Southern Noongar Kaarl

CASE STUDY: Local Government and Southern Noongar people walking together in fire management

This document is intended to:

- Increase cultural understanding for respectful communication and engagement between southern Noongar people and local government with respect to fire
- Increase Noongar participation in local fire management
- Encourage culturally sensitive and inclusive fire mitigation management strategies and outcomes

Target audience:

This document is for anyone wanting to increase their understanding of Noongar burning in the Wagyl Kaip ILUA, and the potential role of Noongar *Kaarl* (fire) in local government fire mitigation. It is intended for local government and DFES employees and volunteers.

Recognition of Country:

Indigenous people have lived in southwestern Australia for more than 60,000 years. Often referred to as the Noongar nation, six Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) now exist across Noongar *Boodjar (*Country*)*. In the south, Denmark falls in the Wagyl Kaip/Southern Noongar ILUA on the traditional land of the Pibulmun and Menang language groups. An obligation to care for Country is central to Noongar culture. Fire has always been part of Noongar life and is an important tool in managing Country for cultural and ecological reasons.

What is 'cultural burning'? Increased interest in Indigenous land management, and recent catastrophic bushfires, has brought terms such as 'cultural' or 'traditional' burning into public consciousness and discussions of fire management and mitigation. The term refers to the burning practices and use of fire developed over many thousands of years by Indigenous people for ecological and social outcomes, and is about respect, responsibility and recognition (Firesticks Alliance 2020). In southwestern Australia, it can refer to traditional Noongar knowledge and ways of managing fire in landscapes, or to contemporary Noongar application of fire in a culturally informed way. There is no prescriptive way to burn 'culturally' that can be easily translated for use by non-Indigenous fire managers. Instead, Noongar burning is a combination of technical and environmental knowledge and cultural worldviews that shape specific fire decisions on a case by case basis. It is important that the re-introduction of Noongar cultural burning is Noongar-led and based in Noongar knowledge (DFES 2021). In contemporary fire mitigation and management, cultural burning presents an opportunity for Noongar people to fulfil their cultural responsibilities to care for Country. It is a chance for land managers, brigades and Noongar people to work and learn together to achieve better management outcomes.

CASE STUDY In 2020/2021, a collaborative project between the Shire of Denmark, Noongar Elders and UWA was undertaken in Denmark to begin the process of increasing inclusion of Southern Noongar people and fire management in local government mitigation planning. Reserves that were considered unsuitable for usual mitigation strategies, due to environmentally and culturally sensitive features, proximity to urban residential areas and size, were allocated as the case study sites. The reserves cover *Melaleuca* riparian areas, karri forest and granite outcrops. They form a rural-urban interface (RUI), and host a number of recognised Aboriginal heritage sites, as well as bordering the Wilson Inlet, an important ecological system. The study explored the perspectives of Noongar Traditional Owners, Denmark fire practitioners, and environmental community groups that play a role in managing the area. It also considered the different vegetation types present in the study reserves and how these interact with fire.

As a starting point, the case study drew upon existing relationships between UWA researchers and Noongar community leaders and Elders. UWA researchers initiated contact with Elders to discuss the proposed project, and the works continued with interested parties.

Noongar family-based groups visited the proposed sites to discuss knowledge pertaining to fire in the study area. Noongar Elders were remunerated for their time, and younger family members encouraged to participate to facilitate intergenerational learning.

Once Elders had visited the study area, a workshop was held with all Noongar families who participated to discuss shared aspirations and steps forward. In this workshop, key requirements and considerations were developed collectively. These have been distilled into **Fig. 4**.

UWA researchers also spoke to representatives of the South Coast Bushcare Services (formerly Denmark Weed Action Group) and Wilson Inlet Catchment Committee, along with employed and voluntary members of the local bushfire brigade service.

On-site meetings were then held with brigade members, Shire representatives and Elders to develop relationships and begin discussions regarding burn planning.

In May 2022, a small Elder-led demonstration burn was completed by Noongar rangers alongside volunteer fire brigade members, forming the first step toward collaborative practice.

Fig 2. Noongar Elders visit Country to feel and listen to its needs regarding fire.

Fig 3. On Country meetings with all stakeholders to discuss burn planning.

Fig 1. Case Study Location: Shire of Denmark Wilson Inlet Reserves (red).The area is subject to human disturbance and forms a rural urban interface (RUI). Management in the area has not actively engaged Noongar people or ecological knowledge.

