

Exploring Social Representations of Indigenous Cultural Fire

Insights from a case study of East Gippsland, Victoria

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I gratefully acknowledge we're meeting today on the lands of the Kurna people

I pay my respects to their elders past and present and extend my respect to Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander people here today

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are the first storytellers, scientists, researchers



Research Context

1. “The big fire problem”: Recognition of and reckoning with the limits of dominant settler-colonial approaches to land and fire management
1. Recognition and (Re)-centering of Indigenous people and their knowledge within fire and land management
 - Cultural burning initiatives expanding – at a range of scales, diverse actors
 - Institutional interest and support growing
 - Discourse - popular texts and media



Landcare Groups back aboriginal cultural burning

Aboriginal cultural burning practices are being backed by Landcare Groups and the Victorian Opposition as a way of managing farmland. Here's why.



2019



2020



2021



Existing research: Indigenous-settler fire partnerships and engagements

What researchers and practitioners are telling us:

Barriers

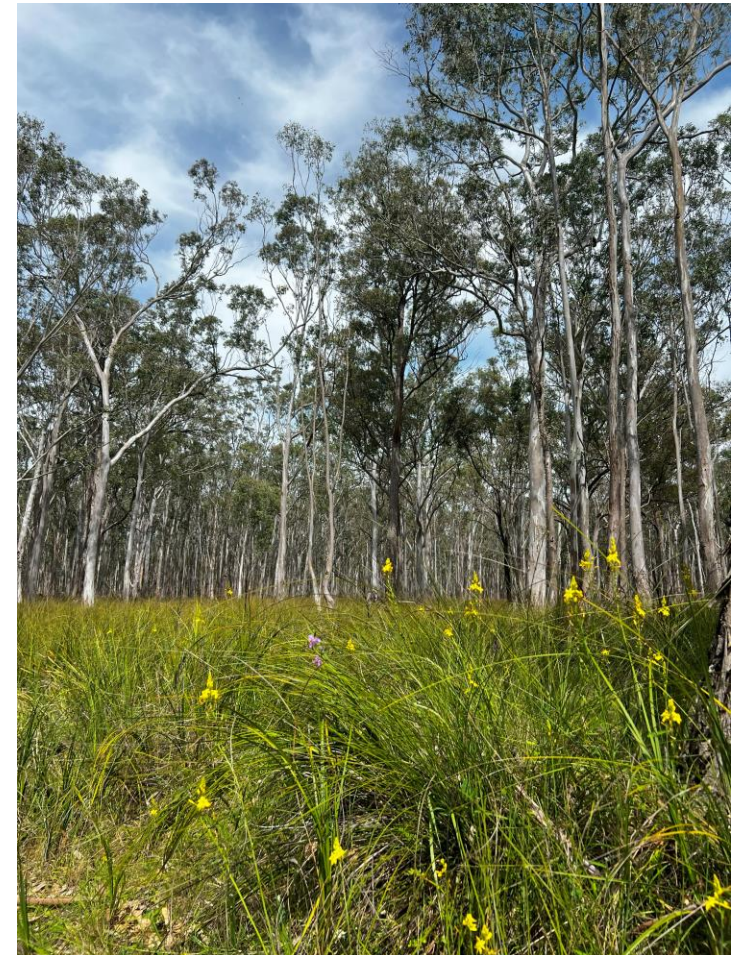
- **Colonial load**
- Legislative and regulatory frameworks
- Persistence and dominance of settler-colonialism and Western paradigms

Enablers

- building two-way trust, mutual respect and understanding
- **Cultural confidence, cultural safety**

