

BURNING-OFF SEASON

This time of year was very important to Aboriginal people in traditional times. Mid-April to mid-May each year was the common burning-off period across a lot of Australia. Burning-off could occur at other times but this was the real season.

This cool but dry four-week window was when to get rid of the accumulated summer grass so as not to pose a bushfire threat the following summer. It was the primary means of managing the whole ecology and ensuring the continuing productivity of the land.

The use of fire as a tool of ecological management was not appreciated by early settlers or scientists, with the term *'firestick farming'* first being coined by the archaeologist Rhys Jones in 1969. His research put a time frame of human occupation in Australia of around 40,000 years.

However in 1985 the Indian archaeologist Gurdip Singh dramatically changed this. His analysis of sedimentary core samples at Lake George in NSW showed regular human firing of the environment had been occurring for more than 120,000 years.

When Captain Cook (actually Lieutenant at the time) sailed up the east coast of Australia in April and May 1770, what he recorded was most interesting. He saw thick smoke along the eastern ranges and speculated that the natives were probably using fire to drive game out into the open to be hunted. He was quite wrong, but it has since become an enduring myth that Aboriginal people used fire to hunt game.

The reality is that fire was used extensively across the continent as a land management tool and any association with hunting was quite serendipitous. In fact before full scale burning-off began, Aboriginal people would usually ensure that animals were herded into safe areas.

What Cook saw was the mid-April to mid-May burning-off season of Eastern Australia in full swing. Typically the weather at this time is cool but relatively dry. Most of the April rain falls in the first half of the month and the May the second half. The early April rain dampens the dry summer grass and the slight to moderate winds do not fan the grassfires out of control.

Additionally, the mosaic pattern of burning employed meant that lit areas burnt back onto each other and could not form a fire front. This in turn meant that whilst the smouldering fires generated a lot of smoke, the flames were low and did not get into the canopy of the trees. As everyone in Australia knows, our terrible bushfires are caused when the eucalyptus from gum trees explodes into fireballs that race across the tree tops. A whole forest can explode into flames in a few seconds.

Aboriginal people were therefore expert at managing 'cold fires' so called because they generated enormous amounts of smoke, but very little flame or heat. Many settlers often expressed amazement at how Aboriginal people wandered calmly out of what seemed to be forest infernos. What was being witnessed however was *'mosaic pattern, cold fire burning'*.

This situation was brought home graphically to me about forty years ago. I had the unforgettable experience of being with the iconic Gunditjmara Elder, Banjo Clarke, when he conducted some burning off in the Framlingham Forest. This forest was near Warrnambool in Victoria's Western District and Banjo had inherited the role of Traditional Keeper of the Forest.

I had turned up in late April wanting to talk to Banjo about a book I had in mind. However he simply held up his hand and said '*You write the book and I'll put my name to it.*' It was a flattering statement of trust. He had important things to do and said we could talk while we were in the forest. He did not explain anything of what he was doing or why, so I just had to observe and try to figure out for myself what I was witnessing. It literally took years for me to do so.

Banjo started at the northeast end of the forest and just wandered back and forth in a generally southwest direction, lighting fires as he went and then waiting until the fire had burnt a patch of ground. He then continued his meander, again lighting fires in a seemingly haphazard way. Slightly damp from dew, the grass smouldered and burnt slowly with the gentle south-westerly zephyr, toward the already burnt grass behind us. Meanwhile it generated smoke that filled the forest behind us.

When we finally emerged from the forest we were near his house overlooking the Hopkins River. The smoke rising up from the forest made it look like we had just left a blazing inferno in which we had no right to survive. In reality we had experienced not the slightest discomfort from either smoke or flame. It was my indelible introduction to Burning-Off Season.