

1-1-2015

Colonisation and fire: Gendered dimensions of indigenous fire knowledge retention and revival

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Recommended Citation

Eriksen, Christine and Hankins, Don L., "Colonisation and fire: Gendered dimensions of indigenous fire knowledge retention and revival" (2015). *Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers*. 1648.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/1648>

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Abstract

This chapter elucidates how gender is entwined in the spatial and temporal knowledge trajectories through which indigenous fire knowledge is retained and revived using a case study of eastern Australia and California, USA. Fire extends its roots far into the past of indigenous cultures worldwide, extending beyond basic domestic needs to responsible environmental stewardship. Fire has played a key role in the land stewardship practices of Aboriginal Australian and Native American women and men for millennia (Stewart et al. 2002; Gammage 2011). This includes cultural and gendered landscapes, such as indigenous sacred and ceremonial sites off-limits to women or men. However, a 'disconnect' between the past, present and future of both ecological and cultural aspects of fire underpins a tendency among many researchers, policymakers and practitioners to dismiss or ignore fire knowledge that is alive today among indigenous elders and cultural land stewards. This may be attributed to assumptions based on historic events, a lack of current burning and relatively low indigenous populations. Instead guidance is sought from archaeological, anthropological and ethnographic records from the past or from scientific models that project the future. An attitude also prevails that depicts historic use of fire by indigenous people as non-applicable in current-day environments due to environmental and demographic changes (White 2004). Yet, it is important to recognise that culture and knowledge are as dynamic as the environment is. From an applied standpoint, indigenous fire knowledge is fluid (for example, changing with past climatic events or gender-targeted genocide), and the ability to read the landscape to know how, when, why and what to burn comes with proper training. The concept of 'proper training', however, arguably plays out differently today from traditional indigenous fire knowledge trajectories of the past due to the impact of history and politics. It is this marginalised political, technological and institutional position of indigenous peoples' knowledge in many 'developed' countries that makes this chapter relevant to a handbook of gender and development.

Keywords

revival, gendered, indigenous, dimensions, fire, knowledge, retention, colonisation

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Eriksen, C. & Hankins, D. L. (2015). Colonisation and fire: Gendered dimensions of indigenous fire knowledge retention and revival. In A. Coles, L. Gray & J. Momsen (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Development* (pp. 129-137). New York, United States: Routledge.

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Colonisation and Fire

[Gendered dimensions of indigenous fire knowledge retention and revival](#)

Christine Eriksen and Don L. Hankins

[pp.129-137]

A fiery context

This chapter elucidates how gender is entwined in the spatial and temporal knowledge trajectories through which indigenous fire knowledge is retained and revived using a case study of eastern Australia and California, USA. Fire extends its roots far into the past of indigenous cultures worldwide, extending beyond basic domestic needs to responsible environmental stewardship. Fire has played a key role in the land stewardship practices of Aboriginal Australian and Native American women and men for millennia (Stewart et al. 2002; Gammage 2011). This includes cultural and gendered landscapes, such as indigenous sacred and ceremonial sites off-limits to women or men. However, a ‘disconnect’ between the past, present and future of both ecological and cultural aspects of fire underpins a tendency among many researchers, policymakers and practitioners to dismiss or ignore fire knowledge that is alive today among indigenous elders and cultural land stewards. This may be attributed to assumptions based on historic events, a lack of current burning and relatively low indigenous populations. Instead guidance is sought from archaeological, anthropological and ethnographic records from the past or from scientific models that project the future. An attitude also prevails that depicts historic use of fire by indigenous people as non-applicable in current-day environments due to environmental and demographic changes (White 2004). Yet, it is important to recognise that culture and knowledge are as dynamic as the environment is. From an applied standpoint, indigenous fire knowledge is fluid (for example, changing with past climatic events or gender-targeted genocide), and the ability to read the landscape to know how, when, why and what to burn comes with proper training. The concept of ‘proper training’, however, arguably plays out differently today from traditional¹ indigenous fire knowledge trajectories of the past due to the impact of history and politics. It is this marginalised political, technological and institutional position of indigenous peoples’ knowledge in many ‘developed’ countries that makes this chapter relevant to a handbook of gender and development.

