Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia

Final report

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians across all the lands on which we live and work, and we pay our respects to Elders both past, present and emerging. We recognise that these lands and waters have always been places of teaching, research and learning.

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Acknowledgements

Executive summary

This research project, funded by Natural Hazards Research Australia (the Centre), explored opportunities for enhancing collaboration between Indigenous land and fire managers and state, territory, and local government agencies. It focused on integrating Indigenous voice and representation into governance structures and developing research principles for ethical and collaborative cultural land management. The project was driven by recommendations from previous research and inquiries, including the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

The project employed a mixed-methods approach, combining interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous experts and workshops with Indigenous land management organisations, Traditional Owner groups, government agencies, university researchers and others. This approach aimed to gain insights into current and desired future states of collaborative engagement and identify opportunities for strengthening collaborative governance and research. The research design and methods were guided by Indigenous research methodologies, emphasising relationship-building and Indigenous self-determination.

This report outlines several key findings based on the project's data collection and analysis, though the primary key findings are that:

1. Collaborative cultural land management projects continue to grow in size and scope across south-east Australia.

2. Though there have been significant structural changes in recent years, these collaborations occur in a social, legal, economic and political context shaped by substantial and ongoing inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations.

3. Given this context, collaborations rely to a significant extent on participants creating interpersonal and interorganisational bonds based on trust, respect for Indigenous rights and knowledge, and resourcing by non-Indigenous organisations

4. Much can be achieved within these collaborations, though perhaps the most effective means of support is the provision of long-term funding and formal collaborative agreements

5. Key barriers include the continuing lack of structural reforms to legal and economic arrangements regarding the management of Country, in particular formal recognition of Indigenous peoples' proprietary land rights, as well as the lack of formal accountability in many collaborative arrangements.

Subsequently, the project team presents implications for future research and policymaking. The first of the research projects would focus on evaluating the performance of governments and government agencies in supporting Indigenous cultural fire management. Currently, despite government commitments to support cultural fire management, there are no known or shared indicators of performance. Developing simple, measurable and culturally appropriate indicators is important to creating accountability within collaborations. The second research project would centre on the creation of a group or lab to support researchers based at Indigenous organisations. Indigenous project partners and participants spoke to the need for Indigenous organisations to keep developing their own internal research capacity, identifying the lack of connection between Indigenous people in research roles as a significant obstacle to building and maintaining this capacity. The policy implications all relate to enabling Indigenous self-determination within the growing 'contact zone' of collaboration. Specifically, these include suggestions for government agencies to provide dedicated ongoing funding to Indigenous organisations for cultural land management, establishing structured engagement mechanisms, resourcing relationship building, ensuring culturally appropriate engagement and ensuring accountability and transparency in dealings with Indigenous organisations.

The project's findings highlight the complex dynamics of intercultural collaborations in cultural land management. Indigenous groups are actively navigating imposed non-Indigenous structures and demonstrating resilience in revitalising cultural rights, knowledge and practices. However, progress is often

hindered by systemic challenges. The findings and implications offer a roadmap for fostering more equitable, effective and sustainable partnerships that recognise Indigenous rights, knowledge and values in land and fire management. By prioritising Indigenous self-determination, land and emergency management agencies can work towards a future where natural hazard management is grounded in sustainability and respect for Country.

End-user statements

Dr Kat Haynes, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, New South Wales

It has been a pleasure to engage and guide the *Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia* project. When the preceding project began, with the then Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre, in 2020, I was at University of Wollongong and part of the research team, I then moved to Natural Hazards Research Australia and participated as a research manager and am now at Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) as an agency stakeholder. This musical chairs has enabled me to see the project evolve and to understand the research – the research needs, project outcomes and their impacts, from multiple perspectives.

The project's insights into the forms of relationships and kinds of values that underpin collaborative natural hazard management are useful to a wide range of audiences. These forms of collaboration are growing quickly, across Australia, and many agencies and staff operating in the space are seeking guidance about how best to proceed, balancing legal requirements, government policies, practical realities, and individuals' personal connections and ethical commitments. In particular, the project's principles and protocols for collaboration have great potential to impact agency practice, as is demonstrated by the fact that they are already being utilised in multiple contexts. In my work environment at Science and Insights, NSW DCCEEW, the project provides evidence and justification for greater focus on building and maintaining enduring relationships with Indigenous partners through community led cultural science.

Aidan Galpin, Country Fire Service, South Australia

Increasingly, bushfire and land management agencies in Australia are recognising the need to work in partnership with First Nations communities to get the best outcomes for residents and Country. This is an issue I have been engaged with over a number of years through different organisations, and so I was very pleased to be able to work with the team in developing this project. I am very pleased to see it has produced not only a range of interesting findings and implications for practitioners and policymakers working in this space, but also outputs outlining principles and protocols that those people can put into their work right away. I look forward to sharing these outputs with staff in both the Country Fire Service and other allied agencies here in South Australia.

Introduction

This research was funded and supported by Natural Hazards Research Australia between July 2022 and December 2024. Building on the project team's previous collaborations and the views of stakeholders (see Costello et al. 2021), the *Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia* (CLMRG) project has sought to develop research that responded to two key recommendations from the preceding project. Specifically, these recommendations came from a series of workshops with Traditional Owners in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, and the two identified priorities for future action within the research context were:

- **Recommendation 6**: Include Indigenous voice and representation in governance structures of institutions and land management agencies.

- **Recommendation 8**: Develop a framework of broad research principles/protocols and processes to guide more ethical and collaborative cultural land management research.

Cultural land management has always been vitally important to Indigenous peoples in Australia; however, they have largely been excluded from opportunities to engage in the management of their ancestral Country. Previous research has demonstrated that many barriers remain for those wishing to start and sustain cultural land management projects in south-east Australia, particularly where such projects require the participation of government land and emergency management agencies.

This project also relates to several recommendations from state inquiries following the 2019-2020 bushfire season, as well as directly addressing two key recommendations of the 2020 *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* (RCNNDA 2020): Recommendation 18.1 Australian, state, territory and local governments should engage further with Traditional Owners to explore the relationship between Indigenous land and fire management and natural disaster resilience; and Recommendation 18.2 Australian, state, territory and local governments should explore further opportunities to leverage Indigenous land and fire management insights, in the development, planning and execution of public land management activities.

This research aimed to guide key issues relating to Recommendation 6 and Recommendation 8 (detailed above) and new insights into opportunities to create and support relationships between these parties. To this end, the project conducted interviews with key experts with relevant experience and expertise and convened workshops with Indigenous land management organisations, Traditional Owner groups, government land management agencies and university-based researchers. These activities aimed to provide new insights into the views of Indigenous land and fire managers and others regarding the present and desired future state of engagements between Indigenous land and fire managers and state, territory and local government agencies (e.g. fire and land management agencies), supporting those engagements in the process. They also provided opportunities for strengthening collaborative governance and research involving Indigenous land and fire managers and state, territory and local government agencies (e.g. fire and land management agencies).

Expected outcomes of producing these new insights was to support those existing engagements in the process through the research process and identify and facilitate further opportunities for leverage in public land management activities with advice about appropriate principles, protocols and processes and governance structures. The intent is that this research will be utilised by a range of groups, including:

- land and fire management agencies, particularly staff with operational and policy roles relating to partnerships with Indigenous communities

- Traditional Owner groups and Indigenous land management organisations, particularly staff engaging in land and fire management activities

- universities and research organisations, particularly staff engaging in research partnerships with Indigenous communities.

Research approach

This project builds on the 2021 *Cultural Land Management in South-east Australia* (CLMSE) project (Costello et al. 2021), which scoped a new Indigenous-led approach to the development of research priorities and projects relating to cultural land management. Drawing on key recommendations outlined above, this project aimed to:

- build on and enhance existing partnerships and relationships between Traditional Owner groups, Indigenous land management organisations, and university-based researchers

- create opportunities to generate new and/or future partnerships and relationships between these groups

- support opportunities to assist end-user groups in developing and implementing relevant policy and practice initiatives.

This project began in July 2022 with an intended end date of April 2023. However, due to extenuating circumstances the project was extended to December 2024 with the agreement of project partners.

Project governance

The project team included a multi-institutional team engaged in a range of relevant research projects and other initiatives. Through the engagement of the project team in project activities (e.g. workshops, meetings), the project leadership worked to develop collaborative opportunities both within the team and with project partners.

A central component of the project's development and execution was the Project Steering Group (PSG), comprised of Indigenous researchers and representatives from Traditional Owner organisations. The PSG met quarterly through the project, according to member availability. The project was also advised by a Translation and Implementation Panel (TIP) which also met quarterly and was made up of representative from land and emergency management agencies. Both the PSG and TIP were vital in ensuring the project was of high quality and utility to its key stakeholders and audiences.

Research questions:

During the project's development, the project team, PSG and TIP identified two central project research questions:

1. What are the existing and potential points within the governance structures of relevant institutions and land management agencies for Indigenous voice and representation to be included equitably and effectively?

