

Walking together: a decolonising experiment in bushfire management on Dja Dja Wurrung country

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Timothy Neale 

Deakin University, Australia; Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre, Australia

Rodney Carter

Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, Australia

Trent Nelson

Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, Australia

Mick Bourke

Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, Australia

Abstract

Within certain settler colonial nations, Indigenous peoples are increasingly becoming present and influential in the agencies legally responsible for the management of their ancestral territories, their environments and their hazards. On the Australian continent, for example, Aboriginal peoples are becoming more formally involved in the management of bushfire (or ‘wildfire’ elsewhere). This environmental phenomenon is at once of profound cultural significance to many Aboriginal peoples and a major natural hazard to human life and property, managed by an extensive professional bureaucracy of settler government agencies. Drawing upon a case study of collaborative bushfire management between Dja Dja Wurrung peoples and settler bushfire management agencies on Dja Dja Wurrung country (or, ancestral territory) in the southeast Australian state of Victoria, this article argues for an understanding of such collaborations as ‘decolonising experiments’. For geographers and others, this means paying attention to the open-ended character of collaborative initiatives, whether and how they materially improve the position of Indigenous peoples, as well as whether and how they give rise to new resources and strategies for the creation of other decolonising futures.

Keywords

Australia, collaboration, environment, Indigenous, wildfire

Corresponding author:

Timothy Neale, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia.

Email: t.neale@deakin.edu.au

Introduction

Gradual and important changes are occurring in the management of landscape fire hazards and impacts in several settler colonial countries. In spatially uneven ways, Indigenous peoples in Canada, Australia and the United States are increasingly present and influential in roles they were often previously excluded from, taking up roles as bushfire managers, partners in government processes and as practitioners within the agencies legally charged within settler law to know and manage fires.¹ Within certain parts of both southern and northern Australia, for example, Aboriginal peoples are changing the bushfire management sector by becoming bushfire management agency employees and volunteers, spreading their ecological knowledge, taking up conservation roles in Aboriginal-managed or joint-managed areas, collaborating with public and private land managers, and through other avenues.² The use and management of landscape fires has been of vital cultural and ecological importance to Aboriginal peoples across the continent for millennia and, today, fire practices remain highly important to many Aboriginal peoples, a central expression of their co-constitutional relations with place and a meaningful cultural connection to ancestors.³ Beyond this, other possible causes for this rising presence and influence arguably include the growing international acceptance since the late 1980s of the need to collaborate with 'local peoples' in environmental management, the expansion of Aboriginal land rights regimes across Australia since the early 1990s, the rise of government-funded Aboriginal land management programmes between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s and the widespread celebration of popular books reappraising the importance of Aboriginal peoples' precolonial use of bushfire within the past decade.⁴

The research that has emerged to date on Aboriginal peoples' recent re-engagements with bushfire management focuses largely on the tropical and desert regions of northern Australia. This has included important work on the 'rekindling' of fire knowledge, the social and economic benefits of managing bushfire for carbon abatement and protocols for the creation of fire management partnerships in these regions.⁵ But, due to their contrasting social and environmental contexts, it is unclear what relevance these studies have to southern Australia, the United States and elsewhere. Compared with northern Australia, fire management agencies in these other jurisdictions operate within a context that is more tightly regulated, has significantly greater potential of intense and extreme fires, and has a greater number of public and private assets at risk of those fires. For example, of the number of human fatalities recorded in Australia between 1900 and 2008, 85 per cent ($n=473$) occurred in the southeast states and territories of Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory.⁶ In addition, while for millennia most of Australia's Aboriginal peoples have lived in the southeast, and the majority of Aboriginal-identifying people continue to live there today, their experiences of colonial invasion and settler occupation differ from much of the north. To simplify significantly, Aboriginal peoples in southeast Australia have had less opportunity to remain on their ancestral territories, giving them fewer opportunities to maintain the traditional practices and forms of occupation by which settler law recognises Aboriginal land rights.⁷ Aboriginal peoples interacting with settler land management agencies in the southeast today do so as smaller demographic minorities with either no recognised land rights or less spatially extensive and legally robust land rights than Aboriginal peoples in the north.

This is not to suggest that Aboriginal peoples in the continent's southeast have not been actively managing bushfire in recent decades, whether independently or by working within and with settler bushfire agencies. Rather, there has been little formal investigation, meaning little is known about how Aboriginal peoples have been negotiating these circumstances and the obstacles they have been encountering in realising their aspirations in working with fire. It was with these issues in mind that we – a non-Indigenous academic from Aotearoa New Zealand and three Dja Dja Wurrung practitioners – began to work together, on Dja Dja Wurrung country (meaning ancestral territory,

