

# Cultural burning at Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa National Park



Images: Parks Australia

## **Aṅangu and fire management**

Aṅangu, the traditional owners of Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa National Park, have lived on and managed this country for more than 30,000 years.

Aṅangu use fire for many different purposes. It is a way of looking after country.

Cool winter fires are lit to manage the grass by reducing the chance of big summer fires that may burn out of control. It is also used to rejuvenate patches of old growth country, encourage fresh growth which would supply food for Aṅangu and wildlife, and to protect areas of cultural significance, living areas, and areas with vegetation that don't like fire.

## **Tjukurpa**

Tjukurpa (pronounced 'chook-orr-pa') is the foundation of Aṅangu culture. Tjukurpa stories talk about the beginning of time when ancestral beings first created the world. These stories contain important lessons about the land

and how to survive in the desert, as well as rules for appropriate behaviour. Knowledge gained about traditional fire management is contained in Tjukurpa, taught through generations from grandparents, and passed down, and is learnt by being out on country.

## **Caring for country**

Burning parts of the country, both large and small, is the most effective way of controlling the spinifex grasslands of central Australia.

By using patch burning as a land management tool, Aṅangu create a mixture of habitat that provides food and shelter for the animals.

Controlled burns also reduce the chance of wildfires burning out of control during the hot months.

The key to using fire as a land management method is to know the country and burn at the right time of year. A cool fire on a winter's day will burn slowly through the grass and be extinguished in the evening when the temperatures drop.

## **Working Together**

The traditional lands of Aṅangu cover a huge area that stretches beyond Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa National Park. As fires can travel a long distance, it's important that everyone works together to manage and protect Aṅangu country.

To do this, a big meeting is held each year with traditional owners, ranger groups and land managers from the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. This is known as the Tri-State Waṛu (fire) Meeting.

Aṅangu and Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa National Park staff attend the Tri-State Waṛu meeting with representatives from the Kaṯiti-Petermann Indigenous Protected Area, Muṯitjulu Community Rangers, Tjakuṛa Rangers, Kaltukatjara rangers and the Central Land Council.

During this meeting, the groups plan winter burns to create healthy country and reduce the risk of summer wildfires.

Before any prescribed burn, a look around is conducted, which is called nyanganyi. During a nyanganyi, Anangu and park rangers travel to burn sites and look around the country. Traditional owners look for many things including sacred or sensitive areas, important trees and endangered animal tracks to help plan and protect these areas.

A nyanganyi is a chance to get back onto country and for inter-generational knowledge transfer. Anangu children and grandchildren are encouraged to join in so they can learn from the elders. This knowledge transfer is very important and prepares the next generation of Anangu to

run the fire program that keeps Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park healthy and keeps culture strong.

### Nyarū (recently burnt areas)

Burning country is also used for traditional hunting. Pila (spinifex plains) and tali (sand dunes) become nyarū after they are burnt. Many animals like recently burnt areas because food plants are plentiful, such as kampurarpa (desert raisin), edible seed, grasses, and succulents. Animals such as kaḷaya (emu), maḷu (red kangaroo), and other kuka (animal meat) prefer these areas for foraging, while others such as tjangtjalka (military dragon) move away until the spinifex cover comes back.

When it rains, nyarū produces many seeds like wangunū (naked woollybutt), wakati (pigweed) and kalpaṛi (rats tailed grass). Anangu grind these seeds to make latja (paste) or nyuma (seed cakes). It is also a good place to look for kampurarpa (desert raisin).

### Other uses for fire

Over thousands of years, fire has also been used for signalling from one group to another. If one family was wanting to travel across another family's homelands, they would start small fires as they were approaching the borders of the homelands, so that the other family would be able to see that they were approaching. Fire is still used today for signalling.



## Anangu and fire

### When does patch burning take place at Uluru?

This typically takes place between April and August each year.

### Who is responsible for cultural burning?

Anangu traditional owners, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park rangers, Muṛitjulu Community rangers, and Central Land Council ranger groups work together to manage cultural burning.

### Why is patch burning effective at Uluru, and what benefits does it have to other fire management strategies?

Patch burning is the most effective way of controlling the spinifex grasslands of central Australia.

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