Yorgas kaala katitje | Women knowing fire

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

10 NEWS PERTH	Just roared across there, the cracking and the popping and the heat from it was just intense. Thirty-eight-degree heat fuelling the inferno, dozens of properties in its path. Defence advice: they have lost 80 percent of all properties in the rural area of Tilden Park in Gidgegannup. As temperature records tumble, WA sizzles through months of extremes. As Australia faces its worst fire season on record, WA authorities say the State isn't immune from a similar disaster. We all know that the bushfire seasons are getting longer. We all know that the climate is changing.
GINA PICKERING	There's no argument, looking forward to the Australian summer comes with an increasing threat. Australia needs fire. Its plants need fire. And for thousands of years, it's had controlled fire farming. Making sense of Indigenous fire knowledge is pivotal to land management across a nation seasonally ravaged by fatal bushfires. And increasingly, Aboriginal women as well as men are creating better management by sharing their knowledge.
STAINTON	In my culture, there's always been a healthy respect for fire. It's part of our lifestyle. It's there for the regeneration of growth.
GINA PICKERING	That's Nyungar Elder Irene Stainton.
CLIFTON BIEUNDURRY	This country is a very unique country. There's plants and flowers and food that need fire, that needs ash, smoke, that need all these things to flourish. My name is Clifton Bieundurry: Bieundurry Tjapanangka Payirntarri. I'm a Walmajarri/Bunuba

man. I am the Traditional and Cultural Fire Officer at the Bushfire Centre of Excellence.

ORAL McGUIRE The land needs fire. The land, in its natural health, and the biodiversity and the ecological systems that are diminishing, must be managed using fire. Must be reenergised, must be reestablished using fire. And so fire should only be put in the context of land management, rather than fire management. How do we manage fire? Well, we manage fire in the way we manage the land. And they are not separate. We've got to be able to read country. Who knows country? Who knows the spirit of that land, along the river, in that valley, up on that hill, amongst those tree species and that bushland, or that woodland or that wetland? These are all different ecological systems. That biodiversity needs the right fire. So reading country is important. My name is Oral McGuire. I'm a Mangarda [of the mangart tree / *Acacia acuminata* / York jam tree] Whadjuk Ballardong Nyungar.

CLIFTON BIEUNDURRY It's much more than just putting fire in a place. It's a whole other deeper understanding of what's happening in and around you, physically. When you're looking at an Aboriginal perspective in order to do cultural fire, there's a whole songline and intergenerational process there that is very community-orientated and very specific to kinship systems.

GINA PICKERING Fire defined first impressions between Indigenous communities and early European explorers on Australia's west coast.

SUSAN BROOMHALL First and foremost, fire means people. So when the explorers see fire, or more specifically, really, they're seeing smoke. They assume this means that people are there. This is Professor Susan Broomhall from the Gender and Women's History Research Centre at the Australian Catholic University.

(sound of waves and wind)

ARVI WATTEL (Dutch voice-over) Members of the crew, having been sent to investigate inland on the fifth of January in 1697. Towards evening, a decision was made to pass the night onshore, and we pitched our camp in the woods in a place where we found a fire which had been lighted by the inhabitants, but whom, nevertheless, we did not see. We fed the fire by throwing on wood and each quarter of an hour, four of our people kept watch. Record from the *Nyptangh*, travelling with Vlamingh.

SUSAN BROOMHALL These encounters were always underpinned by violence, real or imagined. We have to remember that Europeans were there, in part, to capture people to find information about local communities here. And they were using fire and smoke as a way of tracking people.

(sound of waves and wind) [05:00]

ARVI WATTEL (Dutch voice-over) In the morning at sunrise, we saw a boat returning from the land in the east where the sea was rough and where a small island lay half a mile from the shore. On land, they found many thickets and in some places also cultivated land, which had been burned off. But they saw no fruit except some herbs, which had a fragrant scent. So nothing more freshwater or trees going inland. But saw many fires burning. Ship's journal, Auke Pieter Jonck, skipper of the galliot *Emeloort*, 11 March 1658.

SUSAN BROOMHALL What we find is that the Europeans assume that it will be men who are controlling fire technologies. And when they're interacting with Indigenous people, they tend to talk about speaking with men. When I've been discussing with Indigenous women, what I'm finding in these European explorers' records, they very often remark that there is just an absence of knowledge about women's fire management and practices in these records. The European explorers really just do not see that; it's not in their frame of reference to see women as fire

