

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES PROJECT - Bulletin No 2

The Bushfire CRC was established under the Commonwealth Government's Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Programme.

Our objectives can be summarised as providing research which enhances the management of the bushfire risk to the community in an economically and ecologically sustainable way.

Indigenous Communities, Peri-urbanism and Bushfire Issues in Northern Australia, Margaret Spillman and Alison Cottrell

Indigenous communities are a special case in the study of peri-urban regions. A brief review was undertaken to clarify themes in the existing literature and identify issues for possible future research. The papers reviewed can be loosely grouped into the following subject areas:

- Indigenous fire practices
- Ecological and land management issues including fire
- Indigenous Native Title and land rights issues as they relate to land management
- Policy response

There is an ongoing debate on the effect Indigenous fire management has had on the landscape including the timing and pattern of Indigenous burning. Several studies in locations across north Australia conclude that Indigenous burning is not haphazard.

Russell-Smith in a study of western Arnhem Land states that "The consistent pattern which emerges from these data is that Aboriginal people occupying the northern savannas employed burning in an organized, directed manner"(Russell-Smith et al., 1997).

Timing varied as explained by Bowman "Indigenous people in northern Australia recognize more complex seasonal calendars, which may vary subtly between different language groups" (Bowman, Walsh, & Prior, 2004).

There is increasing recognition that Indigenous fire practices should have a role in contemporary land management in northern Australia and current research is examining how best this can be achieved.



Issues concerning ecology and land management including fire concentrate on sustainability in tropical savanna landscapes and are predominately work undertaken by the Tropical Savannas CRC.

Papers from the international conference "Fire and savanna landscapes in northern Australia- regional lessons and global challenges" held in Darwin in July 2002, were published in a special edition

of the International Journal of Wildland Fire (Vol 12, 2003)

Indigenous Native Title and land rights matters may affect the implementation of fire management plans. The complexity of land management issues are discussed by several authors who emphasize the need for indigenous involvement.

Lane outlines seven key factors that influence Indigenous

participation which he sees as fundamental to effective Indigenous land management (Lane, 2002).

This view is reinforced by a recent publication from the Department of Emergency Services, Queensland which focuses on continuous collaboration with all people in a community when developing disaster risk management plans (Department of Emergency Services, 2004).

The diverse environments in which emergency management operates in remote Indigenous communities is acknowledged in the Natural Disasters in Australia report, although it is unclear how the recommendations involving ATSIC will be implemented now that ATSIC has been disestablished (COAG, 2004).

There appears to be little research on peri-urban Indigenous settlements and their associated fire risks and Indigenous

towns, town camps and outstations are the types of locations which would benefit from more extensive research. The challenge is to develop fire management plans that are relevant to each of these culturally diverse communities and which allow for the dynamics of changing settlement patterns.

Several principles of such a plan are similar to those required for less remote urban-rural interface areas.



Bowman, D. M. J. S., Walsh, A., & Prior, L. D. (2004). Landscape analysis of Aboriginal fire management in Central Arnhem Land, north Australia. *Journal of Biogeography*, 31(2), 207-223(217).

COAG. (2004). *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements*: Department of Transport and Regional Services, Canberra.

Department of Emergency Services. (2004). *A Guide to Disaster Risk Management in Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities*: Department of Emergency Services, Queensland Government.

Lane, M. B. (2002). Buying Back and Caring for Country: Institutional Arrangements and Possibilities for Indigenous Lands Management in Australia. *Society and Natural Resources*, 15(9), 827-846(820).

Russell-Smith, J., Lucas, D., Gapindi, M., Gunbunuka, B., Kapiirigi, N., Namingum, G., et al. (1997). Aboriginal Resource Utilization and Fire Management Practice in Western Arnhem Land, Monsoonal Northern Australia: Notes for Prehistory, Lessons for the Future. *Human Ecology*, 25(2), 159-195(137).