

2015 Participants' Review of

Yellomundee Firesticks

Summary* of a report for the National Parks &
Wildlife Service

* Note: this is a summary only. See details on next page regarding access to the full report.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared in consultation with the following **Yellomundee Firesticks participants**:

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This *2015 Participants' Review of Yellomundee Firesticks* was commissioned by the **National Parks and Wildlife Service**. The review and report processes were guided by the **NPWS Project Steering Group** comprising Dennis Barber - Aboriginal Co-management Officer, NPWS Blue Mountains Region, Paul Glass - Ranger, NPWS Hawkesbury Area, Vickii Lett - Project Officer, NPWS Hawkesbury Area, and Glenn Meade - Manager, NPWS Hawkesbury Area.

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Published 30 August 2015

Report compiled by Anne Fitzgerald from the contributions of participants of Yellomundee Firesticks.

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Shaws Creek, Yellomundee

Yellomundee lies within the traditional territory of the Darug people and is a place rich in Aboriginal cultural heritage¹. Its location and features support understanding of the site as an Aboriginal place of learning and living, and as a junction site for trading and ceremonial pathways along the Nepean river and through to the mountains. It joins the Blue Mountains and the Nepean river, and connects to the Cumberland Plains. It is described by a Darug elder as a *place of sacred waters*. A fresh water creek flows to the Nepean river, which features fish traps and a shallow river crossing adjacent to the site. The site is recorded to have hosted one of the last yam beds in the Sydney basin.

Shaws Creek at Yellomundee contains artifact scatters, and the precinct is rich in archeological evidence of habitation, some of which dates back 15 thousand years, including axe-grinding grooves, a significant handprint cave and possible burial sites².

The recent Aboriginal history of the site is also significant. It was named after Yarramundi, a senior cultural man (Kuradji) from the area at the time of settlement, from whom many of today's Darug community descend. The 2008 establishment of the Aboriginal bushcare group at the site, and the return of cultural burning in 2014, bring contemporary significance to the site. Aboriginal people continue to camp and engage in cultural learning at the site.

Shaws Creek is also a recreational site, used by groups engaging in mountain bike riding, horse riding, walking dogs, fishing and camping.

Condition of Country

The Shaws Creek area of Yellomundee is degraded and weed infested due to post-colonial land uses of mining and farming, and the continuing arrival of weeds via waterways. Remnant vegetation species, which represent a number of Endangered Ecological Communities (EEC's) which once dominated the Sydney basin area, are struggling to compete, or are out of balance in this landscape; Bell miner birds impact the eucalypts in the area.

The site hosts feral animals including pigs, foxes, horses and rabbits. Native fauna so far observed include kangaroos, various wallabies including swamp wallabies, possums, platypus, bush rats, and red crowned toadlets. Reptiles sighted include red belly and brown snakes, goannas, skinks, and dragons, including water dragons. Birdlife is dominated by Bellbirds. Sea eagles, magpies, currawong, pheasant coucals, wood ducks, quails, wrens and ibis are among those that have been sighted. The Management Plan which details the endangered ecological communities notes the presence of few individual endangered species on site. The bushcare and cultural burning activities on this site aim to support the regeneration and functional recovery of these EEC's. The area also represents the heritage of European farming which has occurred there.

¹ Aboriginal Place Declaration 30 June 2014 p 2446 www.gazette.legislation.nsw.gov.au/so/download.w3p?id=Gazette_2014_2014-59.pdf

² A Darug participant is aware that some believe Yellomundee to be buried there, and referred to a 'death rock' on site.

Yellomundee Firesticks

Since 2014 the Yellomundee Firesticks program has been working with the local Aboriginal bushcare group, and other local groups and individuals³ in an effort to restore the country at Shaws Creek. The bushcare weeding and poisoning regime, which has been occurring since 2008, is being augmented by Firesticks cultural burning, assisting in the removal of weed biomass and in the regeneration of native species.

Cultural burning is a practice that is embedded within relationships to country and community. The Yellomundee Firesticks project is using cultural burning in a modern regulatory environment, and on a mainly exotic landscape. This is viewed by participants as an experiment with deep, and potentially far-reaching, implications for people and culture.

Cultural burning to date has been limited by the need to coincide the natural conditions and the organisational schedule. In terms of its impact on vegetation to date, Firesticks has been observed to have assisted in some reduction of weed biomass, and has precipitated the regeneration of some native grasses and plant species not previously observed on the site. In some locations on the site the burning has had temporary positive impact, with weeds observed returning in cleared areas. African lovegrass responds positively to fire, and further research and observation is required in order to attempt to schedule burns to its detriment.

