

# NSW Forest Monitoring and Improvement Program: Aboriginal Cultural values and renewal in NSW forests post-wildfires

## Synthesis report

Prepared for: Natural Resources Commission

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Version: 1

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## Acknowledgement

Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation and the NSW Natural Resources Commission would like to acknowledge the cultural continuance of the Aboriginal people and the communities who have led these case study projects. These communities have provided genuine insights into their cultural values and continued cultural obligations to Country.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and custodians of land and seas, and we pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise and honour their ancient cultures, and their connection to land, sea and community. We recognise the Aboriginal peoples’ continued dedication and obligations to the management of healthy Country.

## 1. Executive Summary

The state-wide Forest Monitoring and Improvement Program (FMIP) is independently overseen by the Natural Resources Commission and seeks to improve the management of NSW forests by providing relevant and timely information to meet the needs of decision makers, stakeholders and the broader community. These needs are linked to monitoring, evaluation and research questions for ecological, social, cultural and economic outcomes.

A key evaluation question under the FMIP is:

*“To what extent are Aboriginal values, knowledge and people involved in forest management and decision making?”*

A cultural working group has provided guidance to ensure this question can be answered in meaningful ways. The group includes representatives from Aboriginal Affairs NSW, NSW Aboriginal Land Council, Aboriginal staff from Forestry Corporation of NSW and Department of Planning and Environment, independent experts and Aboriginal stakeholders. The group has been working to develop a state-wide model for cultural values assessment in forests, identifying focus areas and on-ground monitoring projects to help build the model.

Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation was engaged to guide and manage a series of Aboriginal Community-led case studies that explore cultural values in forests before and after the 2019-20 wildfires. Three case studies were undertaken by the following groups:

- Banbai Country – Banbai Rangers with Tamworth and Guyra Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs)
- Gumbaynggirr Country – Coffs Harbour and District LALC with Gumbaynggirr Elders and Knowledge Holders
- Wiradjuri Country – Brungle Tumut LALC.

These case studies involved local Aboriginal-led research using a mixed-methods approach, integrating a range of cultural values and connections beyond the biophysical. They cover a range of forest tenures, and include areas impacted in different ways by the recent wildfires.

### 1.1 Findings from the cultural values assessments

While each case study reported unique findings, there were shared insights about how Aboriginal cultural values are understood and managed, and how these values were impacted by the 2019-20 wildfires, including that:

- there are significant knowledge gaps around Aboriginal cultural values (both pre- and post-fire), with increasing knowledge, identification and protection of cultural values where Aboriginal people had increased access to or involvement in the management and custodianship of an area
- the fires have had significant impacts on many cultural values and practices, although priority sites were able to be actively protected on Aboriginal managed lands and other key sites (including rock art and bora grounds) were reported to be unaffected
- some cultural values have been destroyed or are at higher risk due to the fires, for example burnt scar trees, rock art and stone artefacts that have been made brittle or exposed to erosion risks – there is a concern that cultural sites will be deregistered or devalued where tangible cultural values are damaged or lost
- post-fire site visits led to the discovery of cultural values – including scar trees, artefact scatters and cultural resource sites – that were previously inaccessible due to vegetation cover, and allowed for continuation of cultural obligations

- with the exception of Aboriginal managed lands, Aboriginal people are not adequately involved in land management and decision making, including the identification, management, and monitoring of cultural values, leading to poor environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic outcomes.

## 1.2 Broader outcomes and insights for future projects

Importantly, as well as assessing pre- and post-fire cultural values, the case studies had a range of broader beneficial outcomes. For example, the project facilitated new and stronger partnerships between Aboriginal people and NSW Government land management agencies, provided opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to learn from specialists and undertake training, and enabled on-Country discussions and learning across various land tenures. The case studies provided opportunities for local Aboriginal people to identify, manage and renew cultural values throughout their Country and enabled local NSW land management agency staff to better understand these values. Another notable outcome was the ability of some groups to establish relationships with private landholders, allowing access to significant cultural sites following a long period of exclusion.

These case studies demonstrated the importance and effectiveness of local, Aboriginal-led approaches in delivering a range of beneficial outcomes. Notably, this work provided an opportunity for local Aboriginal people to continue to fulfil their cultural obligations. All participants expressed a desire to continue building on the work undertaken during this project, to keep learning from each other and Country, and to build a community of practice and mentoring network.

These case studies also highlighted the opportunities offered by Aboriginal-owned and managed tenures, specifically IPAs. These areas benefit from resourcing for Ranger groups, the ability to lead planning and management, provide local training for youth, and access to and sharing of knowledge from Elders and knowledge holders.

## 1.3 Areas for improvement

The findings of these case studies emphasise that access to Country and involvement in land management enable cultural practice and are a key pathway to cultural heritage protection. However, despite the positive project outcomes identified above, the case studies identified serious limitations in terms of how Aboriginal people are involved in land management and decision making, and how cultural values are understood and protected. Specifically, the case studies emphasised there are opportunities to improve:

- **Aboriginal involvement in public land management** – by increasing the extent of Aboriginal-owned and managed land, along with greater participation in decision making, planning processes and on-ground land management – including through whole-of-Country planning processes – to ensure cultural values are identified and protected
- **relationships between Aboriginal people, Government and also private land managers** – to encourage increased awareness of Aboriginal cultural values, and facilitate access to and protection of these values
- **cultural value identification, management, access and monitoring** – including by facilitating knowledge sharing between stakeholders, improving Aboriginal peoples' access to areas of significant cultural value to maintain and protect them, and providing resourcing and training to manage, store and organise information about cultural values
- **fire risk management and post-fire outcomes for Aboriginal peoples** – through increased Aboriginal involvement in fire planning, management, recovery and monitoring, including activities to protect at-risk values and/or to renew and enhance cultural values in the recovery phase.

One proposed means of addressing some of the key issues identified in this report is through a focus on ‘whole of Country’ approaches, specifically through the Aboriginal-led development of holistic ‘whole of Country plans’ that address the management of cultural values. These plans would help Aboriginal groups to share their desired outcomes with other land managers, and highlight partnership and investment opportunities across the region.

Critically, while this report highlights the benefits that can come out of discrete, short-term projects, ultimately long-term investment and resourcing is needed to achieve meaningful change in the way Aboriginal people are involved in land management and decision making to ensure cultural values are understood and protected.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1. Forest Monitoring and Improvement Program

The NSW Premier requested the Natural Resources Commission to independently oversee the design, implementation, review and continuous improvement of a state-wide Forest Monitoring and Improvement Program (FMIP). The NSW FMIP Framework 2019-2024 outlines a plan to improve the management of NSW forests through the provision of relevant and timely information to meet the needs of decision makers, stakeholders and the broader community. These needs have been explicitly linked to monitoring, evaluation and research questions that cover ecological, social, cultural and economic outcomes.

### 2.2. Assessing the Aboriginal cultural values of NSW forests

The cultural state-wide evaluation question for the FMIP is:

*“To what extent are Aboriginal values, knowledge and people involved in forest management and decision making?”*

A cultural working group has been providing guidance to ensure this question can be answered in meaningful ways, with representation from Aboriginal Affairs NSW, NSW Aboriginal Land Council, Aboriginal staff from Forestry Corporation of NSW and Department of Planning and Environment, independent experts and Aboriginal stakeholders. The group has been working to develop a state-wide model of cultural values assessment in forests and identify key focus areas and on-ground monitoring projects to trial and help build the model.

Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation was engaged to guide and manage the development of a series of Aboriginal Community-led case studies that explore cultural values and renewal assessment in forests post-wildfires (2019-20).

Three groups were successful in securing funding to undertake a case study assessment in their region:

- Banbai Country – Banbai Rangers with Tamworth and Guyra LALCs
- Gumbaynggirr Country – Coffs Harbour and District LALC together with Gumbaynggirr Elders and Knowledge Holders
- Wiradjuri Country – Brungle Tumut LALC.

These groups undertook local Aboriginal-led research using a mixed-methods approach to address the following evaluation questions:

