



Australian Archaeology Association Inc.
School of Social Science
Level 3 Michie Building
University of Queensland
St Lucia QLD 4072
Australia
president@australianarchaeology.com.au
www.australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au

Australian Archaeological Association Inc.: Press Release
Impact of bushfires on cultural heritage

The Australian Archaeological Association (AAA) calls on the Government to ensure that Australia's rich cultural heritage is included in all bushfire recovery plans.

"In the face of such devastation, heritage is a powerful force connecting people to their communities. This is particularly true for Indigenous communities", said AAA president, Dr Tiina Manne.

The Australian Archaeological Association is the largest archaeological organisation in Australia, representing a diverse membership of professionals, researchers, Traditional Custodians, students and others with an interest in archaeology.

Dr Manne said that the National Bushfire Recovery Agency must take account of cultural heritage in recovery planning, and ecosystems revival. An audit of burned country must be undertaken in consultation with affected Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities and heritage professionals. This audit must have two aims:

1. Visits to the locales of known sites and heritage places to identify what has been damaged or destroyed and to assess the condition of what survives. It is very likely that many hundreds, if not thousands, of sites will have been destroyed. Rehabilitation could cause further damage to heritage places.
2. Surveys of burned country to identify previously unknown Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sites and heritage places exposed by the lack of vegetation that may have survived the ravages of the fires. We have already seen that many previously unknown Aboriginal sites associated with the Budj Bim World Heritage Area in Victoria have been exposed as a result of fire away clearing vegetation. With the approval of Traditional Custodians, these newly discovered sites can be placed onto heritage registers to protect them into the future. The communities can also have the opportunity to incorporate these places into living heritage narratives.

The audit and the heritage surveys must be fully funded in keeping with current heritage assessment legal requirements and best practice heritage management principles. The involvement of Aboriginal Rangers and other trained Traditional Custodians in such activities, as well as members of local Historical Societies in the case of built heritage places, would be an important step in reinforcing Aboriginal people's abiding connection with Country and local communities' links to their history.

There also needs to be funding for emergency mitigation of damage to at-risk heritage places and their ongoing management. This includes not only funding for immediate works to the heritage places themselves, but also funding for associated heritage protection activities, such as the development of conservation plans and the erection of fences to exclude cattle from sensitive heritage areas.

Fires have been a part of the Australian landscape for over 65,000 years and remain an integral part of the Australian ecosystem. Cultural burning was, and remains, a key technology in Aboriginal land management practices. While it is true that bushfires happen every year, the fires of 2019/2020 are different; their scale, duration, and intensity are unprecedented in the history of both the Aboriginal occupation of the continent and the more recent European occupation. In the recovery process it is important to be aware of the effects of fire and of rehabilitation works on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural heritage.

The importance of Aboriginal cultural burning in the development of fire management strategies into the future cannot be understated, and the Australian Archaeological Association strongly endorses calls for the involvement of Aboriginal fire managers and Aboriginal Land Management Rangers in any bodies established to review planning activities for future fire management regimes and in current fire recovery efforts.

Aboriginal people's occupation of the continent has been expansive, and because of this we can safely say that the recent fires have destroyed many important and irreplaceable sites of archaeological and Aboriginal significance. Fires will have destroyed culturally modified trees, such as canoe trees; and fires can cause soft sandstone to crack or exfoliate, causing the complete destruction of grinding grooves for axe manufacture or for food production as well as painted or engraved Aboriginal art. Other cultural heritage made of stone, such as stone artefact sites, quarries and tool manufacturing sites and rockshelters with occupation deposits, are less vulnerable, but even stone artefacts can crack in intense heat and soot deposits can affect rock art pigments.

In addition, with the loss of vegetation cover, erosion can damage the integrity of surface archaeological sites. Many early structures built by European settlers in regional Australia have been destroyed, while many that remain are under direct threat. It is undeniable that there would have been a loss of places that have historical and present-day cultural significance to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, and archaeologists alike.

The threat to the survival of physical cultural sites is just one aspect of loss. Only Aboriginal people can speak to the impacts of the fire on the loss of their cultural places, and the effect this will have on their deep and ongoing connections to Country. These intangible connections between Aboriginal people and Country are embedded in millennia-old land management practices, much of which will have been undone by the uncontrolled burns that characterise the current fires.

The silver lining to the fires, from an archaeological and heritage management perspective, is that much more can now be seen on the ground. The complete removal of all ground cover in many areas means that archaeological heritage places, once covered by vegetation and/or leaf litter, will be visible for a short time, until the bush regenerates following recent rain.

For further information, contact: Dr Tiina Manne, President, Australian Archaeological Association Inc. <president@australianarchaeology.com>. Please also refer to the article published in [Nature](#) on the 23 January 2020 covering this release.

23 January 2020