Research needs

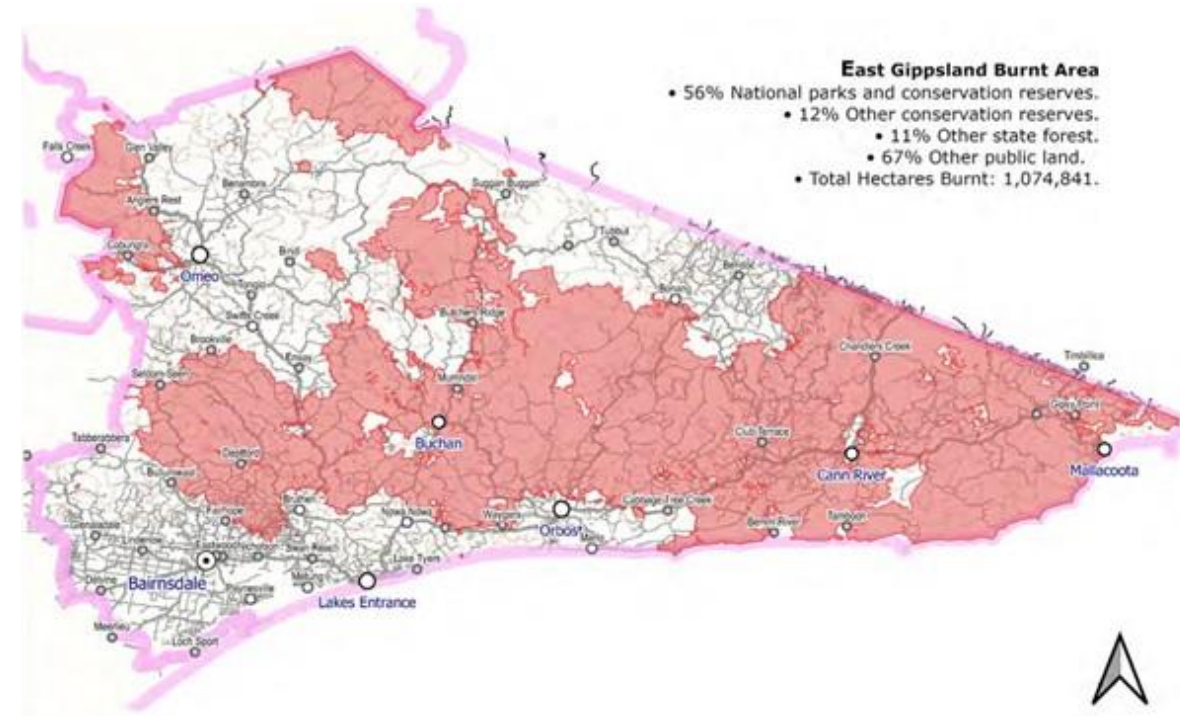
- Empirical studies into the “**other-side**” of settler-Indigenous relations (Beggs et al. 2023)
- Identify potential change agents and **leverage points**