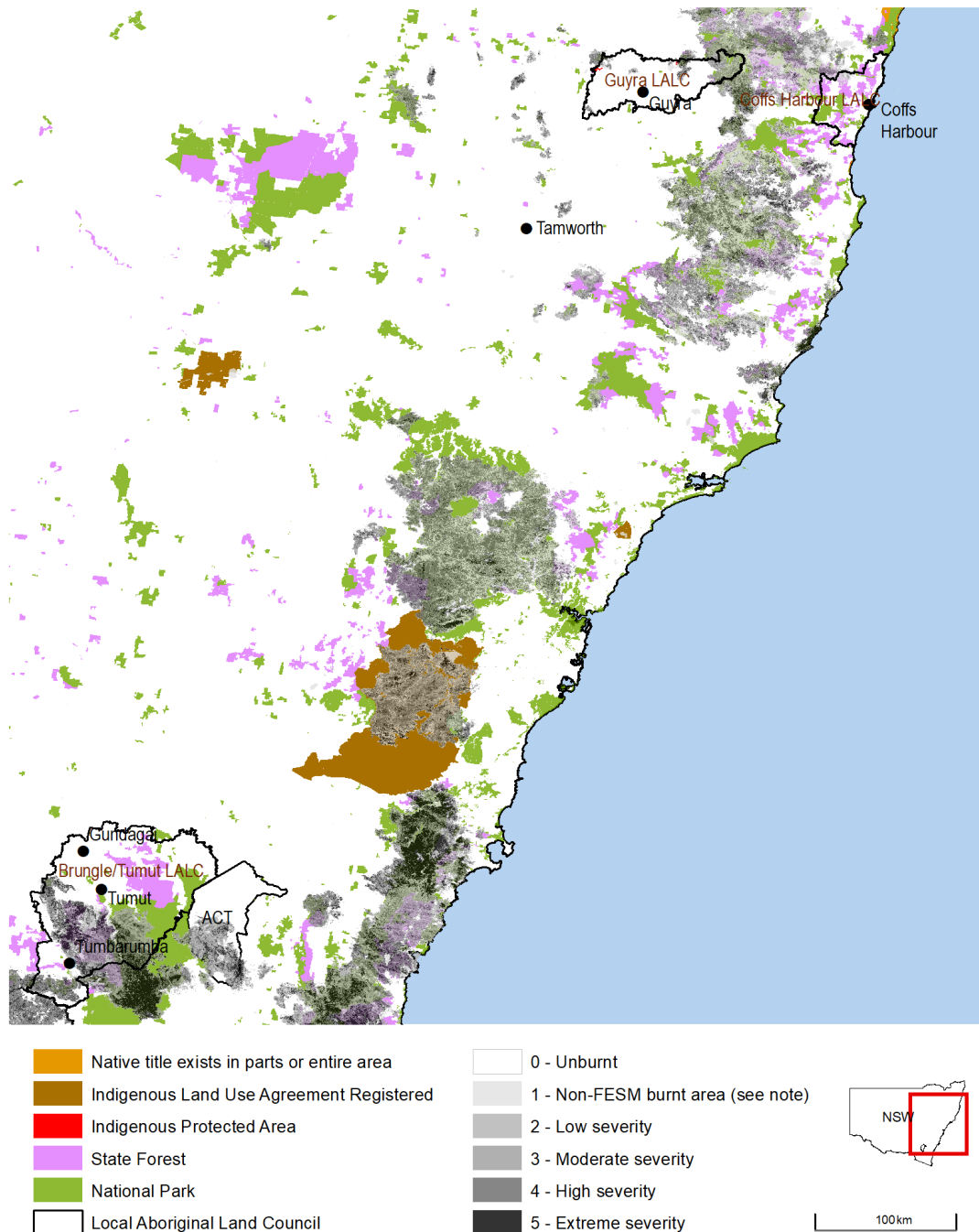
1. What was the condition of cultural values prior to the fire (where known)?
2. How has the fire impacted each of those values and how does this vary across forest types?
3. Are there any gaps in knowledge about the condition of those values and why?
4. What risks to the values have changed because of the fires and are there any emerging risks?
5. What innovative tools, resources and processes can be developed to better address these risks in the future?

The case study areas cover different forest tenures, including National Parks, State Forest, Travelling Stock Routes, Crown and privately-owned land, all of which were impacted in different ways by the recent 2019-20 wildfires. They also involve the integration of a range of cultural values and connections beyond the biophysical.

This report summarises the overarching findings and recommendations from all three case studies. In addition, each group provided a final report documenting their approach and findings, which are available on the [Commission’s website](#). Videos have also been produced for the [Banbai](#) and [Gumbaynggirr](#) case studies.

### 2.3. Case study areas

The three case study areas are shown in **Figure 1**.



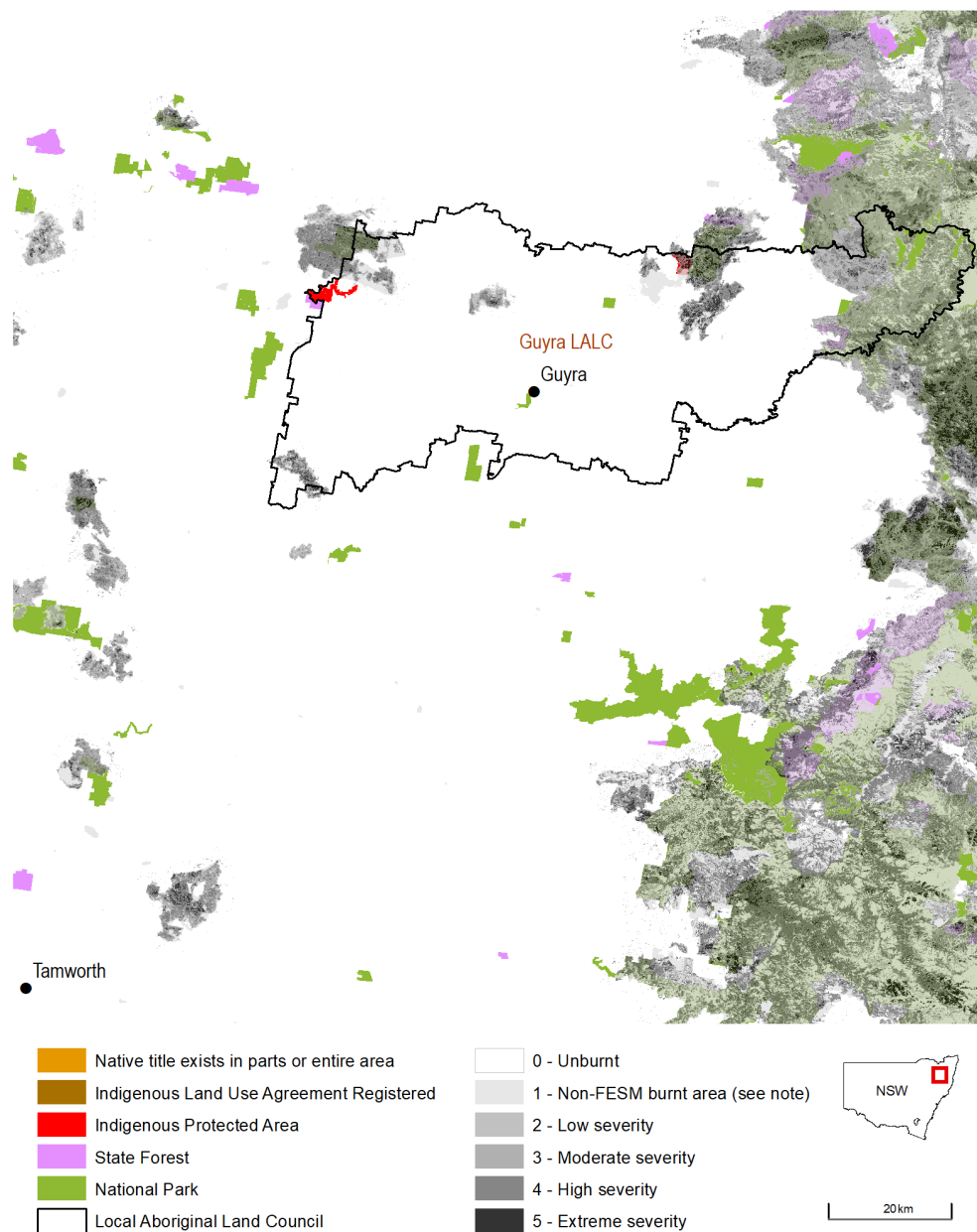
**Note:** Non-FESM burnt area is the area supplied by the NSW Rural Fire Service or the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service where FESM was mapped as unburnt or unassessed.

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**Figure 1: Map showing the location of the three case study areas**

### Banbai Country – Banbai Rangers with Tamworth and Guyra LALCs

The case study focuses on the Guyra LALC region (**Figure 2**). Within this area, the Banbai rangers manage two Aboriginal-owned properties that are Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) where they can autonomously access, manage, protect, and share knowledge about their cultural values in a culturally safe environment. These are the Wattleridge IPA (480 hectares) and Tarriva Kurrukun IPA (930 hectares), both of which were included in the case study.



**Note:** Non-FESM burnt area is the area supplied by the NSW Rural Fire Service or the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service where FESM was mapped as unburnt or unassessed.

