

INDIGENOUS

Seeing grasslands through the trees

TRADITIONAL OWNER INDIGENOUS ENTERPRISES AND SCIENTISTS ARE COLLABORATING TO INCREASE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF INDIGENOUS-LED APPROACHES TO LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT.

For thousands of years Indigenous Australians successfully used fire as a tool to manage and modify the landscape in northern Australia. Knowledge about traditional fire regimes has been carried through generations, and there is further potential to adopt these practices where possible. In Ngallabigee, in Cape York Peninsula, the practice of traditional burning has been absent for over two decades.

“Ngallabigee is a very significant place for the family, purely because of its historical value, and I think it’s a place where there’s a lot of burial sites as well,” said Traditional Owner Dion Creek.

“When I first came up here, there was kilometres of open grasslands. Over the past 20 to 30 years I think, the whole landscape has kind of changed around here. It’s different because of the change of fire regime.”

In 2013, Kalan Rangers joined forces with CSIRO scientists to develop environmental management strategies to care for their country, as part of research under the Australian Government’s National Environmental Research Program. Kalan Rangers manage 350,000 hectares in central Cape York for biodiversity and other natural resource management objectives.

CSIRO researcher Justin Perry says the past management practices of the Ngallabigee grasslands demonstrate the importance of cultural practices to the landscape.

“These grasslands are a really important part of biodiversity in northern Queensland, especially in this region, and they used to be maintained by Indigenous people living up here,” Justin said.

Until now, traditional fire regimes have been absent from Ngallabigee for over two decades.
Photo Jaana Dielenberg.



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GRASSLANDS

“So if you remove fire from the landscape, you start to get a change in the landscape, so maintaining the grassland requires fire, which requires people.”

Dion, who is also the Chief Operations Officer with Kalan Rangers, says the impact on Ngallabgee from threats such as invasive weeds and feral animals is clear. Together, he and other rangers are beginning to turn things around. In early 2015, Dion visited Ngallabgee to burn the grassland, returning traditional practices to the area.

Research project leader Melissa Sinclair says re-establishing Ngallabgee grasslands is a great example of Indigenous bio-cultural management. “The work Kalan Enterprises and CSIRO are doing through this program is increasing the capacity to monitor and evaluate management approaches like this,” she said.

“Federal Indigenous environmental programs such as Caring for our Country and Working on Country have specific outcomes which Indigenous people are engaged to deliver. For projects to be meaningful to local groups, however, they may need to incorporate other locally important objectives, such as traditional burning.”

“This case study is part of a wider initiative to provide specialist technical support to Kalan Rangers and Traditional Owners to adapt existing monitoring frameworks to better suit local objectives and work plans. Through working with this group and others on Cape York, our research team is developing recommendations for how policy and monitoring frameworks can be adapted to better incorporate local aspirations.”



Left: Kalan Rangers in action and below: CSIRO researcher Justin Perry and Traditional Owner Dion Creek. Photos Michael Lawrence-Taylor.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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www.nerpnorthern.edu.au/research/projects/22
You can see Dion and Justin working together in this video,
<https://vimeo.com/120326523>