

# Indigenous fire knowledge and land management practice

A summary of sustainable ways of life and innovative approaches to climate change and catastrophic bushfire as presented at the Gender Justice conference in 2021.

**Victor Steffensen** is an Indigenous writer, filmmaker, musician and consultant. He was interviewed by **Steve O'Malley**, a firefighter of over 30 years.



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**‘You can’t tell our children that all the emus will be gone ...’**

In Australia, Indigenous land management is based on prevention and working with the land and the elements. In contrast, so much human response to extreme weather events and disasters worldwide is based on man (literally) attempting to prevail over nature. Victor Steffensen speaks of ‘young’ knowledge systems that don’t respect nor understand old knowledge systems and the protocols around them. Instead, young knowledge systems need to advance Indigenous knowledge and allow it to demonstrate its value. He said:

*There’s beautiful roses on both sides of the fence. Western science has a wealth of advanced technology that can help, and Aboriginal knowledge has a wealth of knowledge of the landscape from thousands of years’ experience and if only they could work together and respect each other in the right way, we could move mountains.*

**Steve**

In this conference, we’re talking about gender justice and we’re talking about equity. This conversation with you, Victor, is really important. Among other things, you’re a trainer of trainers, and people are going to go out there and do traditional burning. That’s a huge load on your shoulders. But it must also be a relief knowing that emergency organisations are listening. Is that a fair assumption?

**Victor**

*Yeah, it’s a slow, slow process. There are different agencies that want to get these things going and others that don’t want to listen. They just want to do their own thing. We have a whole society, a mixed bag of perceptions of what they think is fire management. There’s also what people think they get out of putting out fires in this country. We need to really be humble about looking after our land. And we need to do it in a way that we connect with*

*each other, and we share with each other. We aim for a baseline of knowledge that we can all draw from.*

**Steve**

The Indigenous approach to fire that you use doesn’t seem to be about domination or having total control.

**Victor**

*That’s right and I learnt that from the Elders. They considered the rights of everybody, and they made sure that everyone was included. There’s this old saying, ‘Help him out, give him a hand’. People need to be inclusive because they’re on this country now. We’ve got to be able to involve everybody. Our past, the history of what’s happened to Elders and people and Country, has been traumatic for all Aboriginal people - and we can’t forget that - but at the end of the day, we need to move forward in a way that is positive and gives opportunities.*

*I’ve just learnt over the years that being aggressive doesn’t work. So, you need to be softer. We need to be inclusive and make sure that people are learning and listening. It’s not about trying to make people change through force or through argument. It’s about exposing them to what’s reality and what is actually the truth. People might get upset but it’s not about them, it’s about future generations.*

*Education is the key. We need to be teaching our children. The very first thing we did with all people back when I was only 18 years of age was go straight down to the schoolhouse and start to teach the kids. We’d take them walking in the bush and teach them how to make fire with 2 sticks and sing songs. The Elders’ highest priority was the children, to teach the young people and make sure that they learn the language and the knowledge. Getting access to the landscape is really important so they can be connected to country, because that’s what will heal and save us all from the*

madness, understanding what society can actually disrupt for us. It really is a holistic thing. Fire has been big, but it's not just about fire, it's more than that. It's about the wellbeing of the environment, wellbeing of communities. There's so many more benefits that float above the fire.

### Steve

Before we started chatting, you said you were talking to bureaucrats today in Council and with a few landowners and you're relaying to them what you're learning from the land.

### Victor

*I'm telling them what they need to hear. For just about everyone, I get them out on Country and that's the classroom. It's not me talking, it's me interpreting. I'm reading the signs of the landscape so that people can see what the land is saying and what's happening. When they see those indicators, and then they see the behaviour of the fire, and they see where it stops – and it does everything that we say the fire does. You can't get any more proof than that.*

*When we look at all the meetings I had with agencies, governments, Council, whatever, you get nowhere. When we sit in a meeting room over all the years, all the years of trying to get this through and banging your head against the wall, you realise that there's one vital being missing and that is the Country. Country is a living thing and it's never heard. People have got their own decisions and their own perceptions. But when the Country steps in, then you can't argue with that. And that's why it's really crucial that I take them out on the land and interpret the land to them and show them - in their own backyard - what's going on. When they actually get that, they understand.*