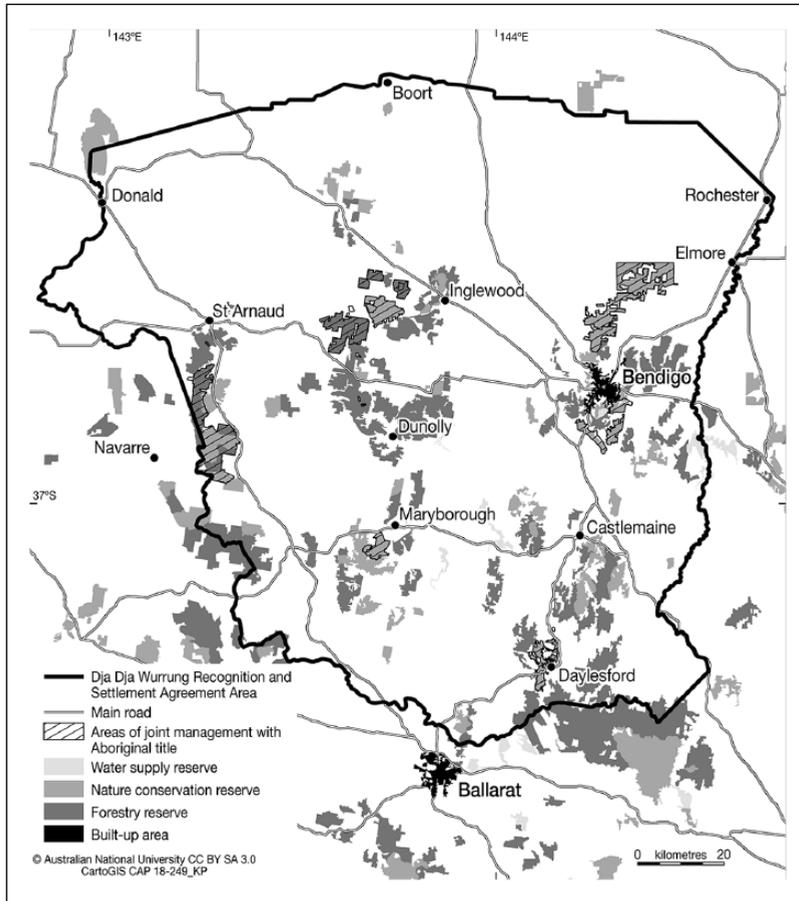


Figure 1. Map of Dja Dja Wurrung Recognition and Settlement Agreement area.
Source: Karina Pelling.

area or place), located in Victoria's central west (see Figure 1). Initially, Timothy Neale approached Rodney Carter, the CEO of the Dja Dja Wurrung corporate group, and then met Trent Nelson and Mick Bourke, who were both employed in bushfire management. Rather than focus on Dja Dja Wurrung peoples' *wi* (fire) practices and knowledge, which are theirs to document and discuss, our conversations probed questions of 'working with [settler] government'. Such discussions revealed immediately how several ongoing collaborations between Dja Dja Wurrung peoples and the Victorian Government had their origins in the signing of a Recognition and Settlement Agreement in March 2013 (see Figure 1).⁸ The first of its kind,⁹ the agreement was key to the integration of Dja Dja Wurrung people into government agencies, as employees and advisors, but also the planning and, beginning in 2017, the completion of 'traditional burns' led by Dja Dja Wurrung peoples.

These 'traditional burns' (also described as *djandak wi* or 'healthy fire') involve the deliberate burning of parts of the landscape for ecological and cultural ends decided by Dja Dja Wurrung peoples (see Figure 2). Elders chose the areas that should be treated with fire, before select Dja Dja Wurrung peoples, in partnership with settler bushfire agencies, light them in the manner and at the



Figure 2. Mick Bourke lighting *djandak wi* or ‘healthy fire’ on Dja Dja Wurrung country, April 2018.
Source: Timothy Neale.

time appropriate to cultural practice. These burns are believed to be among the first Aboriginal-led traditional burns on public lands in southeast Australia since the settler invasion began more than 180 years ago.¹⁰ Given the potential significance of this collaborative arrangement to existing and future collaborations elsewhere, we have sought to understand the key causes of its emergence, the obstacles it has overcome and its vulnerabilities. In what follows, we present a historical background to the case study, a theoretical framework to understand it and an analysis of central themes from interviews with key actors. As we argue in the final section, this case study raises crucial issues for similar collaborations, suggesting that any ‘return’ of Aboriginal peoples to environmental management is not some straightforward revival of a technical practice. Rather, such collaborations are open-ended social and ecological experiments in decolonising, the results and effects of which cannot be fully known in advance. The framework of ‘decolonising experiments’, which we develop below, provides cultural geographers with a critical lens for understanding the range of ostensibly progressive engagements that are developing between settler institutions and Indigenous peoples.

Background

Through the Holocene, as historian Stephen Pyne states, the Australian continent came to be governed by three important forces and, through them, transformed into a ‘fire continent’.¹¹ The first of these forces were plant species, such as eucalypts and annual grasses, that promoted fire by producing an abundance of combustible dry matter, often in order to aid their own regeneration. The second were weather patterns – such as the north’s arid winter season and the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO) – which provided the atmospheric conditions and winds required to draw the moisture from grasslands and forests and feed bushfires with oxygen. Third, there were the humans, the ancestors of contemporary Aboriginal peoples, who applied fire to different ecologies at different times, shaping their surrounds for more than 65,000 years.¹² While the relative

ecological influence of these three factors in different times and places is a matter of ongoing (and interminable) debate, it is clear that when European settlers began invading Australia in the 17th and 18th centuries they encountered a place, in Hallam's memorable words, 'as the Aborigines made it'.¹³ It is also apparent that the period since this invasion has involved massive, complex, and ongoing social and ecological changes, one cumulative effect of which dramatic rises in bushfire frequency and intensity. Between 1900 and 2015, for example, the frequency of major fires approximately doubled in Victoria, while weather records between 1950 and 2016 reveal a 'clear trend' towards more dangerous bushfire weather in the continent's south.¹⁴ There, as in many other fire-prone regions globally, past and present human migration into peri-urban interfaces is continuing to amplify bushfire's human impacts.¹⁵