2. What are appropriate research principles, protocols and processes capable of guiding more ethical and collaborative cultural land management research in the future?

To ensure the success and relevance of the projects' research activities and outputs, the project was expected to meet the following objectives:

Objective 1: Build on and enhance existing partnerships and relationships between Indigenous land management organisations, Traditional Owner groups and university-based researchers.

Objective 2: Create opportunities to generate new and/or future partnerships and relationships between land management agencies, Indigenous land management organisations, Traditional Owner groups and university-based researchers.

Objective 3: Create an environment where Indigenous land management organisations and Traditional Owner groups are actively leading and developing research projects.

Objective 4: Support opportunities for existing and potential Indigenous HDR (Honours, Masters or PhD) projects related to cultural land management in association with the Centre.

Objective 5: Support opportunities to assist end-user groups in developing and implementing relevant policy and practice initiatives (e.g. cultural fire or Indigenous land management strategies).

Research design and methods

This project was designed to have an iterative structure, with a first round of data collection (workshops and interviews) being used to refine the project scope and produce preliminary findings that became the focus of a second round of data collection (workshops). Within this iterative structure, this project employed a range of qualitative research methods (refer to below for summaries of research methods) including:

1. synthetic reviews of relevant literature and guidelines

2. workshop roundtable discussions

3. interviews with subject matter experts.

The research design and methods were guided by Indigenous research methodologies, scholarship and ethical guidelines. Data collection and data analysis were developed in partnership with local Indigenous research partners as well as the project's PSG, utilising principles of Indigenous research methodologies including foregrounding relationship building, Indigenous sovereignty and the protection of Indigenous intellectual property (Hemming, Rigney, and Berg 2010; Smith 2012). A consent protocol to enable Indigenous peoples' participation was developed using key national guidelines (AIATSIS 2020) and in consultation with the project's PSG and Indigenous partner organisations (refer to Natural Hazards Research Australia 2022).

Principles and protocols

The first phase of the project involved conducting a review of existing literature relating to cultural land management research and governance that was collated by the PSG and research team. The review scope existing academic literature, policy documents and guidelines pertaining to cultural land management in south-east Australia, as well as international

scholarship on Indigenous research methodologies and Australian guidelines for ethical research and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more broadly (e.g., AIATSIS 2020). The purpose of reviewing this body of literature was to distil and synthesise a set of core principles for cultural land management research and governance with examples of associated processes and protocols, as defined below:

1. **Principle** - A fundamental proposition, E.g. *Indigenous peoples have the right to speak authoritatively about Country*.

2. **Process** - Structure put in place that supports the principle, E.g. *Resource and support Indigenous representative bodies to act as partners*

3. **Protocol** - Practice that constitutes or supports the process, E.g. *Establish guidelines and requirements for co-design and co-delivery with Indigenous representative bodies*

This approach was guided by the research team and IPSG's previous experience and identification of key findings and recommendations from previous research, the outputs were expected to inform subsequent phases of the research projects' data collection and engagement activities of the research project specifically, producing a set of outputs/guidelines that can be utilised by land and emergency management agencies and research institutions to inform ethical and collaborative cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia more broadly.

The review was not intended to be an authoritative guide, but rather, presents an overview of the literature at a point in time (2022-2023) that necessarily contains gaps that ongoing research and collaborations will contribute to reducing and mitigating. The findings and outputs of this review are discussed in subsequent Findings and Utilisation Outputs sections.

Case study workshops

The next phase involved a series of workshops with subject matter experts, including Traditional Owner groups, Indigenous land management organisations, government land management agencies and university-based researchers. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify individuals that were considered best placed to provide insight into the projects research questions. To address the different scales at which collaborations occur, we chose three case studies, comprising a local (south-east South Australia), a regional (north coast NSW), and a state (Victoria) case study.

The workshops involved roundtable discussions regarding the identified priorities: Indigenous peoples' voice and representation in land management and cultural land management research in the case study locations; principles and protocols for research and governance; and opportunities for building and sustaining collaborative relationships in the case study locations. These priorities informed the development of a workshop guide, which is described in the subsequent Findings section of this report. Select quotations from workshop participants are presented pseudonymously with participants' consent.

TABLE 1 SUMMARY OF CASE STUDY WORKSHOPS

Workshop location	Dates	Attendee organisations
Bundjalung Country, Lismore, NSW	18 August 2023	Jagun Alliance, Lismore City Council, Southern Cross University, Richmond Landcare, Australian National University, Griffiths University, Ngullingah Jugun Aboriginal Corporation, Department of Planning & Environment (NSW)
Boandik Country, Mt Gambier, South Australia	12 September 2023	South East Aboriginal Focus Group, Burrandies Aboriginal Corporation, Limestone Coast Landscapes Board, Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, Forestry SA, OneFortyOne Plantations, Department of Environment and Water (SA), Country Fire Service.
Wurundjeri Country, Burwood, Victoria	15 September 2023	Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, Taungurung Land and Waters Council Aboriginal Corporation, Jagun Alliance, ABSTARR Consulting.
Nyangbul Bundjalung Country, Ballina, NSW	28 November 2023	Jagun Alliance, Githabul Rangers, Gomeroi River Rangers, Gumbaynggirr Rangers, Banbai Rangers, Yaegl Rangers.
Kaurna Country, Adelaide, SA[1]	13 May 2024	South East Aboriginal Focus Group, Burrandies Aboriginal Corporation, Limestone Coast Landscapes Board, Department of Environment and Water (SA), Jagun Alliance.
Wurundjeri Country, Docklands, Vic	25 July 2024	Burrandies Aboriginal Corporation, Jagun Alliance, Yorta Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation, Fire to Flourish, ABSTARR Consulting.

Case study interviews

The specific objective of case study interviews was to understand the existing and potential points within the governance structures of relevant institutions and land management agencies for Indigenous voice and representation. What is working? What has been learned in recent years? How can these arrangements be made more equitable and effective? The interviews were focused around the same three case studies as the workshops, further developing a local (south-east South Australia), a regional (north coast New South Wales (NSW)), and a state (Victoria) case study.

Participants were recruited using a snowball method focusing on Indigenous and non-Indigenous people significantly involved in these existing collaborations, emphasising the voice of Indigenous peoples. 26 semi-structured interviews (n=26) were held in person and via Zoom between September and December 2023, with interviewees prompted to discuss their experiences and views about the governance of land and fire management and the challenges and opportunities for greater Indigenous inclusion, representation and power within land and fire management. Each case study had 8-10 participants and, overall, most participants were

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[1] This workshop was held in this location to align with the Natural Hazards Research Forum occurring the following day.

Indigenous-identifying (n=17) and a majority were male-identifying (n=22), the latter reflecting the continuing gender bias in Australia's fire and land management sector generally (Cavanagh, 2022; Eriksen, 2014). Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis (Boeije, 2009), with draft analyses circulated through the authorial group and the project's 5-member Indigenous Steering Group (ISG) for comment. Interview findings are presented in the following section. Select quotations from workshop participants are presented pseudonymously with participants' consent using a codename indicating whether or not the participant is Indigenous (IN for Indigenous, NI for non-indigenous), the kind of organisation they represent (Govt for government agency, Ind for industry, TOC for Traditional Owner or Indigenous Corporation, and Uni for University), their location (NSW for New South Wales, SA for South Australia, and Vic for Victoria), and a number to differentiate them (e.g., 1 for the first, 2 for the second). A participant labelled IN-Uni-NSW1 for example corresponds to an Indigenous person in New South Wales working at a university.

Engagement

This project adopted a proactive approach to research dissemination throughout, with the research team taking up opportunities to engage with researchers, Indigenous groups, agency staff and others. As detailed below, engagement activities that the CLMRG project team attended and/or facilitated included workshops, conferences and knowledge sharing forums. Engagement activities were key to all project objectives but particularly Objective 1 (Build on and enhance existing partnerships and relationships), Objective 2 (Create opportunities to generate new and/or future partnerships and relationships) and Objective 5 (Support opportunities to assist end user groups).

Image: Timothy Neale and Oliver Costello present project research at the 2024 Natural Hazards Research Forum in Adelaide (Kaurna Country).

Image: Michael-Shawn Fletcher, Oliver Costello, Timothy Neale, and Amy Christianson (on video) presenting a plenary on cultural land management at the 2022 International Association of Wildland Fire "Fire and Climate" conference in Melbourne (Wurundjeri Country).