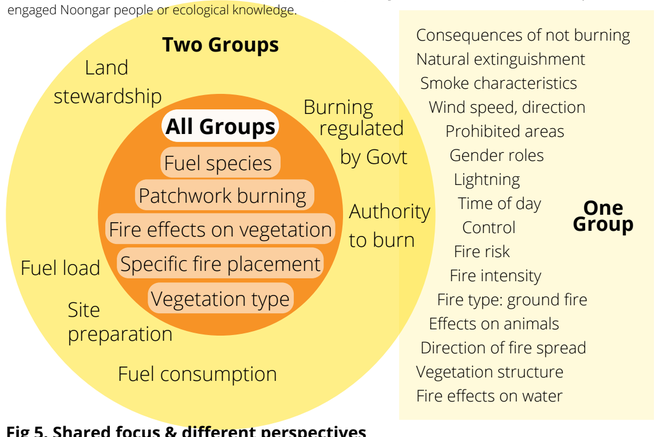

Fig 5. Shared focus & different perspectives

This diagram shows recurrent conversational themes shared by fire practitioners, Noongar Elders, and environmental community group representatives, from statistical analysis of case study conversations. Key elements of conversation that were shared across all participants are displayed centre circle, those shared by two of the three groups are in the external circle. Other recurrent themes of a group are displayed to the right. The analysis identified themes of discussion that were common among group members and different between the groups. It identified eleven elements characteristic of all Noongar conversations and one element characteristics of all fire practitioner conversations. The breadth of considerations demonstrates the need to understand the many perspectives of fire management.

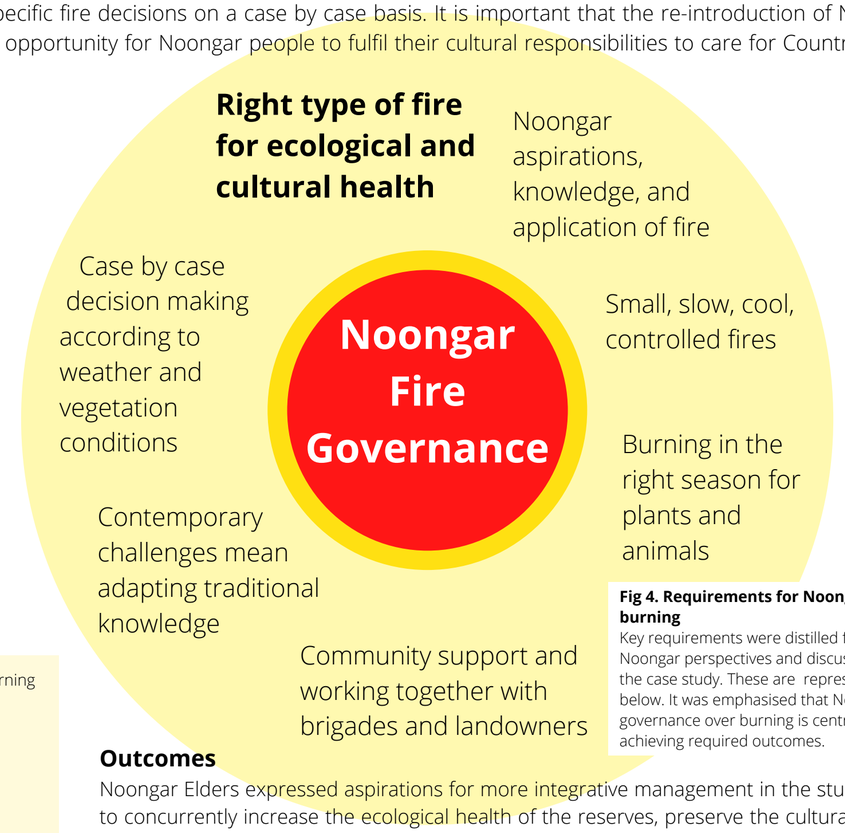

Fig 4. Requirements for Noongar burning

Key requirements were distilled from Noongar perspectives and discussions in the case study. These are represented below. It was emphasised that Noongar governance over burning is central to achieving required outcomes.

Outcomes

Noongar Elders expressed aspirations for more integrative management in the study area, to concurrently increase the ecological health of the reserves, preserve the cultural values and reduce the fuel loading in a sensitive and responsible way.

A central requirement for Noongar burning was Noongar governance over decision making with respect to fire and the case-by-case inclusion of Noongar people and knowledge at all stages. Elder aspirations and key learnings from the case study can be observed **Fig. 4** and **Fig. 5**. Noongar participants had different considerations for burning than fire practitioners and environmental community group representatives involved in the research. The Venn diagram (**Fig. 5**) shows discussion focus themes that overlapped or differed between participants. These areas provide insight into where common ground can be found or where extra attention and/or compromise may be necessary in collaborative management.

It is important that collaborative fire efforts come from a place of respect for people involved and for different ways of knowing fire and Country. Introducing cultural burning is not a straightforward application of technical knowledge and requires commitment to building partnerships.