	managers. And I think some of that way of thinking has worked its way into our culture here in Australia for the last 200 years.
IRENE STAINTON	So for us as a community, fire is important, right from birth, in terms of all sorts of practices that we use fire for, whether it's for the regeneration of growth, fire is very much part of our lives, all the way through.
ORAL McGUIRE	How do we find the right women, when we don't even give value to the role that women have traditionally and historically played in burning country? Who manages the women's sites down near the river or in the certain places that we know women's lore and women's ceremony must be practised? There's only one answer. It's the women. So our women must be supported and encouraged and empowered to take back responsibility, from Nyungar men, from Wadjela men from these departments and agencies.
GINA PICKERING	There are about 30 Nyungar people around a big fire at The Wetlands Centre tonight, mostly women and children. They've shared a meal and they've come to listen about fine knowledge from senior women.
MARIE TAYLOR	On behalf of my mob, I'd like to say, Wandjoo Wandjoo. Greetings, the Aboriginal Custodian welcomes you all here to the place of woylie, the little kangaroo rat, who runs around here still today.
GINA PICKERING	That's Marie Taylor, Elder in Residence at The Wetlands Centre, Walliabup Bibra Lake, a traditional women's place south of Perth in Western Australia. This has been a camping and teaching place for at least 10,000 years, and more recently, a recreation and education hub.
MARIE TAYLOR	I'd like to say that my family has lived in this area, my ancestors were born and walked this area. So thank you everybody for coming.

GLADYS YARRAN	Women would always make the fire. They made sure that where the fire was it was safe, was safe for the kids, and the kids would go and get the sticks of firewood. And once that fire was alight, it was the women that made sure that the kids don't go near the fire, keep them safe.
BARBARA HOSTALEK	One of the most important things was how important my job as a little person going out walking with Grandma, collecting the kindling and coming back to the fireplace to build it and then watching my grandmother start that fire and being responsible as a little person to keep that fire going. And it really made me love my grandmother and all Elders.
MARIE TAYLOR	We had to know [10:00] what type of wood to collect. Now the worst wood to burn, in a fire, is that tree over there, the marri tree, the red gum tree, it's got no warmth to it whatsoever. One of the things that I would like to say about the women and their management of fire, it was the place where they taught the children.
MARLENE WARRELL	We always had a big fire burning, whether we cooked on it or just enjoyed the heat, it was every time we had a get-together. And yarns used to be carried around, different stories.
MARIE TAYLOR	Fire encouraged teaching of the Nyungar culture and traditions and language. And that’s why I think we’ve still got it today.
IRENE STAINTON	Well, when it comes to the use of fire, men would have their cultural practices related to fire and women would use fire not only for preparing food and for warmth, which are the very obvious ones, but for ceremonial purposes, in smoking ceremonies and the like where you douse the fire with green leaves and that provides the smoke. Now, there's a number of different ways that that can be used. It can be used for cleansing, but it can also be used in ceremonial funeral-type services, where the fire provides the pathway to the afterlife.

NEVILLE COLLARD	Part of our culture is that the old people believe that the smoking and the smoke of a fire was significant to keeping those bad spirits at bay. When it comes to fire for men, our relationship with the fire was different to the women. My name is Neville Collard. I'm a Nyungar Maaman, this is my home. There’s evil spirits. And there’s bad spirits. And they all different take different forms. But they can't escape smoke.
GINA PICKERING	A state-funded commitment is recognising the importance of fire in extending a cultural commitment to land management at a Bushfire Centre of Excellence in Mandurah, Western Australia, a $33 million facility that opened in 2022.
IRENE STAINTON	I was approached by the State Bushfire Centre of Excellence. They recognised that they didn’t have Aboriginal participation on that committee. So they approached me and asked me if I’d be interested, particularly given that I’d had some Australian exposure to this in various states. Also because I’d come up through the ranks as a lowly secretary of the Firefighters Union, but also because I have an understanding of Aboriginal cultural heritage and legislation.
CLIFTON BIEUNDURRY	Well, the Bushfire Centre of Excellence first came about back in 2018.
IRENE STAINTON	They were very keen to assist where possible, when they are having prescribed burns and to be able to avoid places of cultural heritage that are significant to Aboriginal people.
CLIFTON BIEUNDURRY	When we get invited onto country, it’s more about understanding their cultural protocols and outcomes that they are seeking, first of all. What we do is promote, establish TOs [Traditional Owners] who are the traditional and responsible person for country to burn. I can’t really speak on women’s fire. It's not my place and it would be absolutely disrespectful to even consider speaking about women's business or even put my take on it.

IRENE STAINTON	In terms of cultural practices, there are many differences between what men do and women do. And there's a place for all of us.
SHARON COX	I'm just switching on the breather here. That's the fuel light. We'll do a burn here.
LILIAN LAWFORD	We're here today doing a fire burn out in the flats here.
SARAH PARRIMAN	The Nyul Nyul women particularly have been one of our longest-standing women ranger groups that we were able to bring on earlier in the piece. [15:00]
HELENA WILLIAMS	Sharon, watch that back part down the fire.
SHARON COX	Yeah, I've got it.
SARAH PARRIMAN	The threat of fire in the Kimberley landscape is ongoing and serious and I think the work of Indigenous rangers is fundamental to ensuring that we don't see the devastation that we've witnessed in other parts of the country and across the world. My name is Sarah Parriman. I'm the Deputy CEO of the Kimberley Land Council.
HELENA WILLIAMS	And Sharon's here with her knapsack. She's taking out some of the fire so it doesn't spread.
GINA PICKERING	We've driven an hour and a half northeast from Broome to Beagle Bay Aboriginal community. The women rangers here are seasoned practitioners, and the crackle of the grassfire is captivating. The women of the Kimberley Land Council bring a leading commitment to the female ranger program over diverse country and culture across Dampier Peninsula.
JACKIE WEMYSS	Women's fire knowledge in the Kimberley is fairly specialised in the regions that they live and have worked for thousands of years on fire management. My name is Jackie Wemyss, I'm the West Kimberley Program Manager for the Kimberley Land Council.