Conferences

2023 Natural Hazards Research Forum – Project presentation

***Wurrundjeri Country, Naarm/Melbourne*, 2 May 2023**

Presentation title: *Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia*

Oliver Costello, Timothy Neale and Andrea Rawluk

2024 Natural Hazards Research Forum – Project presentation

Kaurna Country, Adelaide, 15 May 2024

Presentation title: *Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia*

Oliver Costello, Timothy Neale and Lachlan Beggs

Invited Presentation to Tasmanian Bushfire Research Group

nipaluna/Hobart and online, 28 August 2024

Presentation title: *A sense of partnership: understanding the practice of collaborative Indigenous fire and land management in mainland south-east Australia*

Lachlan Beggs, Oliver Costello and Timothy Neale

2024 Alfred Deakin Institute Annual Conference – Project presentation

Wurrundjeri Country, Naarm/Melbourne, 25 November 2024

Presentation title: *Partnership futures: understanding the practice of collaborative Indigenous fire and land management in mainland south-east Australia*

Timothy Neale, Oliver Costello and Lachlan Beggs

2025 Natural Hazards Research Forum – Project presentation

Kaurna Country, Adelaide, 19 June 2025

Presentation title: *Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia*

Timothy Neale and Oliver Costello

Knowledge sharing forums

2024 Natural Hazards Research Forum – First Nations Network, Kaurna Country, Adelaide, 14 May 2024

Oliver Costello, Timothy Neale and Lachlan Beggs attended this gathering organised by the Centre to bring together researchers and project partners engaged in research project relating directly to First Nations communities. This was an excellent opportunity to network and the Centre has committed to grow these opportunities at future iterations of its Research Forum. The Centre also supported the attendance of project partners from Burrandies Aboriginal Corporation and the South East Aboriginal Focus Group.

Natural Hazards Research Australia Hazardous Webinar – Principles of culturally safe research practices, Online, 21 November 2023

Oliver Costello and Timothy Neale provided an overview of the of the CLMRG research project, describing the research process and findings of the literature review and workshops and introducing some of the core principles and protocols published in the aforementioned documents. The webinar also included presentations from Dr Amy Cardinal Christianson and Alex Zahara (REDfire Lab) that provided insights from the Canadian context (see Utilisation Outputs).

TABLE 2 SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Type	When	Event
Conferences	2 May 2023	2023 Natural Hazards Research Forum – Project presentation
	15 May 2024	2024 Natural Hazards Research Forum – Project presentation
	28 August 2024	Tasmanian Bushfire Research Group – Project presentation
	25 November 2024	2024 Alfred Deakin Institute Annual Conference – Project presentation
Knowledge sharing forums	21 November 2023	The Centre Hazardous Webinar – Project presentation
	13-14 May 2024	2024 Natural Hazards Research Forum – First Nation Research Network

Research findings

In this section, we present key findings from the synthetic literature review and thematic analyses of the on-Country workshops and case study interviews, respectively. Following this, we further discuss these findings and present implications for future cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia.

Literature review: Principles, processes and protocols

Natural hazards management agencies and research institutions all have legal and ethical obligations to engage with Indigenous peoples, no matter where they work in Australia. Everywhere is Country and Indigenous peoples speak for Country. Nonetheless, a review of existing research and testaments of Indigenous people involved in ongoing partnerships and initiatives reveals that starting or maintaining intercultural collaborations can present many obstacles. As such, there is a need for guidance on how to best work together for the benefit of Country.

We reviewed relevant literature and guidelines to scope existing research and recommendations regarding collaborative principles, processes and protocols for cultural land management. This review drew upon the raft of literature collected by the project team and the PSG, synthesising it into six overarching principles, each with three sub-principles and a range of supporting processes and implementable protocols.

These findings were compiled in a document with extensive footnotes providing links to best practice examples. This document was then further synthesised by the project team and PSG into a one-page flyer. These documents were developed as a reference guide for Natural Hazards Research Australia partners and researchers to learn about collaborative principles, processes and protocols relevant to cultural land management governance and research and have been published by the Centre as companion documents.

The findings of this review presented below represent an account of relevant literature at a point in time and necessarily contain gaps. Further, acknowledging both the diversity of cultural, social and policy contexts within which different cultural land management initiatives are re-emerging, this review is not intended to be an authoritative guide. Rather, the principles and protocols presented below provide only a starting point for local and in-depth conversations:

- Self-determination to practice culture on Country

- Recognition, equity and social justice

- Healthy Country, healthy spirit, healthy people

- Empowerment of Indigenous knowledge-holders

- Benefits with and for Indigenous communities

Recognise and respect diversity of Indigenous peoples and cultures

TABLE 3 PRINCIPLES AND PROTOCOLS FOR CULTURAL LAND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH AND GOVERNANCE

	PRINCIPLE	EXAMPLE PROCESS	EXAMPLE PROTOCOL
1. SELF-DETERMINATION TO PRACTICE CULTURE ON COUNTRY	Cultural land management must be self-determined and rights based	Develop collaborative structures that respect Indigenous self-determination	Establish free, prior and informed consent mechanisms for collaborations
	Indigenous peoples have the right to speak authoritatively about Country	Resource and support representative bodies to act as partners	Require co-design and co-delivery with representative bodies
	Cultural leadership and resurgence through caring for Country 'our way'	Resource and support capacity-building according to self-determined pathways	Establish agreements that provide long-term and secure access to Country
2. RECONCILIATION, EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE	(Re)centre women and their unique role within Country	Resource and support Indigenous women's access to sacred and significant sites	Establish guidelines for identifying and protecting sacred and significant women's sites
	Support truth-telling and healing	Develop awareness of historical and contemporary issues facing Indigenous peoples	Make place-based cultural sensitivity training compulsory for all staff
	Address racism and promote cultural safety	Develop training and policies to foster cultural safety and acceptance	Establish a cultural safety framework and embed it in all induction processes
3. HEALTHY COUNTRY, HEALTHY SPIRIT, HEALTHY PEOPLE	Healing Country and healthy people are interrelated	Resource and support Indigenous peoples' connection to Country and culture	Establish formal partnership arrangements to support on-Country practice
	Centre Country, culture and kin in contemporary land management	Develop policies that consider, measure, and monitor cultural and natural values	Establish bio-cultural monitoring including tangible and non-tangible Indigenous values
	Cultural land management is living knowledge and culture	Regulatory changes to dismantle barriers to full participation in cultural practices on Country	Establish exemptions for Elders and children to be involved in cultural fire activities
4. EMPOWERMENT OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE-HOLDERS	Empower Indigenous knowledge and knowledge-holders	Recognise and support Indigenous knowledge and knowledge-holders	Renumerate all Indigenous participants in research activities
	Manage, protect, and share knowledge	Develop policies to protect Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property	Develop local agreements that protect Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property
	Transfer and maintain the rekindling of knowledge	Recognise and support community learning pathways, processes and priorities	Develop project timeframes to reflect community processes and priorities
5. BENEFITS WITH AND FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES	Impact and value come through engagement and inclusion	Resource and support Indigenous peoples to define measures of success for policies and programs that affect them	Establish self-determined advisory groups to lead definition of measures of success
	Strong partnerships are based on shared understanding, respect and trust	Resource and support meaningful and trusting connections with community	Support role continuity and prioritise retention of staff working with Indigenous peoples
	Accountability through outcome monitoring and reporting	Resource and support transparency in monitoring and reporting	Establish procedures for public on partnership outcomes and benefits
6. RECOGNISE AND RESPECT DIVERSITY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND CULTURES	Indigenous peoples and cultures are diverse	Resource and support strengths-based approach to reflect local capacities	Develop localised agreements with Indigenous peoples
	Embed flexible and purpose-built policy and processes	Resource and support local processes for decision-making	Maintain awareness of Indigenous peoples' cultural calendar and significant periods
	Understand Indigenous cultural protocols and cultural authority	Develop staff understanding of local cultural authority	Identify full range of Indigenous representatives, including men and women

This document has been developed by the *Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia* project team as a reference guide for Natural Hazards Research Australia partners and researchers to learn about collaborative principles, processes and protocols. More information and references are available here: https://www.naturalhazards.com.au/research/research-projects/cultural-land-management-research-and-governance-south-east-australia

Natural Hazards Research Australia

For other key guidance, see: AIATSIS 2020. AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research. Canberra, ACT: AIATSIS; Woodward, E. et al. 2020. *Our Knowledge Our Way in caring for Country: Indigenous-led approaches to strengthening and sharing our knowledge for land and sea management.* Canberra, ACT: NAILSMA and CSIRO.

Everywhere is Country and Indigenous peoples speak for Country.

