



# CULTURAL BURNING

AN INTERVIEW WITH **DEN BARBER**

TALK TO THE TREES ISSUE 3

**AN INTERVIEW WITH Den Barber**

**Aboriginal Cultural Fire Practitioner  
Wiradjuri – Mudgee people**

*'I acknowledge Country and pay my respect to the Traditional Custodians and their Elders past and present'.*

*'I acknowledge the Sky Father creator, the good ancestral spirits and Mother Earth'  
'Our Mother provides us with all that we need'.*

# RESILIENCE AND CULTURAL BURNING



## DEN BARBER

Den Barber is an Aboriginal man and descendant of the Traditional Custodians from Mudgee of the Wiradjuri people in the Central Tablelands of New South Wales, Australia. He has more than fifteen years of experience in cultural heritage and environmental management with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) as a Ranger and Aboriginal Co-Management Officer. He holds a Bachelor of Applied Science Degree (Parks Recreation and Heritage) from Charles Sturt University.

Den was also a professional firefighter for NPWS with over 15 years of active experience in hazard reduction burns, wildfire response and remote firefighting. In 2010, Den travelled to Cape York in North Queensland to learn about Indigenous cultural burning from Kuku Thaypan Elders associated with the Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways project. He has since initiated a number of cultural burning projects including Blue Mountains Fire Sticks and Yellomundee Firesticks. He is also the Founding Director and a cultural

fire practitioner for Koori Country Cultural Fire Aboriginal Corporation and conducted burns and workshops on private and public land throughout the Hunter region of NSW.

As a Senior Land Services Officer / Aboriginal Communities with Greater Sydney Local Land Services, Den managed a series of successful two day Aboriginal cultural burning forums and demonstration burns in Western Sydney in 2017, the Central Coast in 2018 and Yellomundee Regional Park in 2019. He has also attended and supported cultural burn forums and workshops conducted by other Local Land Services Regions in the Hunter, South East, Central West and Central Tablelands.

Den has been 'going bush' for the past 15 years and learning from Aboriginal Elders. He actively practices his Aboriginal culture and has participated in cultural burns of mulga, spinifex and mallee Country in a far Western NSW.

## DEN BARBER My Cultural Fire Story

After my initial training in Bush Fire Fighting as a Cadet Ranger with National Parks & Wildlife Service (NSW NPWS), I believed that as a firefighter, I was contributing to looking after Country by responding to wildfires and performing hazard reduction burns on national park. However, after having the opportunity to attend a week long Indigenous cultural burning workshop in Cape York in 2010, I suddenly had a very different view of Country and fire in the landscape.

I knew that wildfires took a terrible toll on life, land and property and I believed that the hazard reduction burns I was a part of were reducing this risk and was good for Country. Hazard reduction burns certainly reduced fuel loads and provided protection to local communities. However, in comparison to what I learnt from the elders in Cape York and here in New South Wales, I realised that cultural burns were the 'right fire' for Country. Cultural burns, also referred to as 'cool burns, are applied to Country in a way that radiant heat, flame height and rate of spread are kept at a minimum to avoid impacting on the soil, plants and animals.

The removal of Aboriginal people and their traditional practices from Country have brought about many environmental issues we face today, including the threat from wildfire.

After returning from Cape York in 2010, I wanted to help revive Aboriginal cultural burning practices, particularly in the Blue Mountains. After being dismissed and facing opposed views by some ecologists, government bureaucrats and long serving firefighters, we finally had the chance to run a cultural burn workshop in the Hawkesbury region. I believe this workshop and burn contributed toward NSW NPWS formulating policy around Aboriginal cultural burning.

I have since founded the Koori Country Firesticks Aboriginal Corporation and our members have been culturally burning private and public land since 28 May 2016.

I also operate as a cultural presenter and fire practitioner under my Aboriginal cultural business, Yarrabin Cultural Connections Pty Ltd.