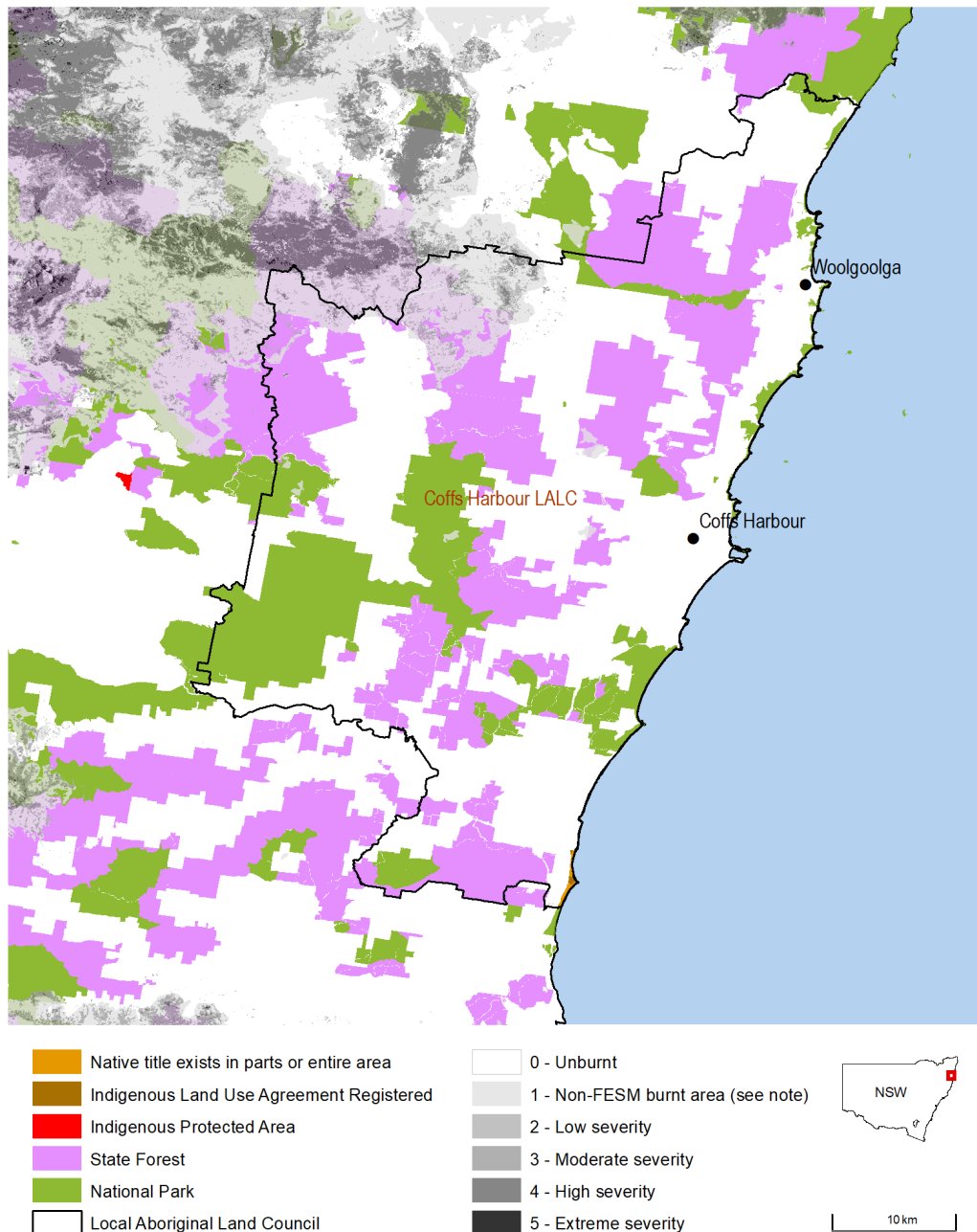
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**Figure 2: Map of the Banbai case study area**



### Gumbaynggirr Country – Coffs Harbour and District LALC with Gumbaynggirr Elders and Knowledge Holders

The study area encompasses all areas within Gumbaynggirr tribal boundary effected by the 2019-20 wild-fires, extending west to Guyra, North West to Nymboida, North to Grafton, North East to Woolli, South East to South West Rocks, South West to Wollomombi (**Figure 3**).



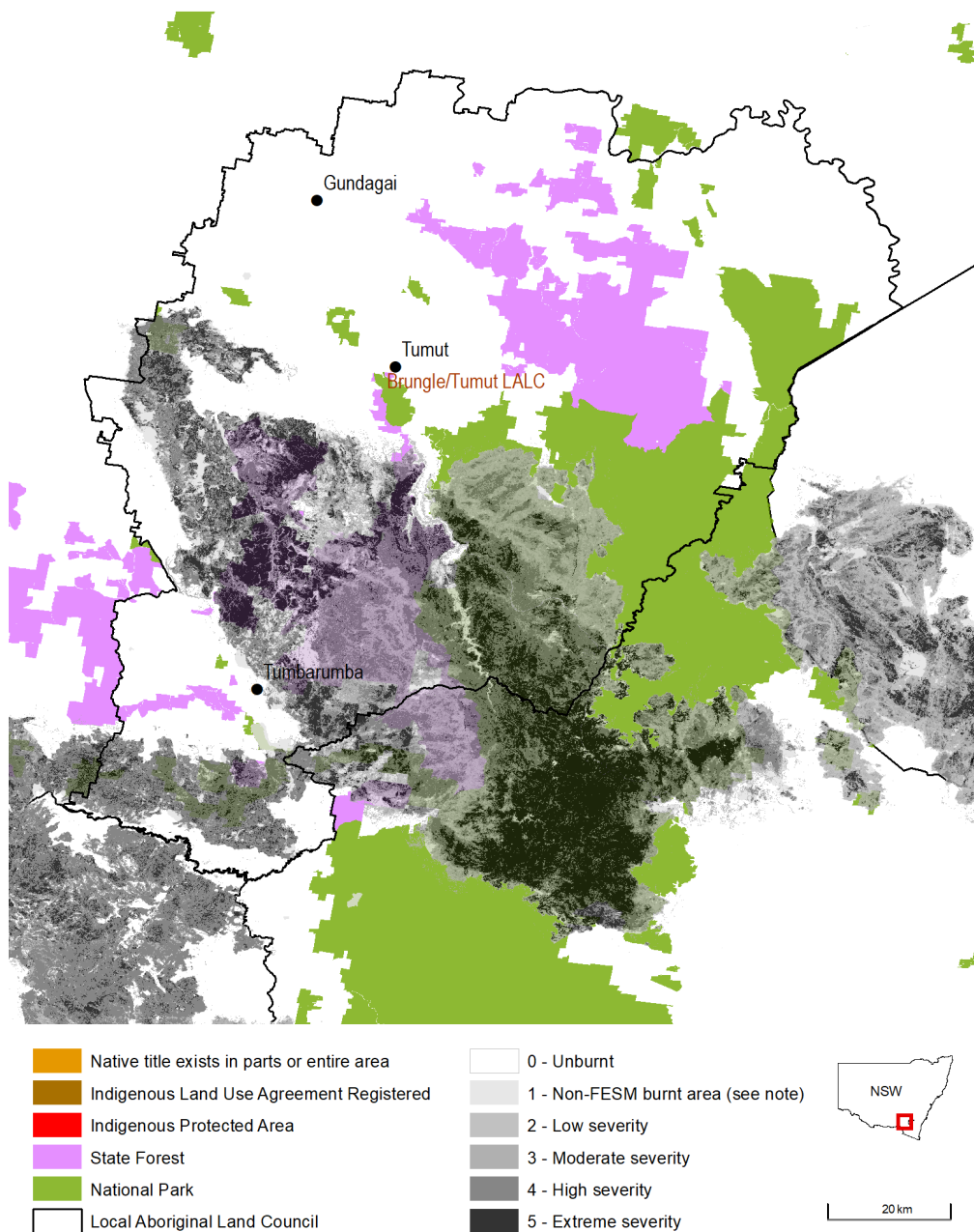
**Note:** Non-FESM burnt area is the area supplied by the NSW Rural Fire Service or the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service where FESM was mapped as unburnt or unassessed.

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**Figure 3: Map of the Gumbaynggirr case study area**

### Wiradjuri Country – Brungle Tumut LALC

The case study focuses on traditional Wiradjuri Country of the people from the Brungle and Tumut area, which lies within the south-eastern corner of the traditional lands of the Wiradjuri people (Figure 4). The Murray River forms the Wiradjuri's southern boundary, while the change from woodlands and open grassland on the plains to forested mountains forms the eastern boundary.



**Note:** Non-FESM burnt area is the area supplied by the NSW Rural Fire Service or the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service where FESM was mapped as unburnt or unassessed.

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**Figure 4: Map of the Wiradjuri case study area**

## 2.4. Case study approaches

This project is centred on local Aboriginal-led case studies, showcasing Aboriginal leadership, research, monitoring and project delivery. As such, each of these case study areas and groups designed their own individualised, mixed method approaches to the case study questions based on their own specific connections to Country, interests, needs and varying outcomes they wanted to achieve.

To ensure each approach was unique and tailored to their region, each group led their own local Aboriginal-led working group with representation from relevant NSW Government land management agencies and other knowledge holders and experts. These working groups helped in developing the case study plan, providing access to land and forests, engagement with agencies and experts, and access to training and other opportunities.

Underpinning the individualised approach, each case study included the following consistent elements:

- ethics agreements negotiated between each case study group, the Natural Resources Commission and Firesticks Alliance
- local Aboriginal-led working groups established with representation from relevant NSW Government agencies and other experts and knowledge holders
- cultural protocol discussions and agreements among working group members and relevant agencies
- collation of relevant agency and other data to identify and map relevant landscapes, impacts and Aboriginal values (including natural values, fire extent and severity, biodiversity, Aboriginal sites)
- literature and data review (desktop research) to identify Aboriginal values and stories about the landscape
- GPS mapping of known, new and already identified Aboriginal sites to input or update data into the Aboriginal Heritage Information and Management System (AHIMS)
- local community field trips to collect and share observational data and other values on Country
- local community workshops with key knowledge holders, stakeholders and land managers (private and government) to build knowledge, record data, share stories and understanding on Country
- multimedia production (film) to share learnings and experiences from the case studies between stakeholders and with the public
- cultural heritage site assessment training and mentoring, including in using AHIMS.

Each case study had varying levels of stakeholder and NSW agency support and partnerships, which they were able to draw on to create a unique way of exploring the case study questions and achieving their objectives.

