

ARE YOU a FIRST NATIONS WORKER OR VOLLIE

IN EMERGENCY AND LAND MANAGEMENT?

OR DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO IS?

In a new survey, you can share your experiences to help shape recommendations that strengthen First Nations leadership, representation and wellbeing in the workforce



All survey responses are confidential and anonymous

First Nations women, cultural fire knowledge, wellbeing and memory

Impact evaluation of the Australia Women-in-Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange program

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



Background

In this section:

- WTREX Exchanges
- An Australian first: AUSWTREX
- Research Project
- Research Methods



WTREX Exchanges

- **Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (TREX)** are two-week fire training programs aimed at giving more people the opportunity to work with fire
- Developed by North American-based organisation Fire Networks
- In 2016, women firefighters adapted the original TREX model to create the **Women-in-Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges (WTREX)** aimed at women in the fire workforce



Bringing WTREX to Australia

- In 2022, the **first Indigenous women's TREN** was hosted by the Karuk Tribe in the remote Klamath Mountains of northern California, USA
- Four Indigenous Australian women from Queensland were supported by their workplaces to attend the Karuk WTREN
- This was their first experience in a program of this kind, and it inspired them to bring the WTREN program to Australia

Image: (L-R) Chloe Swiney, Kylee Clubb, KWTREN participant, Evelyn Ivey, and Alex Lacey at the Karuk WTREN



Image: courtesy of Chloe Swiney, QFD

An Australian first: AUSWTREX

- In 2025, the **Australian-first** Women-in-Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (AUSWTREX) was held in North Queensland
- **A 12-day gathering of 37 women** who work or volunteer in fire management
- Delivered by QFD, QPWS, AFAC, WTREX, and Fire Networks
- The program aimed to:
 - Enhance fire practitioner skills
 - Exchange and share cultural and western burning knowledge
 - Develop a network of women in fire
- A key focus of AUSWTREX was to highlight the **leadership and value** of First Nations women in fire
- 26 participants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women and 4 identified as First Nations women overseas

Image: Ranger Alex (Ewamian) with a biri stick lighting the first fire at AUSWTREX on Ewamian Country



Research Project

- NHRA and National Indigenous Disaster Resilience (NIDR) were engaged by QFD to understand **how participating in AUSWTREX impacted First Nations women's wellbeing**
- The research project had the following objectives:
 - Understand the impact of First Nations women-led gatherings and cultural fire exchanges on wellbeing and memory
 - Inform future iterations of the WTREX program
 - Contribute to a growing body of research on the health and wellbeing impacts for First Nations people engaged in Caring for Country work



Research Methods

BEFORE AND AFTER AUSWTREX

- Interviews with 19 First Nations participants **before** and **after** the program

DURING AUSWTREX

- Daily check ins
- Participant journals
- Participant observation through two Aboriginal female researchers from Monash University who also participated in the program



Findings

In this section:

- Key impacts for First Nations women



Key impacts for First Nations women

The research found that AUSWTREX had **significant wellbeing impacts** for First Nations women.

Key impacts for First Nations women:

- Safety and support
- Confidence and empowerment
- Reciprocal exchange
- Connection and healing
- Cultural, personal and professional growth
- Reincorporation



Safety and support

“The way that everyone would come together and share their knowledge and not bring each other down. We were all there to encourage each other and lift each other up.”

“It was just amazing being there because usually here at work, our ops are mainly males... I feel like I'm going to get criticised or judged if I do something wrong...”

AUSWTREX provided a safe and supportive space to connect and learn alongside other women in fire. This was significant for participants who are often the only woman, or the only Indigenous person, in their workplace. Learning and working in an encouraging environment meant participants felt safe to challenge themselves in ways they haven't otherwise been able to.

Confidence and empowerment

"It built me with a lot of confidence in wanting to go and be more than just an operational ranger, which I've been for most of my working career, and wanting to go into those even more male dominated spaces."

"You give them the opportunity, give them the platform, they'll step up on it and they will own it. You just got to give them that space."

"When I was there, I think it made me realise I actually know a lot of the stuff, especially the fire stuff."

AUSWTREX left all participants with increased confidence and a sense of empowerment. Alongside building new skills, the program created space for existing knowledge and leadership qualities to be recognised. Participants felt pride after taking on new challenges and achieving things they would not normally attempt.

Reciprocal exchange

"There's not one person that I didn't learn anything from, even the younger girls."

"I thought that was really, really awesome that they [interstate and international participants] come over and shared their knowledge and their way of burning to us."

AUSWTREX provided a rare space for First Nations women in fire to connect with other women working across Australia and overseas. Participants exchanged knowledge about different burning techniques, learning from women who practise cultural and hazard reduction burning across different landscapes in Australia and overseas. For some, it was their first opportunity to learn about cultural burning, or to use their skills to protect cultural heritage.

Connection and healing

"Without knowing it, I'm actually healing a lot being around so many strong women."

