

A burning ambition to care for country with culture

By KIRK PAGE



ROWAN Foley is passionate about carbon farming. Rowan, from the Wondunna clan of the Badtjala people of K'gari (Fraser Island off the coast of Queensland), lives in Alice Springs and is the chief executive of the Aboriginal Carbon Foundation – a not-for-profit company that's been operating for 10 years dealing in carbon farming using the savanna burning methodology, which is the most common practice used to maintain country in southern parts of Australia.

Carbon farming involves land owners engaging with traditional owners, rangers and knowledge keepers who can burn off and clear country the right way – sharing traditional fire burn practices safely.

Recently, the Aboriginal Carbon Foundation joined forces with the Firesticks Alliance, another Aboriginal organisation, to remind us of the importance of manageable and safe care of country.

"Bringing about cultural fire in Australia is a huge job so we need to work together as a team to achieve better outcomes," Rowan said.

"Our skills complement each other so that's how the partnership has come about – bringing together the work that Firesticks does and the Carbon Foundation is a perfect match, introducing the idea of the cultural credits to the nation so we can assist in delivering the service to those who want it."

The Firesticks virtual conference, in December last year, brought together more than 150 people in land management, rangers and community members looking to reignite the powerful knowledge around fire practices.

Victor Steffensen from the Firesticks Alliance set the tone with a strong message.

"This conference is about taking cultural fire to the next level," he said.



Yorta Yorta men Ralph Hume and Corey Walker at the opening ceremony at the 2019 National Indigenous Fire Workshop at Dhungala (Murray River) hosted by the Yorta Yorta community.

"We're calling on agencies, universities, private landholders, all communities to work together and put our shoulders behind what is already working.

"We want to see more employment for all the people managing landscapes. We want to see education about cultural fire in schools. We want to see monitoring, research and data delivered proudly across the world from Indigenous knowledge from the communities of Australia."

Aboriginal Carbon Foundation chair Barry Hunter facilitated the two-day conference, which included presentations from Indigenous communities from far north Queensland to Tasmania, about the important work they have been doing on country despite the challenges over the past 12 months.

Rowan told the *Koori Mail* that

it was important for Indigenous communities to share knowledge about fire.

"Maintaining country through cultural fire burns can be confronting as we know the damage that fire can cause," he said.

"The early European invaders brought with them a deep fear of fire and they actively discouraged Indigenous people from their fire practice.

"We are reverting back to the Indigenous practice of land management that goes back 65,000 years, burning country the right way. There have been several recommendations from inquiries into bushfires that formally state that cultural burning is relevant and is the best way to avoid tragedies.

"It is time to review the way we do land management and with the bushfires becoming such a threat

to our lives and homes it's time to rethink how we approach caring for country now and to find ways to improve the way we interact with the land for the future of our young people.

"I would like to see independent income for traditional owners that will provide cultural fire credits which will be invested in the practice of traditional owners and rangers going out and burning country in a way that's independently financed.

"We know what we are supposed to do. We know what should happen but it is the resources that are missing and so we need people to invest in this. We can't rely on government funding on this. The cultural fire credits will assist in maintenance of country.

"Whether it's farm land or national state forest or Aboriginal lands, it should be burnt culturally

and the fire credits will enable this to take place the right way.

"We don't want to be beholden to governments and it just doesn't work depending on our government to invest.

"There is a solution to the problem – a lot of people think that the bushfire problems are insurmountable but they're not. We have been burning country for thousands of years and we want to continue the practice in the right way and with modern resourcing we can, and now we are, establishing a system and we just need to put it into effect."

If you are interested in learning more about cultural fire go online and look at the Carbon Foundation and the Firesticks Alliance – both are not-for-profit organisations doing incredible work maintaining country and training the next generation in fire practice across the country.

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