

Changing landscapes, shifting meanings: settler representations of Cultural Fire

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Exploring social representations of Indigenous Cultural Fire

This study explores the social representations among non-Indigenous people in a Victorian case study of Indigenous Cultural Fire. We identified four *evolving* representations; shaped by diverse experiences, knowledge, and fire narratives, and each with implications for practice and attitudes toward Indigenous fire management.

Why representations matter

In southeast Australia, cultural burning initiatives are expanding alongside growing settler interest and institutional partnerships. While research documents the success of some collaborative projects, enduring barriers remain. Research and Indigenous practitioners have highlighted the critical role of settler representations in shaping respectful partnerships and dismantling barriers¹. Yet, non-Indigenous representations of Indigenous Cultural Fire (ICF) remain underexamined. This project explores different social representations of ICF among non-Indigenous people through a case study of East Gippsland, Victoria.

What are social representations (SRs)?

Social Representations are shared, socially constructed, systems of values, ideas and practices that help people make sense of novel or unfamiliar concepts. They shape behaviour and attitudes; studies show different SRs of biodiversity and forests influence perceptions of how they should be managed. Social Representations Theory is used in this study to explore the different meanings and practices associated with ICF, and how these emerging representations may influence possibilities for collaboration.

Phase 1: East Gippsland case study

This research used a mixed-qualitative approach focusing on a case study of East Gippsland/Gunaikurnai Country.

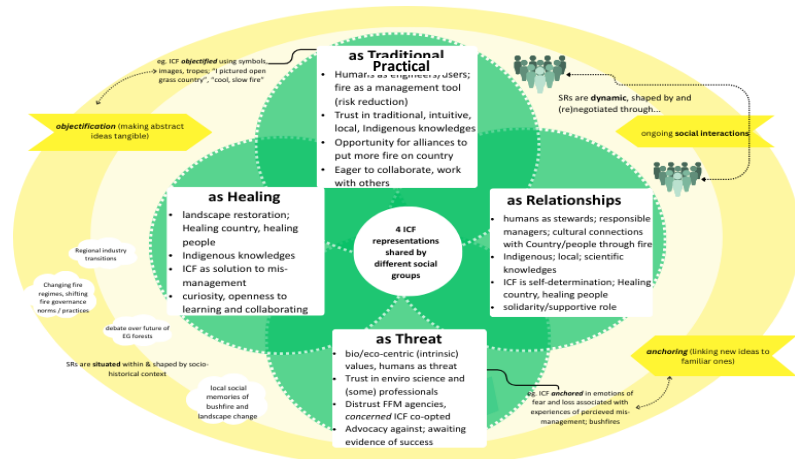


Fig 2. Four evolving social representations of ICF. Representations are characterized by different prioritisation of four components underlying discussions of ICF; human-fire-nature relationships (HFNR), Values (of nature), Trusted knowledges, and Expected landscapes (adapted Buijs et al. 2008; Ford et al., forthcoming). SRs of ICF are each associated with different attitudes towards fire (and land) management generally, and have implications for behaviour and attitudes that may support (or hinder) Indigenous fire stewardship.

Data collection involved 33 interviews with non-Indigenous people and ethnographic fieldwork conducted at community events where Indigenous knowledges and cultural practices were discussed.

Emerging representations of ICF

In discussing ICF, participants drew on diverse concepts to link their understanding with existing knowledge, experience and practices of more familiar *objects* of fire, forests and nature. We identified **four core components** underlying discussions (see Fig 2.). Participants combined and prioritised notions of these components in different ways, forming **four overlapping SRs of ICF** shared by distinct social groups, as illustrated in Fig 2.

Insights: entry points for change

Findings highlight the emergent and contested nature of ICF representations; suggesting a moment of change in public understandings of the place of fire and Indigenous knowledge and practices in the landscape. Our analysis reveals several elements of SRs shared across individuals and groups, and even more that are contested; providing insight into 'windows of opportunity' for social change. Findings may support improved communication and engagement strategies to enable culturally-informed, respectful engagement and future fire collaborations.

Further information

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