GINA PICKERING	Western Australia is vast and varied. It's easy to forget just how big it is. Two point five million square kilometres, more than a third of Australia’s landmass. Ten times the size of the UK and one of the largest states in the world.
JACKIE WEMYSS	The Kimberley has various landscapes that have different types of methods and techniques to do effective fire management. Different areas of vegetation, escarpments, ranges, river crossings, spinifex plains, pockets of rainforest. Each group and each traditional owner group are managing fire around the Kimberley. So it does take a lot of specialised skills to be able to understand.
HELENA WILLIAMS	When I was young, I used to go out with my aunties, we used to go out fishing places. And this time of the year, they’d have the matches, and they’d know when to burn if it was very scrubby, and to clear country. We didn’t have drip torches back then. While working with the rangers, it’s a whole lot of difference now because women is in power with fire and they will pull into it work in partnership with our country, on country. And for the women in the rangers, they do a good job. Hi, my name is Helena Williams. I work for the Nyul Nyul rangers. And I love my country and love going out doing fire when fire season.
LILIAN LAWFORD	Kites and eagles, they come hunting as soon as we light a fire. You'll see all the prey coming around to check all the animals running away from the fire. I missed out learning about my country and our people. So I joined the rangers to teach myself, to teach my grandchildren now. See, because I missed out on that part of learning because I was taken away and taken to Tennant Creek and the Northern Territory and missed out on being on country which I'm now making up for and enjoying it. Usually we go out and burn and we walk with one of those drip torches now for two kilometres each. It’s good. And we have Gija mob, of the desert mob, Palyku mob and all that, they all come

here to fire training. Coming back to country, that lifts a lot of things for me. I'm from Bardi Gija, my mum was born on Nyul Nyul country. My name's Lillian Lawford. I work for the Nyul Nyul Rangers.

ZARIPHA BARNES Benefits to the community are if your women are strong and if your women are healthy and happy, the rippling effect is then your families are happy because the children are happy and, you know, in turn every everyone's doing well. They are more in tune to what they're doing and they know the country. Like where we went today, they knew exactly where and why it was going to be a great spot. I'm Zaripha Barnes, the Women Ranger Development Coordinator at the Kimberley Land Council.

SARAH PARRIMAN KLC has always seen the value, I guess, in women's rangers. There's been a significant growth in women's rangers over the last five to seven years.

LILIAN LAWFORD At the moment, Helene and I just passed our boss, which is the officer in charge of planning and burning for the day on site, which is a big thing for us as women.

SARAH PARRIMAN [20:00] The Kimberly women ranger network has sort of come together and made a really robust strategy over several years, working together to figure out what the gaps are, how they can work together to improve the way that they work within ranger teams, and, you know, at the end, be able to improve their environmental and cultural obligations.

IRENE STAINTON There's a real understanding now of the importance of engaging with Aboriginal people at the local level. And it's really important to stress the local level. And that means that the right people get the opportunity to participate. And that's a real success factor.

ORAL McGUIRE Because 65,000 years of these practices, and this understanding tells us that the sacred places are hubs for renewal. And strength of not only culture, but the spirit of the land. And sacred sites and

	significant sites and places. And the returning health of nature itself are all in the one understanding of country and healing country.
CLIFTON BIEUNDURRY	I think this global sense of wanting to work together and protecting our environment, developing good networks and friendships and all of that, I think cultural burning, more significantly, can bring those things together. But the roll-on effect that happens with that is that we bring back plants that haven't flowered for years. We bring back medicine that that could possibly save us or heal from illness.
SARAH PARRIMAN	It gives me hope, I guess, for the future, because whilst they might be doing the same technical kind of work as the men, they look at things through a completely different lens, they are thinking of the kids and the community and their families when they’re doing what they do. And I think that's really invaluable.
SUSAN BROOMHALL	We need to do a better job of listening to Indigenous women to understand that there are distinct fire practices held by women, and to listen to what those might be and how they can help us care for this country in better ways in the future.
IRENE STAINTON	We all live on this planet together, but if we've got massive fires, and people and communities have been wiped out, we do have a responsibility to everyone to make sure that the practices we adopt make a better environment for us all to share.
GINA PICKERING	Special thanks to the Kimberley Land Council, The Wetlands Centre Bibra Lake, the Bushfire Centre of Excellence and 10 News Perth. Sound by Doug Hampton, editing by Gillian Walker. Written and directed by Gina Pickering. Produced by Susan Broomhall and supported by the Australian Catholic University.