**Table 1** provides an overview of the different approaches taken by each group.

**Table 1: Overview of individualised case study approaches**

Case study	Approach
<p><b>Banbai</b> <i>Banbai Rangers with Tamworth and Guyra LALC</i></p>	<p>The Banbai Rangers worked in partnership with Tamworth and Guyra LALCs, academics, NSW land management agency staff, cultural scientists, archaeologists and other experts to bring their case study together.</p> <p>They have been actively managing their own Lands at Wattleridge and Tarriwa Kurrukun IPA since 2001 and 2009 respectively, so they have been able to resource and develop land management practices over this time. They have also developed some relationships with local agencies and researchers over this time that they were able to draw on, develop and expand throughout the project.</p> <p>The Banbai case study carried out literature and data reviews. It also carried out two on-Country workshops involving a range of stakeholders and including visits across a range of tenures. 26 people were involved in the workshops, including members of the Case Study Steering Group, representatives from various organisations, specialists and private landholders. These workshops helped identify additional sites that were either visited as part of this project, or earmarked for future visits.</p>
<p><b>Gumbaynggirr</b> <i>Coffs Harbour and District LALC together with Gumbaynggirr Elders and Knowledge Holders</i></p>	<p>Coffs Harbour and District LALC has focused much of its business on land management and has fostered strong connections with Gumbaynggirr Country and Elders as part of this approach. This has enabled long cultural continuance and intergenerational transfer of knowledge in cultural values, with Elders taking part in storytelling and senior site officers recording and managing cultural values in Gumbaynggirr lands. They also have a dedicated Ranger team to lead this work on Country that has been able to develop ongoing partnerships with land managers both Government and private.</p> <p>The group used post-fire mapping data and engagement with Gumbaynggirr knowledge holders to identify priority sites for on-ground cultural impact assessment. Site assessments were carried out via physical on-ground site inspection by two Senior Site Officers, or one Senior Site Officer and 3-4 junior site officers, with on-the-job oversight and mentoring provided for juniors.</p> <p>Cultural safety was a strong focus in this case study. Prior to accessing any cultural site, cultural protocols and any known stories for each site were discussed via a cultural induction process led by the Senior Sites Officer or Elder.</p>
<p><b>Wiradjuri</b> <i>Brungle Tumut LALC</i></p>	<p>Although the Brungle Tumut LALC did not have a dedicated ranger team or cultural heritage officers, land management and cultural values are an increasing area of interest for the LALC. This project enabled skills in cultural values assessment to be further developed among community members through the mentoring provided by a project officer contracted to lead the case study. For example, training was delivered to local community members on how to use Avenza mapping to pin locations and navigate using GPS coordinates.</p> <p>The most significant places for site visits were identified by using AHIMS mapping and data to locate existing cultural values. The project officer retrieved data from AHIMS and pinned coordinates to Avenza maps for community members to follow and locate existing sites within the Case Study area. The training enabled community members to relocate and pin any new finds.</p>

### 3. Case study findings, outcomes and insights

#### 3.1. Knowledge and condition of cultural values prior to the fire depended on access, resources and skills

Each case study identified a range of cultural values on Country, including tangible and intangible values. The values identified by each case study are summarised in **Table 2**, noting there are significant intersections and shared values.

**Table 2: Cultural values and practices**

Country	Cultural values and practices
<b>Banbai</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sites and artefacts and stories on Country in the IPAs, including art sites (such as rock art at Kukra on Wattleridge IPA), grinding grooves and the story of Biri Giber</li> <li>• Cultural fire management (knowledge and practice)</li> <li>• Learning culture and language, and sharing it with future generations</li> <li>• Cultural practices, including collection of bush tucker and medicine, making digeridoos, boomerangs, coolamons and wooden tools, knapping and making stone tools, men’s and women’s activities, tracking and hunting, ceremony and smoking ceremonies, connecting to Country, cultural responsibilities, swimming.</li> </ul>
<b>Gumbaynggirr</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural sites – including marker trees, scar trees, camp sites, artefact scatters, a hammer stone, a stone arrangement, a men’s site, old walking tracks, rock art, a bora ground, women’s sacred birthing sites and waterholes, creation story places, increase sites and other sacred places, special cultural resource sites (Eucalypt or Rainforest)</li> <li>• Cultural recreation – vegetation resource gathering and use, camping, bushcraft workshops, bushtucker/medicine walks, bushtucker planting, hut making, hunting, weaving workshops, bush walks/observing nature, species spotting, spotlighting, song, dance and ceremony, painting using Ochre found onsite, cultural artefact knowledge sharing, storytelling.</li> <li>• Cultural activation – Gumbaynggirr people accessing land, acknowledgements of ancestors, singing-up Country with Gumbaynggirr language, use of cultural fire, ceremonies, dance, corroborees, knowledge sharing, storytelling.</li> </ul>
<b>Wiradjuri</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carved trees and stone tool artefacts</li> <li>• Cultural food sources, including bugaang (Bogong moths), river maangaala (lobster), dhandyuri (fresh water mussels) and fish such as gugabul (Murray cod), wambuwuny (kangaroos), wilay (possums), dinawan (emus), fruits, nuts, murnong (yam daisies), wattle seeds, and orchid tubers</li> <li>• Cultural attachments to the land and a responsibility for custodianship of all flora and fauna</li> </ul>

A common theme emerging across the case studies was that knowledge, identification and protection of cultural values improved with increased access to or involvement in the management and custodianship of an area. For instance, the Banbai case study reported local cultural knowledge for the two IPA areas, with the cultural values reported to be in good condition prior to the 2019-20 fires:

*‘Traditional Owners have a good understanding of, and can autonomously manage, land parcels that they own, that are voluntarily managed as Indigenous Protected Areas’*

In contrast, knowledge about cultural values is variable for other tenures. The Wiradjuri case study reported that public lands, including national parks, nature reserves and state forests, supported cultural values associated with flora and fauna, including birds:

*'the country under FCNSW [Forestry Corporation of NSW] and NPWS [National Parks and Wildlife Service] control was heavily forested, with lots of litter on the forest floor making great habitat for reptiles like lizards and snakes. The forests were full of birds – such as cockatoos (both black and white) galahs, rosellas, gang gangs - and many other canopy dwelling animals.'*

However, the Banbai case study indicated the condition of cultural values on non-IPA tenures prior to the 2019-20 wildfires was unknown, highlighting the following issues with cultural values information and management plans for public lands:

*'cultural values information for protected areas tends to be brief and generic. Management plans for national parks and nature reserves are limited and outdated, and require contemporary surveys and updates.'*

Although the case studies did report local cultural knowledge for some private lands, generally knowledge of cultural values and their condition on private land is constrained across all areas by the lack of access and lack of trust with landholders. For example, from the Banbai case study:

*'For private land, Banbai custodians have been denied access in the past and, in some cases, deliberate destruction of cultural heritage has occurred.'*

*'Lack of access prevents Traditional Owners spending time on Country which is fundamental to maintaining and transmitting cultural knowledge and practice, and providing space for Aboriginal people to fulfil their obligations to Country.'*

While the groups commonly used the AHIMS database to record and manage cultural values, there were many critical and shared issues identified with this information repository, including:

- outdated, patchy or incorrect data records and inconsistent handling of artefacts
- lack of access and knowledge of Aboriginal people to use and manage the data for their own needs on Country
- a focus on sites not the whole cultural landscape, including tangible and intangible values, stories, wider values such as species, water quality etc
- most often focused on impacts not proactive management, ongoing protection and renewal, meaningful outcomes, community involvement
- land management agencies use it separately and inconsistently, and it is not always shared to support cross-tenure, effective and localised land management, particularly in the case of fire risk management
- there are no coherent cultural safety principles for collecting, monitoring and sharing the data

### 3.2. The fires had significant impacts on cultural values, although priority sites were able to be protected on Aboriginal managed lands

Aboriginal communities across NSW saw devastating impacts to their Country and their cultural values due to the fires. Each case study region was heavily impacted by the wildfires, including the destruction of cultural sites and impacts on cultural values and practices. It is also noted that the trauma associated with bushfire and post-fire recovery can result in broader mental health impacts for Aboriginal people.<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, where values were known and able to be protected by local Aboriginal people they had better chance of survival. This is demonstrated through the successful protection of priority sites in the IPAs in the Banbai case study through management interventions, for example:

*'important rock art at Kukra on Wattleridge IPA was saved from bushfire damage (through cultural burning and fire mitigation measures) while rock art on private land (near Bundarra, outside of the Guyra LALC area) was severely damaged by back burning by the Rural Fire Service during the 2019-20 bushfires.'*

Despite these successes on IPAs, the case studies reported extensive impacts on both tangible and intangible values across all tenures in their regions. For example, the Wiradjuri case study highlighted:

*'the silence in the forests because of the loss of birds and other wildlife, with most being restricted to unburnt areas and corridors along the creeks and edge of Blowering dam'*

The Wiradjuri case study also identified the loss of indicator plants, including:

- silver wattles, an indicator plant for when it is time to prepare for bugaang (bogong) moth harvest and ceremony in the alpine areas of Walgalu Country
- *Hardenbergia violacea* flowers, which would normally indicate when wandayali (echidna) and other mammals could be hunted.

In the Gumbaynggirr case study, the reported fire impacts included:

- 99 percent burn damage to the Junction Double Marker Scar Tree (1000+ year old Bloodwood that was in good condition pre-fire) – this scar tree was a ceremonial tree and was of very high significance to Gumbaynggirr, with many Elders still alive today having visited this tree
- fire damage to other scar trees at various sites (both known scar trees, and previously unreported scar trees that were identified during the post-fire surveys)
- 90 percent of on-ground and 20 percent of above-ground vegetation burnt at Pigeon Gully (Yuraygirr National Park) – difficult to source current day elders who have detailed knowledge of the site's use, but it is expected that it must have been an important resource gathering place for cultural resources like Cabbage Tree Palm, Bangalow Palms, as well as providing habitat for the Wompoo Pigeon (*Ptilinopus magnificus*, listed as a vulnerable species in NSW)
- fire damage to culturally Important and critically endangered species Scrub Turpentine (*Ganayga*) – stem and foliage burnt off with positive signs of new shoots and foliage beginning to form.

Both the Wiradjuri and Gumbaynggirr case studies reported that many stone artefacts at old camp sites that were assessed during the site visits had been made brittle by the heat of the fires. Many artefacts have also been

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson, B., Weir, J. and Cavanagh, V. (2020). *Strength from perpetual grief: how Aboriginal people experience the bushfire crisis*. Article published in [The Conversation, January 10, 2020](#).

exposed and impacted due to the loss of vegetation in the fires, clearing of new and existing fire trails, and as a result of heavy rainfall post-fire. The Wiradjuri case study reported that:

*'Bulldozers forming fire management trails impacted on artefacts being directly damaged by steel blades cracking and breaking already brittle stone from the heat of the wildfires'*

*'Following the bushfires came heavy rains that had a double effect on Country. Hot fire penetrates below the surface as well as above causing hardening of the soils resulting in the soils not being able to retain moisture. Heavy rainfall flowing over the surface without any foliage to slow its progress caused many stone artefacts to be disturbed and washed out of situ, some washing onto trails and being impacted by traffic.'*

These impacts place the artefacts at higher risk of loss, damage or disintegration to the point of being unrecognisable, the implications of which are discussed further in **Section 3.4**.

With respect to the impacts of the fires on various cultural practices, the Banbai case study provided a useful summary (**Table 3**).

**Table 3: Bushfire impact on cultural practices (taken from the Banbai case study final report)**

Cultural practice	Bushfire impact
<b>Collecting bush tucker and medicines</b>	Burnt everything, all bushtucker gone for 6 to 12 months. No birds or animals around.
<b>Making didgeridoos, boomerangs, coolamons and wooden tools</b>	Trees, bark, logs and ground material, burnt and damaged.
<b>Knapping and creating stone tools</b>	More access to find stone artefacts. Boulders and rocks damaged.
<b>Yarning circle and place to teach kids, share culture</b>	Access trails damaged and hazardous to visitors - makes it hard to teach kids. Can't access important sites to share culture. Rangers have to focus on bushfire recovery, can't host visitors at the IPAs, or run as many cultural activities.
<b>Weaving</b>	Would like to do this in future. Could do it at a site by river and collect materials. Weaving materials burnt and unable to be used.
<b>Cultural fire</b>	Burnt out everything, need to let Country recover. Small unburnt refugia need to be protected. Bushfires 'reset' ecosystems back to early succession so that cultural fire management can be used to manage ecosystems into future
<b>Men's and women's activities</b>	Focus redirected to bushfire recovery rather than cultural activities. Important places impacted by fire
<b>Tracking and hunting</b>	Impact of bushfire on fauna, but easier to track animals after bushfires.
<b>Ceremony, smoking ceremonies</b>	Burnt canopies goes against Lore. Trauma associated with bushfire smoke. No leaves to do smoking ceremony.
<b>Using language</b>	N/A. Need to find a linguist to try to help with learning language.
<b>Connecting to country-being out there and listening, healing</b>	Two years after bushfires, still focussing on recovery
<b>Looking after totems and cultural responsibilities</b>	Bushfires impacted ecosystems, made some cultural responsibilities harder to undertake, went into healing Country phase.
<b>Swimming and visiting waterways.</b>	Quality of waterways declined, animals killed. Impact on bush tucker, fish. Erosion downstream, potential impact on special places



Cultural practice	Bushfire impact
Looking after rock art	Special effort made to protect rock art during fires, good example of using cultural burning to save important places.

Importantly, it is not only the fire itself that can affect cultural values, practices and impact on mental health, but also fire planning, management and post-fire recovery activities. As such, it is important that agencies engage with Aboriginal people in culturally sensitive ways during the bushfire response and recovery process.<sup>2</sup> However, there were stories shared from all case studies of a lack of genuine engagement of Aboriginal people in key local and regional fire planning, management and recovery bodies despite provisions for inclusion of Aboriginal representatives (this is discussed further in **Section 3.3**). This lack of Aboriginal engagement in land management, including limited use of cultural burning and other traditional land management practices, was also a key finding in the recent NSW Bushfire Inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

Where relationships between agency and Aboriginal representatives are not well-established and there is a lack of culturally appropriate practices and trained staff, there is potential for negative impacts from fire management and recovery actions. For example, the Gumbaynggirr case study suggests the combination of high severity fire followed by salvage harvesting via clearing methods resulted in the most adverse impacts observed during the case study site visits. The case study indicates the use of heavy machinery damaged cultural sites and objects (for example, old camp grounds and stone artefacts) through displacement, scraping and fracture. This activity was also reported to have resulted in barren areas with reduced habitat values, delays in post-fire forest regeneration, and risk of erosion during heavy rainfall events. As a result, they expressed a need for more active engagement with Aboriginal groups during land, forest and natural resource planning, and fire planning, management and recovery processes. Overall, the lack of genuine Aboriginal involvement in these processes are noted in the recommendations as needing critical attention (**Sections 4.1 and 4.3**).

Positively, in addition to the active protection of the rock art at Kukra on Wattleridge IPA, other known cultural sites assessed as part of these case studies were found to have been unaffected by the fires. For example, the Gumbaynggirr case study found that the Chambigne Rock Art Site was not impacted. The site officers reported that the site is in good condition, with the large cave keeping the rock art paintings well preserved and sheltered from the weather. In addition, while a known Bora Ground / Ceremonial Ring was unable to be accessed due to logs blocking road access, a review of the Fire Severity Map for the area indicated the site was not affected in the 2019-20 wildfires, despite fire affecting other nearby areas:

*'It is evident the natural landscape and river shape has capacity to naturally protect from wildfire impacts due to shape and orientation of the land and river (perhaps the old people new this and designed it that way).'*

Another beneficial outcome that was identified through these case studies was that, in some cases, fire affected areas provided an opportunity to identify previously unknown cultural values. For example, over 30 new artefact sites were mapped as a result of the Wiradjuri case study, with the team reporting that:

<sup>2</sup> Williamson, B., Weir, J. and Cavanagh, V. (2020). *Strength from perpetual grief: how Aboriginal people experience the bushfire crisis*. Article published in [The Conversation, January 10, 2020](#).

<sup>3</sup> Owens, D. and O'Kane, M. (2020) *Final Report of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry*, Department of Premier and Cabinet (NSW)

*'with so much vegetation removed, the landscape form and layout could be seen very easily, which also happened to make it much easier to see where to look for (and find) cultural evidence, where campsites would have been and travel paths forming connections to Country and people.'*

Similarly, the Gumbaynggirr case study reported improved access at Pidgeon Gully (Yuraygir National Park) post-fire, resulting in a reassessment of the likely cultural value of the site:

*'The fires had consumed 90% of the ground surface of pidgeon gully, however on the day the wind must of provided the right conditions to not kill off too many mid and canopy natives. It has amazingly suppressed the weeds and allowed for ease of access into the forest.'*

*'Prior to the fires, it was not recognised in recent times for having cultural value. There is no doubt now after seeing it today and realising it must have been an important resource gathering place.'*

The Gumbaynggirr case study also identified a range of new cultural values during the site visits for this project, including large numbers of worked stone artefacts, debitage and flakes at potential Old Campsite sites, and previously unknown scar trees that are to be revisited and documented in AHIMS. These findings indicate there may be an opportunity for targeted post-fire cultural values surveys to help expand knowledge around cultural values and enable newly identified values to be better protected in future. Focusing on opportunities for cultural renewal, including from fire, is a key shared recommendation from across all the case studies and one that requires integration into forest data collection, monitoring and management systems and practices (**Sections 4.2 and 4.3**).

### **3.3. There are significant knowledge gaps around cultural values due to lack of access or involvement in land management**

It is noted that there are several areas where the impact of the fires on cultural values is yet to be properly assessed due to access issues or resourcing constraints. Given the extensive area burnt in the 2019-20 wildfires, it was not possible that all existing cultural value sites within the case study areas could be inspected as part of this project. The local Aboriginal-led working groups identified a sub-set of priority cultural values to target in the site assessments. In addition to the Bora Ground / Ceremonial Ring site mentioned in **Section 3.2**, there are other areas across the three regions where access to locate, assess and monitor some values have been heavily restricted due to damage to roads and access routes following the wildfires.

In a broader sense, the three case studies have highlighted significant knowledge gaps regarding Aboriginal cultural values both pre- and post-fire across tenures, with the exception of the two Aboriginal owned and managed IPA properties. Poor understanding and identification of cultural values is a problem as it means that these values will not be adequately protected in planning, impact and recovery phases of fire.

These knowledge gaps are in many cases a result of intergenerational knowledge transfer being interrupted through the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples, as described by Banbai ranger and Elder, Lesley Patterson:

*'The reason I want to learn all I can is, well, my grandmother couldn't pass anything on, my mother couldn't pass anything on. And what knowledge they did pass on, I want to pass it on, to keep that tradition going – it was stopped with my mother – I want to take it up for them. They lost a lot by not teaching: my grandma lost a lot because she couldn't teach her grandchildren, she couldn't teach her children.'*

Knowledge and protection of cultural values also depends on access to these values, which differs across tenures and from region to region. **Section 3.1** has already highlighted some of the ongoing issues with access to cultural sites on private land, as described in the Banbai case study:

*'At this stage, we are not able to access cultural sites on private lands. If you can't get in there and get a management plan around them, you can't protect these sites for the future generations.'*

Access to cultural sites on private lands may, however, be improving in some cases. As part of this project, the Banbai Rangers were able to negotiate conditional access to a previously inaccessible private property, following intergenerational change on the property and with the help of 'champions' involved in this case study. Although the Bora Ground on the property was no longer in its original condition, the shift towards more positive relationships with private landholders was seen as an unexpected and constructive outcome of the site visit. Improved relationships with private landholders is discussed further in **Section 4.2**.

On public lands, physical access is less of an immediate barrier, although there are still many instances of public lands inhibiting access to cultural values due to fencing, management practices, current uses and values, physical inaccessibility, and the prohibition of specific cultural practices in a given area. For instance, the Banbai case study reports that Aboriginal people were prevented from cutting coolamons in a nature reserve due to a perceived risk of tree disease. It is noted that actions by the State preventing the carrying out of traditional activities listed in the *Native Title Act 1993 (Commonwealth)* can in some cases attract compensation payable to native title holders.

Generally, however, the case studies focused on issues around the involvement of Aboriginal people from the management and care of public lands, including exclusion from decision-making and planning forums and/or lack of participation in data collection and monitoring activities. The Wiradjuri case study provides the following explanation for knowledge gaps:

*'There are gaps because there are very few local Wiradjuri/Walgalu people working on Country, and agencies that are doing land management and care for cultural values don't have access to the required knowledge. ... Having Indigenous liaison people from other parts of NSW working off Country is not good enough when cultural values assessments require local knowledge. While better than nothing – is still not good enough.'*

Even in instances where there are existing provisions for Aboriginal representation, such as on Rural Fire Service Bushfire Management Committees, some Aboriginal people reported that they do not feel welcome or supported in these forums. It is important that issues of cultural safety are considered alongside efforts to expand access and involvement in decision-making and planning forums.

Lack of transfer of relevant cultural values information from agencies to key Aboriginal groups such as LALCs is also identified as an issue, including information from field surveys and maintenance records. Lack of access to this information makes it difficult for Aboriginal groups to prioritise their own efforts, including efforts to protect cultural values that may not have been targeted under other agency programs.

It is noted there are some localised partnerships that already support access to public lands through cultural heritage management and site survey work, or through cultural access and workshops. The Banbai case study reported that the Banbai rangers are increasingly accessing cultural values and spending time on-Country through contract work and field days in National Parks and Wildlife Service-managed parks and reserves. It was also reported that this project has stimulated new opportunities for joint projects and dialogue between the Banbai rangers and relevant agencies for Travelling Stock Reserves and State Forests.

However, these positive examples appeared to rely on specific people and relationships rather than the consistent principles and practices across land management agencies. This is an area that needs significant strengthening through cross-tenure principles of Aboriginal engagement, resourcing and land management to ensure Aboriginal involvement is not dependent on the state of relationships between individual parties (see further discussion in **Section 4.1**).

### **3.4. Some cultural values are at higher risk due to the impact of the fires, while other newly identified values can now be better protected**

There is concern that where tangible cultural values are damaged or lost as a result of the fires, these important cultural sites will be deregistered or devalued. This would also lead to the loss of evidence of the existence of old campsites and preoccupation of Aboriginal people in these areas. There is also an emerging risk that these losses will be amplified by the passing of current Knowledge Holders and Elders, unless the opportunities for their knowledge to be passed on in stories and practices are meaningfully supported and resourced. This further highlights the need for Aboriginal involvement in identifying, managing and protecting cultural practice, knowledge and assets, as discussed previously in **Section 3.3**.

In addition to the tangible cultural values that have already sustained fire damage (see **Section 3.2**), a range of cultural sites and artefacts have been reported as being at higher risk of loss or damage post-fire. For example, as mentioned in **Section 3.2**, the Wiradjuri and Gumbaynggirr case studies found that stone artefacts were brittle as a result of fire damage. Depending on the type of stone, repeated high intensity fire exposure could potentially damage these artefacts through rupture, cracking or fracture, eventually resulting in the artefact becoming unrecognisable over time.

The Wiradjuri case study also identified that many stone artefacts associated with old campsites are found on the river flats and lower slopes and are now at risk of being exposed and washed away due to loss of vegetation in the fires. This case study identified revegetation of an area near Jounama Creek as a priority.

There are also cultural values found in areas that did not burn in the 2019-20 wildfires that remain subject to high fire risk. The Gumbaynggirr case study identified several areas that may have heightened fire risks as cultural fire practices are not being maintained, leading to a build-up of ground fuel debris. For instance, there are longer-term concerns about lack of fire management around Pidgeon Gully:

*‘without a regular protective buffer (via cultural burn) being created around rainforest areas, the rainforest is at risk to being burnt due to built-up dry leaf litter and fuels in surrounding Dry-Eucalypt forest (acting as fire starters if not maintained). Once the fuelled-up dry eucalypt forest catches alight in the hotter months, fire starts to move rapidly along the drier ridgelines and develop a pace and intensity strong enough to penetrate the rainforest outer boundaries and burn a patch of forest that historically has never been and should not be burnt.’*

Further, the same case study indicated that there was no designated fire mitigation crew focused on cultural assets in the area at time of wildfires, and that the National Parks and Wildlife Service Aboriginal Mitigation Crew is based in Bowraville, with no Aboriginal crews based in North Gumbaynggirr Country.

The other case studies also highlighted the importance and benefits of reinstating cultural fire practices – for example, from the Banbai case study:

*‘It’s up to us, as rangers, to take on this cultural role as fire practitioners. It’s our job to prevent damage from bushfires happening again’.*

It is noted that with respect to the above quote about preventing future bushfire damage, it is important to recognise that Aboriginal peoples' cultural obligations and expectations around caring for Country may be difficult to meet given the existing institutional and access barriers discussed throughout this report. This may lead to impacts on the health and wellbeing of the people involved.

There are also ongoing risks to cultural values resulting from a lack of knowledge and awareness, as described in the Banbai case study:

*'Lack of information and management increases the vulnerability of cultural sites to damage caused by threats such as inappropriate fire, grazing, vegetation clearing, erosion, firewood collection, deliberate damage and neglect.'*

These ongoing risks apply across tenures where knowledge of and access to cultural values remains low (see **Section 3.3**). There is also an emerging risk that the existing lack of knowledge will be exacerbated by loss of current Knowledge Holders and Elders unless there are opportunities for their knowledge to be passed on.

On the other hand, **Section 3.2** has already highlighted how the fires and subsequent cast study site visits may have, in some cases, increased access to previously inaccessible sites and allowed for the discovery and registration of new values, including scar trees, artefact scatters and cultural resource sites. For the newly identified cultural value sites, the risks to these values may decrease if they are able to be accessed, monitored and protected, providing this is properly resourced and Aboriginal-led.

In other areas, the 2019-20 wildfires may have temporarily reduced fuel loads and weeds around cultural sites, noting that fire, pest and weed risks are likely to return during the recovery phase. For example, the Gumbaynggirr case study reported:

*'Fuel Loads have reduced significantly since the wildfire affected Pidgeon Gully – therefore the threat of fire is currently low. Lantana has been suppressed very well – there is a risk of reinvasion if action is not taken soon to treat the weeds before they take hold.'*

Importantly, there are also opportunities to renew and enhance cultural values in the recovery phase following the fires, particularly through greater involvement of Aboriginal people in identifying, monitoring and protecting cultural values (see **Sections 4.2** and **4.3**). This can include community events and practices such as establishing new scar trees and markers, actively protecting key species, undertaking cultural burning, and sharing bushfoods and cultivation practices. As expressed in the Wiradjuri case study:

*'being able to contribute and be involved in looking after Country, and actively rehabilitating after the extreme wildfires, would be very positive to local people. Exclusion at a time like this would probably be very dangerous to the mental health of Traditional owners and custodians.'*

Greater Aboriginal involvement during fire planning, response and recovery may help address or mitigate some of the potential for trauma and mental health impacts that Aboriginal people may experience as a result of the bushfires or recovery process, as identified in **Section 3.2**.

### **3.5 The case studies led to a range of positive outcomes and insights for future projects**

In addition to assessing the condition of Aboriginal cultural values pre- and post-fire, there were a range of additional insights, outcomes and benefits arising from the process of developing these case studies. It is hoped that the lessons learned can be used in future projects, including opportunities for adapting and scaling up these case study approaches to deliver similar benefits and outcomes elsewhere.

#### **3.5.1 Benefits of Aboriginal-led design and culturally appropriate processes and foundations**

Firstly, these case studies highlighted the importance and benefits of local Aboriginal-led design and culturally appropriate processes and foundations in land and fire management.

Aboriginal communities are diverse and complex, with each community having specific values and cultural knowledge. In addition, there are varying needs or capacity in relation to communication delivery, resourcing, support and expectations. These needs are influenced by factors including location, levels of literacy, age, language, cultural considerations, and access to tech and resources. Each Aboriginal group also has a unique understanding of cultural values, and different preferred approaches for delivering the case study outcomes.

As mentioned in **Section 2.4**, taking a flexible approach has allowed each case study to meet each group's individual needs, interests and capability. It is clear that each group approached the case study from a different angle, building on support through their existing local partnerships (see **Table 1**).

The case studies were also planned and developed with a culturally-sensitive foundation – the case study agreements were negotiated with each group, and the principles and ethics discussed with the local working groups. Cultural safety principles in land and fire management are lacking and, at best, inconsistent – this is an area that needs significant commitment and resourcing to improve in order to genuinely engage in Aboriginal-led design (see **Section 4.1** and **4.3**). The Gumbaynggirr case study had a strong focus on cultural safety, including the use of a cultural induction process led by the Senior Sites Officer or Elder to identify any potential issues, cultural protocols or known stories prior to accessing any cultural site. The Banbai case study also flagged this as an important area for future improvement:

*'Cultural safety is poorly understood, implemented and monitored. It is possible to add a category for cultural safety to existing or future monitoring programs, for example: Are cultural safety procedures being implemented and followed, e.g., is cultural safety increasing over time? If a cultural value is mapped, what are the issues associated with it? How will any activities impact this value? For example, during bushfires some landmarks or indicators for Country were destroyed – so how do Aboriginal people teach their children without these important values?'*

#### **3.5.2 Building relationships, expanding access to cultural values and sites and sharing knowledge**

Improving relationships between Aboriginal stakeholders, agency representatives and private landholders was a key benefit of these case studies.

Through the case studies, Aboriginal stakeholders were able to develop local relationships with agency staff through the local Aboriginal-led working groups, community workshops and discussions. In some instances, this helped build relationships where there previously were none, and provided confidence to both agency staff and Aboriginal stakeholders to know who to talk to and how. This project has stimulated discussion of various opportunities for case study communities to engage with agencies to identify, access and manage cultural values. Aboriginal communities are ready to harness this momentum to ensure that these opportunities come to fruition, and continue to grow. Looking to the future, work is needed to build the agreements and processes for long-term relationships – not just around specific and typically short-term funding or projects.

The Banbai case study also reported that this project has allowed the Banbai rangers to form new, positive relationships with private landholders and build trust:

*'A notable breakthrough was improving relationships with private landholders and accessing cultural sites that were previously off limits.*

*'At the moment we're in a partnership with NRC: it's opened up a new way of communicating with property owners – a different way.'*

The partnerships initiated through this work were helpful in facilitating access to sites across a range of tenures, via both agencies and private landholders.

Another highlight of the project was viewing Country through the lens of a cultural landscape, and sharing knowledge from various perspectives including those of the Traditional Owners, cultural heritage specialists, cultural scientists, archaeologists, ecologists and public servants. The Banbai case study reported:

*'This project provided numerous opportunities for participants to learn from each other, build a community of practice, access mentoring and learn from Country. Most participants gained a greater understanding from attending the workshops and indicated an enthusiasm to continue this learning. It is recommended that the on Country learning with key stakeholders continue into the future. If possible, sharing findings with other groups involved in similar case studies could provide insight and assistance.'*

Work on the case studies helped to build a more nuanced understanding and approach to engagement and communication with Aboriginal communities and highlighted the importance of building local relationships.

### **3.5.3 Opportunities to work on-Country and build local capacity**

The case studies had the benefit of providing direct resourcing for Aboriginal-led training and management, negotiation of agreements with Government agencies, and a genuine ability to design and lead projects on Country. The project also provided access to data, mapping and systems, provided resources to support delivery and on-Country work. This aligns with Priority Reform Five under the NSW Government's *Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap*, which seeks to empower Aboriginal people in NSW to access education, training and employment opportunities that align with their aspirations, and help Aboriginal businesses grow and flourish.<sup>4</sup>

This project provided numerous opportunities for participants to learn from each other, build a community of practice, access mentoring and learn from Country. Most participants gained a greater understanding from attending the workshops and indicated an enthusiasm to continue this learning.

These case studies also highlighted the opportunities offered by Aboriginal-owned and managed tenures, specifically the two IPAs. These areas benefit from resourcing for Ranger groups, the ability to lead planning and management, provide local training for youth, and access to and sharing of knowledge from Elders and knowledge holders.

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<sup>4</sup> NSW Government (2020) *NSW Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap 2021-2022*, NSW Government and the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations

## 4. Areas for improvement

### 4.1. Increasing Aboriginal leadership and involvement in land management

#### 4.1.1 Increasing Aboriginal land ownership, management roles and resourcing across public lands

The case studies have emphasised the need for greater Aboriginal involvement in public land management to ensure cultural values are identified and protected. For example, from the Wiradjuri case study:

*'We expect recognition, especially a right to be consulted meaningfully about decisions by state agencies that affect our Country and our well-being as the traditional owners and custodians.'*

*'For authentic information to be delivered into the decision-making parts of the agencies there will need to be an increase in Aboriginal-identified positions with a required cultural connection to Country and trusted senior people with a cultural connection to Country ... for the state agencies that are managing forests (FCNSW and NPWS) on Wiradjuri/Wolgalu (and especially BTLALC) Country, to directly employ, in responsible positions, Indigenous people with deep connections to Country and considerable knowledge about traditional management practices. This must be much more than a gesture of one or two junior people.'*

The Banbai and Gumbaynggirr case studies also called for increased involvement in land management, including through Aboriginal land ownership or co-management arrangements:

*'working towards co-management of protected areas on Banbai Country is an aspiration for the Banbai people.'*

*'Banbai rangers expressed a strong desire to work across various land tenures and form partnerships with an array of land managers ... It'd help if we had other partnerships with National Parks and Forestry and Local Land Services that get out here and get programs happening out on Country with kids and community members.'*

*'More Gumbaynggirr or Indigenous Rangers and Fire Practitioners on Country.'*

Aboriginal people expect to be involved in making management decisions that affect their Country and well-being. All case studies identified that the plans, policies and documents developed by government agencies which relate to the involvement of Aboriginal people, values and knowledge in management and decision-making are inadequate and outdated. The case studies also highlighted the benefits of Aboriginal land management through IPAs.

Government organisations must acknowledge and facilitate Aboriginal peoples' rights to Country and roles in managing Country. Agencies should actively seek to partner with and enable Aboriginal people to make decisions about their Country. This should involve embedding the right to participate in policies and processes and providing resources so that Aboriginal people can exercise those rights in the longer-term, in culturally safe ways. It should also involve expanding the scope for Aboriginal ownership or management of public lands. Notably, the NSW Government has recently announced<sup>5</sup> it is exploring a new model for Aboriginal joint

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<sup>5</sup> NSW Government (2022), [Media Release: Aboriginal joint management of national parks to expand](#), released by NSW Minister for Environment and Heritage on 3 July 2022



management of NSW national parks, with increased transfers of national park title to Aboriginal owners over time.

Strategies to improve Aboriginal involvement in public land management include:

- as a priority, resourcing more Aboriginal owned and managed areas, in conjunction with increasing in co-management and shared decision-making arrangements between Aboriginal people and public land managers
- resourcing more local, ongoing Aboriginal staff roles in public land management agencies at all levels (with appropriate training and support), including support for more Aboriginal rangers and Aboriginal Ranger Teams working on-Country
- enabling Ranger teams and cultural site officers to access public lands through proactive and formalised working relationships, Memorandums of Understanding or other co-designed agreements
- establishing business start-up programs and support tailored towards Aboriginal Land Management businesses
- developing culturally-informed protocols for public land management agencies to ensure there is a consistent and effective focus on cultural safety
- identifying opportunities for Aboriginal custodians to lead policy development in a culturally appropriate way, and derived from a cultural framework, as has been demonstrated in IPAs
- identifying opportunities for Aboriginal people to lead and be involved in cultural surveys on public land, including in data collection, monitoring and management
- providing a range of training options in land management in regional areas, so that local Aboriginal people become aware of and have access to career opportunities working on-Country
- strategic engagement activities to increase awareness and attract resources and programs to support the management of cultural values, for example engagement with local Rural Fire Service Bush Fire Management Committees, National Parks and Wildlife Service Regional Committees, Forestry Corporation of NSW Regional Operations Meetings, Local Land Services Boards and local Landcare groups
- developing enduring principles and processes for maintaining knowledge and relationships between Aboriginal people and public land managers to address recurring issues of staff turnover, short-term funding and policy change, while also considering cultural intellectual property provisions and arrangements to protect the environmental data of Aboriginal people and communities
- co-designing metrics, indicators and maps to demonstrate, evaluate and report on the success of Aboriginal land ownership, management and partnership initiatives
- integrating culturally innovative practices to improve land and resource use methodologies and operations (such as broadscale adoption of mosaic timber harvesting methods as a common practice to reduce impact to ecology and cultural heritage and maintain fauna passages).