As others have shown, many of the scientists and foresters crucial to the formulation of present Australian bushfire management orthodoxy had an appreciation of Aboriginal peoples' long history of fire use.¹⁶ From the 1960s on, some argued that the absence of anthropogenic burning after colonisation had changed forests and led to 'more severe and damaging bushfires', insisting that the 'only way' to prevent them was to preemptively burn areas 'in much the same way as the Aborigines did prior to the advent of the white man'.¹⁷ But then, as today, this avowed appreciation of Aboriginal peoples' knowledge and practices had critical limits. First, the 'Australian strategy' of burning parts of the landscape during cooler periods of the year to reduce the availability and continuity of fuel for fire during hotter periods of the year has different aims, seasonality, extent and techniques to precolonial burning by Aboriginal peoples. Settler land managers have often borrowed, adapted or stolen fire practices from Aboriginal peoples since colonisation,¹⁸ but over the past 60 years they have primarily applied fire just to reduce 'fuel' (or, dry organic matter) and mitigate the probabilities and consequences of bushfire impacts on property.¹⁹ Second, until very recently, bushfire researchers and the government agencies that manage bushfire events and risks have rarely sought to engage with actual living Aboriginal peoples about this matter. Typically, the role of Aboriginal peoples in contemporary bushfire management has been marginal and addressed as a 'more philosophical than scientific' question.²⁰ Nonetheless, the scientific evidence for the forms of prescribed burning conventionally applied by government agencies is itself 'patchy at best'.²¹ There are now good reasons to suggest not only that in some regions prescribed burning programmes are having marginal or negative effects on their ostensible objectives but also that the communities they serve have unrealistic understandings about humans' technical ability to control fire.²²

Faced with a more flammable climate, growing bushfire risks and significant doubts about present policies and practices, recent critiques of environmental management offer us insight into potential new directions. As Buizer and Kurz argue, Australian agencies tend to frame bushfire as a technical problem with technical solutions.²³ This conflicts not only with established critiques of such 'ecomodernism' – treating ecologies as discretely controllable – but also the fact that 'natural hazards', such as bushfire, are unavoidably cultural and political in their origins, effects and management.²⁴ Bushfire's ecological necessity and social complexity mean that its impacts can 'at best, be minimized rather than solved' in any given context.²⁵ The response of some scholars and practitioners to this predicament in bushfire-prone nations such as Australia, Canada and the United States has been to call for alternate approaches that allow us to 'coexist' with bushfire, often drawing upon understandings of Indigenous peoples' more 'symbiotic' or 'holistic' relationship with combustible environments.²⁶ However, in attending to our coexistence with bushfire, it is important that we remain attentive to the existence of persistent inequalities. Legally recognised rights to control and manage country (or, ancestral lands and waters) have long been the focus of Indigenous peoples' political activism in these nations, in part to remediate their social, economic and political marginalisation.²⁷ The ongoing inequality of Aboriginal peoples in Australia leads us to suggest not

only that, following Ens et al., ‘both tangible and philosophical engagement’ with Aboriginal peoples in forms of environmental management can ‘promote more holistic socio-ecological systems thinking’,²⁸ but also that such engagements have decolonising potential.

Decolonising has been the subject of extensive and diverse research and debate, though it can be broadly understood as, to quote Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, ‘a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power’.²⁹ In geography, ‘decolonisation’ has often meant developing critiques of colonial and settler colonial power, both outside and within academia, as well as, more recently, theories and practices founded on ‘a new relational ethics’ with Indigenous communities.³⁰ Laudable as these efforts are, de Leeuw and Hunt remind us of the need to question whether they are ‘doing the work’ in a practical sense.³¹ Similar concerns have been voiced by Tuck and Yang, insisting that decolonising ‘is not a metaphor’ and, if it is to be worthy of the name, must involve the return of lands and waters to Indigenous peoples’ control.³² So, are Dja Dja Wurrung peoples’ engagements with bushfire decolonising, in this sense? While, in Australia’s southeast, it is unlikely that any Aboriginal peoples will soon gain full autonomy over their country, we suggest that bushfire management is a site of emerging experiments in the redistribution of legal and political authority over country. Thinking broadly, such collaborative projects in environmental management are experiments in the sense that an experiment is ‘a device to materialise questions’ or, as Fortun states, something that allows for ‘the emergence of questions that could not be asked before’; it opens ‘the possibility of envisaging ways in which knowledge/space/society could be transformed’.³³ Initiatives to create new Indigenous-led or collaborative forms of environmental management can be both ‘decolonising’ and ‘experimental’, as they can politically and legally *displace* settler power and authority, though their ultimate dimensions, effects and outcomes are uncertain.

With this in mind we now return to Dja Dja Wurrung country, an area of approximately 2,500 km² and a total population of approximately 195,000 people. Like much of Victoria, this region experienced ‘explosive colonisation’ from 1835 onwards, following which it was subject to the invasion of massive numbers of European settlers, their hungry companion species (cows, sheep, etc.) and their techniques of resource extraction.³⁴ Gold was discovered here in 1851–1852, spawning an industry that consumed much of the native timber, polluted and reshaped its waterways and allowed for the foundation of its present cities and towns. Alongside this resource exploitation, between 900 and 1,900 Dja Dja Wurrung peoples were variously murdered, starved, coerced and exiled by the settler invaders, so that by 1864 perhaps no Dja Dja Wurrung peoples lived on their own country.³⁵ Nonetheless, people survived, their sovereignty unceded and it was their descendants who signed a landmark Recognition and Settlement Agreement with the State government in March 2013. This complex agreement included acknowledgement of the area as a past and present ‘cultural landscape’, provisions for the co-management of several national parks, state funding of AUD\$5 million to the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation (DDWCAC) and obligations to fund several positions within land management agencies for Dja Dja Wurrung people.³⁶ Soon after, DDWCAC produced a 20-year country plan, which marked out aspirations to secure Dja Dja Wurrung involvement in fire management and have Aboriginal fire use ‘accepted and practiced’.³⁷

Although it is hard to put parameters around the resulting experimental collaboration, it is nonetheless worth noting some key aspects. Dja Dja Wurrung country overlaps with the Murray Goldfields region, administered by the State’s lead bushfire agency the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and its national parks agency Parks Victoria (PV). This means the central organisations share a jurisdictional scale. Since 2013, progressively more Dja Dja Wurrung people have been employed within these agencies’ regional offices, including a fire planner, up to three full-time rangers and up to four seasonal firefighters. It was these individuals who,

Table 1. List of recruited participants indicating gender, ethnicity and present employer.