*When I finish talking, they're all quiet and you can hear their mind going. They're thinking about the knowledge and trying to make sense of what we just said to them. Not only that, they're actually thinking about themselves as well. Like, 'Ah, we should be doing this, we should be doing that'. At today's meeting, in one day, the Council came on board to look at ways of funding the rangers and trying to get fire practitioners in the regions.*

*For some people it takes just a couple of hours of being on Country and they leave all excited to do something. But the challenge is trying to keep that going. They might get to work the next day and they go, 'Oh, this is what we should be doing' but then there's someone at a higher rank that goes, 'No, we're not going to do that'. We have paramilitary structures within all these agencies as well, and governments that have so many people in charge. You'll win over everyone else, but it just takes one person to say no, from a higher level, and then it doesn't go ahead. And 100% of the time, the reasons have nothing to do with the landscape.*

### Steve

I've seen that when people leave those positions of power in regimented, hierarchical organisations, they actually get a free voice because they're not hamstrung by bureaucracy or chain of command. Given that response-orientated organisations like fire

services are generally dominated by men, what role do women play in the work you do?

### Victor

*It's a huge movement in terms of women's involvement. In Aboriginal culture, women always had involvement. They had woman's story places and it's embedded inside the land. It goes back to the old stories, like, my uncle would tell the story of the Seven Sisters. And that story goes across many Aboriginal clan groups around Australia. We have women's workshops in Tasmania where only women are allowed to go. Even in the landscapes, where the ecosystems are more connected to women's roles, women can burn those ecosystems because it's more connected to them and the men burn other ecosystems that are more connected to them.*

*When you burn Country, it's really gentle. We're not freaking out and running around putting fires out. It's a whole other thing. The women and children are there. We get to look after the country in a way that is so gentle that everyone's involved and included, because that's where we shape our culture. That's how we shape it on the collective level. And you lose the fear of the fire as well.*

*I can really proudly say that most of the breakthroughs with getting the councils on board and getting national parks involved in the training programs have been from women. It's been the women who have made that happen, nurturing the change. And, let's face it, Western society haven't learnt that yet, either. It's a gentlemen's club always running the show and we never see change. We never see anything for Aboriginal people or the environment and we never see anything for women. We're all saying, 'Hey, we need to chime in to do this', and it's so frustrating.*

*Right now, we are a whole planet going through a transition. It will bubble up and fester, but I think at the end of it, we're all going to find better balance. And that's the same with fire. We're getting the balance back in the landscape again and making it healthier and more prosperous and for society as well.*

### Steve

You're going out there training people and you have devoted much of your life to this. Are they actually giving you some brass to make this sustainable? Is the main barrier the fiscal side of it? Or is it the fact that you get lip service?

### Victor

*Only just 2 weeks ago, I went out and I did a tour for next to nothing. It's the communities that have kept us alive. It's all been done on a small level normally. You think about your values and you have to help. I haven't had the privilege of having superannuation and all that because I was never employed by an agency that will support me. And so I think about what I'm going to do now, when I get older. But that's what you throw your life at. I've always believed it's not about money, it's about connection to people, it's about the honesty, the truth of looking after the land. It's about how you make people feel.*

*The government hasn't done anything in terms of supporting much. They've put some money out there, which is chickenfeed really, to what we need to be doing. And when we look at the direction of that money, it's not the right direction, or what we should be doing either. We should be getting employment going, getting the agencies working together and getting the training happening. Let's get on with this now.*

*The most supportive funding since those wildfires has been philanthropy. We never heard anything from the government. Before those wildfires, and back in 2019, it's been the communities, Aboriginal communities and Indigenous communities that afford a plane fare to get me down, to afford to get some sausage sizzle happening and to get people out on Country.*

*And still today, I'm sitting here, coming down here to help people for pennies and just hope that one day soon that the government will wake up and go: 'Look, we're wasting so much money, billions and billions of dollars going down the drain all the time. Why can't we put a fraction of that to start doing things differently and start investing in the health of our environment, investing in our community, investing in our knowledge, investing in the future?'*

