

Fires in GunaiKurnai Country

Landscape Fires and their Impacts on
Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Places and
Artefacts in Southeastern Australia

Edited by

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Cover: On Country fire occurs with the right fire, at the right time and in the right way, and in the right place (taken for the Gunaikurnai Cultural Fire Strategy). Photograph by Jessica Shapiro, courtesy of Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation.



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Chapter 1

Introduction

Bruno David, Russell Mullett, Joanna Fresløv
and the GunaiKurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation

Wildfires, often called ‘bushfires’ in Australia, are an annual occurrence in Australia, especially in the southeast. Each year they burn thousands of square kilometres of bushland, blazing everything in their way. Some of the physical infrastructure erected or grown by people, such as fencelines, buildings and crops can be rebuilt and replanted, despite the devastation wildfires leave behind for the communities whose lives are upended by their damage or destruction. But other things cannot. Among these latter are the Aboriginal cultural heritage places that have accumulated in the landscape through the course of history and that often form the only material expressions of thousands of years of culture. How do these wildfires impact on Aboriginal sites? Do some site types, or materials, fare better than others? And how have wildfires contributed to a diminution or erasure of material culture, such as those that would otherwise be seen in the landscape as one went about in everyday life, and that contributes an essential, often subliminal role in cultural education down the generations?

With the above concerns in mind, this monograph examines the incidence of landscape fires in relation to the distribution of archaeological sites across one part of southeastern Australia, the lands of the GunaiKurnai Aboriginal clans. In doing so, we review what is known of the region’s fire history through a number of sources: through oral histories, colonial art, and through an examination of government fire records dating back to the early years of the 20th century. The stimulus for this work were particularly severe wildfires that raged across much of southeastern Australia, including GunaiKurnai Country, in the spring and summer of 2019–2020. Our aim is to better understand the impacts of wildfires across GunaiKurnai Country’s varied environments, so as to be in a better position to find some answers for the management of its cultural heritage sites and landscapes.

THE GIPPSLAND FIRES OF 2019–2020

November 2019 was a particularly hot and dry month across many parts of southern Australia. Over a four-day period, 18–21 November, temperatures reached record highs. On 21 November, 150 wildfires covering 326,000 hectares were recorded across Victoria; 60 of these fires were still burning by the end of the day, three of the largest in East Gippsland, much of which lies in GunaiKurnai Country. The Bruthen and Gelantipy fires in particular continued to grow over the coming days.

A month later, on 20 December, a new heatwave led to 110 additional wildfires, again prominently in East Gippsland, with an area of 15,000km² being particularly at risk. By 30 December, a host of new fires had burst through. ‘Three fires in [East Gippsland] with a combined area of more than 130,000ha remained active; some fires burned with sufficient intensity to



Figure 1.1. Wildfire front burning in eucalypt forest near Buchan, East Gippsland, 2019–2020. Photograph by Shamis Law, courtesy of Matt Holland.

create pyrocumulonimbus clouds that generated local thunder and lightning’ (AIDR 2020). The fires continued to burn over the coming days and weeks, so that by 27 February 2020, as the fires waned, 1.5 million hectares of land had burned. The calamitous loss of approximately 120 lives through smoke inhalation, over 1000 cases of hospitalisation, and disastrous damage to property, resources, wildlife and habitats had reached unprecedented levels (for a summary of impacts from the 2019–2020 Victorian wildfires, see AIDR 2020) (Figure 1.1).

While the 2019–2020 wildfires were particularly severe and widespread, GunaiKurnai Country has suffered a number of major wildfires over the past century. The Black Friday fires of 1939 burnt 35% of GunaiKurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GKLaWAC) lands; the Gippsland fires of 1965, 17%; the Great Divide fires of 2007, 27%; the Gippsland fires of 2019–2020, 20%. These individual fires (wildfires in rapid succession) all burnt huge areas of land. They had severe impacts at the time, and have had continued or cumulative effects on people’s lives. But what has not yet been documented are the compounding impacts of the 2019–2020 and earlier wildfires—their frequency, location and extent—on Aboriginal cultural sites in GunaiKurnai Country.