Extended practice and further observation and study are needed to both understand the ecological impact on the site, and to increase the positive impact of cultural burning (along with other management practices) in supporting preferred vegetation and fauna communities at the site⁴.

Interconnected - Community and Country

Firesticks participants observe that the environmental benefits of the project are enhanced by its multifaceted human interface, citing: gradual progress towards remediation of relationships between Aboriginal community and government agencies; relationship building between agencies and community groups, and between Aboriginal and non-indigenous people (who develop increased understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal culture); positive engagement for non-Aboriginal people in repairing the damage done to Aboriginal Australia; and intra-familial, intra-cultural, cross-cultural and cross-generational learning and sharing around care for country.

³ The project is auspiced by National Parks & Wildlife Service (NSW) and funded by the Greater Sydney Local Land Services and NSW Environment Trust. It is a collaboration of these organisations with:

- Darug People as the Traditional Custodians of Country;
- Merana Aboriginal Community Association;
- Mura Mittigar Aboriginal Culture and Education Centre;
- Yellomundee Aboriginal Bushcare;
- Other Aboriginal people and organisations;
- Non Aboriginal people;
- Willow Warriors;
- Bass Fisho's.

⁴ Indented, **bold** text is used to highlight **action points**.

These short-term benefits of the program prime the Firesticks community for the long-term commitment needed to have lasting impact on the ecological communities at Yellomundee. This human dimension of Firesticks places cultural burning at the centre of the range of activities needed to restore and care for country at Yellomundee. Firesticks has brought new energy to the work of bushcare at the site, and has empowered and enabled cultural practitioners to exercise their authority and responsibility for country. These benefits are reported by traditional owners, as well as other Aboriginal people now engaged in caring for Yellomundee.

Beyond its apparent benefits to Aboriginal people, it has the capacity to enhance commitment to conservation at a broader, society level as it builds people's understanding and recognition of the needs of our native bush areas.

Aboriginal Community Benefits of Cultural Burning

The land tended by the Yellomundee Firesticks project has become a place of increasing contemporary significance to the Aboriginal people involved. Since colonisation their people's authority to exercise their traditional responsibility - to care for country - has been denied. Cultural burning practice was prevented by dispossession and threat of punishment. Fire is integral to Aboriginal culture and its return as part of cultural practice is important to the health of individuals and community. Aboriginal law significantly concerns the use and sharing of fire, and it is central to the cultural practices of sharing stories and learning culture.

Firesticks participants consider the project is not only important for those directly engaging, but for their culture and communities, as it represents the beginning of a process of reconnection with country, and of relearning how to care for country today. This includes overcoming new challenges of managing relationships with exotic species, as well as gaps in traditional knowledge relating to the site.

Increasing engagement at the site for more people from the Darug and other Aboriginal communities is important to participants. Cultural knowledge can thus be shared from Yellomundee in the same way as it has returned to Yellomundee.

To ensure cultural protocols and best practice drive its growth, and to build the resilience of Yellomundee Firesticks as its impact broadens, participants see the need to build stronger foundations. These include

- **greater experience and knowledge of traditional burning, its impact and adaptations (along with a range of bushcare techniques) to restore a degraded landscape;**
- **exercising culture and cultural authority in modern Australia; and**
- **the development of firm and positive collaborative relationships with agencies, groups and individuals involved with Firesticks at Yellomundee.**

Collaboration and Participation in Cultural Burning

Cultural burning is a specific practice. It exists within cultural protocols, and these underpin sharing of this cultural practice at Shaws Creek. Cultural burning is guided by values, objectives and burn plans, and those with the cultural authority to exercise this responsibility lead the practice.

There is merit in collaboration between traditional custodians and other Aboriginal people, and the NPWS, RFS, local regenerators and other agencies and community groups. This increases the available ideas, capabilities, knowledge and expertise and brings access to a wider range of resources. A diversity of views assists in considering the range of ways contemporary communities engage with country, which may assist in developing resilient models for caring for country in modern Australia.

Traditional custodians request an open dialogue between stakeholders, and respect for their self-determination at Yellomundee. For Aboriginal people involved, the process of relearning and reconnecting with this cultural practice cannot be rushed.

The traditional owners, and other participants, hope for continuing, respectful sharing of knowledge as the project develops, engaging people with traditional knowledge from other places, and working in respectful relationship with agencies, scientists and researchers from a range of disciplines.