Phase 1: Case study on Gumnai-Kurnai Country / East Gippsland, Victoria

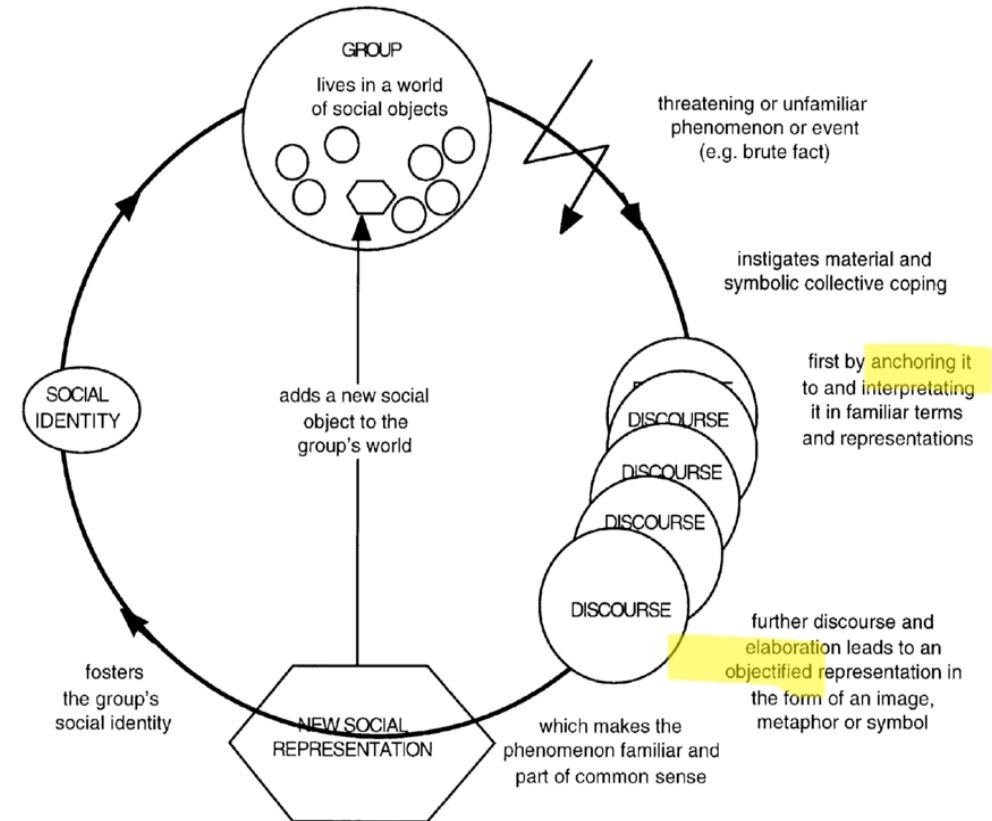
- Aim: accessing a *broad* range of views relating to ICF
- EG landscape provides rich and complex context for study:
 - High bushfire risk and ecologically significant
 - diverse land tenure and ownership
 - Industry transitions
 - growing presence of initiatives seeking support Aboriginal Groups in re-application of cultural fire

“He used to describe East Gippsland as a sea of forest with islands of freehold land within it” (Ex-forester)



What are social representations?

(SRs) are shared, socially constructed, systems of values, ideas and practices that help people make sense of novel or unfamiliar concepts



Sociogenesis of social representations from Wagner et al. (1999: 98)



Why study social representations?

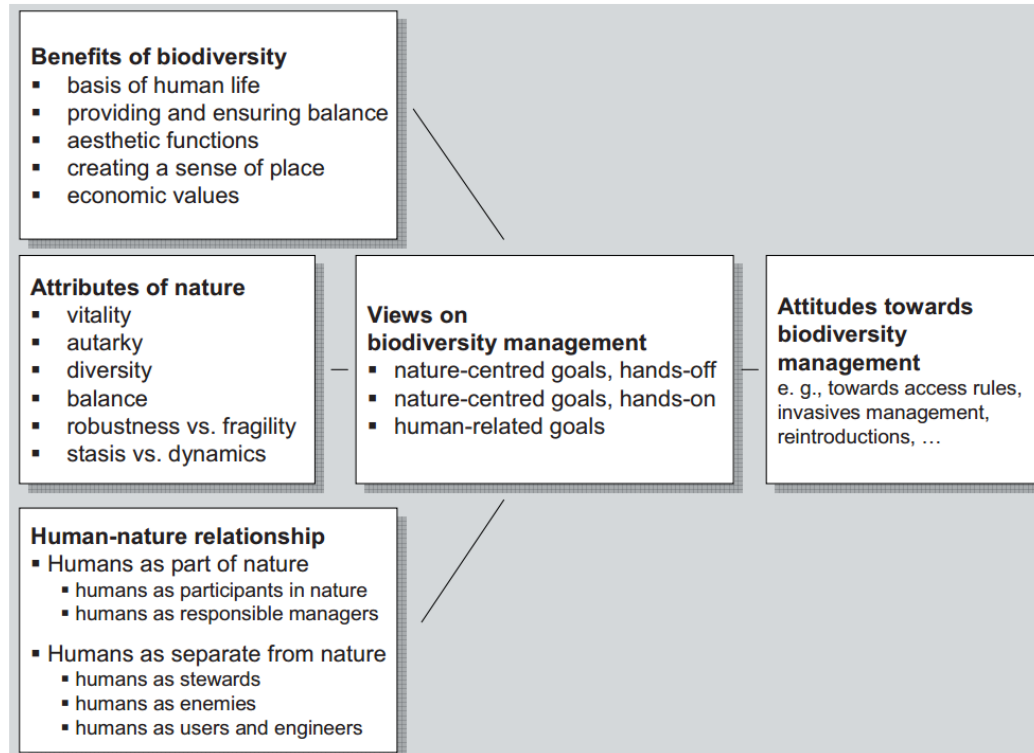


Figure 2 Conceptual framework: components of social representations of biodiversity identified in one or more of the 19 focus-group discussions

