks without fences, possible because most Australian plants need or tolerate fire, and because there are few large native predators to disturb prey located by fire or no fire. They planned and worked hard to make plants and animals abundant, convenient and predictable. They depended not on chance, but on policy.

Newcomers could not imagine that policy. To them it defied common sense. Fire eats plants and litter, hardens ground and sterilises soil. In 1833 Charles Sturt concluded,

The proportion of bad soil to ... good in New South Wales, is certainly very great ... the general want of vegetable mould over the colony [is due] chiefly to the ravages of ... [fire], whereby the growth of underwood, so favourable in other countries to the formation of soil, is wholly prevented ... There is no part of the world in which fires create such havoc as in ... Australia.

In Tasmania botanist Ronald Campbell Gunn attributed

the general poverty of the Soil ... to the habit the Aborigines had of regularly burning the Bush, thereby preventing that accumulation of decayed vegetable matter on the face of the Country, which would otherwise have necessarily occurred when the whole face of the Country is covered with wood.

Yet Australia’s plants thrived. Millennia before, fire and most plants had allied, letting both increase their range. About 70 per cent of Australia’s plants either use fire to reseed or regenerate, or can recover from all but the hottest or most frequent fires. Most plants that need no fire are in rainforest or wetland where fire rarely thrives, but even wet forest mountain ash, for example, accepts infrequent fire. Fire and no fire shape the ecological arrangement of Australia.

**Pascoe, Bruce & Gammage, Bill (2021) *Country: Future Fire, Future Farming*, Thames & Hudson Australia**

**Fuel Reduction - Page 119**

2021 has fire problems unknown in 1788. Climate change makes fire prevention harder and more dangerous, but this is cause to start prevention programs, not stop them. 2021 also has ‘assets’: buildings, fences, crops and so on. Yet in 1788 people had special places they backburnt to protect – why can’t we do more of that? Flammable exotic plants also add to today’s fire challenges. Buffel grass, introduced over a century ago and spreading in the Centre, burns fiercely, wafting tiny seeds far on fire winds. But people are learning to manage it. Near Ernabella (SA) in 2014, three senior women burnt buffel grass tussocks for months, watching to learn when and how to control it. One, Tjariya, remarked, ‘He’s a mean one that one, but we’ll beat him.’

There is not enough fuel reduction, in two ways. First, it’s commonly done when it’s easiest, which is often the wrong time. A Sydney comparison found that most 1788–1845 fires were in spring to early summer, but 60 per cent of 1990s prescribed fires were in autumn to winter. Second, it can be token. About 2016 Victoria shifted its burn targets from a benchmark system to the minister’s discretion, and lobbying has made ministers very discreet. Compared with Western Australia’s 6 per cent, Victoria and New South Wales burn less than 1.5 per cent annually, so about 85 per cent of bushland carries fuel older than ten years. Worse, what is burnt gives little thought for any creature in the way, let alone for all of them. Primitive. If 1788 fire is the university of land care, control burning is the creche.

Fuel reduction treats fire as untrustworthy. On our fire-prone continent this is a mistake, for it accepts landscapes out of control as normal. Nonetheless it will remain our most common fire type for many decades, because the land is indeed out of control, and because fuel reduction is the only fire we even half-comprehend. Even traditional owners say that this fire is needed for years to come, until the country is sufficiently set up to start 1788 fire. We must learn to reduce fuel before we can hope to begin more sophisticated fire management and use it to protect species.

**Pascoe, Bruce & Gammage, Bill (2021) *Country: Future Fire, Future Farming*, Thames & Hudson Australia**

**After Black Summer - Page 128-9**

Many Black Summer images of fire and black land show whipstick stands of youngish eucalypts. In southern Australia regrowth forest, burnt and not yet burnt, is common. If it were a plant category, as it usefully could be, it would be the most common category. Generations back that whipstick country was mostly grass or open forest. We let it run wild. Now we reap the whirlwind.

Notice something else. In 2019–20 and commonly earlier, the killer fires were all in southern Australia. There was no red rampage in the north or Centre. Perhaps there was no climate change across that vast region? Escape fires happen there, but almost all big fires are controlled. Neither results from not burning. In the south we focus on saving lives and houses after a fire takes hold; in the north and Centre they focus on prevention and control. They see ground to love and nurture with fire and no fire, which repays their ceremonies and care a thousandfold with comfort, abundance and beauty. This sustains every species, for all are equally entitled to the riches of the earth. People know well that this can never mean doing nothing. All things change, so all must be kept in balance – not only humans, but every plant, animal, bird, reptile and insect. Once it was like this in the south too.

In the south, rural fire brigades remain the fire front line, still mostly voluntary but increasingly professional. Men and women commit their lives to firefighting, while technology and command have been increased and centralised, on the face of it greatly expanding firefighting capacity – equipment, communications, planes. In 2021 we are better equipped, as distinct from better organised, than we have ever been.

Yet. As fire trends worsen while more equipment is assembled, local autonomy diminishes. Firefighting has become a state matter, and may become a national matter. As a result, fire management can’t avoid focusing on fighting fires after they break out, sometimes days after. Key responses and equipment are centralised, so time lags let fires take hold and get worse.

The key to fire control is prevention. Here some local autonomy remains via control burns by brigades, farmers and volunteers, which in varying degrees state-based fire controllers approve or tolerate. Since we have let so much fuel build up, especially since the 1960s, this is sensible, though too many state-run burns are more for public relations than for fuel reduction. We would do better at fuel reduction by freeing local initiative.

We can’t hope simply to chain fire up. We’ve tried that: it doesn’t work. Learning to reduce fuel must take us further, teaching us to understand fire, to work with it, to see it as much a friend on the ground as in the fireplace. Perhaps not a friend – that might be asking too much of whitefellas – but at least an ally, a tool pivotal to helping all Australia’s plants and creatures flourish, including us.