*We can't be playing their game either, in the sense of blaming people who caused climate change. We've got to get on with fixing it. No matter who has caused the problem, we've got to clean up the mess together. We can't do it any other way because we need to evolve our culture and we need to evolve together. I think 'All right, you've done the wrong thing. Get up now, dust yourself down, let's work together and get this sorted out'. That's how we need to see the way forward.*

### Steve

By virtue of being a white dude, in the uniform, I carry some entitlement and privilege that other people don't. I'm happy to say that I should be doing whatever I can in my sphere of influence to change what the status quo is. There's an absolute urgency for us to be actively trying to assist people like you in your work. We use the word 'custodians', you've got a way of thinking that is passive, successful and sustainable given the right resources and tools and funds. But at the other end of the scale is at the reactive end where it's aggression. It's like, 'This is a wildfire. Let's aggressively approach it now, because we didn't do what we should have done back in the investment days'.

### Victor

*That's exactly right. The turning point has to be now. Once we start, we will start to see just how prosperous it would be, like green jobs in the future. The answers are really in the health of our landscapes. There's just so much good that can come out of it. And at the end of the day, I just want people to get on with it, I get the training done, let's get trainees happening. Get them over there managing the land so that we can move on to the next bits, to the knowledge map. Because we have the water, we have the plants, we have the ceremony, we have the food, we have other parts of the whole knowledge map.*

*If we can start to demonstrate all of that, and activate that, and then pass it on to the next generations to improve, including in our technology. Now we're talking on another level of science and knowledge and economy and education. There's so much that comes from thousands of years of experience. But yeah, people just look at it and go, 'Well, rub 2 sticks together, what technology?' Stupid, things like that, when they fail to realise the greatest intelligence is the ability to stay on Country for days and years without stuffing it up. So fire is the first thing to sort out.*

*We need to get the job done, to demonstrate Aboriginal fire management so people can see the benefits and the outcome. That's what Indigenous teaching methods are. It's based on practical learning and teaching.*

*There are still places that haven't even started yet. Sometimes I get another community, like where I am now, and they haven't even started to do their first burns. If you can't make it work here, then you make it work somewhere else, and that influences all the other places that have been negative about it. You find that it gets easier as we go along.*

### Steve

That's the kicker, they need to be able to see an end result and know that it's proven and it's successful. It's a great illustration that sort of sums up your personality to a point, if I dare say, where you say, 'It's easy', and I think to myself, 'How do you go about it?' How easy can it be carrying the can for 70,000 plus years of cultural practice. It's a hell of a gig you've got! It's enviable to anyone who is in land management and in fire science. I would imagine that there's any amount of learnings they could take from your land practice. Do the scientists reach out to you much at all?

### Victor

*Yeah, I think not as much as I would like. Scientists have been a funny one. Researchers and business people come and listen to us talking and run off with information most of the time. And then it's about 'their' program and how they want to run it. We want to see science support our work. We want the science to help promote our knowledge and demonstrate our knowledge in a way where we deliver that to the world. They can help us to collect our own information. We want science to not pick from traditional knowledge and then call it something else. We want science to respect all knowledge systems and to help old knowledge systems to grow and to stay alive, to flourish into the modern world and to be respected. And if that's done, then we'll see a lot more opportunity and we'll see a lot more advancement and knowledge.*

*Rather than them saying, 'OK, well, they're doing that, we'll take it and we'll work it out. Maybe we'll dissect it and do it over here, or we'll call it 'Burning for biodiversity' or we'll run a research project, and we'll put our name on it and be the authors', and they're not respecting that knowledge properly in the way that it should be by actually keeping it alive and allowing it to demonstrate its values. So we have to create our own sort of 'Science Division' now and it shouldn't be like that. It should be,*

*'We'll give you a hand, what do you need?' but we don't get that. It's always take, take, take. If they're going to give us a hand, it's about their own agenda.*

*You've got to remember, it's a young knowledge system. They don't understand the values of knowledge in a traditional sense and the respect and protocol around knowledge in a traditional sense. It couldn't be quite easily changed and that's something that we want to see through the monitoring of all the fire that we're doing. Not only our work, the training program was looking at training fire practitioners but also the scientists and the monitors who go out and collect that data, and do their Masters and become the next scientists, Indigenous scientists and involving non-Indigenous science. But at the end of the day, we're putting our shoulder behind an old knowledge system and not picking its brains and turning it into something else. That's like losing identity of Aboriginal people in a way. So it's really important, that question and that discussion. Through the training program, that's the window for us to really get a good handle on science and start to use science in a way that advances Indigenous knowledge into the future and keeps it alive and well and respectful. And that Indigenous knowledge is the knowledge of our environment.*

#### Steve

You've used the word respect there are a couple of times. That sort of mutual cultural respect seems to be lacking quite often nowadays.