Workshops

Informed by these identified priorities and the projects' research questions, a workshop guide was developed to inform roundtable discussions across the six workshops and included the following identified priorities and themes:

TABLE 4 SUMMARY OF WORKSHOP THEMES AND TOPICS

Theme	Topics	Example questions
Structural governance	Discussion of needs and issues for equitable and effective "voice and representation" Barriers to and enablers of "voice and representation"	*Where are we "at" with collaborative cultural land management?* *Where does decision-making sit within Indigenous organisations, government and non-government organisations respectively?*
Principles and protocols	Discussion of existing and recent research projects focusing on cultural land management	*What are some examples of principles/policies that are guiding "voice and representation"* *Are there common principles, protocols, and processes across our contexts, or strategies that could work in different contexts?*
Improving, building, and sustaining relationships	Discussion of future opportunities relevant to project objectives Reflection on workshop	*What have we learned today?* *What actions should the project team now take?* *What actions should participants now take?*

Nonetheless, these guides were designed to be flexible, reflecting the iterative/exploratory approach of the project and acknowledging the diverse needs/interests/experience/engagement of participants across contexts. Therefore, both the content and format (e.g. Questions posed, activities, agendas, developed over the course of data collection in response to initial findings/themes, and the specific setting/context of each workshop) of the roundtable discussions differed across the six workshop settings.

Below, we present a summary of the key themes identified *within* each of the six on-Country workshops, respectively. Shared themes/interests identified *across* the workshops, as well as the implications of these findings, will be discussed in the subsequent section.

Summaries of workshop findings

Workshop 1: Bundjalung Country, Lismore, NSW

At the Lismore workshop, on Bundjalung Country, participants were invited to discuss and reflect on some of the challenges and opportunities for cultural land management in the Northern Rivers region. Key sessions focused on governance, decision-making, research and actionable strategies for cultural land management. A key takeaway was the increasing interest among private landowners to collaborate with Indigenous groups, particularly in the wake of events like the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfire season. The workshop underscored the fundamental importance of interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships in cultural land management, emphasising shared responsibilities to Country and the necessity of grassroots-led initiatives.

Barriers and drivers: participants identified both barriers and drivers to successful collaborative cultural land management. A lack of cultural knowledge among government staff, coupled with mistrust, were recognised as significant hurdles. These issues are compounded by existing gaps in cultural knowledge, practice and intergenerational connection amongst Indigenous participants. Short-term funding cycles, tokenistic engagement and siloed government structures were also seen as impediments to effective collaboration.

Principles and protocols: however, the workshop also highlighted successful practices and potential solutions, with many emphasising the crucial role of co-design and community-driven research. Other identified practices include deep listening from the outset, involving the right people for the specific Country, and focusing on resilience rather than simply emergency response. Initiatives such as community ranger groups, which foster intergenerational knowledge transfer, were cited as positive examples of progress. The workshop highlighted the need for clear principles and protocols for research and governance in cultural land management. Research principles should be rooted in community-driven approaches, with transparency and co-design at their core, and should employ inclusive language and avoid disempowering jargon. Similarly, cultural safety and truth-telling should be embedded in all collaborative processes, ensuring engagement at project inception wherever possible and providing adequate time and support for relationship-building.

Opportunities and strategies: looking ahead, the workshop identified several opportunities and strategies for overcoming barriers to collaborative cultural land management. Building trust was deemed essential, requiring governments to invest in long-term relationships with Indigenous groups and promote education and awareness about local histories and cultural safety. Structural and institutional reforms were also seen as necessary, including the establishment of independent advisory bodies led by Indigenous representatives to mediate government interactions. Finally, the workshop highlighted a key research need: determining how the government should operate in areas where there is an overlap of multiple Indigenous interests.

"Another thing I've found as well is consultation, there's a lot of legal framework within consultation but there's no actual commitment that needs to be done. So, a lot of mobs, they go consult developers or government, you know, just more like a tick and flick kind of thing. It's not so much like they're actually listening." Indigenous Land Manager (Male), New South Wales, Indigenous non-governmental organisation

Workshop 2: Boandik Country, Mt Gambier, South Australia

At the Mt Gambier workshop, on Boandik Country, sessions revolved around roundtable discussions of who needs to be involved to make cultural land management happen; the strengths of existing cultural land management projects; the challenges faced by those projects; what now needs to be in place to support future success; and the potential benefit of future research on cultural land management. Participants identified several positive developments. These included the establishment of strong partnerships between Indigenous communities and public and private land managers, increased collaboration with non-Indigenous agencies, and a growing recognition of the benefits of Indigenous cultural burning for land management and bushfire mitigation. Additionally, the formation of Landscape Boards with Aboriginal Engagement Officers was seen as a positive step in fostering collaboration.

Barriers and drivers: there are many significant challenges to implementing cultural land management and this was acknowledged and discussed in depth by participants. These challenges included navigating complex relationships between different stakeholders, managing diverse expectations, securing adequate funding and resources, building trust between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous organisations and addressing historical imbalances. The discussions underlined the need for greater recognition and understanding of Indigenous cultural heritage by mainstream government institutions and private land managers.

Principles and protocols: despite these challenges, participants identified several effective protocols and potential pathways for future research and governance. These included the need for genuine and long-term engagement with government agencies, cultural awareness training for agencies and research exploring the broader benefits of cultural land management, including its impacts on land, water, health, culture and the connection between the health of Country and the health of people. Additionally, there was a call for increased involvement of farmers and landholders in collaborative fire and land management practices, and support for Indigenous people to access their land for regular cultural burns and on-Country learning.

Opportunities and strategies: the workshop highlighted both the progress and the ongoing challenges in implementing effective cultural land management practices in the region. The discussions emphasised the importance of collaboration, understanding, and respect for Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in achieving sustainable and culturally appropriate land management outcomes. Key identified strategies for building on existing success were drawing greater funding and resources to support Indigenous peoples to engage in effective land management and collaborations and creating opportunities to build trust and create spaces for genuine partnerships between Indigenous communities and land management organisations. An example of these two strategies being put in practice was the establishment of Indigenous engagement positions within government agencies.

"I think about the effects of colonisation and I know that people like my dad and my aunties and uncles have been oppressed... We've got the fire, it's been passed on to us but we know how to say the right things in the right ways and I think developing that younger group, upskilling them in all of those policies and procedures and actually who you have to front to make those changes is probably where the gaps are." South Australian Traditional Owner (Female)

Workshop 3: Wurundjeri Country, Burwood, Victoria

The Burwood workshop, on Wurundjeri Country, had a more specific set of objectives than the previous two workshops. This emerged from discussions with project partners and, in line with the project's guiding ethos of enabling and supporting relationship building, the project team responded by helping convene a discussion that would be supportive of our partner's priorities. Therefore, rather than focus on cultural land management governance and research as broad themes, the workshop focused on the issue of how Indigenous groups might collectively advocate for greater voice and representation in fire management through the implementation of the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy. Given the sensitivity of these discussions, they are summarised below in general terms.

Following the work of the Cultural Fire Leadership Group (CFLG) in helping develop the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy (VTOCFKG 2019), there have been ongoing discussions about the potential benefits of a coordinating group or authority that might enable statewide advocacy and coordination for Traditional Owners rights in relation to cultural fire.

Barriers and drivers: several barriers to building and sustaining cultural fire programs were identified by participants. First, insurance and liability concerns are hindering the broader adoption of cultural fire practices, particularly in high bushfire risk areas where there is a perceived risk of cultural fire treatments affecting assets and values. Participants emphasised the need to manage the expectations of public and government stakeholders while increasing the pace of growth in Traditional Owner's capacity to deliver cultural fire management and assert their rights in fire management more broadly. The current resourcing and funding landscape is fragmented and competitive, limiting the capacity of Traditional Owners for long-term planning.

Opportunities and strategies: participants recognised an ongoing need for expert support and collaboration to overcome these barriers. Engaging with relevant experts and leveraging academic and practitioner expertise can support Traditional Owners in policy and governance development. A coordinating group or authority was discussed as one possible strategy to assist with the necessary tasks of policy development, regional advocacy and legislative review to remove practical and policy barriers to greater cultural fire. Such a coordinating group or authority would require secure ongoing funding to ensure Traditional Owners have the independence necessary to promote cultural fire practices and be empowered in fire management.

"You can be kind of trapped in this space where you either just kind of fully commit to the state, and do whatever they say, or you wait because you want to do your own pathway, which is hard and often a really expensive pathway." Victorian Traditional Owner (Female), Environmental Management

"…part of this is trying to work at figuring out what's that mechanism of government that makes sure that there's recurrent funding coming through and there's influence in the decision-making across government." Victorian Traditional Owner (Male), Environmental Management

Workshop 4: Nyangbul Bundjalung Country, Ballina, NSW

At the Ballina workshop, on Nyangbul Bundjalung Country, the project team were able to join a longer two-day forum with Indigenous rangers in the Northern Rivers and New England regions. During sessions devoted to the CLMRG project, the discussions covered core topics relating to the empowerment of Indigenous voice and representation in cultural land management. These discussions were guided by participants' recent experiences, in particular recent bushfires, floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Stories of community impacts and the work of ranger teams assisting their communities during these events led to conversations about the resources and skills that are needed to better assist communities in the future, how government agencies can support communities and rangers to better protect people, property and cultural values.