Colonisation introduced a new paradigm of law into indigenous cultures in many parts of the world, although it should be noted that colonial processes were uneven in time and space. Colonial interests in both Australia and the USA disrupted indigenous use of fire through the [p.130] removal of people from their lands and policy prohibition (Gammage 2011; Vale 2002). Policymakers in other regions of the world are likewise using Eurocentric fire suppression policies, rather than developing and adopting fire management strategies adapted by indigenous people over many centuries to suit regional or local environments and agricultural practices. Indigenous use of fire, whether for resource harvesting, hunting, vegetation and soil regeneration or maintenance of communal areas, were instead seen as an ‘evil’, environmentally degrading practice, as such fires threatened both the property and the social hierarchies of rigidly ordered colonial societies (Eriksen 2007; Mistry 2000). Case studies on the environmental impact of indigenous burning practices in West Africa (e.g., Laris and Wardell 2006), research by Jay Mistry (2000) on policy and politics surrounding indigenous fire management in savanna regions globally, the persistent conflict over fire as a land management tool in southern parts of Africa (e.g., Eriksen 2007) and insights into government-funded programme pressure on indigenous fire management in South America (e.g., McDaniel et al. 2005) have all concluded that conflicts between indigenous or local communities and official bodies over fire management often stem from global (Eurocentric) perspectives on environment and natural resource management having replaced local standpoints. This is despite the more recent acceptance of the role of non-equilibrium theory in ecosystem management, which highlights the value of fire in, for example, indigenous shifting cultivation systems and wildfire protection schemes (Eriksen 2007). The consequences of the continual dominance of Western environmental narratives over indigenous land management practices in many fire-prone regions have arguably been ‘large-scale illegal burning, and the occurrence of catastrophic burns resulting in ecological and economic damage to land and property’ (Mistry 2002: 308).

Indigenous burning practices are distinguished from the fire management of government agencies in the context of traditional law, objectives and the right to burn. At the core of indigenous eco-cultural fire processes is recognition of the interrelated and interdependent aspects of fire that follow the laws of the land (nature). Traditional law and lore are rooted in the landscape and stories that define a given culture (Black 2011). Gendered norms are interwoven into both law and lore. By 'lore' we refer to story, whereas indigenous law is coded in the lore. The landscape will convey its need for burning based on factors such as the accumulation of dead plant materials or the decline in resource conditions. Such knowledge may be encoded in the stories of a region. These stories may also convey the penalties for not following the laws of the land, as often depicted in Aboriginal fire paintings. The Aboriginal Australian governing principle is founded on the ontological concept of 'the Dreaming'. This concept reflects how indigenous people place their continuing practices of traditional action within a metaphysical context. Indigenous people do not generally separate the synergistic relationships between fire and other aspects of the physical and metaphysical. Rather those relationships are interrelated and interdependent. The scaling of the relationships extends from the individual to the universe, and is inclusive of the feedbacks within those levels. They may be separated at a community level to distinguish the responsibilities of, for example, a given gender, society or clan, but beyond that there is recognition of those relationships. Many examples of fire in the stories of indigenous people explain various aspects of fire knowledge from inter-specific gendered relationships to devastating fire. This knowledge forms how a culture interacts with fire and more specifically how, what, where, when and why burning occurs spatially and temporally for cultural and environmental reasons. This is evident, for example, in the dependent relationship between fire and water and its close connection to balanced gender relations: [p.131]

When I go to gatherings in other places in the US, there's a really strict protocol around fire: the men handle the fire and the women handle the water. That balance is representative, but also practical, of a partnership that's always there whether it's recognised or not. Perhaps that more than anything else in contemporary US society is what's completely out of whack. Both the fire and the water now sometimes work in opposition because of human interference. So it makes me think to right things men and women have to be more in balance with each other or the fire and the water doesn't work.
(female Coast Miwok/Jenner Pomo cultural practitioner, California 2011)