"I felt like sharing my story is done with people that understand, like the women from WTREX."

"And I guess one of the toughest things I did, but now I think it's the best thing that I did was face my fears with fire, respect fire, and just learn from fire as well."

Friendships formed during AUSWTREX have continued beyond the program. Despite coming from different places, many shared similar experiences of how colonisation and government policies had impacted their families, and connections to community and culture. AUSWTREX enabled Indigenous women to connect with others who shared similar experiences, leading to positive impacts on belonging, identity and wellbeing.

Cultural, personal and professional growth

"It's like the best program I think I've been to for Indigenous women. It's the first one I've been to for fire for Indigenous women."

"Seeing these girls that work with Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service was like, that would be my ultimate dream. I would love that. That would be my ultimate dream job."

"I don't really have a lot of friends that are parents, so just being able to connect with a lot of women that have kids helped a lot."



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Reincorporation

*"I think our work
doesn't really
understand how
big of a deal it
was."*

*"So coming back to
work, I was able to
share a heap of
stories and
everybody's super
interested and want
to know more."*

*"I just feel like I
have all this
knowledge, but
it's not being
used."*

Participants experienced significant cultural, personal and professional growth, returning from AUSWTREX as changed women. Reincorporating or returning as changed people to unchanged environments presented both opportunities and challenges. Some women returned to workplaces where their experiences were valued, while others faced negativity and limited recognition of their experience and skills.

Research Impact

In this section:

- Boosting the workforce of First Nations women in fire
- Key learnings for future programs



Boosting the First Nations women in fire workforce

- A small, but highly skilled workforce of **First Nations women in fire exists**
- This workforce is often **overlooked, not absent**
- AUSWTREX delivered significant **wellbeing impacts** for First Nations women
- Investing in First Nations women through programs like AUSWTREX strengthens **workforce expertise, wellbeing and retention**



Key learnings for future programs

- Prioritise structured **recovery and reflection time** in program design
- Recruit a **First Nations mental health practitioner** in the program
- **Reincorporation support** is critical to ensure wellbeing impacts are carried beyond the program
- **Embedded evaluation** as a decolonial M&E tool can provide rich insights
- Add a **participant reunion** to the structure of the program to foster participant companionship



Australian Women-in-Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (AUSWTREX)

Connection and healing

Friendships formed during AUSWTREX have continued beyond the program. Despite coming from different places, many shared similar experiences of how government policies and practices had impacted their families and connections to community and culture. AUSWTREX enabled Indigenous women to connect with others who shared similar experiences, leading to positive impacts on identity and wellbeing.



"Without knowing it, I'm actually healing a lot being around so many strong women."

Confidence and empowerment

All participants left AUSWTREX with increased confidence and a sense of empowerment. Alongside building new skills, the program created space for existing knowledge and leadership qualities to be recognised. Participants felt pride after taking on new challenges and achieving things they would not normally attempt.

"You give them the opportunity, give them the platform, they'll step up on it and they will own it. You just got to give them that space."

Reciprocal exchange

AUSWTREX provided a rare space for Indigenous women in fire to connect with other women working across Australia and overseas. Participants exchanged knowledge about different burning techniques, learning from women who practise cultural and hazard reduction burning. For some, it was their first opportunity to experience a cultural burn, or to use their skills to protect cultural heritage.

A 12-day program delivered by QFD and QPWS saw 37 Indigenous and non-Indigenous women enhance their fire practitioner skills and share cultural and western burning knowledge. This research project aimed to understand the impacts for Indigenous women who participated in Australia's first WTREX program. NIDR carried out interviews and participant observation, providing valuable insights to strengthen and support Indigenous women in this workforce.

Cultural, personal and professional growth

AUSWTREX went beyond a networking and training program. Participants found companionship within a workforce described as challenging and isolating for Indigenous women. For many, the most meaningful learnings from the program emerged through the development of relationships with other Indigenous women in fire.

Reincorporation

Reincorporating or returning as changed people to unchanged environments presented both opportunities and challenges. Some women returned to workplaces where their experiences were valued, while others faced negativity and limited recognition of their experience and skills.

"I think our work doesn't really understand how big of a deal it was."

This research highlights the capability and skill of Indigenous women working in the Australian fire and land management sector. It demonstrates that investing in culturally supportive programs can positively impact the wellbeing of this workforce, benefiting both First Nations women and the broader sector.

Safety and support

AUSWTREX provided a safe and supportive space to connect and learn alongside other women in fire. This was significant for participants who are often the only woman, or the only Indigenous person, in their workplace. Learning and working in an encouraging environment meant participants felt safe to challenge themselves in ways they haven't otherwise been able to.

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Next steps:

Presenting at AFAC in Melbourne on 19 August 2026

IGEM article by end users (QFD/QPWS)

Academic article by research team (NIDR)

A second WTREX in Australia?!

