

Preface

The unprecedented and devastating bushfires experienced across vast areas of eastern Australia in the long summer of 2019–20 drew world attention to the fragility of Australia’s ancient ecosystems. Many now acknowledge that climate change, drought and the cumulative effect of inappropriate settler land management practices have made Australia’s bush and grasslands increasingly vulnerable to wildfires. In the aftermath of the disaster, some commentators called for the revival of Indigenous cultural burning to reduce the risk of wildfire in south-eastern Australia. In the past decade, collaboration between environmental agencies, government and Traditional Owners has seen the restoration of cultural burning practices in northern Australia.¹ Such cultural resurgence holds potential benefits for people and places across the whole continent of Australia, not just in the north. Traditional Owners hold sophisticated ecological knowledge that explains the interrelationships between ‘people, plants, animals, landforms and celestial bodies’.² This place-based wisdom is both practical and spiritual, and directs proper action or ‘right behaviour’ on that particular land.³ Colonial records reveal the fury and distress of Traditional Owners when settlers contravened traditional laws by using agricultural and forestry methods most appropriate to Europe.⁴ This included using fire incorrectly for Australian conditions or failing to understand the importance of timely or controlled burning.⁵ Yet, because settlers commonly believed First Nations people were ‘primitive’ and ignorant, they did not recognise or respect their place-based Indigenous knowledge. A memoir by Marion Popple (1872–1960), a settler woman who lived near Taggerty in the Upper Goulburn Valley of central Victoria,

1 McKemey et al., ‘Cross-Cultural Monitoring’.

2 Grieves, ‘Aboriginal Spirituality’, 365.

3 Broome, ‘There Were Vegetables’.

4 Kenny, ‘Broken Treaty’.

5 Fred Cahir et al., ‘Winda Lingo Parugoneit’.

provides an example. Popple wrote her memoir in 1936, recalling childhood memories and stories told by early settlers. ‘The blackfellows’, she wrote:

Always called the [Mount] Cathedral ‘Debils Jawbone’. They were afraid whenever they heard the wind roaring through the caves and gullies, and they used to tell us that ‘one day big fellow fire him all burn up’[;] they would roll their eyes and show the whites, poor blacks really believed it would happen.⁶

Dire warnings that deadly wildfire would transform the Cathedral Range were trivialised by Europeans, whose cultural superiority led them to dismiss the ancient wisdom of the Traditional Owners, the Taungurung people. These predictions came to fruition when wildfire swept through the district during the Black Friday disaster of 1939, and during the Black Saturday fires of 2009, when the bulk of the Cathedral Range State Park was burnt. These unnamed Taungurung people from ‘the early days’, I suggest, were not afraid of the ‘wind roaring through the caves and gullies’, as Marion Popple implied. Rather, they feared the outcomes of exploitative and extractive land management strategies that seemed to disregard the needs of plants and animals, land and waters.

Uncle Roy Patterson was a Taungurung Elder who inherited detailed traditional ecological knowledge from his ancestors. He believed that settler practices were harming the land and shared the worldwide concern of Indigenous people that injustices arise ‘when one culture decides what is significant and worth protecting in the heritage of another’.⁷ Uncle Roy’s priority was, therefore, to educate as many people as possible about his beautiful country. Before he died on 15 April 2017, he shared his generational knowledge of bush tucker and bush medicine with anyone who would listen: school children, community groups and academics like me. During one of our trips looking for bush tucker, Uncle Roy took me to Mount Monda, 920 metres above sea level in the Yarra Ranges National Park. It was a cool December morning and the mountainside rang with bird calls. Uncle Roy quipped:

6 ‘Some True Stories about the Aborigines of Victoria for Vivienne Hulley and Audrey Bevan, Read by Mrs Marion Popple of Wymarong’, *Aborigines of Australia—Miscellaneous Reminiscences*, Royal Historical Society of Victoria, MS 22545, Box 118/11.

7 Susemihl, ‘We Are Key Players’.

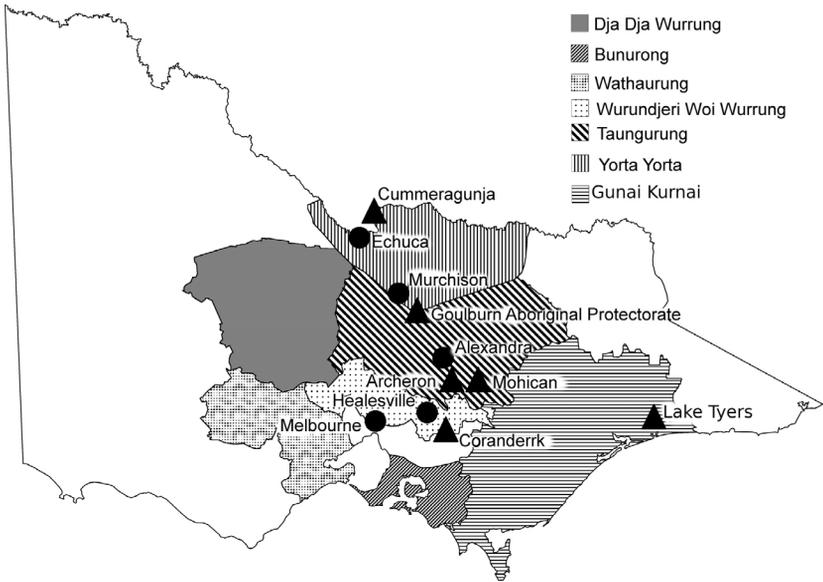
Isn't it gorgeous up here; that is Wurundjeri land up there and this is Daunagung over here. You can drive all the way along here and all you got is mountain pepper [trees]. Because the eucalyptus and mountain ash gets clear felled, all this will go, and we will lose the mountain pepper as well. So, it is not just the animals and the reptiles and that, it is the trees with our bush tucker and bush medicine as well that we lose. There is the ring tail possum, the bushy tail possum, the yellow tail black cockatoo, the red tail black cockatoo and the little glider. There is the rock wallaby and a little black swamp wallaby; the porcupine, the wombat; all native animals that live in this area and are going to die and near be extinct if we don't stop it. Australia is Aboriginal Country, not the Europeans' country; they reckon that they own it, but they don't ... It is terrifying what Europeans want to do to our beautiful Country ... I better not go any further or I'll get real savage about it!⁸

This book reveals why Uncle Roy's ecological convictions were so strong. We first chart his family story, and the wider experience of the Taungurung Nation under colonial rule, and then share the distinctive and vibrant living knowledge that has been handed down to Uncle Roy from generation to generation. Uncle Roy's final wish was to facilitate healing and growth for all Australians by sharing this heritage. Therefore, our book attempts to reduce environmental harms and foster ecological justice by teaching wider audiences about Taungurung land and revitalising relationships with local places.

Jennifer Jones
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8 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 14 December 2016, DS300172-74. All transcripts are in the author's possession.

ON TAUNGURUNG LAND



Map identifying First Nations peoples and location of Acheron, Mohican, Coranderrk, Cummeragunja and Lake Tyers Aboriginal stations

Triangles = Aboriginal protectorate and Aboriginal Stations; Circles = Towns and cities; Patterned squares = Lands of the Kulin Nation and that of adjacent Nations discussed in this book.

Source: Rebecca Le Get.

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