In light of these calamitous wildfires, and under the already-proven success of an established Memorandum of Understanding for partnership research between GKLaWAC and Monash University, a few months after the 2019–2020 wildfires GKLaWAC commissioned the authors to undertake a desktop study of the distribution of registered cultural sites across the geographical spread of the 2019–2020 Gippsland and earlier wildfires in the GKLaWAC Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP) area (a RAP is a legally recognised representative Aboriginal group with formal rights to protect and manage Aboriginal cultural heritage on their lands and waters). At Monash University, this work was done through the Monash Indigenous

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Studies Centre and the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage. The study was undertaken in partnership with GKLaWAC as part of the Victorian government's Bushfire Biodiversity Response and Recovery (BBRER) program, and as a background step in community-led on-Country cultural heritage and biodiversity wildfire response and recovery. The study's major aims were to understand the impacts of landscape fires on cultural sites across GunaiKurnai Country. This monograph is one outcome of this study, and brings together a broad range of information on fires and their impacts on cultural sites and cultural materials. While it is designed as a one-stop resource for GKLaWAC and cultural heritage managers in GunaiKurnai Country and Australia more generally, some results (e.g., on the effects of fires on shell) and methodologies (Geographical Information System (GIS) analyses of wildfires and their effects on sites) have broader, international significance or adaptability.

THE GUNAIKURNAI LAND AND WATERS ABORIGINAL CORPORATION: PEOPLE AND COUNTRY

The study area covers the whole of the GKLaWAC RAP area, being the Registered Aboriginal Party that represents the GunaiKurnai Aboriginal Traditional Owners of eastern Victoria, southeastern Australia. Comprising some 25,770km² (calculated using VicGrid94 projections), the GKLaWAC RAP area extends from the mountains of the Great Dividing Range at Mount Hotham (1861m above sea level) in the north to Bass Strait in the south (Figure 1.2). This is a diverse landscape, with only 125km between the High Country and the coastal lakes. In pre-colonial times prior to the early 1800s, GunaiKurnai Country was partly insulated from neighbouring groups by the mountain ranges to the north, the sea to the south, and dense temperate wet forests to the east. Many traditions and cultural practices of the GunaiKurnai clans differed from those of outside groups, who were referred to by GunaiKurnai as *brajerak*, 'aliens' or not-GunaiKurnai (Howitt 1904: 41).

The GunaiKurnai were traditionally divided into five dialect groups or 'clans': the Brayakaulung, Brataualung, and Tatungalung to the west; Brabralung in the central area; and Krauatungalung to the east, with smaller, fluid residential groups (sometimes called 'bands' in the literature) within each of these larger groups (Fison and Howitt 1880: sketch map; Howitt 1904: 73) (Figure 1.3). The five main clans each have Country that includes parts of the coast or the large lakes system, but only Brayakaulung, Brabralung and the Krauatungalung have mountain areas in their territories. The rugged nature of the High Country to the north meant that there were only a few travel routes through the mountains (Howitt in Smyth 1878, vol. II: 325). In Krauatungalung Country, where archaeological research has been focused since 2018 and where the 2019–2020 wildfires were particularly severe, the Snowy River (Doorack) was a major travel route between the coast and the mountains (Bulmer in Smyth 1878, vol. II: 191; Howitt 1904: 518, 693).

Understanding GunaiKurnai social relationships is key to understanding the archaeological sites and artefacts in the landscape, because people and goods travelled at least as much to maintain social connections and affiliations with different parts of Country as for food and other material resources. The activities, contents and locations of camps and other frequented places, now evident as archaeological and oral history sites and artefacts, were a product of those connections and patterns of mobility.