Changes in land tenure following colonisation have disrupted the continuous relationship between indigenous people and their homelands. Access to land is important to indigenous peoples' memory of land, self-identity and for their sense of belonging – i.e., it is a core element for both the physical and mental wellbeing of indigenous cultures. The land is not only the source of traditional law and lore, it is what defines many indigenous cultures; when the ties to the landscape are compromised, then so too is the culture (Brody 2002). Indigenous people struggle with mitigating many forced losses in the aftermath of colonisation from the loss of language to a loss or displacement of knowledge and culture linked directly to environmental stewardship. With colonisation, the indigenous obligations to burn as responsible environmental stewards were in many cases reduced from application at a landscape scale to memories, which have survived generations through oral tradition. To the dominant (white) society, indigenous fire knowledge, when not currently applied, has been relegated to a thing of the past. This negates the recognition of indigenous fire as a keystone process environmentally and culturally today. This is despite the tangible results of adaptive management frameworks that have empowered indigenous knowledge keepers to practice fire (e.g., Ross et al. 2011). In some regions of northern and central Australia, indigenous law and practice are still applied through fires ranging in scale from individual plants for food, fibre and other resources to fire at a landscape scale for hunting and environmental management purposes (Bliege Bird et al. 2008; Vigilante et al. 2009). In California this happens at a fine localised scale at present, although it was significant historically, occurring across scales from individual plants to the landscape (Stewart et al. 2002; Anderson 2005). These examples demonstrate a chain of knowledge from which to contrast indigenous and non-indigenous fire use and management practices.

More than two-dozen indigenous elders, cultural practitioners and land stewards have shared oral narratives with us over the past decade during participant observations at prescribed burns, fire knowledge workshops, fieldtrips with students, informal conversations and audio-recorded interviews in New South Wales, Queensland and California. In comparing indigenous fire knowledge and burning practices across geographical regions we run the gauntlet of scholarly criticism regarding the portrayal of all indigenous knowledge as being the same (Smith 2012). However, in addition to the regions' many ecological, climatic, colonial and pyro-geographical similarities, the approach is supported by the many similarities apparent in the narratives from both regions of indigenous eco-cultural fire processes.

Gendered dimensions of indigenous fire knowledge trajectories

Despite the impacts of colonisation, indigenous law has remained at the root of many Aboriginal Australian and California Native American communities through their continuing operation [p.132] outside present-day laws established by the colonising governments of Australia and the USA. While applied skills in indigenous fire knowledge still exist in some, frequently remote, communities such as the Martu in Australia's Western Desert and the Karuk tribe in northern California, many indigenous people working with fire are today trained within the Eurocentric and patriarchal notion of firefighting. Firefighting agencies and men are therefore likely to be their main source of fire knowledge – a potentially problematic knowledge-gender relationship also highlighted in the quote above. Fire among indigenous cultures is therefore a complex affair, which has been muddled by colonial laws, policies and practices that have largely placed Australian and American governance above indigenous. For instance, in the USA, only federally qualified individuals can burn on federal lands, which excludes most indigenous traditional practitioners from tending to their homelands as had been done for millennia. In place of indigenous-based fire knowledge, agency-derived policies established around the concept of fire suppression or firefighting has become a societal norm, which today forms a baseline of sorts among both non-indigenous and indigenous people. From our experience, however, the knowledge of indigenous fire practices persists in varying formats among many indigenous women and men who are either cultural practitioners or land stewards within land and fire management agencies. Their employment or engagement with such agencies reflect the need for dynamism and change within a culture over time for its wellbeing and ultimate survival (Black 2011). Dynamism – spatially and temporally – is the crux of the story of how indigenous fire knowledge has been able to persist in New South Wales, Queensland and California. Although gender norms are interwoven into indigenous laws – in the most obvious form as women's laws and men's laws – the stories shared with us strongly indicate that the gender of specific indigenous knowledge-keepers is generationally dependent due to the impact of external social factors past and present. As exemplified below, a temporary generational crossover of gender roles and gendered knowledge has been forged to ensure the retention of indigenous fire knowledge and land stewardship, as well as ceremonial traditions more generally. The temporality of these crossovers can be indefinite.

[Figure 14.1](#) illustrates a generalised view of this spatial, temporal and gendered trajectory of indigenous fire knowledge-holders, which has been derived from our work with California Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians in New South Wales and Queensland.