Barriers and drivers: significant barriers persist for Indigenous people in the region asserting their cultural land management rights and responsibilities. These include challenges in gaining and maintaining access to public and private land on Country, misperceptions about the reality of Indigenous land ownership amongst non-Indigenous peoples, and the need for landholders to work respectfully in partnership with Indigenous people. The destruction of sacred sites and the need for the return of cultural heritage remain pressing concerns, as do the persistence of racist perceptions of Indigenous peoples. Additionally, the workshop identified a lack of trust between government agencies and Indigenous groups, highlighting the need for improved communication, consultation, and culturally safe hiring processes.

Opportunities and strategies: discussions highlighted the strong interest amongst private landholders and non-governmental organisations in partnering with Indigenous groups and rangers. This presents an opportunity for reform and greater recognition of Indigenous peoples' valuable land management skills. Non-governmental organisations can play a crucial role by providing support and funding to Indigenous land managers. Additionally, participants noted, there is potential for government agencies to better understand and utilise the broader capabilities of ranger groups, potentially leading to more land being returned to Traditional Owners and increased employment of Indigenous people in senior government positions.

The workshop also underscored the importance of embedding cultural values within government structures. To continue and expand their work, Indigenous ranger groups require recognition of their cultural authority, ongoing learning opportunities, sustainable investment, coordination and planning. Participants concluded the workshop with a discussion of the need for more elders to be involved in decision-making processes and a shared commitment to continued collaboration within the region.

> "When we're talking about participation and how to get equity and representativeness in participation. If there's no resources for the collaboration people just – and often, you know, I look at a lot of budgets and there's no line item there for people to participate or people to collaborate, like it's this hidden investment and it takes so – that relational approach takes so much time, and if you want people to participate there needs to be resources." Project Officer (Female), New South Wales, Indigenous non-governmental organisation

Workshop 5: Kaurna Country, Adelaide, SA

The workshop held on Kaurna Country in Adelaide had several purposes. The first was for the project team to learn more about some of the collaborative projects that partner organisations are engaging in regarding collaborative cultural land management. Second, the workshop was an opportunity for the project team to supply the partner organisations with a short written brief and explanation of findings from Workshop 2 (Boandik Country) and to receive feedback from them about whether these were accurate. Third, the project team sought to facilitate a discussion regarding the partner organisations' future aims, and particularly those aims that relate to governance and research needs which the project team might support, drawing upon the project team's expertise and experience. Fourth, the workshop was also used as an opportunity to discuss attendees' participation in the 2024 Natural Hazards Research Forum (held in Adelaide the following day). Given the topics covered within the workshop, we are unable to report on some matters discussed. However, to briefly outline some of the discussions in relation to the themes established in other workshops:

Barriers and drivers: as has been noted in previous workshops, participants discussed how Indigenous organisations are often called upon to respond to the agendas of others and in this case partner organisations are engaged in a number of projects led by government and non-government organisations regarding wetlands restoration, water management and cultural heritage management. These projects form significant opportunities for the activation of Indigenous peoples' rights and responsibilities; however, as discussions showed, they also create significant work that they may not have the resourcing or capacity to meet. Sound relationships built on experience with individuals in those government and non-government organisations is key to supporting their equity, but it is also not a guarantee of their sustainability. Interpersonal relationships themselves are not sufficient to address the continuing need to address historical imbalances between Indigenous communities and non-indigenous land management organisations, or the many barriers to addressing these imbalances (e.g., insufficient resourcing, lack of legal recognition, etc.).

Opportunities and strategies: participants noted that existing strategies of building up cultural land management capability and capacity through a range of partnership arrangements had yielded significant results. This, some noted, could be supported through seeking greater knowledge exchange with Indigenous organisations in neighbouring regions, including Traditional Owner groups in Victoria and South Australia, who have successfully established cultural land management enterprises. Such exchanges are a key opportunity for building knowledge and practice and can be supported by researchers such as the project team and research organisations such as the Centre.

> "Why has it taken so long for Australia to recognise the fact that Indigenous Australians have lived and died here for so long, our environment represents us, our seasons represent us… Australians should recognise that fact, that we have a template that's been there for that long. It's up to agencies, institutions, even education through curriculum, to develop the strategies to recognise who we are and understand properly so we can all do it together, and it should be done now." SA Traditional Owner (Male), Environmental Management

Workshop 6: Wurundjeri Country, Docklands, Victoria

The workshop held on Wurundjeri Country, Docklands, focused on identifying opportunities and challenges related to Indigenous cultural land and fire management across case study locations. Discussions explored examples of successful collaborative and Indigenous-led initiatives, strategies to advance Indigenous self-determination and leadership, and systemic mechanisms to support these efforts. Participants highlighted progress, including the evolution of job opportunities beyond traditional agency-based roles, offering more diverse career pathways for Indigenous communities. The importance of self-determination in enabling communities to manage properties and achieve economic benefits through their stewardship was emphasised. Participants who shared stories of encouraging managers who played a key role in fostering confidence and capacity-building of individuals in new Indigenous leadership roles highlighted the importance of supportive leadership within government.

> "I think success would be for each mob to have their own self-determination, to go out and manage properties in the way that they want to, and to be able to like benefit in a way of an income. So we can be ourselves, go out on Country, do the right thing, then make a living, so we can come home into this Western world and survive." Cultural Fire Practitioner (Male), New South Wales.

Barriers and drivers: participants identified significant challenges hindering Indigenous-led fire management initiatives. Navigating insurance and liability issues was identified as a key barrier for Indigenous fire management. Participants noted how ambiguous insurance policies and difficulties securing Insurance coverage for private burns create risks and financial strain for Indigenous groups. Limited access to adequate training and bureaucratic hurdles, such as the complex processes for obtaining police checks and medical certifications, further constrain participation. The difficulty of translating traditional cultural knowledge into governmental frameworks complicates the integration of Indigenous practices into mainstream fire management. Additionally, the diversity of interpretations of cultural fire among communities present challenges in aligning approaches and managing expectations for collaborative initiatives. These challenges are compounded by systemic issues, such as short-term funding models and a lack of cultural understanding within non-Indigenous institutions, which hinder long-term progress and sustainability of partnerships and initiatives for Indigenous land and fire management.

> "And we have to offer not just, you know, six-month contracts to people, because you can't keep them around. So, we need ongoing roles... We're carrying all that load so that youngfellas can be just kind of turning up every day to their job and building skills... That's why we struggle to get people to come into those jobs, because it's often just a short-term thing in project funding." Victorian Traditional Owner (Male), Environmental Management

Opportunities and strategies: Participants identified several pathways to overcome these barriers to advance Indigenous leadership in land and fire management. On the challenge of navigating insurance and risks associated with fire management, key suggestions included developing collaborations with insurance agencies to conduct safety inspections which could reduce premiums, and exploring the establishment of a First Nations-founded insurance company tailored to cultural fire work. Strengthening capacity within communities was also highlighted, participants highlighted opportunities for empowering Indigenous leaders and members to engage directly with agencies, rather than relying on individual champions. Transitioning from short-term project funding to sustainable, long-term agreements was seen as essential for ensuring stability and building capacity in Indigenous fire management. Bringing people together at knowledge sharing forums and community events such as the NIDA Gathering, were proposed as means to foster resilience and promote understanding of cultural practices. The need for legal and regulatory reforms to streamline processes was highlighted as critical for enabling Indigenous groups to focus on cultural practices without being hindered by administrative burdens. Discussions also highlighted the importance of developing guidance on protocols for non-Indigenous individuals and organisation to engage with Indigenous communities in a way that based on equity and mutual respect, understanding and trust. Participants envisioned a future where intergenerational knowledge sharing is prioritised, with youth involvement, early education, and the inclusion of Elders and children in cultural practices, for example, through redress of administrative and regulatory barriers to access burn sites.

Interviews

Cultural fire management collaborations have grown significantly in scope and number over the past decade – notably in the aftermath of the 2019-2020 Black Summer wildfire season – with partnerships emerging at different scales and supported by different legal and financial arrangements. The aim of the case study interviews was to explore the dynamics of intercultural interactions between Indigenous organisations and settler state agencies involved in cultural fire management collaborations in the selected case studies; local (south-east South Australia), regional (north coast NSW), and state (Victoria). Below we analyse the findings from interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals engaged in partnerships at local, regional and statewide scales, organised into three key themes revealing the forms of **pragmatism**, **experimentation** and **affect** that sustain them within a broader settler colonial context. Rather than seeing such formations as co-optative or liberating, interviews with those involved suggest their crucial importance in understanding Indigenous sovereignty as an emergent practice in tension with the settler state. Following this, we will conclude with a discussion of the implications for future Indigenous fire management partnerships in Australia and elsewhere (refer to Discussion and Recommendations section below).