Total participants		14
Gender	Male	10
	Female	4
	Other	0
Ethnicity	Aboriginal	8
	Non-Indigenous	6
Employer	DELWP (Public lands agency)	7
	PV (Parks agency)	3
	DDWCAC (Aboriginal corporation)	3
	Other government agency	1

in May 2017, led the first two *djadak wi* burns on public lands, meaning fires on areas chosen by Dja Dja Wurrung elders and conducted for their ends according to their chosen means. In 2018, there were seven sites for these burns on DELWP's Fire Operations Plan for Dja Dja Wurrung country, varying in size between 8 and 135 ha, and many more are planned for registration in the coming years.

Considered by many as a leading example of the 'return' or 'revival' of Aboriginal peoples' fire management knowledge and practices in southeast Australia,³⁸ we have sought to document the collaboration in several ways, including through structured research. During 2017, Neale used a 'snowball' sampling method to identify the key actors within the collaboration, under the advice of Carter, Nelson and Bourke, before conducting semi-structured interviews with 14 individuals as well as several 'go-alongs' to meetings and field sites (Table 1).³⁹ Interviews and fieldwork data were then coded and analysed by Neale in order to understand, from the perspective of its participants, the factors that had negatively and positively affected the collaboration, and their hopes and concerns about its future. We then discussed drafts of this analysis and appropriate theoretical framework iteratively over several meetings before completing a final analysis. The following section presents our findings, noting, where relevant, interviewees' demographic and institutional background.

'Walking together'

Key factors and obstacles

Universally, people spoke of the importance of the Recognition and Settlement Agreement in changing how the government agencies – DELWP and PV – related to Dja Dja Wurrung peoples and their corporate group, DDWCAC. According to most, the agreement provided the conditions-of-possibility for collaboration, particularly through its financial provisions and placing legal obligations on the agencies to consult with DDWCAC on land management issues. As one non-Indigenous manager noted, the agencies had 'engaged' prior to the agreement, but it was only afterwards that they 'really went from informing to inclusion' (P1). Other non-Indigenous employees at DELWP and PV reflected on how, prior to the agreement, their own intentions to work more comprehensively with Dja Dja Wurrung peoples had been forestalled by a lack of the institutional authorisation required to devote time and resources. After the agreement, their requests for support for collaborative activities within these bureaucracies were explicitly and implicitly backed by the state's legal obligations. The same person described how:

. . . it's about recognition of the traditional owners and the organisation and individuals wanting them to become real partners . . . They're equals. We're not telling them what we're going to do, they're actual land managers with us . . . There is a mindset change there.

For many non-Indigenous people, the agreement had the added benefit of reducing the political complexities that had previously made them uncertain about the appropriate Aboriginal parties to approach. It was comparatively easier to work with a 'recognised' corporate entity than attempt to parse claims to authority. Asked if, absent the agreement, the agencies would have collaborated with DDWCAC at all, another non-Indigenous person mused 'I don't know, possibly not' (P4). Alternately, Dja Dja Wurrung people were more certain that the agreement was indispensable to what followed. As one explained, 'a collaborative approach' and 'partnership with the state' had been a driving focus for DDWCAC in the agreement-making process itself (P6). The agreement established their rights to be involved in management of their country and to insist on changes when those rights were not observed; thereby, the agreement marked the profound difference between Dja Dja Wurrung peoples and the many other community and industry 'stakeholder' groups that government agencies routinely consult. A Dja Dja Wurrung person described the situation by placing one hand higher than the other; after signing the agreement 'we're sitting up here now', they said, bringing their hands to an equal level, 'we're a partner with state, so they have an obligation to talk to us' (P11).⁴⁰

Nonetheless, an agreement alone is not sufficient to make practical or material changes. In Australia, as elsewhere, it is not unusual for state and non-government signatories to not meet their contractual obligations to Indigenous parties. Beyond institutional racism, there are many possible reasons for such underperformance, as public lands agencies can be both fiscally constrained and culturally conservative environments, making them resistant to any deviation from standard practice. Therefore, as interviewees said, another important initial factor was that there were key senior managers within relevant government agencies at the regional level personally committed to making the relationship with Dja Dja Wurrung peoples 'a success'. 'If we had have waited for the policy settings and for the governance to be set up and then gone back to head office', one non-Indigenous manager explained, 'I don't think we'd be where we are [now]' (P4). In addition, these managers were willing to 'go beyond' (P4) or 'go outside their core function' (P6). For example, while DELWP's state-wide executive branch had 'endorsed' the collaboration they had not provided budgetary support, including for employing Dja Dja Wurrung individuals in contract and seasonal bushfire positions. Managers said 'roughly' AUD\$800,000 had to be reallocated within DELWP's regional budget over 3 years to fund these positions. Similarly, they had intervened to overcome various minor hindrances to placing people in these positions, such as making exceptions to institutional restrictions on criminal convictions or finding funds to support necessary training and certifications. At a more symbolic level, many interviewees spoke of the importance of these same managers showing 'leadership', meaning they repeatedly demonstrated to internal and external parties that they were committed to treating Dja Dja Wurrung peoples as partners. This had a dual effect, as some Dja Dja Wurrung people noted, at less senior levels within the agencies' regional offices. Those who were, like the senior managers, personally motivated to support collaboration felt authorised, while those actively or passively resistant to the collaboration – 'just waiting for that time for it to fail' (P8) – felt censured. Sustaining the collaboration, one Dja Dja Wurrung person said, it requires managers with 'a community reputation, and a reasonable government reputation, to say "we can just do this"' (P6).