According to our research, the layering of Aboriginal east-Australian and California Native American eco-cultural fire knowledge has traditionally been the responsibility of fire-keepers – a role that according to tradition seems to have fallen mainly (but not exclusively) to men (White 2004). This finding correlates with the interpretation by Bill Gammage (2011: 160) of how Aboriginal Australians in 1788 managed what he terms 'the world's biggest estate': 'Fire was a totem. Whoever lit it answered to the ancestors for what it did. Understandably, fire was work for senior people, usually men.' More specifically, it seems that men in the pre-colonial period were the holders of the fire knowledge that was applied at a landscape scale. While women held some fire knowledge, the extent of their personal engagement with prescribed burning practices was in the context of finer scale burning for specific purposes, such as plant foods or basketry. Even though such gendered norms and gender roles were interwoven into indigenous everyday practices, this did not seem to preclude an understanding of the underlying knowledge by the other sex. M. Kat Anderson (2005) offers a rationale for the distribution of fire knowledge and responsibilities among California Native Americans based on traditional tasks men and women would engage in historically. The logic of multiple fire knowledge domains are also described by Bliege Bird et al. (2008) regarding different types of fire use for hunting by Martu women and men respectively in Australia's Western Desert. These fire-hunting practices correlate with the 'temporary activity-space relation' described by [p.133] Francesca Gleeson (1993) as underpinning the complementarities and interdependence of apparent gender-specific activities and purposes of Australian hunter-gatherer uses of fire. Gleeson (1993: i) concludes: 'While most domestic and economic fire-related activities appear to be gender-specific, the only strict adherence to gender specificity is in ritual.'

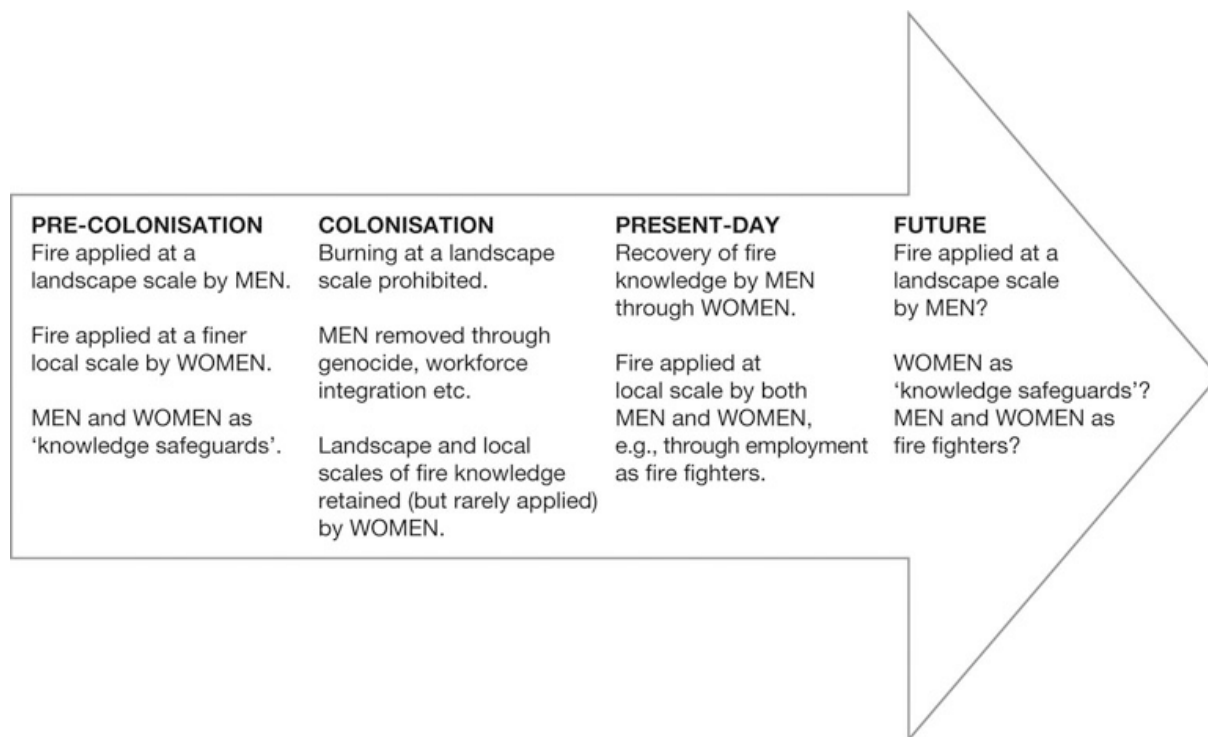


Figure 14.1 A generalised spatial, temporal and gendered trajectory of indigenous fire knowledge-holders in eastern Australia and California, USA (Eriksen 2014)

