



## Indigenous values and grassy ecosystems in the ACT region <sup>+</sup>

Adrian Brown

ACT Parks & Conservation Service

**Abstract:** Adrian has an exceptional knowledge of the Ngunnawal culture and traditional methods of gathering and managing resources for food, medicine, tools and shelter and he is very proud to pass on his knowledge of the land to anyone who will listen. Adrian will describe what is happening to enable Ngunnawal people to reclaim their knowledge and learn new skills, and how that traditional knowledge and practice may be shared with landowners and the broader community to ensure that our grassy ecosystems are managed more in accordance with traditional practice.

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I want to begin by acknowledging my Elders past and present, and thanking them for the opportunities they have given me.

I am very fortunate that I can stand here today and tell you a little bit about my culture: who I am and where I come from. I was born in Queanbeyan. I have lived in Queanbeyan all my life. I am now fortunate enough to be working for the ACT Parks and Conservation Service as the Senior Ngunnawal Ranger. I take a lot of pride in my job. I take pride in the fact that I am able to go out and educate people on Country, and about the Ngunnawal People and their belonging, their connection that is ongoing to Country also.

With this talk I want to explain a bit about Indigenous land management – to tell you what it is, how my people understand it, and how they actually work that back into the landscape.

I think it is important that we start from the beginning. We go back to the word, we listen to language. For example, we listen to the word Murrumbidgee and we all say, 'What does that word mean?'. *Murrum* means pathway, *Bidgee* means boss, so *Murrumbidgee* means pathway for bosses.

As we grow up in our community we go higher and higher into the mountains and we learn about lore, we learn about who we are as a people and we learn about our responsibilities back to Country. Many community groups from the south-east of Australia have been going up to the mountains and practising that lore, doing that ceremony, doing their trade, doing their marriage, using their language and talking about responsibilities for Country as they go back to look after it. We have had the families from near the coast, the Yui people; the Gundungurra people, from over Goulburn way; the Wiradjuri people, over the mountains; and the Wolgalu and the Ngarigo. All these, our families, came together and we all spoke about our management system and how we would look after that.

It is important to understand, when we go to that mountain Kosciuszko, that there are three major rivers running off it. There is the Murray, there is the Murrumbidgee and then there is the Snowy River. And all these rivers are feeding paths; they are pathways, and they all go back and they connect, and they tell stories. It is really simple to understand what that story is and what that initiation process is.

I will tell you this story. Some of you may have heard it, and some of you may not. It is about the kangaroo and the grass parrot. I can tell you now that these two animals are married, and you will look at me and say: 'How can these two animals be married within the landscape?'. But there is a simple answer, and it is the reason why we are here – and it is *grass*. We look at that kangaroo, and it can be dominant. It can go out and it can eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, and if we allow that to happen, if we allow that to keep going on, then what do we do for that poor old grass parrot? That is what our people do. When we go up and do our lore, we learn about that animal, and we come back and we understand what that animal needs, and then we go out



and watch what is going on – and we listen, we pay attention, and when we see an imbalance we control that, we manage it and we fix it so that we look after that landscape for the future. If we allow that animal to be dominant then we start losing insects, we start losing bugs, we start losing moisture in soils, we lose everything, you know. That is the control method. I say to people:

'What about the ant and the wedge-tailed eagle? What are the relationships between all these animals, and how do they marry back to the landscape? How do they marry to water and how do they marry to the plants?'

It is a complex thing, but this was something that was put in place by our people and it worked. It was proved to work.

What I am saying is that you just have to listen and think about the past and where we are going, and where our future is taking us; how we understand that knowledge and move forward with it. It is through conversation; it is through talking and through education. I always say:

'Is this something that we can put into the school curriculum? Is this something that we can put back out to our community?'

And I say:

'Each of you, including the kids, you are all going to have responsibility now. That is *your* parkland. Your school is next to that. We are going to give *you* a parrot. *You* are going to have a magpie. *You* are going to have a kangaroo.'

