

Aboriginal Cultural Burning

lutruwita is the country of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and everyone has a responsibility to protect our heritage.



How did Tasmanian Aboriginal people use fire?

Tasmanian Aboriginal people used fire as a tool for several purposes. Like today, fire was used as a heat source for cooking and keeping warm but fire also played an important role in:

- travel
- hunting
- communication
- burial practices, and
- land management

Creation stories about fire

A written record from the early 1830s suggests Aboriginal people in the north east of Tasmania believed fire was first made by two particular stars in the Milky Way. These stars gave fire to people to use. Camp fires feature in several creation stories. In one story

a campfire helped to bring people back to life. In another story a creature scraped fire onto two people who were sleeping.

Fire used for land management

At certain times of the year, Tasmanian Aboriginal people set fire to the bush to encourage new growth and prevent scrub from taking over. The fires they used were small-scale cool fires. Cool burning is a practice where the fire burns at a much lower heat intensity than a wildfire or a modern large scale fuel reduction burn. This sophisticated use of fire burned at such a low intensity that the tree canopy remained protected. The fire only burned the undergrowth. This practice was used to prevent wildfires and manage hunting grounds. It cleared areas of the ground to enable smoother travel for people and make

Tasmanian Aboriginal people and fire

Land management:

- New growth
- Open button grass moorlands

Hunting and fire:

- Smoke flushed out animals

Travel and communication:

- Keeping trading routes clear
- Communication between bands and clans

Cremation:

- Used more than burials

Tasmanian Aboriginal people today:

- Continue to use fire for land management



it easier to hunt animals. Australian archaeologist, Rhys Jones, coined the phrase 'firestick farming' to describe this practice of Aboriginal people using fire to manage and adapt the landscape.

The Tasmanian landscape today reflects the burning practices that were undertaken for thousands of years. One of the best examples of this practice is the open button grass moorlands. These are found in many highland areas including the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. It is believed that this cultural landscape is a direct result of the burning regimes undertaken by Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Fire practices and hunting

Tasmanian Aboriginal people made fire using flints and fire drills. The flint created sparks when it was struck against another stone. Fire drills were pieces of hardwood that were rubbed or spun on a piece of softwood. The rapid rubbing or turning heated the softwood until it was hot enough to light some grass laid on the wood. For convenience Aboriginal people carried fire sticks especially when hunting – so they did not need to create fire everyday. The dry grasslands provided excellent fuel for fire, creating flames and smoke that flushed wallaby, wombat, bandicoot, bettongs, potoroos, possums, echidna, blue tongue lizards,

and emu out of cover where they could be easily speared or clubbed.

Other uses of fire

Fire was also used during travel and the burning practices helped keep trading routes clear between neighbouring camps and clans. While travelling, the smoke from fire was also a form of communication to warn neighbouring clans that the travelling

band or clan were entering the area or passing through.

Dances and story telling by Elders often occurred around campfires in the evening. Camp sites usually had several small fires rather than one large fire. Spears were also straightened and hardened by warming them in the coals of a campfire.

Tasmanian Aboriginal people used fire to cremate the bodies of those who had died. This was a common practice that was used more than burials. This practice changed as burials became more common during the first two generations of the colonising experience.

Tasmanian Aboriginal community today

Today, the Tasmanian Aboriginal community undertake traditional land burning practices on Aboriginal managed lands. These cool burn cultural practices also assist with fire load fuel reduction, discourage weeds, generate new flora, and encourage the return of native fauna to the area.



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