That women in many places became the main carriers of fire knowledge is directly linked to the impact of external social factors, such as male genocide. However, recognition of whom – women or men – the knowledge and customs belong to traditionally remains with the intent of returning the knowledge to its rightful gender when time and space allow. Thus even when the practical connection to land has been hindered past and present, the cultural connection of indigenous laws to their source – the land – enables knowledge transfer across gender rather than knowledge prohibition caused by static gendered norms. An example of such dynamic transitioning of indigenous fire knowledge is the ways in which Aboriginal Australians and California Native Americans have been able to reconnect with land they are otherwise denied stewardship rights to through employment with wildfire management agencies. While agency burning practices may differ from traditional burning practices and outcomes, employment inadvertently opens up an avenue for the retention and fortification of elements of indigenous fire knowledge through interaction with (tribal) land – albeit in different contexts, such as agency wildfire fighting, and not always within one’s own homeland.

The feeling of personal wellbeing recorded among male and female indigenous firefighters in our research is consistent with the correlation between indigenous burning practices and increased physical, mental and social health recorded by Burgess et al. (2005). This feeling of wellbeing through agency wildfire management, however, obscures the power struggles, contrasting cultural norms, rules and generational gendered fluidity that underpin the interaction between indigenous and agency fire knowledge. For example, the difference between agencies’ [p.134] emphasis on scientific notions of environmental ‘thresholds’ in comparison to Aboriginal perceptions of fire as a ‘living thing’ is problematic as differences in desired outcomes drive on-the-ground practices:

When we drove out to Nullumbuy [in the Northern Territories] we actually saw an old car [with] probably eight traditional people in the car. They’re just walking through the country and they’re burning. You know, there was burning everywhere and I love seeing that. Because they’ve got management of that land and they know when to burn, what to burn, and what their outputs of that burning is. I think that we, even we as an agency, still are coming to terms with thresholds and all this sort of thing. ‘Cause it’s a scientific notion, I suppose. Whereas I see Aboriginal burning practices, it’s a living thing, do you know what I mean?
(female Aboriginal ranger, New South Wales 2011)

Another example is the current emphasis on equal opportunity within federal and state agencies, which result in fire knowledge and training opportunities in theory being shared equally with men and women of indigenous and non-indigenous heritage. Indigenous firefighters trained by agencies have been trained outside of the traditional rights and pathways of fire knowledge acquisition, which makes them privy to knowledge they might not have traditionally had access to within their tribal society. Agency approaches to firefighting thus contribute to the breaking of traditional rules surrounding what fire knowledge is shared with whom, defying cultural laws and practice, which could subvert the revival of traditional indigenous burning practices.

An example of cultural sensitivity (or lack thereof) that appears frequently in our research is the impact of wildfire fighting on indigenous sacred sites, women's and men's ceremonial sites and other areas of significance. Just as knowledge of fire has been retained and protected by indigenous people, so too has the knowledge of cultural sites. The laws governing access to such sites are often related to an individual's own role within their society. For some areas access may be linked entirely to gender or may be restricted to initiation into a given group. In modern society the implementation of prescribed fire and/or the suppression of wildfire may bring conflict with the traditional practices of a given group. Thus knowing where, when, what and how to burn is one set of attributes governing traditional fire, but knowing the deeper significance of the landscape is key to securing appropriate cultural context and sensitivity awareness. The need for knowledge of land is evident in the ways in which concerns for indigenous cultural heritage are seen as being thrown out the window in order to ease the logistics of firefighting operations. For example, when a helicopter used an Aboriginal rock art site as a landing pad, one Aboriginal firefighter felt the site was being 'desecrated'. Another Aboriginal firefighter spoke of her frustration with the lack of consideration for cultural heritage sites as part of the planning and incident management stages of firefighting operations. It is an interesting dilemma that agencies often overlook indigenous sacred ground, rights of access and cultural practices, in that if traditional burning practices were in place, then the right people would inherently be burning the places they were obligated to care for. However, since policy does not support such practice, the reality of having damaging fires scorch sacred ground is often only overcome by fire suppression by whoever is appointed by the agency to do so.