**What is given and what is received when you burn Country?**

This question is probably best answered in my 'fire song' about cultural burning of Country: **wiiny nganhagu ngurambang**

*With acknowledgement to Uncle Stan Grant Senior and Dr John Rudder for their Wiradjuri language dictionary from where these words were sourced.*

*(Adapted Wiradjuri language)*

**WIINY NGANHAGU NGURAMBANG**

wiiny  
wiiny  
wiiny

wiiny nganhagu ngurambang  
ngurambang nganhagu wiiny

wiiny nganhagu balugan  
balugan nganhagu wiiny

wiiny nganhagu bila  
bila nganhagu wiiny

wiiny nganhagu ngurambang  
ngurambang nganhagu wiiny

wiiny  
wiiny  
wiiny

wiiny nganhagu ngurambang  
ngurambang nganhagu wiiny

wiiny nganhagu madhanda  
madhanda nganhagu wiiny

wiiny nganhagu yubaa  
yubaa nganhagu wiiny

wiiny nganhagu ngurambang  
ngurambang nganhagu wiiny

wiiny  
wiiny  
wiiny

**FIRE FOR THAT COUNTRY**

fire  
fire  
fire

fire for that country  
country for that fire

fire for that animal  
animal for that fire

fire for that river  
river for that fire

fire for that country  
country for that fire

fire  
fire  
fire

fire for that country  
country for that fire

fire for that tree  
tree for that fire

fire for that rain  
rain for that fire

fire for that country  
country for that fire

fire  
fire  
fire

**DEN BARBER**  
**Cultural Fire Practitioner**  
**Wiradjuri - Mudgee People**

*(Note: All copyright and Intellectual Property Rights are reserved)*



**The story of my 'fire song': WIINY  
NGANHAGU NGURAMBANG**

I have been culturally burning Country since the traditional knowledge was passed on to me by the 'old people' of the Kuku Thaypan in 2010.

I have since presented at quite a few public forums and performed a number of cultural burning workshops and burns.

I wasn't convinced that simply sharing the knowledge, my story and experiences as an Aboriginal cultural fire practitioner was enough. Other than performing these burns with others on Country, I needed to find a way to convey how cultural burning not only cared for Country, but also how it made me (and others) feel.

In my time and experience with Aboriginal cultural burns, I have experienced some profound moments

that resulted in the 'fire song' coming to me.

More recently, I decided to begin my presentation by singing this 'fire song' at the beginning of cultural burns and a number of related forums and workshops.

This song captures the spiritual and reciprocal nature of cultural burning and everything that is a part of the Ngurambang (Country) including us humans. It is not simply about reducing the fire hazard or protecting life and property. It is part of my cultural responsibilities and obligation as not only an Aboriginal person, but as a human being living on this planet (Mother Earth).

Now I not only carry out the practice of cultural burning, I sing, dance and share stories of it. I am practicing my culture and caring for Country.

**What obstacles are there in preventing you from conducting large area burns and replacing hazard reduction burns?**

Firstly, unlike contemporary large scale hazard reduction burns conducted by public land owners and fire management agencies, Aboriginal cultural burning is not necessarily about 'conducting large area burns'. Cultural burns are applied to various 'systems' that reflect the diversity of geological, environmental, ecological, botanical and other words ending in 'al' that exist within any given area of Country. When we use the term Country, Aboriginal people are referring to not just the landscape, but everything within it including the plants and animals, rocks, soil and water, the seen and unseen, the tangible and intangible and of course, we as the people. Places identified as 'Aboriginal sites' that reveal tangible 'evidence' of Aboriginal occupation such as rock engravings, artefacts, shelter art, middens, burial sites, scar trees etc are also part of Country. However, sites do not exist in isolation for the entire Australian continent is in fact one entire Aboriginal site and place.