Proceeding pragmatically - 'making do'

Across the three case studies, those pursuing Indigenous fire management goals highlighted the challenges of navigating a complex and uneven web of regulations. Participants described how legal and policy frameworks constrain Indigenous groups' efforts to manage and care for Country in a self-determined way, with many drawing on examples of outdated and/or inconsistent legislation and regulation, highlighting how these frameworks are largely fundamentally misaligned with Indigenous ways of being/caring for Country, stewardship and cultural practices. Reflecting on these inhibitive legal and policy settings, one Indigenous participant explained that to "work within our Lore": "It's hard for us to do our cultural obligation and burn Country when there's policies that are really, really grey – so it's hard to even understand where you're going" (IN-NGO-NSW1).[2] Interviews revealed the various **pragmatic strategies** employed by those involved in efforts to advance Indigenous land and fire management; in other words, the ways Indigenous groups 'make do' within these constraints while continuing to advocate for systemic reform. This often involves fitting their work within existing settler legal categories or identifying and leveraging omissions and 'loopholes' in regulatory frameworks. Two common strategies stood out across the case studies:

1. **Alliance building**: Indigenous groups fostered collaborations across representative and community-controlled organisations and with non-Indigenous supporters. Participants described many instances where these alliances helped strengthen their capacity to advocate for and implement fire management practices.

2. **Policy brokers**: Many Indigenous groups relied on individuals within government agencies to act as policy brokers. These individuals helped translate the intricacies of settler policy regimes into actionable insights for Indigenous practitioners, easing navigation through bureaucratic obstacles. South Australian participants especially

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[2] For an explanation of the codes used for participants in the interviews refer to the "Research approach" section above.

highlighted their importance, as one noted their value in "working out ways we can operate together under their law structure" (IN-TOC-SA3).

Despite efforts to build strategic relationships and leverage supportive actors, across case studies many Indigenous participants spoke of the ongoing impacts of colonisation as manifesting in **persistent barriers to their work**. A widely identified challenge was that of **resourcing inequalities**. Across the case studies participants highlighted that Indigenous groups often lack operational funding and struggle with the burden of managing multiple short-term funding agreements. As one Victorian Indigenous participant reflected, "They think they're giving us these lands to manage, but often the tenure arrangements make them economically worthless… It's like, we're given responsibility, but with no resources to support us." Relatedly, participants highlighted a clear need for structural reforms to address resourcing challenges. Treaty processes and broader legal recognition were widely identified as essential to ensure a transfer of resources and power to Indigenous groups to access land to practice their culture on Country, interviews with practitioners revealed that despite often well-intentioned efforts by non-Indigenous individuals and agencies to support Indigenous groups to practice on Country, progress on necessary structural and cultural changes have been uneven and slow to eventuate. "There's a lot of good people there [in government] that have a lot of good ideas and want to see change and progress," but their institutional setting "makes it really hard to actually do anything different" (IN-TOC-Vic1).

While interviewees experiences of navigating different institutional settings differed across case studies/scales, **mis-matches** in governance approaches between government and Indigenous groups were widely identified as a fundamental hindrance to collaboration and partnerships. For example, agency preferences to engage at broad scales run counter to the norm amongst many Indigenous groups to represent or 'speak for' defined local or regional areas independently. One Victorian government employee reflected on this tension:

> …government loves hierarchical representative bodies. There's nothing better than a state representative body. It makes our life easy. We've got to talk to one body and it works… [But] when you're dealing with Traditional Owners that doesn't work… [because] you'll have mobs now that'll go – "but I'm only here to talk to my Country and my people" (NI-Gov-Vic1).

This presents a key obstacle to tailoring arrangements to the 'stage' or 'capacity' of the relevant Indigenous partners, which was widely identified as important by Indigenous participants. Relatedly, participants highlighted that the cultural/institutional setting of agencies (public servants often "live in a world of performance indicators… [rather than] allowing the time to think deeply about what is actually wanted" (NI-Gov-SA2) combined with what others noted as a lack of consistent cultural capability) present further barriers to appropriately tailoring agreements and partnerships to the needs/capacity of different local Indigenous groups/ that support Indigenous partners to deliver, for example, cultural burns, on their own terms and minus the onerous and coercive oversight of government agencies.

As Indigenous participants re-affirmed that "self-determination… doesn't always mean sole management. It means the self-determination to kind of define the terms in which you would see the best outcome" (IN-TOC-Vic5). Ultimately, while Indigenous groups 'make do' within existing constraints, interviews highlighted the limitations of 'making do' without broader and

ongoing systemic reform to address these enduring challenges and enable meaningful self-determination.

Working experimentally – 'trying it out'

Linked to these pragmatic strategies of 'making do', throughout the three case studies, participants identified diverse and changing approaches to forming and sustaining Indigenous and settler government partnerships relating to the stewardship of Country. Case study interviews with those involved provided new insights into the emergence and development of these intercultural cultural land management collaborations, in what Neale et al. (2019, 155-6)) described as an '**experimental**' approach, in the sense that they involve novel formations of actors who are working together without predefined guidelines or models for how collaborative environmental governance can or should be implemented. The findings from these case study interviews support existing research into intercultural collaborations in settler colonial contexts, revealing the ways these experiments necessarily involve critical reflection and provide opportunities for defamiliarisation of the normality of "settler common sense" (Rifkin 2013), meaning the dominant systems and practices of settler government and the inequity of the status quo. Across case studies, interviewees described how partnerships often rely on improvisations, which were found to provoke new and sometimes unexpected conceptualisations and practices of governance.

One common method of experimentation is the **setting down of Indigenous laws and customs in formal policy documents**. Across case studies interviewees described how strategic policy documents authored by Indigenous groups provided an opportunity for groups to influence government processes and assert Indigenous values in governance structures in intercultural collaborations. A watershed example in the Victorian context was the *Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy* (VTOCFKG 2019). Some noted the significant value of this document, due in part to its **bureaucratic form**, in that as a strategy it can then be cited and affirmed in government documents, but also its ability to **embody Indigenous voice** external to government. As one senior white public servant recalled in discussing the Strategy with government ministers: "…it was like 'We haven't written this. It's been written by the Traditional Owners.' And that changed [their] view of the document. Rather than just being a risky document for government, although it's really clear saying 'No, we can give this forward as a really strong example of TO voice'" (NI-Gov-Vic1).

However, these processes can impose administrative burdens on Indigenous groups, particularly in jurisdictions with less supportive policies. On the north coast of NSW, participants emphasised the importance of **cultivating in-house skills**, noting the significant role Indigenous personnel with prior experience working within partner government land and fire management agencies play in acting as **cultural translators or 'buffers'**. These individuals facilitate navigation of policy and resource limitations, and further, as one participant explained, enable others to focus on "the perpetuation of cultural responsibilities and obligations and management practices, all that culture can continue because there's fellas like that that are doing a lot of that work, buffering it and translating it" (IN-NGO-NSW3). Despite these efforts, most NSW participants' experience of government land management agencies were characterised by frustration; participants described feelings of frustration at their requests for policy changes and burn permits being ignored, delayed, or indefinitely deflected between agencies. In

response, many Indigenous groups have begun experimenting with **novel partnerships,** such as **collaborating directly with private landholders** to enable cultural fire.

Consequently, across the case studies' partnership experiments we observed a common 'insistence' on Indigenous groups' sovereign right to **self-determine** the parameters of their relationships with the settler state and others (Richland 2021). As one Indigenous interviewee in Victoria explained:

> "Rather than us supplementing [settler government] or their resource management objectives, they can actually support ours, not the other way around. …This is the objective for this Country. This is what we're doing about it and we invite you to work with us to achieve it (IN-TOC-Vic3).

Relating to people and place – 'being there' and 'getting personal'

Alongside these forms of pragmatism and experiment, interviewees identified a range of feelings based in relationships and commitments that they see as necessary for sustaining collaborative partnerships. In alignment with existing research (Beggs and Dalley 2023), this study reveals a similarly complex yet diverse layering of **affect** in intercultural land and fire management settings, identifying the importance of "affective encounters" to sparking and maintaining the difficult work of 'walking together' in a broader context of ongoing dispossession and unhealthy Country (Neale et al. 2019). **Affects** are feelings that can be named, though they may not be easily represented or explained (Gregg and Seigworth 2020); across the case studies participants highlighted these relate to feelings of **respect**, **trust** and **connection to Country.**

Across the three case studies, Indigenous participants consistently drew attention to the importance of both feeling "valued" and "respected" in partnerships. This was sometimes articulated in terms of much-needed material and structural reforms – such that providing resourcing for Indigenous groups to engage in cultural fire might be regarded as a practice that indicates respect – though many also articulated this feeling as emerging from more intimate and interpersonal situations. In the case of the latter, for example, Indigenous participants across the case studies stressed the need for non-Indigenous people to do their "homework" and come into meetings with intended Indigenous partners prepared to contribute and collaborate equitably. A Victorian Indigenous organisation executive made a point regarding how respect can be sensed through practices: "We feel respected when they've done their homework. If they come to us unprepared, it's just another tick-box exercise, and we've seen enough of that." Whereas Indigenous people are forced to become literate in non-Indigenous cultures and institutions, non-Indigenous people making the effort to acquire parallel forms of literacy are a sign of reciprocity and thereby respect. This was a sign of "partnerships that respect who we are and what we are" (IN-TOC-Vic3).

