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Oxford Word of the Month – October: cultural burn

noun: a method of vegetation control by burning, used especially by some Aboriginal communities.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In a news report entitled “‘Traditional burning’: Reviving Indigenous cultural burns for bushfire management’, Dja Dja Wurrung man and Parks Victoria ranger Trent Nelson said:

It’s a practice that our old people used before European contact, so it’s the way we manage the land and use fire as a tool to provide for our self, to provide for our habitat as well that we live in. (SBS News, 29 May 2017)

The same report notes the difference between conventional ‘planned burns’ for hazard reduction, and the cooler cultural burns that ‘preserve native shrubs and animal life’.

An article on traditional burning practices in the Canberra region reveals further reasons for the use of cultural burns by Aboriginal people:

Gibraltar Peak is an obvious place to include as a cultural burn as it is highly valued by Ngunnawal people and it is also located on an ancient pathway significant to neighbouring nations including the Wiradjuri, Ngarigu, Yuin, Gundungurra and Walgalu. These types of cultural burns play a vital role in fire management. While the primary purpose of these burns is cultural connection, they also play a part in the renewal of native vegetation, safeguarding culturally significant sites, hazard reduction, and maintaining water catchments. (Canberra Chronicle, 12 April 2016)

While traditional burning practices have been used by Indigenous peoples for centuries, the term cultural burn appears to be quite recent.

Evidence can be found on the Internet from around 2010. Although there is some evidence for the term in Native American contexts, its usage seems to be chiefly Australian.

Another Australian term for this practice, recorded from the 1960s, is *firestick*

farming. In traditional Aboriginal use, a *firestick* was often carried as a smouldering stick while travelling.

With an increase in the number and severity of bushfires in recent years, there have been renewed calls for hazard reduction. The interest in traditional Aboriginal burning methods, and the wider use of the term **cultural burn**, are partly a result of this response to fire in the Australian landscape.

Cultural burn will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.

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