→ Conceptual framework adapted from existing studies of social representations of **forests** (Ford, Williams, forthcoming), and **biodiversity** (Buijs, 2008)

→ SRT can help us understand:

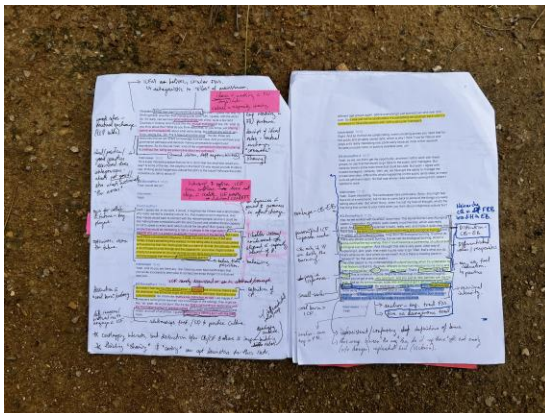
- How individuals make-sense of unfamiliar concepts (e.g. ICF) by linking it to their own context
- **How these meanings influence attitudes and behaviour** →

Buijs, et al. (2008). Looking beyond superficial knowledge gaps: Understanding public representations of biodiversity. *The International Journal of Biodiversity Science and Management*, 4:2, 65-80



What we did

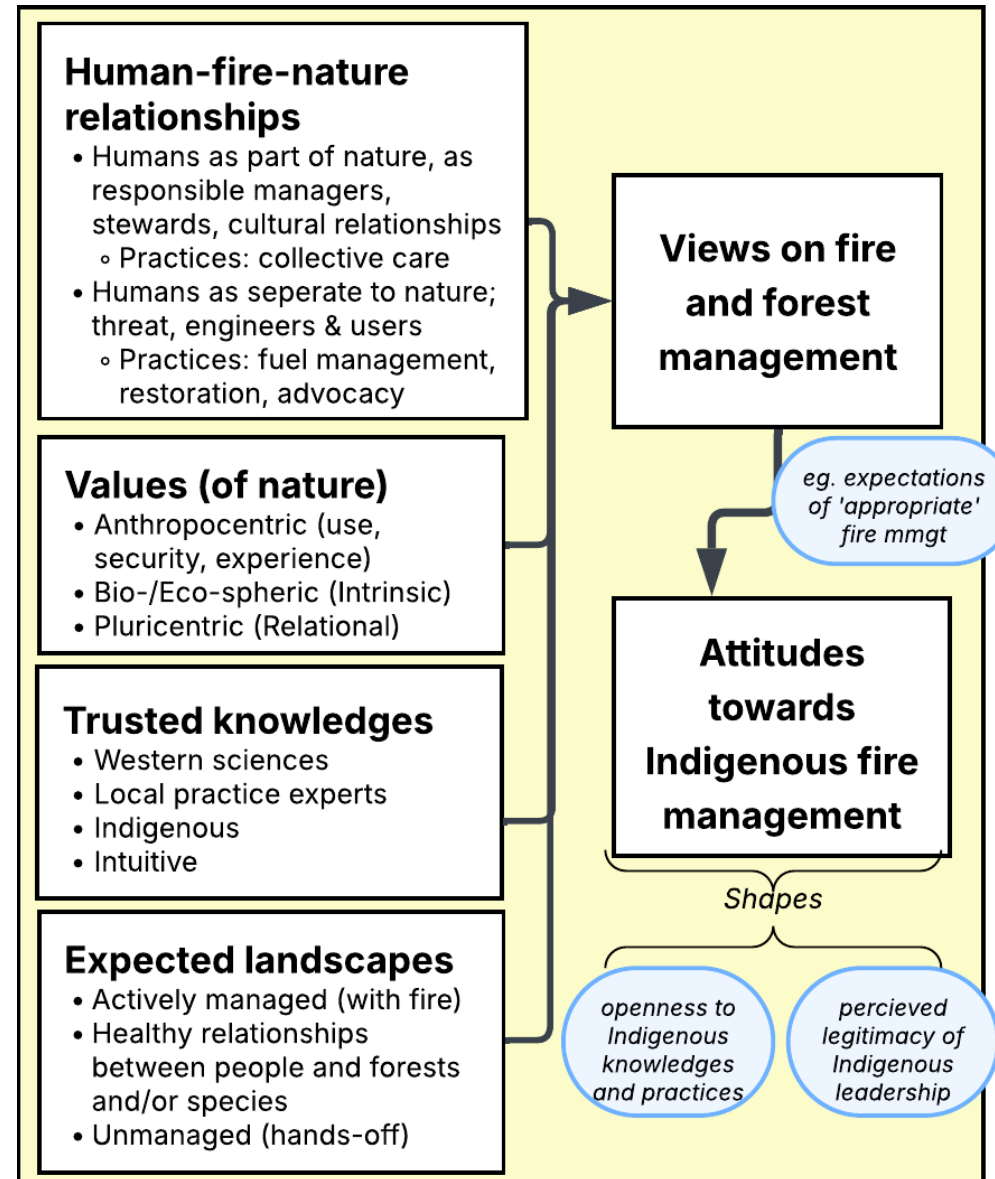
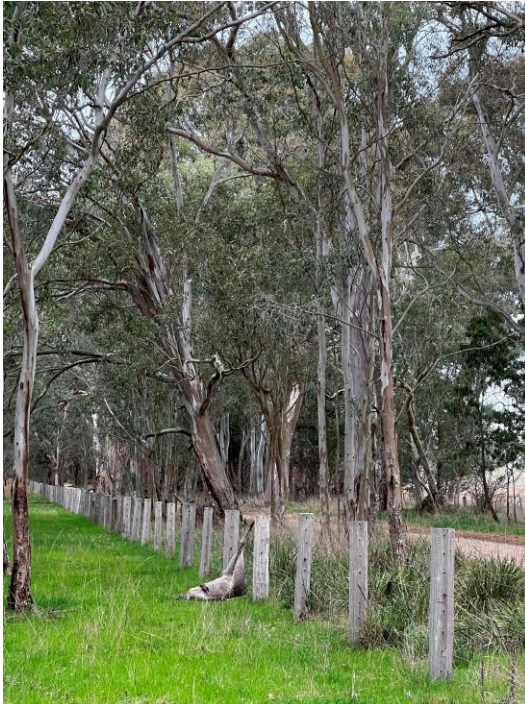
Data Collection Methods	Dataset
29 Semi structured interviews with 31 participants	- Interview recordings (29.3hrs) → - Annotated Transcripts
Participant observation at community events where Indigenous cultural practices and knowledge were a topic or focus of the discussion	Ethnographic notes interactions, conversations, practices observed at 4 community events
	Researcher Memos