Mutual respect was intertwined with building and sustaining **trust**, which participants across case studies described as a critical foundation of intercultural cultural land management collaborations, which supports previous research (Rawluk et al. 2023). How trust might be detected in a given situation, though, was nonetheless difficult for participants to specify; however, like respect, it was generally asserted as a sense or a feeling, often as emerging from more intimate and interpersonal situations. As one south-east SA Indigenous land manager

explained: "We've got to trust the people we're working with. We're not just dealing with governments but with individuals. And when they prove themselves, you work harder to keep those relationships going" (IN-TOC-SA1).

Another reflected on the high importance of trust to "walking together" when "we don't actually have signed agreements to work together, it's built on trust and ongoing relationships" (NI-Gov-SA1). Some referred to practices that indexed the presence of trust or its absence, for example, some Indigenous participants emphasised the need for non-Indigenous people to do their "homework" and come into meetings with intended Indigenous partners prepared to contribute and collaborate equitably. Both practices were widely seen as positive examples of practices that can develop and deepen understanding of Indigenous history, values and culture, which was in turn, closely related to feelings of **mutual trust**. In South Australia, a non-Indigenous public servant spoke about a recognition that: …we've already got a big enough trust issue with First Nations people. Very good reasons as to why they would distrust us. So, if we're trying to build trust, then we must be committed" (NI-Gov-SA2).

The processes of building trust and mutual respect were also linked to developing feelings of **connection to Country**. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants spoke of the benefits/transformative power of being on Country. Several non-Indigenous land managers spoke enthusiastically about "positive experiences around culture on Country changes people's mentality" (NI-Gov-SA1) and how: "It's funny—you have to justify meeting on Country. But when you're there, you feel it. You connect. It's tactile. And for Aboriginal people, it's their home. It changes everyone involved" (NI-Gov-SA2). Similarly, Indigenous participants across case studies spoke of how being and walking on Country with non-Indigenous partners provided an invaluable opportunity for developing deeper respect and understanding/fostering a shared connection to Country that could help shift non-indigenous collaborators mindsets to critically reflect on and move beyond settler-centric or government-centric frameworks.

TABLE 5 SUMMARY OF CASE STUDY WORKSHOP AND INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Workshops	Findings
Common barriers and drivers	Lack of cultural knowledge and trust between Indigenous groups and government staff hinder collaboration
	Short-term funding cycles and tokenistic engagement hinder collaboration
	Complex relationships between partners and stakeholders mean navigating diverse expectations key to collaboration
Common opportunities and strategies	Build trust through personal and financial investment in long-term relationships between partners
	Establish independent advisory bodies led by Indigenous representatives
	Create opportunities for knowledge sharing and cultural awareness over time

Interviews	Findings
Proceeding pragmatically	Many Indigenous groups employ pragmatic strategies, such as alliance building and policy brokerage, to navigate complex regulations and relationships
	However, barriers persist including resourcing inequalities and mismatches in governance approaches between partners
Working experimentally	Cultural land management collaborations are often experimental and involve ongoing adaptation and learning
	Common strategies include setting down Indigenous lore in policy documents and cultivating skills and capacity within Indigenous organisations
Relating to people and place	Partnerships rely on building relationships based on respect, trust, and connection to Country
	These relationships are essential for navigating the inevitable challenges of collaboration and fostering commitments to shared goals

Discussion and implications

Synthesis of workshops and interviews

Our research on three contemporary case studies of Indigenous fire management partnerships at local, regional and state-wide scales highlights the complex dynamics at play in the growing number of such collaborative "contact zones" in settler colonial contexts. Despite persistent colonial legacies and systemic challenges, Indigenous groups are strategically navigating coercive settler legal and policy frameworks, employing pragmatic and experimental approaches to engage in collaborative land stewardship while insisting on their sovereignty. These partnerships are fragile, inequitable and sustained by feelings of respect, trust and a shared connection to Country, demonstrating the resilience and agency of Indigenous peoples in revitalising their traditional practices and knowledge. While widely celebrated, including by non-Indigenous partners, our empirical examination of the lived realities of partnership demonstrates that progress is geographically and temporally patchy. Progress at a local level does not guarantee progress at another spatial scale, and vice versa, just as gains made at one time are not assured to last.

To summarise the key findings of the workshops and interviews:

1) Collaboration, trust and commitment

At the heart of collaborative cultural land management between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous organisations lies the long-term commitment and trust-building between individuals and organisations. Successful partnerships have yielded positive outcomes, demonstrating the power of non-Indigenous organisations taking responsibility for actively supporting Indigenous peoples' assertions of their rights and responsibilities as well as respecting Indigenous knowledge systems. However, progress is often impeded by funding limitations, regulatory hurdles, and instances of cultural insensitivity, highlighting the need for systemic change and a genuine commitment to reconciliation.

2) Structural reforms and Indigenous empowerment

Empowering Indigenous communities and ensuring the sustainability of cultural land management practices necessitate structural reforms that will institutionalise increased Indigenous voice and leadership with governance arrangements and support culturally appropriate research methodologies. Dismantling barriers and fostering an environment where Indigenous voices are heard and respected will enable organisations with land and emergency management responsibilities to move towards a more equitable and just approach to the management of Country.

3) Legal frameworks, resourcing and governance

The limitations of current cultural land management practices are rooted in the misalignment of non-Indigenous (or settler) legal frameworks with Indigenous lore, persistent resourcing inequalities and fundamental mismatches in governance approaches. To overcome these

challenges, strategic alliances and policy brokers are needed alongside structural "whole-of-government" reforms like treaty processes and legal recognition of rights to Country (e.g., use rights, consultation rights, proprietary rights, etc.). These are mutually supportive arrangements and it is insufficient for non-Indigenous organisations such as government agencies to wait for structural reforms before beginning to make changes in how they conduct business.

4) Fostering innovation and experimentation

Further to this, existing cultural land management collaborations are progressing by not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. In many cases this means embracing experimental approaches – including by making novel forms of policy documents, forming unprecedented partnership arrangements and implementing new landscape interventions – where there is a lack of established formal guidance. Working in this way can pave the way for innovative solutions and more effective land management practices. Moreover, nurturing affective relations, such as respect, trust, and a deep connection to Country, is paramount in sustaining collaborative efforts and fostering long-term success.

5) Paths to Indigenous self-determination

Ultimately, achieving the full potential of cultural land management in Australia requires a shift towards Indigenous self-determination, long-term funding models, and culturally sensitive engagement practices. By prioritising Indigenous rights, knowledge and values, non-Indigenous organisations engaged in land and emergency management can foster a future where the management of bushfire and other natural hazards are grounded in sustainability, respect and care for Country.

Outcomes against objectives

As noted at the beginning of this report, the *Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia* project had five objectives. The project team and partners met these objectives in multiple ways through the life of the project and in this section we will briefly provide examples of how these objectives were met.

Objective 1: Build on and enhance existing partnerships and relationships between Indigenous land management organisations, Traditional Owner groups and university-based researchers. The project was fortunate to be able to build upon existing research relationships between project team members based at universities and key organisations including Taungurung Land and Waters Council, Djaara, Jagun Alliance and Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation.

Objective 2: Create opportunities to generate new and/or future partnerships and relationships between land management agencies, Indigenous land management organisations, Traditional Owner groups and university-based researchers. The project was successful in developing a new research relationship with Burrandies Aboriginal Corporation and the South East Aboriginal Focus Group (SA), as well as build emerging connections with other groups such as Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation.

Objective 3: Create an environment where Indigenous land management organisations and Traditional Owner groups are actively leading and developing research projects. The project team have continued to work with Indigenous land management organisations and Traditional Owner groups to support their research aspirations, including by investigating pathways for them to become partners in Natural Hazards Research Australia. Conversations are ongoing however no Indigenous organisations have yet been registered as partners that can lead or lead the development of Centre projects.

Objective 4: Support opportunities for existing and potential Indigenous HDR (Hons, Masters or PhD) projects related to cultural land management in association with the Centre. The project was unable to recruit any HDR students however project team members have individually worked to mentor and support Indigenous HDR students engaged in related research.

Objective 5: Support opportunities to assist end-user groups in developing and implementing relevant policy and practice initiatives (e.g. cultural fire or Indigenous land management strategies). Through the project, the project team have been actively engaged in efforts in Victoria by state government agencies and Traditional Owner groups to implement the *Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy*. Project team members have also been involved in discussions regarding the development of future cultural fire policies in South Australia and New South Wales.

Implications for future research and policy

Research

Through the course of the project, the research team has taken feedback on what members of the Project Steering Group (PSG), Translation and Implementation Panel (TIP), and also Indigenous project partners believe would be the most useful "next step" research. The following proposals represent two possible projects that would build upon the project findings and further support relationships between Indigenous land management organisations, Traditional Owner groups, government land management agencies and university-based researchers.

