

ssBushfires: Worksheet 4

Aboriginal use of fire

Bushfires have always been part of the Australian natural environment. Many were started by lightning strikes. People ignited others, sometimes deliberately, sometimes by accident.

When Aboriginal people arrived in Australia, more than 50,000 years ago, they developed a way of life well suited to the environment in which they lived. They learned to manage the land in ways that met their needs. Their main tool was low-intensity fire.

Aboriginal people made frequent and planned use of fire to keep the country more open and easy to travel through, to promote the growth of fresh green grass and herbs that would attract animals, as a means of signaling and hunting, and for the more obvious purposes such as warmth and cooking.

Their patterns of burning were quite sophisticated. They deliberately used fire to clear out some heavy bush areas and burnt the areas around fire-sensitive vegetation communities as a form of protection for the plants they used for food.

Over time, the use of fire by Aboriginal people changed the Australian landscape. Fire sensitive species of plants died out while those able to cope with frequent burning (for example, the eucalypts) flourished. Scientists also believe that the use of fire contributed to the extinction of Australia's ancient megafauna – the giant marsupials that once roamed the land.

As a result of Aboriginal fire use practices, large intense bushfires, such as those that occur today, were uncommon.

Figure 1: Aboriginal Australians used fire to manage the land. Painting by Joseph Lycett, National Library of Australia.



Activities:

1. List the reasons Aboriginal Australians used fire.

2. In what ways could the use of fire by Aboriginal Australians be described as 'sophisticated'?

3. What impact did Aboriginal people have on the Australian landscape over time?

4. Study Figure 1. What activities are taking place in the painting by Joseph Lycett?