However, experiences to the contrary – of agency fire operations considerate of indigenous gendered landscapes – have been shared specifically by female non-Aboriginal wildland firefighters. At one fire, for example, the on-the-ground fire units were organised so only men [p.135] would patrol the fire on a site sacred to Aboriginal men. Can this heightened awareness by some white female firefighters be explained by a greater sensitivity towards other minority groups given women's minority status within the male-dominated world of firefighting? The answer could be both yes and no. Bob Pease (2010) points out that, while awareness of experiences of oppression are much more common than consciousness of aspects of one's own privileges, members of dominant groups are at the same time conditioned by the normalisation of inequality. Privilege seems natural because processes of oppression are normalised in everyday life through habituated and unconscious practices. Many, therefore, do not recognise aspects of their own privilege as the cultural norms and bureaucratic institutions in which privilege is embedded legitimate it. Thus women within the male-dominated sphere of firefighting are continually reminded of how their gender is a source of discrimination through the habituated and unconscious practices of many male colleagues (Eriksen 2014). This may heighten their consciousness of other forms of oppression in their everyday lives. However, white female firefighters are simultaneously privileged by their race, which may alienate some indigenous women from this 'alliance' (Black 2011). Thus while indigenous employment with wildfire management agencies hold many opportunities and promises, its long-term effect on the retention and revival of indigenous fire knowledge is a critical unknown.

Conclusions

Gendered dimensions of Aboriginal east-Australian and California Native American fire knowledge retention and revival have been illustrated in this chapter through a temporal and spatial trajectory of fire knowledge-holders. This generalised trajectory reveals how gender is at the crux of the story of how fire knowledge has been able to persist over time in New South Wales, Queensland and California. By forging temporary generational crossovers of gender roles and gendered knowledge, the retention of indigenous fire knowledge and environmental stewardship has been ensured despite generations of externally imposed cultural hardship.

Men are presented as the traditional (but not exclusive) holders of fire knowledge that was applied at a landscape scale. While women held some fire knowledge, the extent of their personal engagement with prescribed burning practices was in the context of finer scale burning for specific purposes. As stated earlier, that women in many places became the main carriers of fire knowledge is directly linked to the impact of external social factors, such as male genocide during colonisation.

In discussing the pros and cons of employment with wildfire management agencies for indigenous fire knowledge retention and revival, the power struggles, contrasting cultural norms, rules and generational gendered fluidity that underpin interaction between indigenous and agency fire knowledge are highlighted. State and federal agencies approach to wildfire management contribute to the breaking of the traditional layering of indigenous eco-cultural fire knowledge and rules, for example, through the indiscriminate sharing of fire knowledge and training opportunities between female and male firefighters of indigenous and non-indigenous heritage. However, employment with wildfire management agencies is also an important element in the retention of indigenous fire knowledge through access to and caring for (tribal) land. Integration of cultural perspectives of fire provides indigenous peoples with the opportunity to engage with the restoration of healthy environments, despite the potential simultaneous subversion of traditional indigenous burning practices as cultural laws and practice are defied. [p.136] The retention and revival of indigenous fire knowledge through spatial, temporal and gendered trajectories of adaptation hold many lessons, which can aid ongoing debates on how to coexist with fire in wildfire-prone countries such as Australia and USA. Perhaps most importantly in light of indigenous knowledge systems is that in working together with Aboriginal Australian and California Native American communities, wildfire management agencies stand to gain through the protection and enhancement of a real asset at risk, namely the cultures that have shaped our landscapes since time immemorial. The continuing legacy of twentieth-century fire suppression policies acts against the laws of nature (including ecosystem processes) in many parts of the world. When indigenous people have not actively asserted customary law and applied fire to care for the environment, the laws of nature continue to play out through wildfires. Indigenous practice inherently has recognised the land 'speaking' its needs through wildfire. This recognition drives the implementation of indigenous prescription of fire. We believe a greater recognition of this traditional understanding of the environment could aid current struggles to manage the growing frequency of devastating wildfires if it is acknowledged by, and incorporated into, the practices of wildfire management agencies.

Note

¹ By 'traditional' we refer to the time-tested knowledge and customary practice that still guide many indigenous societies.

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