

Warlpiri fire management

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Based on participation with senior Warlpiri in off-road travel in their country, I make some observations about how they view land management with fire. An ideal sequence of events for a burn begins with a senior man signalling by hand sign or radio from the lead vehicle that an area is to be ignited (*ylingklrni*). Appropriate workers (*kurdungurlu*) get off the rear vehicle to burn, sometimes just dropping matches, but usually using a fire brush (*marlpi*) of a branch or bunch of grass ignited from the first patch of spinifex. The brush is trailed (*tiji-kanyi*) in the two directions across the wind. The vehicles move upwind to the edge of the target area of dead grass with the lead vehicle paused even further ahead, and the two men would bring the line of fire along the lee side of the wheel tracks to the vehicle, then climb on as it drove off. The vehicle engine is left idling as the people remaining in it wait and keep an eye on the two men burning. The lead vehicle in turn waits ahead, further across the wind, and in sight.

This pattern of burning is underwritten by Fire Dreaming (*Warlu Jukurrpa*) events in the central 'Tanami Desert', wherein fire is made by two men using a fire-saw or fire-drill (and empowered by the correct songs), and two men carry the fire away from its source forming a double hunting fire (*lrramlrni*) which joins up and has the potential of travelling a long way to the west and north-west. This accord with the prevailing winter easterly or south-easterly winds. On the west of a major Fire Dreaming area is a major Rain Dreaming area. A fire-produced cloud (*lrranjil*) promotes rain, and the rainfall on the freshly burned areas (*wini*) brings green growth. Storms also bring lightning, which also is potential fire. Cleaning the country with fire is seen as work, and the Dreaming also emphasises its co-operative nature, with the involvement of both land-holding patrimonies, *klrda* and *kurdungurlu*. Commonsense allowance is made for wind strength and direction, and fuel abundance. The spinifex cover is constantly being assessed during travel as to whether it will sustain a burn: it may be too patchy (*yarluyarlu*) or too much space between the hummocks. The various spinifex species are distinguished in Warlpiri vocabulary.

Fire is not used for large-scale hunting drives nowadays, and in any case most of the relevant small game is now gone. Nevertheless the Warlpiri are still keen on burning and do so at most opportunities. Though travel today is by vehicle and not on foot, and the Warlpiri use matches for ignition, the appreciation of country and the practices are still driven by the *Jukurrpa*.

Travel through country is related to burning in various ways. Memories of burns from previous winters play a part in plans for travel, partly as a navigation aid, partly because the scrub cover is reduced. The continual smokes show people moving openly around their country. This is 'Aboriginal radio', and the burned areas (*wini*) are a kind of calling-card.

Control is an apparent theme of the Warlpiri vocabulary relating to fire, in camp, or as a tool of various kinds. They follow certain constraints on burning of country and are quite safety conscious. There is a general impression that most Europeans do not like bushfires.

Warlpiri have on many occasions expressed a desire for the development of network of (graded) vehicle tracks. These allow access by vehicle for a multitude of purposes, including burning, and on the same trip hunting and food-gathering, and renewing contact with sites and Dreamings. Over the past decade or two, the Warlpiri have gained access to vehicles in their own control, and the network of tracks has grown remarkably. These tracks are all in sufficient use that burning along them is common. It is understandable then that the Warlpiri would prefer resources to be directed to facilitating their ground travel, rather than, say, aerial burning. Aerial burning is a single-purpose trip, with minimal contact with the country, and much control passed outside Warlpiri hands.