Asked about the major obstacles to creating more collaborative relationships between Aboriginal peoples and agencies, all Aboriginal interviewees and many non-Indigenous interviewees spoke about the cultural distance between these parties. This had two primary aspects. First, it was

routinely observed that many Aboriginal peoples have ‘a distrust of government [agencies]’ (P1) because ‘a lot of our people have been mucked over by government organisations’ (P11) and the settler state more generally. One Dja Dja Wurrung person (P10) captured the sentiments of several others when they summarised that:

[There is] a lot of deep-seated angst and anger that still comes through . . . We don’t forgive easily because if we’re being disrespected, you’ve got to earn that trust back. We’re dealing with angst from a couple of centuries of oppression and governmental control.

This distrust can mean that individuals, whether themselves non-Indigenous or Aboriginal, are sometimes received by Aboriginal peoples as untrustworthy or illegitimate because they work ‘for government’, forestalling any engagement. Alternately, government employees gain trust often under the understanding that they may lose it when they ‘break promises’ due of events, policy changes or decisions beyond their personal control. Second, as many said, government agencies can be culturally hostile or alien places for some Aboriginal employees.⁴¹ Their offices are typically culturally ‘white’ spaces, meaning ‘you can walk into an [agency] office sometimes and there’s no Aboriginal flags, there’s no Aboriginal people, and you feel like a fish out of water’ (P10). Such spaces can be ‘very daunting’ (P11), particularly as there may be only one Aboriginal person within a given organisational unit, leading to them being interpellated as the ‘representative blackfella for everything’ (P2). Most Aboriginal interviewees could readily recall a time where they were given the ridiculous task of explaining what ‘Aboriginal peoples’ en masse felt about a given subject. Such feelings of ‘being sort of the odd one out’ (P8) could also be compounded for some by their comparative lack of experience with bureaucracies. Whereas many interviewees accepted procedural slowness and setbacks as a natural part of life in a government agency, some Dja Dja Wurrung people with less experience in these contexts found these same phenomena perplexing and disheartening. ‘The governmental bureaucratic mumbo jumbo’, as an Aboriginal person said (P10), ‘just the vanilla governmental business that goes on . . . it is exhausting’.

Sustaining collaboration

Building the collaboration to its present point has required the individuals and groups involved to overcome or, at the least, manage these significant obstacles, as well as the legions of everyday misunderstandings and complications of bureaucracy. In explaining how they had collectively persevered through several years together, many spoke of the importance of central Dja Dja Wurrung and non-Indigenous actors establishing relationships of trust, obligation, and honesty. This was widely understood as a more general principle – that in any collaboration ‘the relationship is critical, and you just need to take the time to build the relationship’ (P9) – which had nonetheless been applied beyond the usual bounds in this instance. Asked about maintaining the collaboration, a non-Indigenous manager (P4) stated:

I cannot over-emphasize the need to have a trusting relationship. The more you open yourself to people, the more important it feels to you . . . the days where you think ‘oh, Christ, this is hard’, you can just go, ‘I know what this means to me’ . . . you kind of have to be a bit vulnerable.

Being ‘open’ or ‘vulnerable’ is not typical of relationships between higher and lower level staff in these agencies, nor is it typical of the relationships between higher level staff and the external ‘stakeholder’ groups they routinely interact with, such as foresters, environmentalists and Aboriginal groups. Bushfire agencies, like other emergency management agencies, are command-and-control

organisations with a robust hierarchal structure and corresponding culture. People in the senior levels of regional offices will generally know individuals in the lower or lowest levels of the institutional hierarchy, but they do not interact with them on a day-to-day basis or have direct reporting relationships. Furthermore, as a Dja Dja Wurrung ranger said, 'a lot of traditional owner groups don't have relationships with people in Parks Victoria or the regional directors [of DELWP]' as a rule (P11). But, in this instance, individuals saw the need for such relationships across organisations and between bureaucratic levels and put personal effort, during both work and private time, into building lines of communication that arguably sidestepped the 'chain of command'. This had the benefit not only of reinforcing individuals' investments in the collaboration, and reducing misunderstandings, but also allowing more senior managers to intervene in problems identified by Dja Dja Wurrung people who were at once partners and employees in 'lower' levels.

It was also apparent that, beyond interpersonal relationships, many interviewees were motivated by shared ideological commitments to partnership. While these commitments were diverse in their respective origins and expression, they collectively reinforced the idea that state agencies and traditional owner groups *should* be partners. For most non-Indigenous government actors, this was grounded in a sense that settler governments and their various institutions owed a historical debt to traditional owner groups such as Dja Dja Wurrung. Past (and present) mistreatment gave bushfire agencies a moral obligation to 'do better', though, as several people noted, within their policy documents and enabling legislation, these agencies are not conceived as instruments of social justice or equity; they are in 'the business of risk management' (P7), not intercultural reconciliation. Furthermore, whereas some of these government actors were uncertain about how collaboration with Dja Dja Wurrung might relate to their key institutional goal, reducing 'risk' to human life and property, most were assured of the social benefits. To give an example, a non-Indigenous manager (P1) spoke of an epiphany they experienced at a traditional burn, where:

It just dawned on me then and there, this is not even about putting a fire in [that site], this is about – and I've said this before – this is about the people. This is about bringing people back, and the power that has . . . reconnecting people with land is really, really important.

