

FIRE COUNTRY: HOW INDIGENOUS FIRE MANAGEMENT COULD HELP SAVE AUSTRALIA

By Victor Steffensen

2020. Hardie Grant Travel. 221 pp. ISBN: 9781741177268

Cultural burning has been drastically restricted by western-influenced fire management around the world, and the role of Indigenous people in shaping healthy ecosystems and landscapes has been downplayed or even dismissed. *Fire Country* by Victor Steffensen is a timely book, given that extreme wildfire events and seasons are becoming more common and a revival of cultural burning is increasingly called for as part of the solution. Over the years, Steffensen — a descendent of the Tagalaka people (from Northern Queensland, Australia) — learnt and subsequently spread traditional ecological and cultural knowledge, and *Fire Country* is his ‘story of bringing back the good fire’.

Fire Country is strongly autobiographical. The narrative is straightforward and pleasant, delivered mostly in the first person (and frequently in its plural form), often intimate and poetic at times. Some amusing moments involving burning activities in defiance of authority are included. The communication and empathic qualities of the author are manifest, and he avoids the divisive discourse that could be expected given the book subject.

In Part 1 (*Finding the old people*), Steffensen describes his early years and his move at the age of 18 from a small rainforest community to the small town of Laura in Cape York. There, he starts working as a community ranger under the guidance of Tommy George and George Musgrave, the last of the Awu-Laya Elders and holders of the traditional knowledge and stories of their homelands. In Part 2 (*The fire*), the author is acquainted with cultural burning through his mentors and, to his dismay, with the western burning practices in national parks, which he perceives as ‘wrong’ because of ‘too much’ fire both in intensity and extent. Here, and across the book, cultural burning emerges as an artisanal and fully integrated patchwork, in contrast with the institutional and one-dimensional practice of hazard-reduction burning, which is seen as disconnected from culture and the environment. As the Elders are given rights under government agreements to access their land for certain activities (but not burning), the reader is made aware of their distress upon realising that their country has become ‘sick’ in the absence of its traditional custodians. Then, a liberating moment comes when they light their first (and unauthorised) fire.

The remainder of *The fire* (Chapters 5–9) explains the framework and rationale for cultural burning in the various ecosystem types (‘countries’) of Cape York and is revealing of the depth of ecological and cultural knowledge involved. The motto is to ‘burn country like you are gardening for food, and like you are living off the land to survive’. Thus the goal is to ensure optimum plant regrowth without damaging the trees, which is attained through gentle slow fires producing white, thin smoke and black ashes. Fire use in the different countries follows a sequence synchronous with grass curing, which

controls the spread and intensity of fire through the relative amount of green grass and creates a dynamic patch mosaic. But the timing of burning is based on additional indicators of plant phenology, animal activity, weather, and the availability of food and medicine plants. Importantly, as Steffensen emphasises more than once, ‘reading the land’ to inform decisions on burn activity is almost a permanent job.

Fire Country does not forget no-fire country, i.e. the fire-sensitive ecosystems that can be protected by burning the adjoining vegetation: most rainforests, gullies, and riverbanks occupied by ‘water-based’ vegetation. Nonetheless, ‘nothing feels better than fishing while the country is slowly burning near the riverbank’ in case fire-adapted vegetation extends to the bank margin, and the same goes for saltwater grasslands bordering mangroves. The special and delicate case of species and habitats that coexist but have different fire requirements, namely heathland versus wetland, is also addressed. Part 2 ends with considerations about the central role of trees in making connections within the landscape and how to apply fire to protect them without causing damage.

Part 3 (*The other side*) is about the struggle to get cultural fire acknowledged and the frustration of dealing with government agencies, both for managing the land with cultural burning and making its demonstration in workshops. Accounts are given of unsuccessful cooperation efforts and never-ending negotiations and meetings to obtain burn permits, even for land under Aboriginal tenure, plus the obstacles faced when actually burning, e.g. conflict over safety procedures. Finally, Steffensen criticises how science compartmentalises knowledge, exemplified by the distinction made between burning for biodiversity and for hazard reduction, which opposes the concept of cultural fire as a holistic treatment. He argues that reading the land has been replaced by quantitative methods and technology that disconnect prescribed burning from the land. Fortunately, a network of cultural fire practitioners repossessing their rights has grown steadily over the years through Indigenous fire workshops for communities and other initiatives, and that is the subject of Part 4 (*Sharing the fire knowledge*).

Fire Country reaches its zenith in Part 5 (*Healing country, healing people*), even if its contents could have been better organised. The new term ‘Praction’ is introduced in Chapter 19 to mean the practice of an action in benefit of the land and guided by its health status, highlighting the value of hands-on learning (to burn) following the knowledge passed on by the Elders. Chapter 20 follows as an intriguing description of how native animals are aware of and respond to fire. This gives way to the dark tone of *What have they done to the country?* with its tales of environmental degradation following European colonisation and the demise of Indigenous people: old-growth tree logging, fire misuse or exclusion (in conservation areas), and severe wildfire followed by proliferation of alien weeds and biodiversity loss. Chapter 22 (*Healing people with country*) is about the

positive outcomes of cultural burning from a social perspective, from individual empowerment to health.

Chapter 23 (*Healing country*) addresses what western knowledge calls ecosystem restoration. Here, environmental distress is handled as a health issue that is diagnosed and then treated with the right prescription of fire, variable with ecosystem and health condition. A comprehensive focus on the use of fire to control biological invasions, building on Chapters 5–9 to reach another level of substance, makes *Healing country* the corollary of the book and an enticing piece for both fire researchers and fire managers. As I approached the end of Chapter 23, I could not avoid noting that the right fire to care for the land equates to the type of fire that Australian fire ecologists often criticise for being too cool and too frequent.

The final chapter in the book (*Living knowledge*) mentions the tragic Black Summer fires of 2019–2020 as the inevitable

outcome of neglected land and severe drought, as well as the absolute need for change and the challenges that lie ahead. Significantly, it starts and finishes with the decisive role that young people need to play for change to occur. *Fire Country* depicts a journey of awakening, practicing and sharing the traditional knowledge of the Elders; however, it is more than a successful book about fire management and for that reason I see it as appealing to a diverse audience. I can only hope that other regions of the world will produce their much-needed *Fire Country* counterparts.

Paulo M. Fernandes

CITAB, Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro
Vila Real, Portugal
pfern@utad.pt