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Fighting carbon with fire

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by [Dean Yibarbuk](#) on September 10, 2009

Keywords: [Aboriginal community](#), [Arnhem Land](#), [fire management](#), [indigenous Australians](#), [traditional knowledge](#)

Fire has been used by Bininj (aboriginal) people for managing habitats and food resources across northern Australian over millennia. The secret of fire in our traditional knowledge is that it is a thing that brings the land alive again. So we don't necessarily see fire as bad and destructive — it can be a good thing.

Unfortunately, today fire is not being well looked after in many places in Northern Australia. However, it continues to be managed well around the outstations where people live all the time, such as at Kabulwarnamyo, where I live. To go forward, we need to encourage our children in the ways of the past. Fire must be managed and people must be living on their country (tribal land) to manage that fire.



With scientist friends, we have studied fire in the different seasons. We proved that if we burn in patches, and at different times of the day, we can control the spread and intensity.

As a Bininj man from Nangark of the Gurrguni clan, I hold much knowledge regarding my people's traditional use of fire and have a great responsibility to ensure that this knowledge is passed down to younger generations, and more importantly, that this knowledge is still used and practised into the future to keep our country alive and healthy.

Bininj perspective on climate change

Bininj people have experienced very dramatic climate changes that have been happening since long before Balanda (white people) settled in our country. In our beliefs, our ancestors have been here from the beginning, when the earth was still soft and when some animals were like people before they became the animals we know today.

Our old people used to tell us dreamtime stories that happened a long time ago; stories about animals, birds and reptiles, and how they've gone through those processes of change.

When our ancestors saw changes happening, they started to adapt to the changes by looking out for solutions of how to live and survive. They were hunters and gatherers that looked for food and good places to live and enjoy a new kind of life in changed circumstance. When walking about, they would cover the whole area as part of their role as land managers — looking after our country according to our traditional land management practices.

Our people have lived through periods of great change. Knowledge of what they've experienced through those changes has been passed down from one generation to another.

The Great Drought

One story that is still talked about by our old people concerns a great drought. Balanda have their bible story about a great flood, but we have a story about a great drought.

When springs and rivers dried up, the first people, or Nayiyunki, were desperately walking around looking for water when they came across a paper bark tree that had a hump like a camel's, with drinkable water in it.

So they used their stone axes to crack the humped side of the paper bark tree and out came the water to save their lives. We call the hump and the water that comes from it Djidjindok. Nayiyunki lived on that drinking water from the tree for long periods until water came back in springs and creeks.

We don't know exactly when this happened, but we do know that Balanda (white) scientists are able to tell us that this part of Australia went through very dry periods between about 35,000 and 18,000 years ago.

Sea level rise

Another story our people talk about is how Northern Australia was attached to Papua New Guinea. It was one big land and the Nayiyunki (first people) walked around managing the whole landscape, looking for better hunting places or lakes stocked full of fish.

There are stories from Maningrida, now on the edge of the Arafura Sea that separates us from Papua New Guinea. Just off from Maningrida township is Entrance Island. It lies about 3 kms from the nearest land, at Ndjudda Point.

Our people remember when the Island was connected to the mainland. In the middle, was a big billabong — a big wetland area full of fish and geese, water chestnuts and water lilies, and other game for hunting. It was a very well known wetland place for our past generations and today people still talk about this lost wetland. When the sea level rose, all that wetland went under the seawater.

At Goulburn Island, the people there still have more stories about these times — stories about islands where people used to live that are there no longer.

Human made climate change

So we have been experiencing climate changes for long-long periods up until today's generations. But the climate changes previously experienced were brought on by nature. They were not climate changes brought on by people, like in the situation we face today.

Nayiyunki, our first people, watched the way nature worked. They looked at how things changed at the yearly scale and named six seasonal movements for the calendar — Bangerreng, Yekke, Wurrkeng, Gurrung, Gunumeleng and Gujewek.

These are the six calendar cycles of movement for our hunting and gathering purposes. People knew when the seasons changed by seeing the signs and signals in nature that marked those changes. We see changes in winds and clouds and rain; we read the changing seasons through the flowering of plants and grasses; we read the movement of birds and other animals.



Being the boss of the fire
was always the way,
not fire being the
boss of us.

These seasonal calendars have been built up over thousands of years, but now our old people and even middle-aged people like me are seeing that the seasons start to look wrong. We see that things are not really happening when they should be.