Implication 1: Accounting for performance in supporting cultural fire

The *Cultural land management research and governance in south-east Australia* project has found that:

a) many agencies want guidance about what would form appropriate and relevant indicators of success in supporting cultural fire management

b) many Indigenous communities want to gain clearer insight into agency support for cultural fire management to both monitor performance and enhance the accountability of agency partners.

Our proposed response is a research project focused on understanding and testing the applicability of indicators in evaluating government agencies performance in supporting Indigenous cultural fire management.

The specific **objectives** of this research would be to:

1) Test the applicability of several indicators in evaluating government agencies performance in supporting Indigenous cultural fire management, including employment, funding, and assistance.

2) Evaluate the performance of government agencies in supporting Indigenous cultural fire management.

3) Identify gaps in government agency data collection regarding support for Indigenous cultural fire management.

4) Advocate for the adoption of identified indicators in government agency data collection.

Implication 2: Cultural Land Research Lab

The project has found that:

a) many Indigenous organisations now have internal research positions conducting Indigenous-led cultural land management research

b) these researchers often feel that they would benefit from external support including more networking and mentoring opportunities with researchers based at other Indigenous organisations and at universities.

Our proposed response is a 4-year research project focused on supporting researchers positioned with Indigenous organisations conducting research on Indigenous cultural fire management.

The specific **objectives** of this research would be to:

Create a lab of at least four (and not greater than 10) researchers based at Indigenous organisations conducting cultural land management research.

Evaluate the needs of these researchers in terms of networking, mentoring, and capacity-building.

Support these needs of these researchers through employment (0.2FTE) and monthly and annual meetings.

Advocate to the Centre and agencies through identifying the challenges and opportunities for Indigenous-led cultural land management research.

Policy

Implication 1: Support for Indigenous self-determination

Where agencies seek to empower Indigenous communities to meaningfully participate in land management agencies' governance structures and institutional decision-making, there are several actionable steps to take:

- **Provide dedicated funding:** Allocate sufficient and sustained funding to support Indigenous-led initiatives and capacity building for engagement in governance. This

should include core ongoing funding for Traditional Owner organisations and project-specific funding for participation in specific governance processes.

- o For example: Victoria's Cultural Fire Grants Program and ongoing base funding to support Traditional Owner organisations cultural fire programs; other government agencies (e.g., Resilience NSW, Emergency Management Australia) have offered one-off project support funding.

- **Establish structured engagement mechanisms:** Create formal pathways for Indigenous representation within existing governance structures, such as designated seats for Traditional Owner representatives on internal boards and committees with decision-making power; creation of Traditional Owner advisory bodies with clear mandates, dedicated budgets and influence; and opportunities for Indigenous communities to set their own agendas and priorities for engagement.

- o For example: Traditional Owner Land Management Boards, Victoria's Caring for Country Partnership Forum, implementation of Traditional Owner consultation within emergency response arrangements in Victoria.

- **Ensure culturally appropriate engagement:** Recognise and accommodate diverse Indigenous cultural protocols, communication styles and decision-making processes within governance structures. This may involve holding meetings in locations and at times that are accessible to Indigenous communities and incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems and values into governance frameworks (where culturally appropriate).

- o **For example:** see guidance in *The Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy Western Australia 2021-2029* (WA), *Pupangarli Marnmarnepu 'Owning Our Future':   Aboriginal Self-Determination Reform Strategy 2020-2025* (DEECA, Vic)

Rationale: Self-determination is a fundamental right. Supporting Indigenous communities to define and lead their own engagement helps ensure their voices are genuinely heard and their priorities are reflected in decision-making processes, leading to better outcomes for all.

Implication 2: Support for engagement and relationship-building

Fostering strong and trusting relationships between Indigenous communities and land management agencies is foundational for effective and sustainable partnerships and collaborations. Without specific support for engagement and relationship-building, agencies rely too heavily on the goodwill and dedication of individuals and the strength of relationships between isolated individuals. To support engagement and relationship-building, there are several actionable steps to take:

- **Resource relationship building:** allocate dedicated time and resources for relationship-building activities, such as Indigenous engagement positions within agencies; regular meetings and cultural exchanges between Indigenous communities and agency staff; joint participation in community events and cultural activities; and support for Indigenous-led initiatives that promote cross-cultural understanding.

- **Recognise the value of Indigenous knowledge:** acknowledge the value of Indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives into land management practices and institutional policies.

- **Commit to long-term engagement:** establish ongoing mechanisms for communication and collaboration that extend beyond individual projects or initiatives. Maintain Indigenous engagement positions within agencies as core functions.
- **Ensure accountability and transparency:** develop clear protocols for communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution that are grounded in principles of mutual respect and understanding.

Rationale: Meaningful partnerships require trust and mutual understanding. Prioritising relationship building creates a foundation for effective collaboration, knowledge sharing, and collaborative decision making. This is not only important to Indigenous peoples' assertions of rights and authority over Country, but also the effective and efficient administration of agency responsibilities.

Important considerations for policy implications:

As detailed in the *Principles and Protocols for Cultural Land Management* (Natural Hazards Research Australia, 2022), there are a number of important considerations for agency policymakers when developing policies, protocols and practices for collaborations with Indigenous communities. For example:

- **Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC):** agencies should ensure all engagement processes uphold the principle of FPIC, allowing Indigenous communities to make their own decisions about their participation in governance.
- **Flexibility:** agencies should recognise the diversity of Indigenous communities and be prepared to adapt engagement processes to meet their specific needs and priorities.
- **Capacity building:** agencies should invest in capacity building for both Indigenous communities and land management agencies to support effective participation in governance processes.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** agencies should establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their programs in achieving their goals and the goals of their partners. This should include agreed measures of success and regular feedback from Indigenous communities about the appropriateness of those measures.

By implementing these findings, institutions and land management agencies can take meaningful steps towards ensuring that Indigenous voices are included in decisions that affect their lives and Country.

Utilisation outputs

TABLE 6 SUMMARY OF UTILISATION OUTPUTS

Date	Type	Title
25 January 2023	Hazard note edition (webinar)	Hazard Note 1 – Understanding the Black Summer Bushfires through research
1 May 2023	Presentation	2023 Natural Hazards Research Forum presentation
6 July 2023	Guide / factsheet	Principles and protocols for cultural land management governance and research
17 July 2023	Workshop material	NAIDOC Week 2023 webinar – additional resources
21 November 2023	Presentation	Principles and protocols for cultural land management governance and research
15 May 2024	Presentation	2024 Natural Hazards Research Forum presentation
5 May 2025	Journal article	Emergent sovereignties: Pragmatism, experiment, and affect within collaborative Indigenous wildfire management in south-east Australia

Principles and Protocols for Cultural Land Management: Review of recommendations regarding collaborative principles, processes, and protocols for governance and research

In July 2023, the Centre published the project's *Principles and protocols for cultural land management governance and research* as a 1-pager (Natural Hazards Research Australia 2024a). This has since been complemented by a full companion guide titled *Using cultural land management principles and protocols* (Natural Hazards Research Australia 2024b). Developed in consultation with the CLMRG Project Steering Group and Research Team, this resource summarises a review of relevant collaborative principles, processes and protocols for agencies and research institutions. A companion guide to the principles and protocols is also available to support individuals and organisations in implementing them as a starting point for local and in-depth conversations.

In November 2023, lead researchers Oli Costello and Timothy Neale presented *Hazardous Webinar: Principles of culturally safe research practices* (Accessible here). The authors provided an overview of the of the research project, describing the research process and findings of the

literature review and workshops and introducing some of the core principles and protocols published in the aforementioned documents. Another key premise of the webinar was to learn from other countries and their experiences, with Dr Amy Cardinal Christianson and Alex Zahara (REDfire Lab), providing insights from the Canadian perspective.

The report, fact sheet and webinar are now included as part of the Centre's First Nations engagement resources webpage. These resources build upon existing guidelines for researchers' respectful engagement with First Nations peoples (e.g., AIATSIS 2020), to provide principles and protocols that are tailored to audiences within and across a range of emergency and land management agencies and natural hazards contexts.

Project journal article

In October 2024, the research team submitted a journal article titled *Emergent sovereignties: Pragmatism, experiment, and affect within collaborative Indigenous wildfire management in southeast Australia* based on project research for publication. This article is included on the Centre project website and was shared with all project partners, participants, and relevant agency and research contacts.

Publications list

Beggs, Lachlan, Timothy Neale, Oliver Costello, Andrea Rawluk, Jack Pascoe, and Teagan Shields. 2025. "Emergent sovereignties: Pragmatism, experiment, and affect within collaborative Indigenous wildfire management in south-east Australia." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 0 (0): 25148486251337284. https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486251337284.

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