PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELAND SOCIETY

BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

Official publication of The Australian Rangeland Society

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Form of Reference

The reference for this article should be in this general form:

Author family name, initials (year). Title. In: Proceedings of the nth Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference. Pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

For example:

Bastin, G., Sparrow, A., Scarth, P., Gill, T., Barnetson, J. and Staben, G. (2015). Are we there yet? Tracking state and change in Australia's rangelands. In: 'Innovation in the Rangelands. Proceedings of the 18th Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference, Alice Springs'. (Ed. M.H. Friedel) 5 pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Parkside, SA).

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The Australian Rangeland Society

Aboriginal people choose new media for an old practice

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Keywords: fire management, indigenous knowledge, video production, Aboriginal rangers

Introduction

We report on a project about fire management and indigenous knowledge sharing. Unexpectedly, Martu preferentially chose a video production rather than other media to share knowledge about fire. We found Martu people actively engaged in video making as it had direct relevance to their skills, topic of interest, and an applied context. They shaped the video content to reflect their contemporary reality of integrated knowledge rather than exclusively 'traditional' knowledge.

The Western Desert fire program considered two key questions - How to reduce wildfire regimes that are extreme and intensifying in desert landscapes? And how to facilitate the intergenerational transfer of Aboriginal ecological knowledge about fire management practice?

The program aimed to utilize traditional knowledge and contemporary practice to reduce fire size, intensity and frequency. It also aimed to improve the well-being of Aboriginal people. Six partner agencies contributed to the two-year program. We authors were involved in the fire program as applied researcher, fire management officer and video editor respectively.

A feature of desert Australia is the relatively comprehensive 'traditional' or cultural knowledge of Aboriginal people. Practices derived from Aboriginal knowledge had sustained the productivity of Australian ecosystems. In contemporary times, some argue that two-way knowledge exchange between Aboriginal people and scientists or NRM practitioners is required to respond to modern landscape-scale problems including wildfire regimes. But traditional ecological knowledge is rapidly fragmenting. What processes, media and contexts support indigenous people to pass on their knowledge? A question asked in national and international forums (Carothers et al. 2014; Christen et al. 2006).

Context to fire management and traditional knowledge

The above questions are pertinent on Martu and Birriliburu Native Title lands in Western Australia. These lands fall across the Great Sandy Desert, Little Sandy Desert and Gibson Desert bioregions. These are vast landscapes. The Martu determination area of 13.6 million ha spans nationally recognised features - the Canning Stock Route and Karlamilyi (Rudall River) National Park.

Approximately 650 Martu people reside in settlements on these lands or frequently visit them. Martu people are the major land user group additional to tourist and mining personnel. The regional NRM agencies are Kanyininpa Jukurrpa (KJ http://kj.org.au) and Central Desert Native Title Services (CDNTS http://www.centraldesert.org.au). The former is the largest employer in the region. It supports five ranger groups; based in three settlements but active in wide areas.

Martu rangers are frontline fire managers in this vast region. Family-based hunting and burning creates the fine-grain burn mosaics observed close to settlements and major travel routes (Bird et al. 2008). Increasingly fire management on distant lands is a responsibility of rangers (Fig. 1).

The Western Desert Fire Program outputs included a 15-year fire management strategy (Catt 2013), maps of 15 years of fire history plus partner and Martu-dominated workshops. The program's activities included hundreds of square kilometers burnt, managed and/or protected. KJ and CDNTS, continue an active fire management program. A video documentary was an unpredicted output from the program component that aimed to support Martu people share traditionally-derived knowledge amongst themselves. Other project components involved the exchange of science-derived and western knowledge about fire.

Figure 1. An experienced Martu woman (left) guides younger women who burn whilst working with the Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa Parnngurr coordinator who observes.

Giving people choices about the media that suits them

Martu rangers were offered a choice of media to facilitate knowledge transfer between generations. The rangers were given choices because they were the prime audience for the project products. Commonly, outputs are pre-determined by project proponents, generally non-Indigenous managers responding to funding guidelines and agency reporting requirements.

The Jigalong ranger group, twenty Martu men 18 to 65 years old, and three non-Aboriginal staff were given examples of different potential media – community reports, technical reports, posters and maps. The media included a mockup of an A3, photo based, plain English report about burning on Martu lands. The researcher, Fiona Walsh, expected the latter to be the ranger's media of choice.

After an independent discussion amongst the rangers they asserted they wanted a video made. This was problematic as limited equipment was available. We were two days drive from the nearest video camera so we used expertise on hand and compromised with the equipment (Fig. 2).

The rangers chose video for different reasons. They spoke about older people knowing it as the preferred media of younger people and that there were younger Martu present with production skills who could contribute to the production process. It is interpreted that video suits people with high visual literacy but lower text literacy and video is commonly circulate on USB for Playstations and devices available in Martu households. Also burning is an applied dynamic practice better communicated visually. The rangers chose video as a communication tool that suited their skills, resources and context.

Figure 2. At Kaalpi (Calvert Range), Kernot Samson audio-records one of twenty Jigalong rangers, these interviews became core to the documentary content.