This document is co-produced in good faith based on learnings from a collaborative research program carried out by Southern Noongar Elders, UWA researchers and the Shire of Denmark. The information presented is distilled from scientific research, and readers should be aware that information may be incomplete or not applicable to circumstances different to those at the time of research. Further expert, scientific and/or technical advise should inform any actions being made based on information presented.

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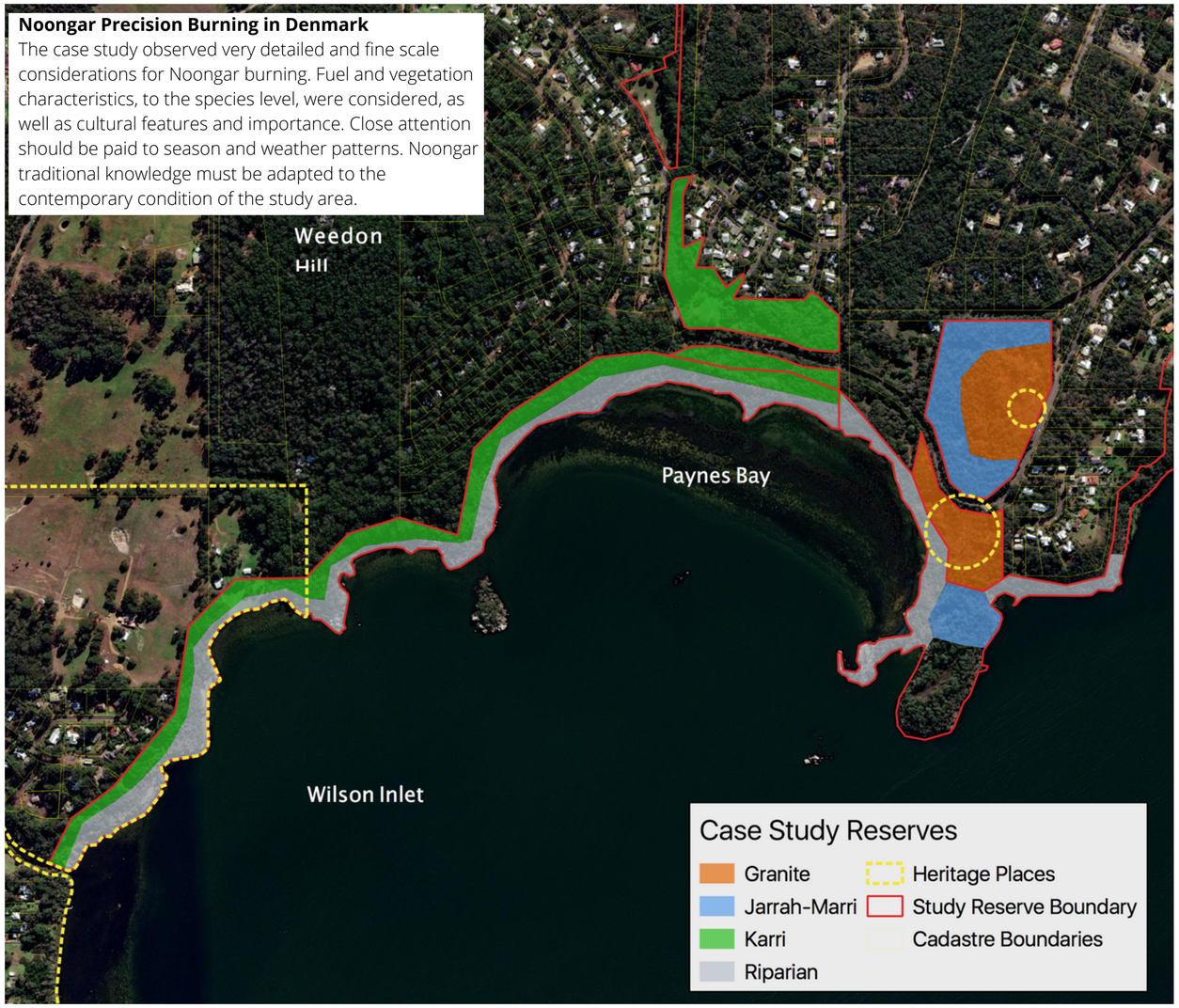
Applying case study outcomes: key management considerations

Noongar Precision Burning in Denmark
The case study observed very detailed and fine scale considerations for Noongar burning. Fuel and vegetation characteristics, to the species level, were considered, as well as cultural features and importance. Close attention should be paid to season and weather patterns. Noongar traditional knowledge must be adapted to the contemporary condition of the study area.