Such statements closely aligned with those of their Dja Dja Wurrung colleagues, who similarly felt that being partners was foremost 'a healing thing' (P6) and 'all about the people' (P11) rather than managing risk, biodiversity or some other calculable policy goal. Nonetheless, the reasons given by Dja Dja Wurrung people for their commitment to partnership were different. As several explained, prominent figures within the Dja Dja Wurrung community had for some time taken the position that Aboriginal peoples and traditional owner groups 'cannot afford to be disengaged' (P6) from negotiations with settler governments. This was evidenced by the 2013 agreement and partly inspired, as some noted, by the ideals of past elders such as Doug Nicholls (1906–1988) and William Cooper (1861–1941) to 'walk' or cooperate with non-Indigenous people. As a Dja Dja Wurrung person (P8) explained:

. . . at the end of the day we're better off walking together. The last 50 years, we could have walked away [from the government], but like Uncle Doug and all them said 'we're going to walk together'.⁴²

This ideal of 'walking together', raised frequently in discussions of Dja Dja Wurrung's involvement, was understood to serve a strategic purpose. Placing greater numbers of their people in long-term, multi-year or seasonal roles within agencies would, as several explained, build the collective capacity and resources of Dja Dja Wurrung peoples and contracting relationships with DDWCAC. This strategy would also, they predicted, eventually put greater numbers of Dja Dja Wurrung

individuals in more senior positions where they could influence government policies and practices internally, or, as one commented dryly, ‘the only way we’ll beat them is joining them’ (P8).

As interviewees identified many other factors that had helped sustain the collaboration, we have therefore describe only the four factors that were raised by multiple people. These included, first, that DDWCAC and the state agencies both contained senior figures with a decade or more of experience within government bureaucracies. These individuals’ insights into policy processes, institutional change and the obscure inner workings of the settler state became an important resource to their peers at different points, particularly in helping Dja Dja Wurrung individuals to react strategically to institutional barriers. Second, appropriate and ‘work-ready’ Dja Dja Wurrung people with the skills, formal qualifications, experience and interest were available to be placed in the positions within 2–3 years of the 2013 agreement. This was comparatively quick and, some surmised, would not necessarily be the case elsewhere. Third, those Dja Dja Wurrung individuals felt they had a degree of independence as traditional owners within agencies. This is not to suggest that those agencies were not pervasively ‘white’ contexts, as outlined above, but that a small fraction of that Whiteness has been alleviated by, for example, placing Aboriginal art and material artefacts on display, and having meet-ups just for Dja Dja Wurrung staff where ‘we have no agenda, there’s no ‘outcomes’, we have no reporting . . . it’s cultural business and it’s not government business’ (P10).

Finally, several people identified an exploratory attitude as crucial to the collaboration’s progress. This related both to the question of how to collaborate and also, more specifically, how to do plan and conduct traditional burns, or *djandak wi*. At the beginning, as a non-Indigenous manager commented (P4), ‘I probably had no idea, to be honest, how to make [the partnership] work’, but like others they persisted with the maxim that ‘let’s do the right thing before we can do everything right’. ‘For me’, a Dja Dja Wurrung person (P11) said, ‘it’s about getting runs on the board . . . we learn as we go’.⁴³ Another non-Indigenous officer (P7) put it this way:

I think whilst there is a desire for [Dja Dja Wurrung peoples] to be getting back to ‘historic burning practices’, for want of a better term, there’s a significant hiatus in their experience . . . So, it’s about them getting the opportunity to start to re-learn some of that expertise.

This experimental attitude, which was widespread but not universal across participants, had been important to creating a sense of a common ‘project’ and, more specifically, making sure the first burns conducted by Dja Dja Wurrung occurred. Rather than follow the precautionary approach often utilised by agencies to a ‘new’ practice, individuals at different levels had dedicated themselves to ‘giving it a go’ (P12), as one Dja Dja Wurrung person described, persevering through institutional inertia, bureaucratic checks and the negative comments of doubtful colleagues and stakeholders (Figure 3).

Existing and emergent vulnerabilities

In many cases, discussions with participants about the strengths of the collaboration between Dja Dja Wurrung peoples and the agencies led logically to discussions about its vulnerabilities. The institutional terms of the collaboration can give a misleading impression of its robustness, because although DELWP is a large organisation with approximately 3,000 employees, and DDWCAC has approximately 350 registered members, the collaboration involves fewer than two dozen people directly. If, as participants noted, having a set of motivated actors positioned across different levels of agency hierarchies has been vital to their successes, it is therefore necessary to consider the several potential reasons one of these actors could leave their role or the Murray Goldfields region entirely. As many noted, not only is there a general ‘churn’ of employees within and between such



Figure 3. Aboriginal ranger spreading fire at a burn on Dja Dja Wurrung country, April 2018.
Source: Timothy Neale.

agencies, but an initiative's success can also engender its demise. In this case, internal and external publicity of the collaboration had created greater demand for certain actors to liaise with internal and external parties, putting them at risk of becoming oversubscribed and 'burnt out', or, alternately, being 'poached' for more illustrious or highly-paid positions elsewhere. Related to this was the fact that the collaboration's accomplishments had led to a demand for more Dja Dja Wurrung people to take up entry-level positions within agencies, but there was some uncertainty over whether there were sufficient numbers of young people interested in meeting this demand. Putting these factors together, we suggest that the success of such a collaboration creates human capital pressures, illustrated by the tension between the need for 'new recruits' with the appropriate skills and principles and the need to retain 'founders' who embody those skills and principles.