Effective ways a video was made

There are many steps in video production. It is a challenging medium that requires different people in different roles - hence the length of film credit sequences.

Critical components in our production process included: a topic of universal interest and concern; an immediate context and purpose of relevance; initial recordings in Kartujarra and other Martu dialects; Martu people in roles including interviewer, audio-recorder, photographer, musician, translator and rough cut reviewers; the availability and budget for an experienced editor; existing trusted relationships between the researcher, editor, fire management officer, participants and agency staff; availability of archival audiovisual and stock footage to complement the core twenty interviews; a researcher and editor with long experience of Martu cultural and land-based concepts; a researcher with some experience in scripting, direction and production; the fire management officer able to use the video in consultations, and, agencies (KJ, CSIRO, Rangelands NRM and WA Department of Parks and Wildlife) willing to distribute the production. These components melded to help make the production relevant.

There are subtleties in the video content perhaps not apparent to audience members. For example, the production opens with senior Martu men speaking thus it recreates a customary protocol of senior people speaking first and younger people following. And the activities of women burning typify customary practices (Fig. 1) and contradict the modern predominance of men as fire managers. There are tensions in fire management that were not be revealed in the content because of their complexity. For example, some senior Martu who use burning primarily for food production were concerned landscape-scale preventative burning was a waste of the food resources.

Fire management is a contentious, complex and dynamic topic. Like all research, video production is an interpretive process. It filters and synthesizes information from visual, aural, emotional and historical sources. Working in a 'new' media, we had to maintain high standards of both professional rigour and cross-cultural credibility. Independent reviews by eleven senior Martu people, KJ staff and research colleagues were vital steps in the production process. Constructive feedback improved the production at three main editing stages.

The production was made principally for a Martu audience. It has been distributed amongst Martu on USB and as a packaged DVD. It's content and English subtitling and narration made it accessible to a wider audience. It has been screened on television and an Australian company holds international distribution rights for the North American tertiary sector and elsewhere.

Collaboration shaped the content

Martu people's roles changed the project's outputs and shaped the production's content. The project's initial objective, to facilitate the transmission of 'traditional' knowledge about burning, was adapted in response to Martu directions. Core interviews were done during a long trip to monitor

recent ranger burns. In a group, Martu recounted experiential and intergenerational knowledge and spoke of 'pujiman' (bushman) and 'kartiya' (whitefella) knowledge together. The video content reflects modern realities in an intercultural world that blends information from 'traditional', western, scientific, experiential and other sources.

A trailer of 'Waru, Kuka and Everything' (Fire, Meat and Everything) or the documentary before television edits can be viewed at Walsh and Wells (2013). The latter shows eras in the use and management of fire. It opens with Jukurrpa (Creation-time) concepts that underpin modern Martu views of fire. Over generations, Martu used fire primarily to harvest foods. In the mission-era, people's absence from their land contributed to wildfires. Martu then returned to their homelands and resumed familiar activities with Martu families continuing to hunt on foot and burn as they travel. Today, Martu rangers and senior people burn on foot, from vehicles and helicopters to reduce extensive wildfire risks. They burn by combining past practices with new purposes and techniques.

Video complements but does not replace on-ground burning practice and life-long experience

Video produced by or for indigenous people has a long history. It can be both entertaining and informative. To be effective, the 'Waru' video needed to affect both well-being and land management. In future, a formal assessment of its impacts could be useful. Observational feedback indicates 'Waru' has benefitted Martu. It is popular; people watch it with interest. It appears to validate Martu content, affirm historical practices and give greater confidence to those featured in it.

For an applied fire management officer (Catt), the 'Waru' video is a useful tool. It helps in consultations about fire management with widely scattered people who hold different worldviews and speak other languages (Fig. 3). It aids the introduction of fire as topic and stimulates discussions.

A new technology has been applied for an old purpose. But still the most effective way to learn about fire and its management is from skilled people burning and managing under variable conditions. Video or multi-media productions complement but do not replace practice and life-long experience.

Figure 3. During a remote burning trip, Martu rangers watch the 'Waru' film; its content potentially informs on-ground actions.

Conclusion

In a regional fire program, Aboriginal people made an unexpected choice of media. There were important reasons for their choice of video. Partly as a consequence of this choice, the project evolved from an original objective to 'share traditional knowledge' to reflect more dynamic intercultural contemporary realities. Through film, traditional knowledge was both regenerated and integrated with other knowledge sources. Increasingly video is used to record and share indigenous ecological knowledge. Traditional knowledge can be revitalized in a topical context amongst people active in fire management on country. Video is likely to have social impact and improve practice

when and where there are situated, timely and social contexts. Video complements but does not replace lifelong experience and learning about the subtleties of burning – or not burning.

Acknowledgements

Senior and other Martu, KJ staff and the Jigalong, Parnngurr and Punmu ranger groups contributed to the video development. Eighty-five people are listed in the video credits. Marcus Barber and Josie Douglas reviewed this paper constructively. CSIRO and the Rangelands NRM Coordinating Group funded this project within the wider Western Desert Fire Program.

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