The observance of cultural protocols is necessary for the project to continue in cultural safety: to protect custodianship of country; and to prevent appropriation of culture, which can occur where there is not sufficient understanding of, or regard for, traditional culture and law.

Cross-cultural Relationships

Participants acknowledge the consistent effort of the people engaged in bushcare and regeneration at Shaws Creek over many years. Extraordinary effort of many people and organisations has brought about the commencement of the Firesticks program at Yellomundee: the work of traditional custodians and cultural advisors over many years; the effort and commitment of National Parks & Wildlife staff - the rangers, with the support of the Area Manager; the assistance of funding from Greater Sydney Local Land Services; and support from partner organisations and community groups and individuals.

Traditional owners look forward to a process for clarification of the roles and responsibilities inherent in the declaration of Shaws Creek as an Aboriginal Place, and to consolidation of their cultural authority, and that of other Aboriginal cultural practitioners. This is important as stakeholders collaborate to consider the sustainability of, and build the resilience of, the Yellomundee Firesticks project.

Aboriginal people's experience within the dominant culture has left a legacy of mistrust. For this cross-cultural project to continue for the long term (a requirement for significant ecological impact) ongoing vigilance will be required to build upon the trust and relationships which have formed.

Firm foundations and long term commitment are needed for the project to reach its potential: to substantially enhance ecology both at Yellomundee and ultimately in connection with other places; and to benefit those involved and the wider community as it grows to educate and engage more people and places in cultural practice over time.

Growing the Knowledge Base

In guiding the reintroduction of cultural burning at Yellomundee Aboriginal participants have been listening to country, observing, and bringing knowledge from other places. Within its first year the program has engaged interested groups, and begun to negotiate the range of challenges of permits, timing around weather, fire restrictions, bushcare and the untested landscape.

Many people have brought knowledge of the site and its ecology to the Firesticks program. Participants rely on a range of people for information about the species and their relationships. They welcome knowledge and experience shared by Aboriginal participants. Many rely on the National Parks rangers, who also bring cultural knowledge. Most depend upon local bushcarers for species identification, particularly those with decades of experience on the site. Amongst these are people with environmental science expertise, who welcome this unique opportunity to explore and apply this in the cultural burning context.

Participants foresee further planning, practice, monitoring and reflection in order for Firesticks to consolidate and enhance its positive impact on country at Yellomundee. Observation of the impact of burns, and 'listening to country', are the slow and necessary drivers of this process. To assist in this, participants have identified the need for

- **consensus and clarification of the intent of burning (and the companion practices) without which burning plans and monitoring can seem haphazard;**
- **further species identification - both of what is on the site and species historically present;**
- **unbiased ways of monitoring and measuring progress of cultural burning;**
- **resources to enable augmentation of regeneration by planting.**

Participants have identified the need for resources to enable them to gather together periodically, and for sufficient time, to deepen knowledge exchange and common intent. Getting the conditions right to enable cultural sharing without exploitation was considered important for the long term resilience of the project. They want to see appropriate acknowledgement and remuneration for those who bring the cultural knowledge and education. Resources are needed to enable attendance at cultural learning workshops and conferences.

In order to continue to build knowledge - during cultural burning days, workshops and 'on country' learning events - participants welcome cultural advisors and other people with required knowledge (such as environmental and biological sciences, anthropological and archeological knowledge). Observing appropriate cultural protocols, participants welcome the assistance of others with expertise across disciplines.

The cross-cultural nature of such knowledge sharing exposes cultural knowledge, enmeshed as it is with relationship and responsibility to country, to appropriation and disengagement from its cultural context. Aboriginal participants require negotiation to maintain cultural safety in any collaboration with educational or research bodies, whilst welcoming knowledge sharing in the spirit of caring for country and growing the contemporary relationship for a healthier country and healthier people.

Potential Reach

Aboriginal culture understands and respects the interconnectedness of people, culture, cultural heritage and environment. Connection between people and with country is considered the most important feature of the program by most participants. However several note that this approach can challenge the approach and understanding of the dominant culture, which oversees management of public lands.

Into the future, Firesticks participants envisage greater integration of cultural burning knowledge and practice with mainstream fire service practice over time. They regard the Firesticks project as an important step in moving beyond the conventional 'demonising' of fire, to an understanding of its service in landscape management, wildfire prevention and in supporting flora, fauna, people and culture.

