

Reimagining fire management in fire-prone northern Australia*

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Summary

The northern savannas, occupying a quarter of the Australian land mass, constitute the most fire-prone landscapes of a fiery land – in recent years, on average, 18% of the savannas have been burnt each year. Land use is predominantly given over to extensive beef cattle pastoralism – although over much of the rangelands this is at best an economically marginal activity, especially in frequently burnt, higher rainfall northern regions. Outside of urban centres most of the savanna human population is Indigenous, increasingly rapidly, and remains impoverished. Much of the northern cadastre is Indigenously owned outright, or is subject to continued rights of access and use under Native Title arrangements. In this paper we articulate a distinctly northern Australian understanding of and approach to the management of fire, matched to the biophysical and social realities of the north. Despite many obstacles to effective management associated with remoteness, sparse population and limited transport and other infrastructure, management of fire can be improved for positive ecological and social outcomes over a large part of the Australian land mass. Taking advantage of emerging carbon and biodiversity environmental services developments, skilled fire management offers a culturally apt enterprise opportunity where few others exist.

Introduction

Australia is rightly recognised as a fire-prone continent. Fuelled by public media and official enquiries (e.g. Ellis *et al.* 2004; Teague *et al.* 2010), the dominant popular perception is that fire is a particularly southern Australian phenomenon, characterised by life- and property-threatening conflagrations under extreme summer fire-weather conditions. Indeed, under envisaged climate change scenarios of marked increase in number of days of extreme temperature and diminishing regional water availability (CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology

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