#### Victor

*It goes both ways. It's not just a one-way thing. There are beautiful roses on both sides of the fence. I learned that from travelling around so many places and meeting so many people. Western science has a wealth of advanced technology that can help, and Aboriginal knowledge has a wealth of knowledge of the landscape from thousands of years of experience. If only they were to work together and respect each other in the right way, we can move mountains.*

*I've stepped on the toes of researchers, like when they've come and done the wrong thing in the past when I've been more hot-headed and, even now, I don't agree with researchers just coming in and just taking stuff. I sometimes put them in their place. But at the end of the day, it's about us working together. I'm still waiting for the day when they come and approach us and actually say, 'How do we do this the right way?' instead of trying to get around you and trying to get a hold of that knowledge. It's all about the sitting down, coming together and working it out. You got to be open minded and you will be able to share the benefits. But it's got to be done with respect of people and place. That's really crucial. There's a time when you have to raise your voice. But it shouldn't be all the time.*

#### Steve

I know a lot of people who have a lot of empathy for where our First Nations people are today. For instance, we're still talking treaties, we're still talking reconciliation, action plans and inclusion plans. That should be a done deal ages ago. It's 2021.

#### Victor

*We just did a burn here 2 years ago and came back to that site yesterday to have a look. What was there before was lantana and dead grass and it was just a mess. You could hardly walk through the country and now there are heaps of native grasses, food, berries, even saw emu footprints, everything. That is the response from Country. That's what allows me to say it's possible. I'm there burning a lot of places and seeing the return and seeing that the weeds disappear and the natives come back. And if it didn't, I'd be talking about, 'Oh, man, we're in trouble, because we can't seem to bring back the natives, we can't control the fire, and then you should be worried'.*

*The positivity that I'm telling, that I shine with, is not something that just comes from me. It comes from the landscape and it comes from seeing the country improve and I've seen people improve. Young people have hope and their eyes light up to a whole wealth of information. And when they see the land respond the right way, they are so excited. All that work on Country that's been done over the years and all that response has built my attitude – a positive attitude that it can be done.*

*When I first started doing this, there was negativity everywhere. The mountains that we had to climb to get rid of that negativity! And every now and again, there would be a different slogans like, 'It's too expensive to do cultural fire management', 'Oh, it's climate change, we can't stop the fire', 'Oh, you can't learn from North Queensland and bring into Victoria'. All of these things that they'd say, over the years, and I wouldn't respond to them on this, but instead say, 'OK, let's make it work' and then show them and so you don't hear people saying certain things anymore. That's because they're starting to learn in different ways.*

*We can't tell the children that all the emus are going to be gone, they're never going to see one, or the koalas. We can't tell them that we can't do anything about climate change and the world. That's just ridiculous. If the land wasn't responding the right way, then I would be actually saying to you, truthfully, we're in trouble. And we are in trouble. But not as deep trouble as you think. We can bounce back. It's possible because Mother Nature is an amazing thing. And the planet is a living being, it's a one being, and it has an immune system. And we need to tap into that, give her a hand and help ourselves.*

#### Steve

That's a great way to do it. I know you've got a lot of fans here. It's really, really important in the scheme of emergency management. Thanks so much, Victor.

#### Victor

*It's been a real pleasure to be able to contribute to this and I guess I'll close off by going back to the fire. The fact is we're always going to be needing the firefighters and we're going to continue to fight fire. We need land managers too. We need a lot more people on board and more employment. And that's where the training needs to happen. Let's get the process of looking after the land to lessen the threats of fires and to make it safer for everyone – and safer for the firefighters.*