In this way, each kid walks away with responsibility; and with responsibility comes confidence. That is what I think is important for our community to grow.

I think sometimes we are frightened to understand. I think sometimes we look at that path and we ask, 'Well, how can we do that?'. We do not understand it and we question it and we say: 'Well, if we do not understand it, we cannot move forward'. But we have to practise it.

I have been fortunate enough to practise these methods that our old people have used for thousands of years. One of those opportunities was over at Jerrabomberra Grasslands. We burnt 18 plots, and for each plot we put in a different burning method. It was a very proud moment for me, before I even started, because I had my father Carl Brown there, who threw the first match onto the ground. That was the first traditional Ngunnawal man to do a burning on Country for at least 100 years. That was a very very proud moment for me and my team of Aboriginal staff who work at ACT Parks.

We talked; we did the burning. In some plots the method was just to drop the match and let it burn out, and we did about a 6 m ring. That was one way; we just wet the edge as it came and then we put it out. Another method was to burn from one end to the other, letting the wind push it. And another method was burning from that end and letting it slowly move back.

The really good thing was that I was told quite clearly that the seed there was never going to be viable; that that dormant seed was never, ever, going to come up. I was told that, and I said 'No, no, no. I know, because I know that it's there'. And you know what? When we burnt, we had a native sedge come back! That was one of the most powerful things to see, to know that we adopted a practice that we all think has been lost, but that practice showed us a method and it showed us that it was true – that we can move forward with fire practice and make a difference.

Let us not be afraid. Let us not be afraid as people who are not all Aboriginal. We do not understand but let us adopt that culture. Let us adopt that method of thinking and that method of understanding and not be shy about it. Do not be ashamed. We are all learners here. We are all babies. I am learning. I am trying to understand. You are all trying to understand. And from our speaking together, our speaking collectively, we can make a difference. That is where we can go as a community.



## 'Grass half full or grass half empty? Valuing native grassy landscapes'

Friends of Grasslands' forum 30 October – 1 November 2014

Friends of Grasslands Inc. ([www.fog.org.au](http://www.fog.org.au)) supporting native grassy landscapes

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I honour people who are not Aboriginal but want to work with Indigenous land management practices on your own land. Within my Ngunnawal Country boundary, my own small family is willing to try and help. I can come and have a look and see if I can give some advice, for example. Outside our family boundary it may be that NSW Parks can help, perhaps with their machinery and their tools to help facilitate applying our land management practices. Eastwards, the land of my people stretches out just to Goulburn. The people out at Goulburn were the Malwaree clan, and you can see that in the Council name, the Mulwaree Shire. Our language has been used in many current placenames: our community, our Country, our language.

We talk about 'responsibility' and we mean being open and thinking about how we can apply our traditional methods. We can all of us think about how we engage, how we talk to community. When I think of people in groups like ParkCare I see isolation, with everyone working in their own areas – in pockets. I do not see very much communication going on between groups. I think we can take on board the responsibility to have frank conversations, because what is going on in your neighbourhood is related to other neighbourhoods. They all belong to each other. That is connectivity and I think that is something that we and all of the people working in ParkCare and Landcare could talk more about.

Also while I am here I acknowledge my old people. And I am saying, 'Ningi.' *Ningi* means 'look'. I am Ngunnawal, and I am *Murring*. I am a man, and I am here and I am *Murramba*: I have come for goodness, and that is what I am saying. I welcome you here on Country, and I welcome that open conversation and I welcome the opportunity to speak about my old people's Country. This is the thing. We are all here. We are all talking about my people's Country and how we can manage that better, and I want to work with you and make that happen.

Welcome to Ngunnawal Country.

Adrian Brown describes himself as a Ngunnawal man and ranger with ACT Parks and Conservation Service. He is a former adviser to the ACT Chief Minister and the Executive Director of the Ngunnawal Elders Board.

+ This record of the talk given at the forum has been checked by the presenter, but not peer-reviewed. To find out more, contact the presenter, via their institution or by email to: [info@fog.org.au](mailto:info@fog.org.au).