**“When we use the term Country, Aboriginal people are referring to not just the landscape”**

Traditionally, cultural fire was applied to various parts or 'systems' within Country in line with a 'cultural prescription' or calendar if you like. Country would show the indicators

of when it was the right time to burn and thousands of years of traditional knowledge underpinned this application.

The most obvious 'obstacle' is what now exists on Country that never needed to be considered prior to European occupation of Australia. Where there was once just Country, people now live in houses within towns and cities made up of a vast infrastructure of buildings, roads, railways, airports, water and electricity supply etc etc. Not to mention the rural landscape where thousands of square kilometres of farms, crops and livestock as well as national parks, state forest and world heritage areas now exist.

Then of course there is the issue of land ownership, both public and private, management and land tenure. There are now layers of complex local, state and commonwealth legislation that dictate what can and can't be done legally on Country under contemporary law and within Australia's legal system. Not to mention of course the array of land management agencies involved in Fire Management who are all burning Country for all sorts of reasons and categorizing and implementing fire according to their respective mandates etc.



A seemingly surprising obstacle has come from some quarters within the environmental agencies and 'green' groups including academics, ecologists and bureaucrats who do not recognize the value of traditional ecological knowledge including Aboriginal cultural burning. Upon returning to the Blue Mountains from the Bizant Cultural Fire Workshop in Cape York QLD in 2010, I was met with great scepticism from work colleagues and community members alike in response to my enthusiastic accounts of what I had learnt from the elders up north. In response to my suggestion that we

adopt these practices here in the Blue Mountains, I was met with comments such as:

***'The Blue Mountains is nothing like the savannah grasslands you were burning in Queensland'.***

Other 'gems' included:

***'That knowledge has been lost down here and is no longer relevant to this day and age'.***

These uninformed views fueled my determination to see Aboriginal



cultural burning revived in not only the Blue Mountains, but in areas in and surrounding Sydney and South East Australia generally.

And of course, there is the issue of funding to support such an initiative to reintroduce Aboriginal cultural burning programs. At this point, I wish to acknowledge one NSW Government department that has put more support behind cultural burning initiatives than any other. Local Land Services and the NSW Department of Planning and Environment have funded numerous cultural burning workshops and forums.

This funding has been used to help Aboriginal communities secure the services of Cultural Fire Practitioners to attend numerous workshops and forums to pass on this traditional knowledge to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of NSW. Apart from this, there has been little investment into supporting communities to revive Aboriginal cultural burning.



**Eliminating these obstacles as a Cultural Fire Practitioner, what could your fire practice look like in 5 years time?**

With the meaningful engagement of Aboriginal people by government, land management and fire authorities, an Aboriginal led revival of this practice could see cultural burn programs being implemented right across NSW and Australia.

A genuine commitment of support to fund salaries, equipment and training Aboriginal people in both contemporary firefighting and cultural burning could see teams of Aboriginal people and cultural burning organisations working alongside Rural Fire Service, National Parks, Forestry and Local Councils. There is also the role cultural burning has to play in the treatment of invasive weeds and the complimentary work of Landcare and Bushcare along with other land management activities such as agriculture and pest management.

The longer term intent would be to make these cultural burning organisations self-sustainable by providing fee for service as

commercial entities and contractors for public and private landholders. Of course, these organisations and cultural burn programs would not be the panacea for the multitude and vast complexity of issues relating to wildfire and hazard reductions. The current status of the role of land managers and fire agencies would continue while Aboriginal people and their cultural burning knowledge and practices are implemented.

***“The current status of the role of land managers and fire agencies would continue”***

Ultimately, my personal vision would be to see Aboriginal people reconnecting to Country while they undertake this cultural practice leading to a multitude of socio-economic benefits for all. I believe it is a key practice that will help restore our natural environment while also contributing to building relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Australia in a meaningful and practical spirit of reconciliation.



**Photo credits and thanks to**

Lisa Walker  
Amanda Clymo  
Rosie Nicolai