Vegetation	General Noongar Management Considerations for Specific Vegetation
Karri Forest	Study reserves were considered overgrown, 'unhealthy' and a fire risk to nearby residents. Very small, patchy fires low in heat and intensity may be applied in cool weather conditions once the first rains have arrived after the hot season. Fire should travel slowly along the forest floor. Manual removal of undergrowth before applying fire is necessary due to current level of suspended materials and undergrowth in this area.
Melaleuca / Riparian	Study reserves were considered overgrown, and do not allow good access to important sites on the Wilson Inlet. Very small and very patchy fires, if any, using the soil moisture as a natural extinguisher may be applied. Manual removal of material before applying fire is necessary due to current dense vegetation state. This area is ecologically fragile, caution must be exercised in burning here.
Granite Outcrops	High cultural and ecological significance informs different management actions for granites than other vegetation types. Granite outcrops are unlikely to require any burning and should be avoided in prescribed burns. These registered cultural sites should be considered and respected in fire mitigation activities. Management around these sites must include Noongar people.
Jarrah / Marri near granite	The dry and sandy nature of this vegetation and its position on steep slopes requires targeted and careful application of fire. Vegetation around granites is often habitat for important resources and may be 'cleaned up' by Noongar people as part of caring for the granite, but must be carried out with caution.

How do I engage with cultural burning?

Although it is important to remember that cultural burning is contextually specific, below are some suggestions distilled from the case study to help you engage with cultural burning. The suggested work plan demonstrates the process followed in this case study and provides an indicative guide of actions that may be taken to engage with Noongar cultural burning and reintroduce it in your reserve. The lessons from the case study communicated in this document provide a basis for developing understandings about Noongar burning in southern WA. A key learning is the close level of attention paid to Country, such as vegetation type and cultural features, by Noongar burning on a case-by-case basis. An example of how these understandings of the landscape may be applied is demonstrated in the map to the left.

Suggested Work Plan

1. **Partnership between Noongar community and LGA / brigade**
2. **Elders visit proposed burn sites to connect and reflect on fire needs**
3. **Noongar community discuss aspirations and actions for burning**
4. **Burn planning with Noongar community and brigades**
5. **Carry out planned burn activities**

Engagement Protocol

Like all individuals, Australian First Nations people and organisations have preferences on the way they interact. Engagement will differ on case-by-case basis. Invest time and resources into building relationships, ask questions with respect and carry out work with integrity. Contacting the Aboriginal prescribed body corporate or native title group for the area of interest is a good place to start. In the Wagyl Kaip and Southern Noongar ILUA, the Wagyl Kaip Regional Corporation will manage the ILUA. In the case study, engagement occurred through existing relationships with family-based groups to allow cultural protocol to be followed with respect to sharing knowledge. The process followed allowed Elders to sit and feel their Country individually, before coming together to make collective decisions.

Knowledge Sharing and Burn Planning

Noongar fire knowledge relating to specific vegetation types in the case study area are presented in the map on the left-hand side. The map shows landscape features and management considerations of the reserve. Cultural and ecological mapping can be a useful tool and process in burn planning. Mapping specific features of the intended area for burning and the related actions required to burn appropriately will allow for the development of a fire plan that incorporates these features and understandings. The development of maps helps to ensure shared understandings of the important features and necessary considerations for the proposed burn area are clear to all stakeholders. Some cultural knowledge may be inappropriate for sharing more widely, making the case-by-case involvement of Noongar people integral.

Examples & Resources

Some examples of cultural burning throughout Australia:

- Dja Dja Wurrrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation partnership with Forest Fire Management Victoria for fire management in Victoria. For more info: culturalburning.org.au
- Wardandi Elder and Boodjari Uncle Wayne Webb and his son Zac Webb through Undalup Association deliver training and advice in cultural burning, with support from Southwest Catchments Council. For more info: undalup.com
- Firesticks: Indigenous Fire Alliance supports Indigenous organisations to meet fire management goals. For more info: firesticks.org.au

Some useful resources about Noongar fire and cultural burning:

- "A Natural Blackfella thing, hazard reduction, or both?" Knapp, L., Lullfitz, A., Rodrigues, U. (2021): https://vimeo.com/channels/fabforum/576642908
- "Karla Wangkiny - Fire talk with Lynette Knapp." (2021): https://youtu.be/7aX3s-aGGIA
- "Auntie Carol's Story." Petersen, C. and Burton, N.M. (2021). Cultural Burning in Southern Australia, BNHCRC, Melbourne: www.bnhcrc.com.au/resources/poster/8218
- "Indigenous Aspirations and Capacity for Bushfire Response". NESP Threatened Species Recovery Hub. (2021): www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/projects/indigenous-aspirations-and-capacity-for-bushfire-response
- "Cultural and contemporary fire practices". DFES. (2021): https://www.dfes.wa.gov.au/site/documents/Cultural-and-Contemporary-Fire-Practices.pdf
- "Guide for developing a fire management plan". Firesticks. (2020): www.firesticks.org.au/category/resources/planning-tools/
- "Karla Wongi." Kelly, G. (1999): www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/images/documents/fire/karla-wongi-fire-talk.pdf

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