What we found... so far



Components of Cultural Fire SRs



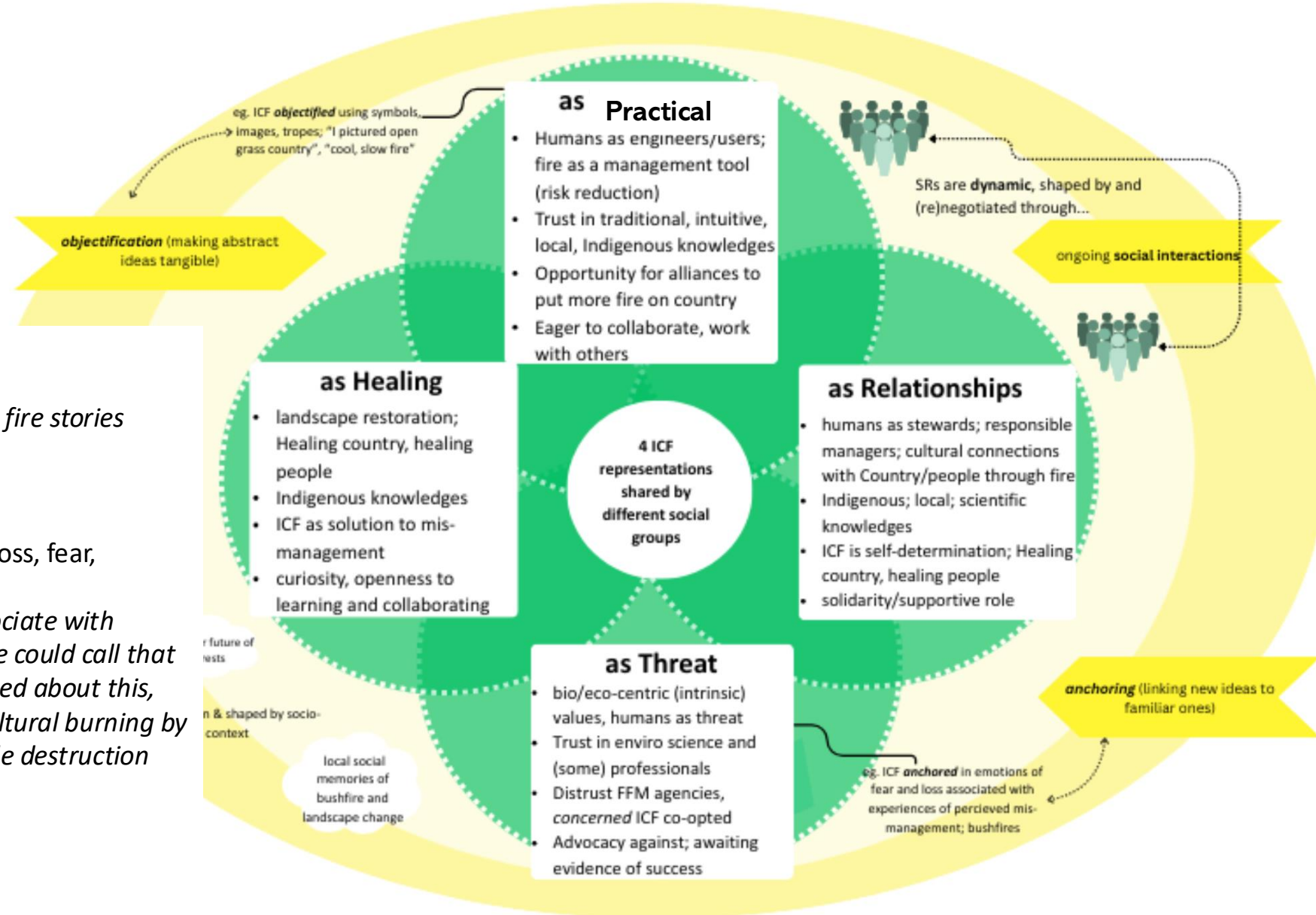
Shifting, sharing and negotiating meanings: 4 *evolving* SRs of Cultural Fire

As Practical

- Perceived alliances *"I grew up with fire stories also..."* (Farmer, CFA vol)