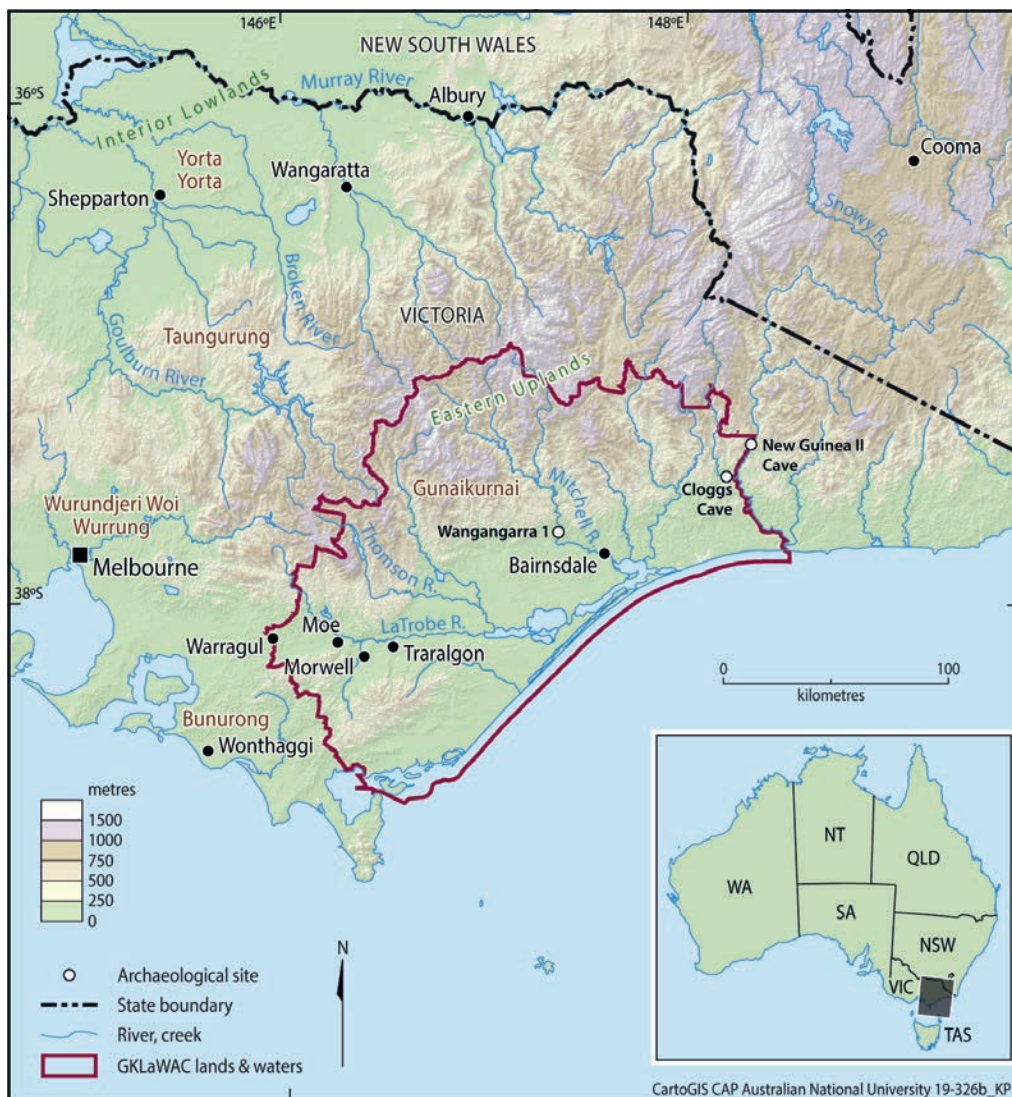


Figure 1.2. Location of the GKLAWAC RAP area, showing excavated archaeological sites where major findings have been made (figure by CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University, using Esri ArcMap 10.5 (<https://desktop.arcgis.com/en/arcmap/>) and Adobe Illustrator CC 2017 (21.0) <https://helpx.adobe.com/au/illustrator/release-note/illustrator-cc-2017-21-0-release-notes.html>).

Contact with outside groups was more fluid on the outer edges of the five clan territories. Cross-cutting clan affiliations, the GunaiKurnai were divided into two ancestral eponymous ‘sex moieties’ named after birds (totems), *yirung* (Emu Wren, *Stipiturus* sp.) or ‘elder brother’ for the males and *djiitgun* (Superb Warbler, *Malurus cyaneus*) or ‘elder sister’ for females (Howitt 1904: 103, 148). Neither of these species could be injured, for to do so would be tantamount to injuring kin of that sex. ‘Fights between the sexes on account of the killing of the brother or sister totem’ were widespread (Howitt 1904: 148–149; Pepper 1980: 37). This highlights one among many ways in which GunaiKurnai Country and all within it were, and in many cases continue to be, socialised: fire damage to the landscape is also damage to GunaiKurnai society and culture, encompassing not just artefacts but also the animals and the plants. They are more than zoology and botany; they are part of the GunaiKurnai social world. Traditionally GunaiKurnai daughters took their mother’s sex moiety and sons took their father’s, with marriage taking place outside (i.e., exogamously to) one’s local residential group (which consisted largely of close kin) and undertaken by arrangement, elopement or capture. *Yirung* therefore married *djiitgun* or outsiders (*brajerak*), and residence was predominantly patrilocal (Fison and Howitt 1880: 199, 204, 227). GunaiKurnai men married GunaiKurnai women of the opposite sex moiety, including across clans and with *brajerak* especially from the east. GunaiKurnai men lived in their father’s Country and women lived in their husband’s Country, and men could, if marrying *brajerak* women, access their wives’ Country to the east and to the north (Fison and Howitt 1880: 204). Accordingly, people also travelled across the landscape through such associations, connecting to different parts of the landscape through kinship affiliations and relationships, spreading material goods and cultural practices along the way, and creating and maintaining travel routes and various kinds of meaningful places in the process. Different parts of GunaiKurnai Country were culturally interconnected in various ways, and individual events in one area could affect GunaiKurnai or other Aboriginal groups further away, including where to burn the landscape to maintain ‘healthy Country’ according to ancestral and kinship affiliations and managerial rights. While some of the old ways are not now followed, others are, including relationships to clan lands and the managerial roles that these entail.