Our old people are confused. They don't know what's happening. These are the signals that tell us when we should be burning grass or when we can find the food we want. Scientists tell us the monsoon stopped for more than 10,000 years a long time ago. What would our world be like if we didn't have the monsoon to give a regular annual cycle for growing, drying and burning grasses. What would tropical Australia be like if it had years of drought, like down south? It's a scary thought.

People move around to observe signs of what things are there and what things aren't there. If things aren't there then people know that something is going wrong somewhere.

When changes happened before, the Nayiyunki knew the country very well through their observations. They would talk to spiritual beings and ask for their help and to show them in their dream, so that they could be ready for unexpected events.

Nayiyunki were able to deal very well with the changes in their time because these were changes made by mother nature. These were natural climatic changes that happened from the first generation. But the changes we are looking at today are not natural changes — they are caused by human behaviour. People, not nature, are responsible.

Our challenge, our contribution

Our present generation, we hear media news about global warming. Changes are happening and everybody around the world is running around madly trying to figure out a way to tackle the problems.

Though for us, the Bininj people, climate change is not new topic, since we have the stories about the changes that happened many-many years ago before our generation, we are very worried about what is affecting us today. Like sometimes we see that the wet season comes in at the wrong time.

In recent years we have experienced strong cyclones — Cyclone Monica set a new mark for violent storms and we had unexpected floods hitting our communities. Sometime we hear our old people saying these things are happening because our sacred objects are not happy with us because of disturbances to the sacred land. Dynamite and mining, big machines and roads, these are all things that worry our people.

Within Northern Australia our country has changed in a big way ever since I was born. These are the most visible symptoms that I see:

- (1) the human population has tripled since I was child;
- (2) our people have been losing our language and culture;
- (3) feral weeds and animals are entering our community;
- (4) establishment of towns and settlement;
- (5) mining happening in our country; and
- (6) changing weather, and more.

Feral animals and weeds are changing our natural environment. Large animals like buffaloes are damaging our landscape and weeds are already within our communities and our home-lands.

Traditional fire management has changed in a big way. Traditional practices, like travelling on foot, are not happening these days like they used to. People have changed in many ways because of the contemporary forces from outside.

We all, Balanda and Bininj, have to look at what we can do to fix the damage that is being done to the climate by greenhouse gases and so on.

Out there at Kabulwarnamyo, we are tackling climate change by bringing back and strengthening our traditional burning, the tools that we have used for thousands of years for managing our landscape.

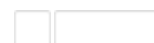
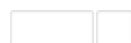
By bringing back our way of land management and making it strong for the future, we are doing our bit to help the world deal with climate change.



Video brief made in association with Kim McKenzie, Dean Yibarbuk and Peter Cooke.

This video brief and article complements the on-going Indigenous Peoples Climate Change Assessment. It forms part of the work of the UNU-IAS Traditional Knowledge Initiative. The UNU would like to thank Warddeken Land Management Ltd. and the Research School of Humanities at Australian National University for their support for this initiative.

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Just added the Carbon Guide for Northern Indigenous Australians developed by the UNU-IAS Traditional Knowledge Institute. See the PDF download on the right side of the article.

This is a short guide for Northern Indigenous Australians on the impacts of and responses to climate change, particularly market and financial mechanisms for reducing greenhouse gas emissions (often referred to as the 'carbon market', 'emissions trading' and/or 'carbon financing').

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[...] 中には、生態系への貢献や炭素取引制度で対価を得る仕組み作りに、積極的に参加している先住民社会もある。石油会社コノコフィリップスは2007年、製油所が排出する10万トンの温室効果ガスをオフセットするため、オーストラリア北部に住む先住民民族に対し、毎年100万オーストラリアドルを17年間支払うことに同意した。この先住民民族は伝統的な火災管理術を実践している。(詳しくは「火を武器に」のビデオをご覧ください) 彼らの方法は、自然に起こる山火事に比べ、温室効果ガスを抑制することが科学的に証明されている。 [...]

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About the author

Dean Yibarbuk

Dean Munuggulumurr Yibarbuk was born in 1955 near the Tomkinson River, in Central Arnhem Land. Two years after Dean's birth the Government established a settlement nearby at Maningrida which today is a regional centre for small indigenous communities in the region.

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