In the shorter term the environmental impact of hazard reduction practices could be improved with greater regard for cultural burning principles and practice. Beyond this, the human dimension of cultural burning, and it's concentration on the nexus between people and environment - healthy country, healthy people - is seen to have profound implications for people's relationship with country and with Aboriginal culture.

Building a pathway toward mainstream legitimation of cultural burning requires support for those with cultural authority, Aboriginal people, who may wish to undertake the training necessary to engage with, and advance within, fire management services in Australia.

The Future for Firesticks

Participants foresee a renewed ecological and cultural landscape at Yellomundee. They see healthier relationships, between plant, animal and human communities, and see the traditional owners and Aboriginal cultural practitioners taking leadership in redefining the critical human role in caring for country, which is now severely impacted.

They describe Yellomundee as a place where Aboriginal people will come to learn culture, and where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people will find an example of how we can heal country, exchanging knowledge and culture through story, song, dance and 'simply being there'.

Firesticks is described as a program with no end. Participants urge the development of the necessary cross-cultural framework, plans, strategy and resourcing to enable the program to continue. Some steps are already in place or are being trialled. Others require the support and commitment of the agencies, groups and other participants and leaders to progress further.

Priorities identified include

- 1. The development of a Plan of Management for the Aboriginal Place with the Darug people as traditional owners; this will assist in bringing more traditional owners into relationship with the program, which is an objective of the Darug participants.**
- 2. The development of a framework which takes into account the cross - cultural nature of the project, cultural leadership and protocols, sharing of knowledge with cultural safety, and appropriate cross-cultural systems for valuing and remunerating work and sharing of knowledge (cultural education);**
- 3. Discussions and decisions on intent: the site currently has is a diverse range of uses. Traditional uses of the site are compatible with some of these. Clarification and decisions on the future uses of the site, and the way these will be managed, assists in creating the land**

management and cultural burning plans needed to lead, collaborate and coordinate bushcare and cultural burning practices, and measure impact with accuracy.

Time on country and 'an open dialogue' are favoured ways of discussing and resolving questions of intent. Participants urged that the time be taken that is needed, especially whilst relearning cultural practice. Traditional practice supports learning from all sources and listening to country, then 'feeling what is right'. Today that practice will bring together cultural knowledge with knowledge from a range of 'disciplines' (by which academic-based knowledge systems organise understanding of dimensions of the place, eg, ecology, land management, anthropology, archaeology, geography). It will take time and care to integrate traditional knowledge and practice with the range of specialisations that could assist in understanding and restoring country at Yellomundee.

- 4. The development of strategies for proceeding to fulfil intent over time. These need to be responsive to a range of factors - feedback from country, weather, bushcare schedules, observation of impact, policies and regulations and resourcing etc. These strategies also will help to guide burn planning, and leadership on the day.**
- 5. Resources and support have been forthcoming to enable the program to succeed in its first year. Participants call for this commitment to continue and to grow. Additional funding and support are needed to engage with the range of people and communities and to facilitate the program's development.**
- 6. Opportunities to integrate policies and provide training and employment for Aboriginal participants within land and fire management authorities will be necessary for these services to benefit from cultural practices.**
- 7. The Darug traditional owners want the site to be made more secure out of respect for its significance to the traditional owners and other Aboriginal people. Coming on the site is coming onto a culturally significant place and this needs to be understood. The traditional owners continue to see Yellomundee as a place of cultural learning and sharing. They see the project as bringing more energy into this role for Yellomundee - for the traditional owners, for the Aboriginal community, and for the wider community.**

Commitment

The Yellomundee Firesticks program uses traditional Aboriginal land management techniques along with contemporary bushcare techniques to restore ecological health and balance to a significant and degraded landscape.

Cultural burning is a growth and weather-dependent practice, and it occurs in a national park which is visited occasionally for this purpose.

The project involves collaboration between Aboriginal groups, bush care groups, and other community groups, regenerators, researchers and land management experts, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Rural Fire Service and a range of others.

It operates within the existing policy and regulation frameworks designed to accommodate culturally foreign knowledge systems, and fire management regimes designed to protect life and assets in a modern context, rather than support the health and ecology of native species.

The Yellomundee Firesticks program is undertaking important and difficult work in a challenging context. The continuing efforts of workers in the collaborating organisations to help the project in this, and to help make it easier, is appreciated by participants. Increased organisational commitment will assist the project to meet its objectives, as obstacles are encountered and negotiated. The outcome of this effort will reward country and people.