GKLaWAC HEALTHY COUNTRY, WHOLE-OF-COUNTRY PLAN

GKLaWAC has developed a Whole-of-Country Plan, towards the nurturing and maintenance of healthy Country that incorporates GunaiKurnai knowledge and educational opportunities for community members. Fire and its management is an important dimension of keeping Country healthy.

It is important to understand what the notion of ‘Country’ means in GunaiKurnai culture. Country includes the land, waters and sky and all the living and inanimate things such as the rocks and soils within it all as one. But it is also more than this: Country includes the ancestral presences, their past actions, the present peoples, and the relationships between them and with all the things that reside or pass through the GunaiKurnai landscape. GunaiKurnai management of Country includes the cultural ways of keeping the landscape healthy, as passed down from the Old Ancestors together with new ways that are embraced by GunaiKurnai Traditional Owners. GunaiKurnai Traditional Owners ‘are guided by the spirits of our ancestors when we walk through this Country. ... We have a cultural responsibility to ensure that all of it is looked after. ... Our spiritual connection is something that cannot be

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seen, but nevertheless exists strongly in the places we walk and in the paths of our ancestors' (GunaiKurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation 2015).

The GKLWAC Whole-of-Country Plan has direct relevance to the management of Country and wildfires:

[It] has drawn heavily from the aspirations that our mob have expressed over many years. We have worked hard to be faithful to all of the work that was done before, and bring it into the new context in which we are now operating. We are now embarking on a fresh push to implement the things that our mob has cared about for a long time. (GunaiKurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation 2015).

The Plan is based on nine fundamental Principles:

We have cultural obligations. It is our inherent responsibility to look after Country—to heal the damage of the past and protect it for future generations.

Everything is connected. All of our Country is linked. There is no separation between our landscapes, waterways, coasts and oceans, and natural and cultural resources. All are linked and bound to our people, law and custom.

Every bit matters. We understand the need to prioritise limited resources to where important values are under threat, but every part of our Country remains important to us. Our values exist even when you can't see them—whether they are under water, deep inside caves, covered with vegetation, they are still important to us.

Don't wait until it has gone. When you lose a site, it's gone forever. We need to act now to prevent any further loss of environmental or cultural values.

Look at what was there before. When we are healing and restoring degraded landscapes, we should try to put back the plants and animals that used to be there.

Sustainable use. Our approach to managing Country is to balance resource use with conservation—they are all part of the same. Take only what you need—leave some for others.

Seek collective benefits. We use our resources for the benefit of our mob rather than seek individual gain.

We have the right to be on our Country. Traditional Owners should not be restricted in accessing our traditional Country. At the same time, we should have the right to restrict access to others who disrespect and damage our sensitive areas.

Our traditional knowledge is valuable. Our traditional practices and approaches sustained the land for thousands of years. Our Country should be managed in harmony with our traditional ways. We need to take the time to understand what natural and cultural heritage exists out on Country. It can't be managed properly if we don't know what is there. (GunaiKurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation 2015: 16).

In this context, it is important to note that GunaiKurnai cultural heritage sites—archaeological sites and story places—are non-renewable ancestral places. They are the GunaiKurnai 'history

books' written in the landscape. Through time, as more and more sites get damaged or destroyed through disasters such as wildfires and the expanding footprint of developments such as roadworks, urban growth and the like, progressively fewer of the old ancestral sites survive; Gunaikurnai cultural heritage sites are a diminishing 'resource'. It is thus especially incumbent on land managers to treat cultural places carefully, and in the event of widespread calamities such as wildfires, to retain a sharp awareness of the special nature of Aboriginal places during fire-management and fire-fighting planning to recovery.

