

Project Summary: Cultural Burning at Coffs Harbour Airport



Cultural burning in the Jaliigirr area

The Jaliigirr *Connecting communities and cultures through corridors* project has provided support to several Aboriginal Green Teams to help maintain connections to country and support conservation and land management training. Across the Jaliigirr area, Green Teams have been engaged to undertake bush regeneration, weed control, revegetation and cultural burning activities. These projects have allowed members of the Green Team to work with professional bush regenerators; staff from National Parks and Wildlife Service, Rural Fire Service and local government; and to meet other indigenous Rangers from across the state.

This project summary will look at a recent project involved the burning of a 12ha block of long unburnt Coastal Wallum Shrubland at Coffs Harbour Airport by the Darrunda Wajaarr Team from the Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Land Council.

Coffs Airport cultural burn

Site description

The dominant vegetation community in the burn site is shrubby wet heath with a dense canopy 2-3 m high.



Photo of the Wallum Shrubland prior to the burn.

The dominant canopy species is White's Tea-tree (*Leptospermum whitei*); other common canopy species are Wallum Banksia (*Banksia aemula*) and Olive Tea-tree (*Leptospermum liversidgei*).

The dense ground cover is dominated by sedges, rushes and the grass-tree *Xanthorrhoea fulva*. In the north-west of the site, a much less shrubby variant of this community occurs, while in the south of the burn site there is a shrubby woodland where Scribbly Gum (*Eucalyptus signata*) is the dominant canopy species.

Cultural values

On the northern section of the planned burn, local Aboriginal women had also identified a woman's mythological site which meant, where possible and practical, women were required to carry out the burning.

Pre-burn monitoring

Team members from the Coffs Harbour Local Aboriginal Land Council's Darrunda Wajaarr team worked with local ecologist Greg Elks to establish monitoring plots across the site and will return and assess the response of the vegetation to the burn over the coming year.

"Fire is an important part of the ecology of many Australian vegetation communities and wet heath communities like this one, require fire to maintain diversity over the long-term" Greg Elks - Ecologist.

The burn

On the evening of 8 August 2015, there was a light breeze and cool temperatures – conducive conditions for a burn. The participants waited for the touchdown of the final Qantas flight and then commenced the burn, at approximately 1720 hours.

Due to the cultural sensitivities of the site, female rangers from the Minyurnai Indigenous Protected

Area (near Casino) and female members of the Darrunda Wajaarr team were on-site to assist NSW RFS female volunteers from the local Red Hill and East Bank brigades. These rangers began ignition on the north-west corner of the burn site while other crews were established along the remaining sectors of the burn.



First ignition in the north west corner of the burn site.

After months of meticulous planning, the burn went well and there were no escapes. The next day a good rain fell across the site and the burn was patrolled for a further two days.



Alita Carbery, a local Gumbaynggirr woman from the local Darrunda Wajaarr Team

Post-burn response

The following months saw a flush of new growth throughout the site, as well as an abundance of wildflowers. This peak in flowering following the fire will benefit many nectivorous species leading to an increase in breeding birds as the vegetation recovers. Smaller mammals such as the New Holland Mouse will

also peak in abundance in the first few years after the fire as shelter and food requirements for this species become optimal.



Aerial photo of the burn site 2 weeks post-burn showing plot locations.

Vegetation plots were resampled in late 2016 with members of the Darrunda Wajaarr team maintaining their involvement in the site through this on-going monitoring.



Vegetation monitoring 1-year post-burn with members of the Darrunda Wajaarr team.

As a result of the project, members of the Darrunda Wajaarr team have learn valuable vegetation monitoring skills and will undertake on-going post-burn weed control at the site through funding from the North Coast Local Land Services (NCLLS) Jaliigirr Project. Projects like this provide an excellent opportunity to develop the skills of Aboriginal youth and build important partnerships between Coffs Harbour City Council, the Rural Fire Service and the local Aboriginal Community.