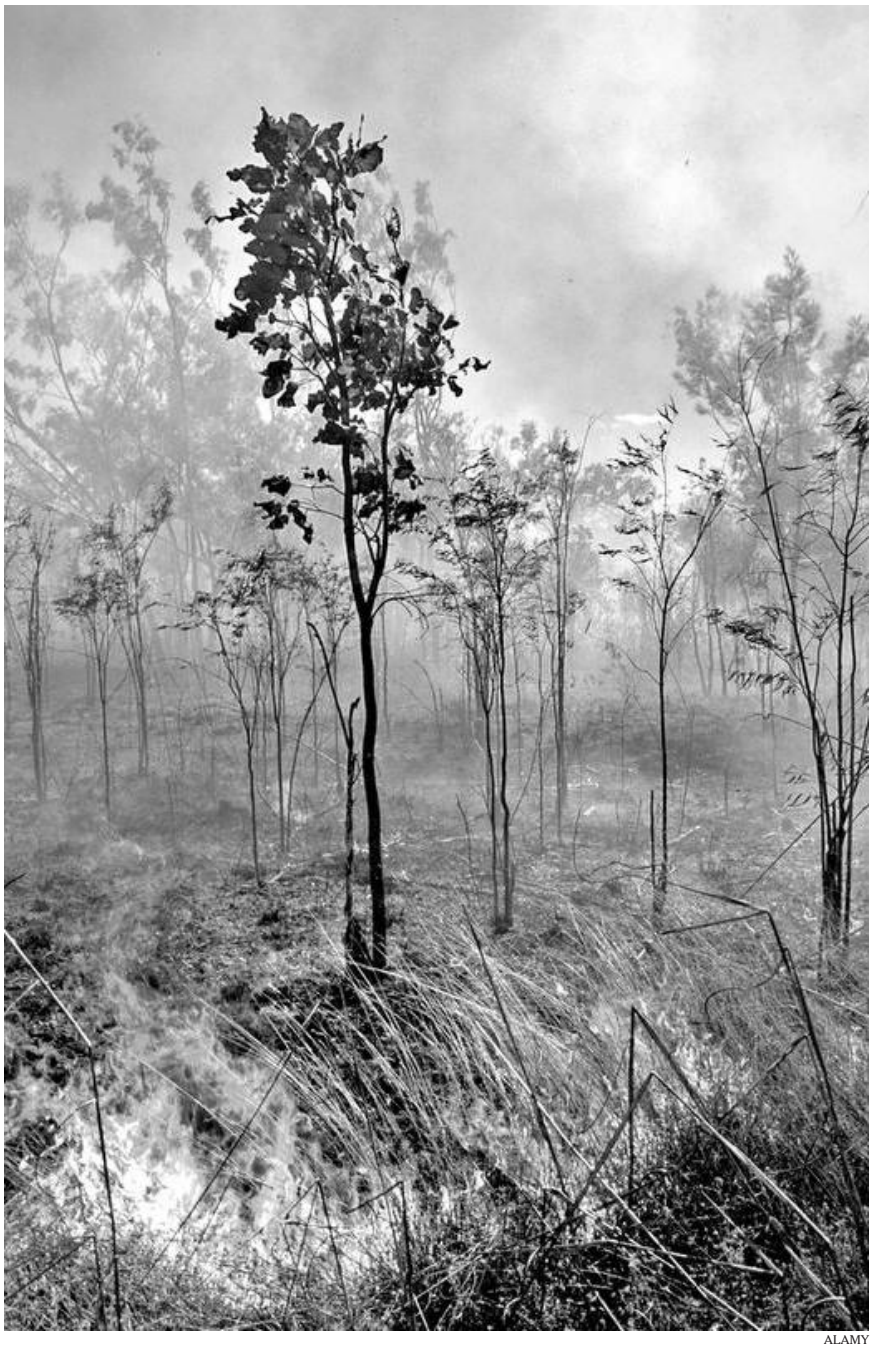

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Indigenous People Know How to Control Fires

Alexis Wright
CARPENTARIA, AUSTRALIA

ABORIGINAL people in this country firmly believe that we are the longest-surviving culture in the world. We were raised with the knowledge that our ancestors have adapted to changing climatic conditions here for millenniums.