After a wildfire, the GKLaWAC Bushfire Recovery Crew works across the fire's footprint area, monitoring the impacts of wildfire on cultural heritage sites and the broader landscape, towards the management of the fire's impacts such as the recovery of animal and plant species that are significant to the community. Such management practices are also a means of cultural learning on Country. As GKLaWAC points out:

Country heals us and connects us to our ancestors, our culture and our history. But our mob cannot be healthy when Country is sick which is why it's been so important to get community out and involved in bushfire recovery—reading and healing, connecting and sharing knowledge. (<https://gunaikurnai.org/our-country/bushfire-recovery/>).

GKLaWAC AND THE VICTORIAN TRADITIONAL OWNER CULTURAL FIRE STRATEGY

Articulating with the GKLaWAC Whole-of-Country Plan towards healthy Country is the *Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy*. Its purpose is to 'reinvigorate cultural fire through Traditional Owner led practices across all types of Country and land tenure; enabling Traditional Owners to heal Country and fulfil their rights and obligations to care for Country'. 'Cultural fire' refers to the knowledge and practices of intentionally burning parts of Country towards its short-term to long-term management. Cultural burning is done at particular times of the year, under appropriate environmental and social conditions, by the rightful Traditional Owners and sometimes with their approved affiliates for that land, and using fire technologies that are apt for the job at hand. 'Cultural burns are used for cultural purposes—they are not simply about asset protection. Cultural burns protect sites and clear access through Country for cultural uses—hunting, access to fish traps, ceremony etc.'. (Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group 2019).

With these aims in mind, the *Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy* is based on six Principles:

- Principle 1.** Cultural burning is right fire, right time, right way and for the right (cultural) reasons according to Lore. There are different kinds of cultural fire practices guided by Lore applicable across Victoria's Countries.
- Principle 2.** Burning is a cultural responsibility. Traditional Owners lead the development and application of fire practice on Country; the responsibilities and authority of Traditional Owners are recognised and respected.
- Principle 3.** Cultural fire is living knowledge. Aboriginal fire knowledge is shared for continual learning and adaptive management. Traditional Owners will work together on each other's Country to heal Country and guide practice development. Knowledge and practice are shared.

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- Principle 4.** Monitoring, evaluation and research (MER) support cultural objectives and enable adaptive learning. MER will be used to build a body of evidence that allows cultural burning to occur and grow.
- Principle 5.** Country is managed holistically. Traditional Owners manage Country holistically to address multiple values and objectives, healing both Country and culture. Partnership arrangements and management objectives are tailored to each regional and cultural landscape context. This includes analysis of the tenure, regulatory and operational arrangements to support cultural fire application, other beneficial Indigenous management practices, together with a process of learning to continuously improve planning, management and action.
- Principle 6.** Cultural fire is healing. There are substantial positive impacts to Traditional Owner wellbeing and confidence through providing access and authority to practice on Country.

GunaiKurnai cultural burning is about caring for Country, and helps restrict and manage a landscape that is less at risk of uncontrolled wildfires, for example by burning dry undergrowth and leaf litter that can act as kindling in Gippsland's hot summers, or burning in relatively small areas or 'patches' so that different parts of the landscape retain differential patches of growth. Cultural fire is a tool for managing Country (Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group 2019). Accordingly, the *Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy*, embraced by GKLAWAC, has four major Objectives:

- a) For Traditional Owners to develop and lead on-Country cultural burning pathways.
- b) To build Traditional Owner governance and capacity in cultural fire knowledge and practice.
- c) To improve landscape management through collaborative practice, to heal Country, and build community and landscape resilience.
- d) To develop and strengthen institutional frameworks that support cultural burning practices.

While this volume is concerned mainly with wildfires, it is aligned both with the *Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy's* four Objectives, and with GKLAWAC's aspirations to build respectfully shared knowledge and research that can add positively to the GunaiKurnai management of GunaiKurnai Country (including to reduce current and future negative impacts of wildfires), as expressed in the Whole-of-Country Plan.



PART 1

Background to Fires and Cultural Burning on GunaiKurnai Country



Previous page: GunaiKurnai Ranger, Harley Finn managing Country using fire at Lake Tyers State Park, East Gippsland. Photograph by Jessica Shapiro, courtesy of GunaiKurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation.