

# 6 DBCA PRESCRIBED BURNING HAS NO SIMILARITY TO INDIGENOUS BURNING



## FACTS ABOUT PRESCRIBED BURNING AND WILDFIRE IN SOUTH-WEST FORESTS

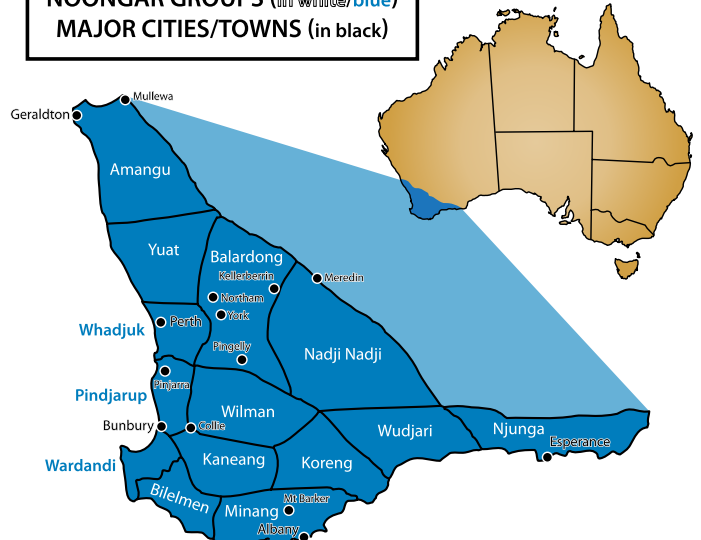
Contemporary fire management in the south-west forests, with its dependence upon broad-scale prescribed burns, contrasts starkly with the approach of the Noongar people, south-western Australia's First Nations peoples.

The Noongar people have lived in the south-west corner of Western Australia for at least 45 000 years. That their burning regimes were strictly controlled is demonstrated in the early colonial literature of Barker (1830) and Nind (1831). Firing regimes were ecosystem- and ownership-specific, with most burning related to procurement of animal resources (hunting). Burning activities were rare in old climatically-buffered infertile landscapes, such as the south-west eucalypt forests<sup>1</sup>. The Noongar people did not burn:

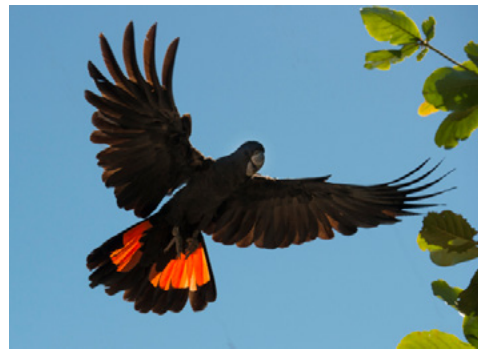
- Red tingle forest<sup>2</sup>
- Karri forest<sup>3</sup>
- Granite outcrops
- Peat wetlands
- Other sensitive environments.

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attraction's (DBCA's) prescribed burns are indiscriminate. They are mostly ignited by dropping incendiaries from aircraft and not controlled at ground level, so once lit, they burn any ecosystem in their path, including peat wetlands, riparian zones and sensitive granite outcrops. For a comparison between Noongar and DBCA burning see the next page.

**NOONGAR GROUPS (in white/blue)**  
**MAJOR CITIES/TOWNS (in black)**

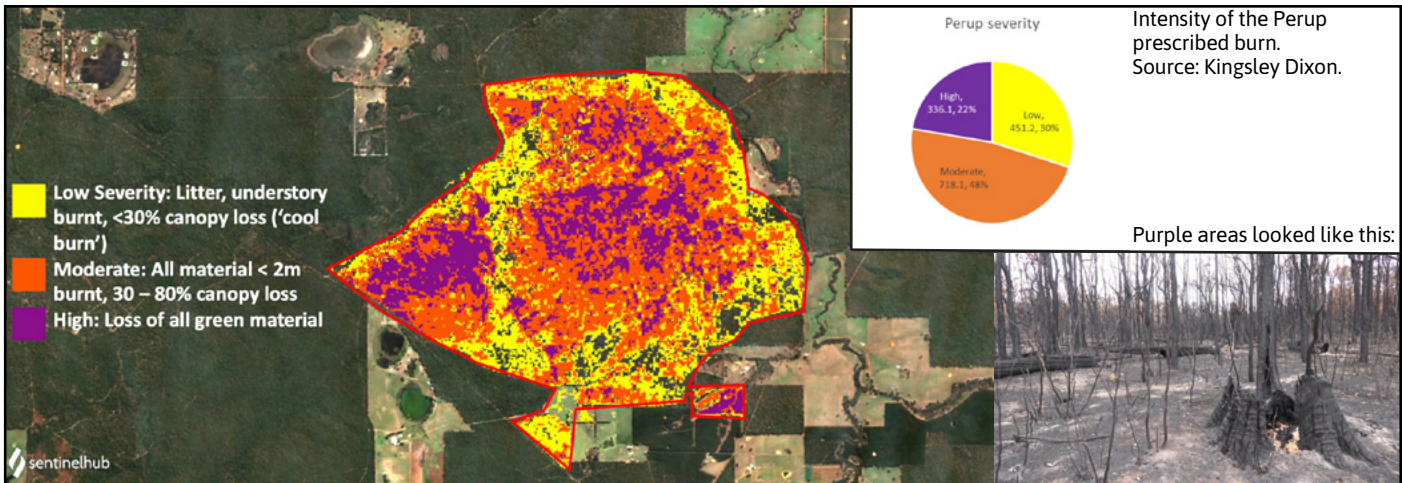


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Red-tailed black cockatoo.  
Source: John Carnemolla.

Prescribed burns cause old trees with nesting hollows used by threatened red-tailed, Baudin's and Carnaby's black cockatoos to burn out at the base and collapse.



Noongar burning	DBCA prescribed burning
Burning was highly localised and for very specific reasons, e.g., to improve hunting or foraging <sup>1</sup> .	DBCA has a blanket target of burning 200 000 ha per year over the forest management area.
Noongar burning regimes were strictly controlled: Nind (1831) <sup>1</sup> commented: “all of them (the Noongar people) have a right to break down grass trees, kill bandicoots, lizards, and other animals, and dig up roots; but presence of the owner of the ground is considered necessary when they fire the country for game.”	DBCA does not consult in good faith or address serious public concerns. Most of the areas burnt each year are not targeted to protect human infrastructure and assets as they are tens of kilometres away from infrastructure.
The Noongar people lived on Country of which they had intimate knowledge and they could burn when the weather conditions were exactly what they needed to produce the desired results. With their ongoing connection to country Noongar people should be involved in fire management decisions.	DBCA staff do not have Noongar awareness of country or weather. With the detailed preparation of people and gear needed immediately before a burn and the urge to meet its annual target, DBCA is under pressure to go ahead with burns at unsuitable times and in unsuitable conditions.
<p>Ignition was at a limited number of locations on the ground - ‘firestick burning’. The Noongar people did their burns bare-footed.</p> <p>Indigenous burning in the Great Western Woodlands. Source<sup>2</sup>: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/aec.12377">https://doi.org/10.1111/aec.12377</a></p> 	<p>Incendiaries are dropped from aircraft, so that the burn area is quickly ignited in a blanket grid of ignition points. Animals are unable to escape such an unnatural pattern of fire.</p> <p>Flight path for a 2022 prescribed burn in the Walpole Wilderness area. Source: Flight Radar 24.</p> 
The Noongar people never burnt in spring. Most burns were done in autumn.	DBCA burns in any season when conditions are suitable. Most prescribed burning has been conducted in spring, the worst possible time for nesting birds <sup>4</sup> and flowering plants.
Noongar burns are controlled at ground-level to achieve a desired outcome, so are generally ‘cool’ burns.	The (road) perimeter of a prescribed burn area is first ignited by hand, to form a fire-break to contain the main aerial burn. After the incendiaries are dropped, the conditions and weather changes during the day dictate the resulting fire intensity.
The Noongar people did not burn sensitive old ecosystems <sup>1</sup> . They did not burn red tingle forest (Wadandi Pibulmun Yunungjarlu Elder Wayne Webb) <sup>2</sup> or karri forest <sup>3</sup> .	Deliberately or accidentally, DBCA routinely burns sensitive ecosystems including riparian zones, peat wetlands and granite outcrops.
The Noongar people did not burn at a frequency that would endanger ecosystems.	DBCA’s frequent prescribed burns have a disastrous effect on many species of flora and fauna and their habitat structure <sup>6</sup> .

#### References

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