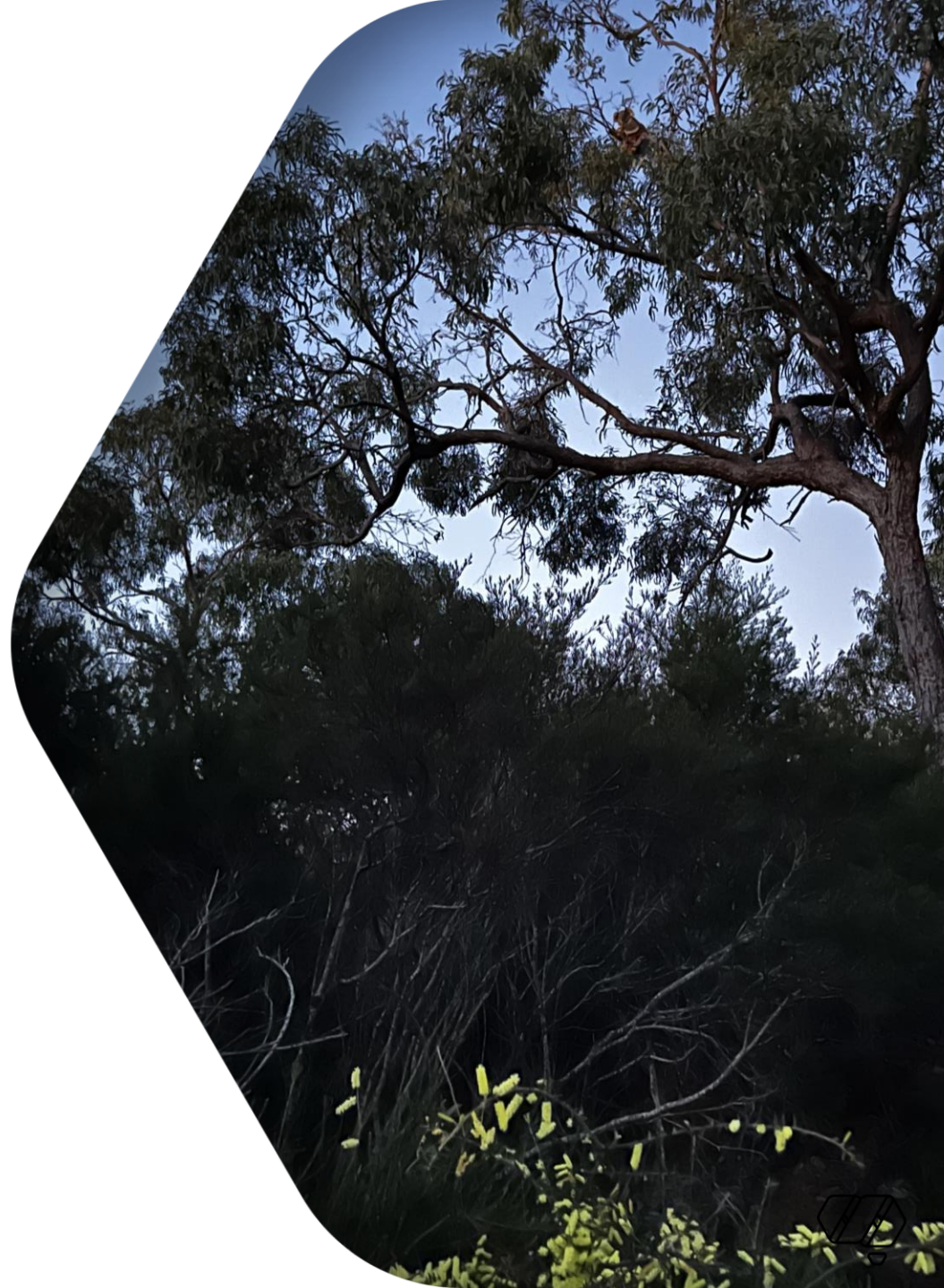
As Threat

- Emotional anchoring – feelings of loss, fear,
- *"A healing burn is something I associate with cultural burning...I can't see how he could call that a healing burn. I'm very concerned about this, [pause], this appropriation of of cultural burning by FFMV to allow them to do incredible destruction with their burning..."*



Some takeaways

- Four overlapping representations highlight diverse understandings of ICF shared by social groups
- Preliminary findings may help identify potential leverage points and change agents
- Understanding settler representations is crucial for developing respectful, culturally safe and meaningful partnerships.



Thank you!

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Further information

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