Other vulnerabilities identified by participants are more clearly economic. As the literatures of both Indigenous development and joint management initiatives have detailed, many excellent projects are compromised by their underlying finances. These systems often operate on 3- or 5-year funding cycles, leading to demands for quick results, onerous reporting requirements and limits on Indigenous organisations' ability to make long-term strategic investments. DDWCAC's engagement in bushfire management has been aided by the funds associated with the 2013 agreement, as those funds have supported staffing and its capacity to act as a subcontractor in natural resource management. However, from an accounting perspective, DDWCAC estimates that the total financial benefits of collaboration have not yet outweighed the costs. It is also apparent that some agency costs that have been paid from pools of money are not guaranteed year-to-year. For example, although DELWP funded four seasonal firefighting positions for Dja Dja Wurrung people during the 2016–2017 fire season, there was no guaranteed funding for the same positions ahead of the 2017–2018 fire season. As summer loomed, regional managers eventually 'found' funds for only two seasonal firefighters. Such roles are important opportunities for Dja Dja Wurrung people to acquire formal training, learn more about the sector and, potentially, be recruited into full-time positions. Uncertainty surrounding financial support for these roles and others is an ongoing

challenge for the parties involved, one which also illustrates larger economic issues for DDWCAC and similar traditional owner corporations elsewhere. Is it economically sustainable for traditional owner corporations to have members remain private employees of government agencies, whether seasonally or full-time, or would it be better for the corporations to become the employer for these individuals? As several participants noted, the sustainable business case for collaborative bushfire management is not altogether clear.⁴⁴

There is one further vulnerability to the collaboration which, though hard to define, can reasonably be summarised as epistemological at heart. As discussed above, some participants spoke of the presence of colleagues who are dubious about the merits of traditional burning and think ‘that it’s not going to work’ (P11) ecologically or socially. At the same time, others noted that the burns helped reduce the adversarial attitude some environmentalist groups had towards agencies and their prescribed burning programmes. These groups, a non-Indigenous manager explained, ‘linked traditional ownership and traditional management with better management’ (P1). ‘We’ve tried to keep the connection separate’ between the traditional burns and the ‘conventional’ burning the agencies perform elsewhere, another said (P4), ‘but people are joining the dots themselves’. These different parties’ scepticism and optimism about the benefits of the *djandak wi* to biodiversity, risk to human life and property, and other management goals are made possible by the relative lack of relevant data about these burns. Data are being collected through agency processes, however, the burns do not have the formal properties of a generic scientific experiment (standardised methods, ‘control’ sites, etc.), and most estimate it will be 10–20 years before there is a strong basis to speak confidently about ecological outcomes. More generally, the merits of conventional prescribed burning in southeast Australia – including in the types of box–ironbark forest found on Dja Dja Wurrung country – continue to be subject to extensive scientific debate.⁴⁵ The collaboration therefore contains many of the necessary ingredients for a potential knowledge controversy.⁴⁶ As two Dja Dja Wurrung people noted (P11, P10), if one of their burns were to escape from its containment lines, or a large bushfire occurred in an area they had treated, doubters and supporters alike would reassess the foundations of traditional burning. At such a moment, what would be the epistemological basis for defending it? These individuals were doubtful that Dja Dja Wurrung peoples’ knowledge and authority to speak for their country would be respected in such a debate.

Discussion and conclusion

Recent critiques of ‘collaboration’ and ‘participation’ in the fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Indigenous Studies have drawn attention to how these terms have risen to the status of generically ‘good’ things in diverse fields of governance and public policy-making.⁴⁷ As several STS scholars note, the turn to participatory approaches emerged out of ‘constitutional changes’ in the relationships between expert groups and wider society during the 1970s and 1980s, and was ostensibly pursued in order to transform those relationships.⁴⁸ This arguably parallels moves within international policy-making to encourage collaboration between state governments and ‘local peoples’, or, more recently, Indigenous peoples, particularly in forms of natural resource management and natural hazard management.⁴⁹ To cite one prominent example, the UN’s Sendai Framework states that ‘through their experience and traditional knowledge’ Indigenous peoples ‘provide an important contribution to the development and implementation of plans and mechanisms’ for disaster risk reduction.⁵⁰ This demonstrates a set of problems relevant to our concerns. There are many reasons why traditional knowledge is a problematic basis for recognition or inclusion, in part because, as Karuk fire ecologist Frank Lake argues, it should not be assumed that Indigenous peoples have traditional knowledge ready at hand or that they are willing or able to share it (particularly with the settler state).⁵¹ A fixation on traditional knowledge embeds our

understanding of Indigenous peoples less within their lives and experiences and more within their apparent alterity or 'timeless cosmological difference'.⁵² Such prescriptions on the grounds for Indigenous recognition illustrate a key problem of participatory governance more generally, namely their failure to reconfigure power relations. The many techniques, programmes and forums devised to include or collaborate with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities or publics affected by a given policy matter have often simply reconstructed the 'dynamics of closure and control that they seek to overcome'.⁵³ By deploying a participatory approach, state actors may often gain a social licence while continuing to retain the power to parse between stakeholders, excluding some and including others who will then have their demands diffused through exhausting consultative processes.