The above improvements align with the Priority Reform One of the NSW *Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap* relating to formal partnerships and shared decision making.<sup>6</sup> It also helps deliver other desired outcomes under this plan, including ensuring Government institutions and agencies are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people (Priority Reform Three), and increasing jobs and pathways to employment (Priority Reform Five).

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<sup>6</sup> NSW Government (2020) *NSW Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap 2021-2022*, NSW Government and the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations

#### 4.1.2 Providing opportunities to improve relationships with private land managers

Private land is commonly viewed as prohibiting access to cultural values and has a historical context of conflict and dispossession. However, but the case studies demonstrate the significant opportunities private lands present for both accessing and protecting cultural values. Regarding partnerships with private landholders, the Banbai case study suggests:

*'Initially, it is a good idea to 'make a start', build relationships and goodwill with landholders, and gradually work towards looking after cultural values on private land. ...*

*Support from government organisations could facilitate this process. For example, LLS could identify the name of a landholder and contact them, explain the regulations related to cultural heritage and answer their questions, try to win over the farmer and build relationships, and provide a fact sheet on cultural values on private land. ...*

*Relationships between Banbai people and landholders could also be initiated through other projects (such as bushfire recovery projects which focus on natural values) and then expanded into cultural values projects.'*

Strategies to help improve relationships with private landholders include:

- support for projects aimed at building awareness and relationships between Aboriginal people and private landholders to better manage cultural values on private property, including growing a positive public profile for relevant Aboriginal groups and land managers
- development of 'whole of country' plans as a means of engaging and communicating with the community and encouraging participation and investment in the management of cultural values (see **Section 4.4**).

#### 4.2. Improving cultural value identification, management, access and monitoring

There is a need to improve cultural value identification, management, access and monitoring, as explained in the Banbai case study:

*'Whole reserves need to be walked and surveyed, cultural heritage assessments undertaken and cultural values management plans developed. Aboriginal cultural heritage values should be as well understood and managed as natural values.'*

There is an opportunity to build on and continue the on-Country learning processes between key stakeholders initiated during these case studies. There is also a need for Aboriginal people to be able to better access areas of significant cultural value to maintain and protect them. Access, including for cultural practices and eco cultural tourism, not only allows for better protection of cultural values, but also helps maintain or improve cultural obligations and cultural continuance. It opens a pathway for education and training for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (where appropriate) to learn about the local Aboriginal communities and Country in which they live or visit.

The case studies also demonstrated the importance of the collation of electronic resources such as spatial data and electronic documents, as well as hard copy resources such as books and reports. Aboriginal communities, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and other Aboriginal groups require support and improved facilities to manage, store and organise electronic and physical resources related to cultural values (such as important archaeological, anthropological and cultural evidence), in ways that support these values and have meaning for their Country.

Opportunities for improving cultural values identification, monitoring and management include:

- projects focused on the identification of cultural values, sites protection, management and monitoring on areas that currently have limited records of cultural values, such as Travelling Stock Routes and private lands
- projects to establish cultural landscape, context and stories for existing and newly identified cultural values sites
- projects to create and develop opportunities for cultural activation and cultural recreation use at priority listed sites as a form of cultural enhancement and protection
- increased identification and use of ongoing cultural asset protection measures at identified cultural value sites under relevant plans of management (e.g. cleaning sites from debris build up, treating problematic weeds, carrying out stability works)
- projects to explore use of new technology such as drones, photography and oral recordings to support identification, recording and monitoring of cultural values
- commitment to improving existing data and spatial tools, particularly AHIMS, through direct measures including:
  - more accessible and useable mapping outputs
  - improved capacity to share and overlay related spatial data (such as tenure, biodiversity, fire impact)
  - ability to capture and prioritise areas for surveys and management activities
- ability to incorporate other data (such as cultural context, stories, new technology, audio and visual outputs)
- commitment to improving existing data and spatial tools through supporting measures including:
  - provisions for regular Aboriginal-led monitoring and management of data
  - culturally safe data standards and co-designed agreements on use
  - training to help Aboriginal people better use and interpret spatial data resources
- resourcing to improve facilities to store and organise electronic and physical resources related to cultural values, including spatial data, electronic documents, and hard copy resources such as books and reports
- establishing Aboriginal-owned repositories for storing and managing access to cultural value information, giving Aboriginal people greater ability to access and monitor cultural values information – for example, using the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' Indigenous Research Exchange model

establishment of cultural centres in or near forests, as a focal point for Aboriginal knowledge about the forests, landscape and biodiversity, and to increase public awareness of this knowledge.

### **4.3. Improving fire risk management and post-fire recovery processes and outcomes**

The case studies highlighted a need to significantly improve fire risk management and post-fire recovery processes and outcomes for Aboriginal peoples. For example, the Gumbaynggirr case study called for 'much more cultural burning' and the preparation of 'an all of Gumbaynggirr Country Fire Regime' where critical areas are prioritised for burning including cultural sites buffer zones, ridge lines and peaks.

As mentioned throughout **Section 3**, there are also opportunities to renew and enhance cultural values in the recovery phase following the fires through greater involvement of Aboriginal people in identifying, monitoring and protecting cultural values. The Gumbaynggirr case study also identified priority areas where at-risk values may need active interventions to ensure these values are maintained.

Strategies to help achieve improved fire risk management and post-fire outcomes for Aboriginal peoples include:

- establishing shared cross-tenure, culturally appropriate principles for fire planning, management, recovery and monitoring
- ensuring existing provisions for Aboriginal representation on Bushfire Management Committees and associated functions are implemented and reported on
- funding routine Aboriginal-led post-fire site inspections on public and private land (where possible) to assess fire impacts on cultural values, and identify cultural values that were previously concealed or inaccessible prior to the fire event
- identification of at-risk cultural values and prioritisation of interventions to protect these values as an integrated part of risk management plans (such as revegetation of riparian areas with exposed artefact scatters, root stabilisation for damaged scar trees or maintenance of stone arrangements)
- support for ongoing practices of cultural forest management, including cultural burning, that are critical to mitigating fire risk and impacts
- explore options for simplified pathways for cultural burn approvals and implementation (such as providing exemptions from Hazard Reduction Burn Certificates, or minimum response times for assessing and issuing Hazard Reduction Burn Certificates for cultural fire management activities)
- establishing dedicated and integrated Fire Mitigation Teams with a focus priority on preserving and protecting cultural assets, and/or ensuring the presence of a Cultural Heritage Officer/Traditional Knowledge Holder at bushfire events

identifying opportunities to renew known or discovered values, for example rescarring trees to replace lost or damaged scar trees, exploring new native food sources, revegetating damaged habitat.

#### **4.4. Development of ‘whole of Country’ plans**

One way to bring together and support the recommendations of this report holistically is through a focus on ‘whole of Country’ approaches. Sufficient support and long-term resources should be provided to Aboriginal stakeholders to develop holistic whole of Country plans that articulate their aspirations to manage their cultural values and determine how they do business with partners, in a tenure-blind manner. As part of this process, communities could partner with others to view Country through the lens of a cultural landscape, capturing the varying perspectives of knowledge holders, community, experts and others.

Whole of Country planning has well-established processes and outputs, and effective examples are available to draw on particularly in other states and territories. The plans themselves can document a range of information, as noted in the Banbai Rangers case study, including:

- tenure-blind mapping, including mapping of cultural values where appropriate
- relationship mapping with agencies and landholders across various land tenures
- desired outcomes across tenures, and opportunities to manage cultural values
- options for forming partnerships and working with partner organisations
- funding, investment or partnership opportunities and priorities
- programs to monitor cultural values and safety from a local perspective.

These plans would help Aboriginal groups to proactively share their aspirations and desired outcomes with other land managers and highlight partnership and investment opportunities across the region. As described in the Banbai case study:

*‘This overarching document would inform and direct the way in which Banbai people have a voice, interact with partners, and share their values and knowledge across their Country.’*

These plans could begin with cultural value mapping on public and Aboriginal-managed lands and expand over time as cultural values mapping is undertaken on a wider range of tenures.

## **5. Conclusion**

These case studies demonstrated the importance and effectiveness of local, Aboriginal-led approaches in delivering a range of beneficial outcomes. This project stimulated new initiatives, employment and facilitated stronger partnerships. It provided opportunities to learn from specialists and enabled on-Country discussions across various land tenures to assist Aboriginal peoples to increase their opportunities to manage cultural values throughout their Country. The case studies have developed relationships and opportunities to a critical point, with all participants expressing a desire to keep working together to build on the progress made during this project.

However, the case studies also identified serious limitations in terms of how Aboriginal people are involved in land management and decision making, and how cultural values are understood and protected. As a result, the recommendations of this report put forward critical, wholesale reforms required for genuine and effective Aboriginal-led forest monitoring and management, as well as options for land management agencies to build on ready opportunities developed in these case studies.

The recommended actions will support Aboriginal cultural values and help Aboriginal people to play a leading role in NSW forest management and decision making, drawing on tens of thousands of years of practical experience in caring for Country.

## **6. Appendices**

BTLALC case study report

Tamworth LALC case study report

CHDLALC case study report