And yet our knowledge of caring for the land is questioned or largely ignored. In the face of catastrophic fires, Australia's leaders need to recognize the depth and value of Aboriginal knowledge and incorporate our skills in hazard management.

I spoke about the destructiveness of the recent fires with my countryman Murrandoo Yanner, a Gangalidda leader and the director of the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation. Mr. Yanner is a man made for these times; he has an encyclopedic knowledge of the world that he has assimilated into Gangalidda laws and philosophy.

Mr. Yanner said that the way forward is back. "If we can understand, learn from and imagine our place through the laws and stories of our ancestors," he told me, "then we will have true knowledge on how to live, adapt and survive in Australia, just as our ancestors did."

Since the 1990s, Mr. Yanner has led Aboriginal people in the Gulf of Carpentaria toward sustainable economic development. He guided the Waanyi nation through Aboriginal rights campaigns, including opposition to the development of Century Mine, an open pit zinc mine that began production in 1999 and operated for 16 years.

Today he leads the Jigija Indigenous Fire Training Program, which educates pastoralists, volunteer firefighters, Indigenous rangers and the mining industry on how to fight fire with fire — as our ancestors did.

One technique the program teaches is mosaic cool-fire burning. Lighting small patches of low-intensity fires during the cool season burns off bush undergrowth, reducing the amount of flammable materials. This prevents fires from developing, as they have now, to catastrophic levels. Mr. Yanner also teaches his students to create wildlife corridors: a continuous refuge of native habitat that allows wildlife to escape summertime fires.

These Indigenous techniques can lessen the damage that fires cause by reducing fuel loads, and restricting fires to smaller areas.

Such tactics are vital. Although some fire agencies use these methods, the scale of their efforts should be intensified, and they should be managed with more care for local conditions. We live in a fire-prone country; we still have at least two months to go before this extended fire season ends. And it's not too late to start planning for future years.

The severity of these fires have shown us a reality that was previously unimaginable. A fiery twister formed in the fires on Kangaroo Island. A fireman, Samuel McPaul, was killed when his truck flipped over in a fire tornado in Jingellic, New South Wales. Four thousand people huddled on the beach in the coastal town of Mallacoota as a wall of fire approached them; they had to be rescued by the Australian Navy.

Matthew Deeth, the mayor of Wollondilly, New South Wales, summed up the devastation. In some areas there was "literally nothing left," he said just before Christmas, "apart from a few burnt sticks in the ground."

We are only beginning to understand the fires' disastrous consequences. Fragile forest ecosystems were decimated. Over a billion animals, experts estimate, perished. Perhaps thousands of birds, including our iconic yellow-tailed black cockatoos, died of exhaustion when they flew out to sea to escape the fires; their bodies washed up on beaches in East Gippsland. And our southern skies have been a smoky haze for days. More bad news will follow when rains wash vast quantities of ash from the fires into our waterways.

We've lived in Australia's fire-prone landscape for millenniums.

Australia remains caught in the nightmarish spell cast by these fires. Our hearts and minds have been thrown into a furnace; a volcano of anger has spewed from our mouths. Some of that anger is misdirected, aimed at arsonists or the Greens party for supposedly stopping trees from being chopped down as a fire-management technique. But most of the anger has been directed straight at Prime Minister Scott Morrison, whom people condemn for taking a holiday in Hawaii while his country burned.

Many people are starting to ask the right questions about climate change. When will we have leadership that reflects our needs? We urgently need governments that are not afraid to act to defend our planet from further destruction.

Aboriginal people are the caretakers of this ancient land. The nation's leaders should value our knowledge. I join Craig Lapsley, who led the emergency response after the 2009 Black Saturday fires in Victoria, in calling for the federal government to start a national Indigenous burning program. While the results would not be immediate, listening to Indigenous knowledge would help curb catastrophic fires of the future.

This terrible disaster has forced us to imagine our way in unimaginable times. I am guided by the words of my countryman Murrandoo Yanner, who reminds me of the strength of our ancient country. "The greatest thing we have to offer today is our humanity," he said, "because this is all we ever had." □

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