Rather than take participatory governance as a banal good, Chilvers and Kearnes suggest, we should approach each instance of participation as an empirical and contingent 'experiment' that can be assessed according to its strategies and results; such experiments are not pre-given but 'actively produce publics, public issues, material commitments and forms of democratic engagement'.⁵⁴ This is a useful and novel basis from which to approach the collaborations that are emerging in Australia, Canada, the United States and elsewhere between Indigenous peoples and state agencies in relation to the governance of country and, more specifically, bushfire management. Existing framings imply either that such collaborations necessarily actualise Indigenous peoples' aspirations, repress and coerce them to follow settler state imperatives, or are a straightforward expression of Indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge.⁵⁵ These three responses position collaborations as a predetermined expression of something innate rather than, as they are often experienced by those involved, an emergent and pragmatic experiment in exploring the bounds of what is possible. While we are apt to be suspicious of the institutions of settler governments, and the motives of different actors, such summary analyses can obscure the pragmatics and unexpected transformations that emerge through doing collaborative or participatory work.

To return to Dja Dja Wurrung country, while it is possible to examine collaborative bushfire management and detect the presence of familiar influential forces, and colonial language, these tell us little about what it has produced. Based on the narratives of those who have been involved, the difficult work of 'walking together' has involved far more than a contract, resourcing, traditional knowledge or government policy. Even with many factors in its favour – motivated actors, motivated institutions, financial backing and so on – it has been demanding on those involved. While ongoing, we can say that this experiment has produced three key hypotheses of relevance to other similar engagements. First, recognised legal rights to country are not sufficient but may be necessary for Aboriginal parties. Such rights not only place an obligation on government agencies, but they also provide crucial leverage for actors both within and outside those agencies to attract resources and push back against institutional inertia and active resistance. Second, both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous individuals have to seek and gain trust from one another. Overcoming institutional and historical barriers to creating such trust seems to be essential, in part because it produces further commitment from peers and reduces opposition. Third, and finally, agency employees have to go beyond their official roles in order to sustain such collaborations. Strategic improvisation may be required to make and protect space for Aboriginal partners within such culturally White and institutionally conservative contexts.

What does it mean to look at 'walking together' in bushfire management as a decolonising experiment? Our framework is not meant to imply that at some point this 'experiment' could come to an end and, finally, be objectively assessed as successful (or not). Engagements between Indigenous peoples and the settler state do not have clear temporal or spatial boundaries as might be found in a laboratory; rather, they involve interminable manoeuvring and agonistic wrangling towards what seems like a better horizon for the subjects involved. Calling engagements by Dja

Dja Wurrung peoples with settler government and its institutions ‘experimental’ is a way to remain attuned to their open-ended and contingent character. Celebrations of this particular collaboration’s achievements, by agencies and news media alike, can give a misleading impression of their material and practical basis in a set group of sites, individuals, practices and relationships within Dja Dja Wurrung country. These sites, individuals, practices and relationships have been transformed or, to use Chilvers and Kearnes’ phrasing, *actively produced through the collaboration*. They will continue to be actively produced together – or *cultivated* – as more sites are chosen for traditional burning, as more of these sites are integrated into agency plans and documents, as more traditional burns are conducted, as DDWCAC invests more in its natural resource management capacities and as more Dja Dja Wurrung people become central to the everyday business of bushfire management.⁵⁶

This makes apparent the decolonising character of the experiment, as, to return to Tuck and Yang’s definition, the collaboration is materially and structurally redistributing greater control over country into the hands of Aboriginal traditional owners. What is occurring is not decolonisation in the sense of a complete and irreversible transfer of authority, or withdrawal of settler colonial government, but rather the iterative decolonising renovation of the political and practical dominance of settler agencies. These are modest but real gains with nascent and unpredictable effects on those involved. Slowly, resources and authority are less solely on the side of the government and its agencies. Here, we arrive at a synthetic understanding of the decolonial and the experimental. A decolonising experiment is one that allows for ‘the emergence of questions that could not be asked before’ because Indigenous peoples are leading the management of their country. Such experiments materially alter ecologies, the political and economic position of Indigenous peoples, and give rise to new ideas about possible futures and new debates about how country might be cared for *differently*. Perhaps, as some interviewees wondered, Dja Dja Wurrung peoples will have an executive position within bushfire agencies in the future? Or, as one Dja Dja Wurrung person said, ‘I don’t know why we don’t run our own DELWP?’

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ORCID iD

Timothy Neale  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4703-5801>

Notes

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56. It is worth noting that, for the Dja Dja Wurrung authors, the use of fire in the landscape is part of a broader project of cultivating the environment. Fire is linked to the cultivation of culturally important food and fibre plants and animals and, thereby, the revitalisation of Dja Dja Wurrung territory as ‘country’.

Author biographies

Timothy Neale was born in Aotearoa New Zealand and currently lives in Melbourne, Australia, where he is employed as Senior Research Fellow at Deakin University’s Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization. He is the author of *Wild articulations: indigeneity and environmentalism in northern Australia* (University of Hawaii Press, 2017).

Rodney Carter is the Dja Dja Wurrung Group’s CEO and is also a descendant of the Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta peoples, residing in central Victoria at his grandfathers’ country. Carter learnt burning at a young age from an Uncle that managed grasslands on rural rail easements, and eventually spent over a decade in state fire management as a heritage specialist, accredited Burn Officer in Charge, Level 2 Planning Officer and Operations Officer.

Trent Nelson is a proud Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta man. Trent is Chairperson for the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, as well as Dja Dja Wurrung Team leader at Parks Victoria, where he manages the cultural heritage of six joint-managed parks collaboration with three rangers and a project coordinator.

Mick Bourke is a proud Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta man. Mick is also a Cultural Burn Planner with Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic). Having begun his career as a youth justice worker at Rumbalara, Mick’s love of and connection to Country saw him move into land management roles. After serving with Parks Victoria for over four years, he went on to lead efforts to protect cultural heritage with the Yorta Yorta Nation.