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 northern 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.
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.


