

FORUM ARTICLE

## INTRODUCTION TO FIRE-STICK FARMING

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Rhys Jones was not a fire ecologist, and he was the first to admit that. What Rhys Jones did understand was time—deep time. By his death in 2001, Jones had become the pre-eminent Australian archaeologist, with a research portfolio that spanned from Tasmania to New Guinea. Among his many achievements, Jones helped establish the time of human occupation of Australia at 40 000 years.

When Rhys Jones published *Fire-Stick Farming* in 1969, the Australian state operated under the doctrine of *terra nullius*, which established that the continent was uninhabited at the time of European discovery and there for the taking. Aboriginal people had only just gained full recognition as citizens within the constitution in 1967 and were still over twenty years away from having their native title claims recognized and *terra nullius* negated in the High Court's Mabo decision in 1992.

In 1969, ecology itself was seen as *terra nullius*, governed by homeostatic forces driving communities toward climatic equilibrium. The best humans could hope for was to stunt the drive to climax for their own exploitative advantage. Few ecologists (e.g., Odum 1969) considered humans as part of ecology, but then usually from an agronomist standpoint. Hunter-gatherers were just that—at best active hunters of game, but otherwise catch-as-catch-can gatherers of what their environment offered. Fire ecology, such as it existed, was dominated by the discourse of thwarted climaxes—of fire prevention and fire suppression. However, in the heavily settled areas of southern Australia, the failures of this policy were becoming apparent and fire managers had begun experimenting with large-scale burning to reduce fuel loads (Pyne 1991).

*Fire-Stick Farming* began with a question as simple as it was radical: “We imagine that the country seen by the first colonists before they ringbarked their first tree was ‘natural.’ But was it?” Inspired by the extensive fire management he saw practiced by Aboriginal communities across central Arnhem Land, and appreciating the antiquity of Aboriginal occupation, Rhys Jones answered in the negative. This insight, that Aboriginal people managed the landscape through fire to make it more productive and had been doing so for millennia, was revolutionary. The use of the word ‘farming’ was intentional—it simultaneously challenged the notions that Aboriginal people were passive creatures eking out a rude existence in a wide brown land, and that fire was inherently destructive. Indeed, Jones went a step further and suggested that Australian biota had adapted over millennia to a distinctly anthropogenic fire regime and, significantly, that removal of that fire regime following European colonisation was detrimental to plant and animal communities.

Perhaps the fact that Rhys Jones was not an ecologist was all to the good. Unbound by the ecological dogmas of the time, he was able to ask and answer a simple question, and leave it for later scholars to uncover the details. Since the publication of *Fire-Stick Farming*, we have an increased appreciation of the variability and antiquity of fire in Australia. For example, fire was clearly prevalent in Australia well before the arrival of humans and, at least at broad scales, climate remains the principal driver of fire regimes (Mooney *et al.* 2011). Nonetheless, the evidence of widespread, systematic, and careful application of Aboriginal fire across Australia is now in-

controvertible, and Aboriginal people drive major fire management projects across north Australia (Russell-Smith *et al.* 2010).

It is not often that a scientific paper can herald a cultural and scientific revolution, but *Fire-Stick Farming* was the right paper at the right time for Australia. The paper has significance outside of the antipodes, however. Perhaps the biggest lesson of *Fire-Stick Farming* arises from the fact that what Jones wrote about was, ironically, not particularly novel—extensive records and notes on the indigenous use of fire existed since the time of the first explorers (Gammage 2011). *Terra nullius* is a convenient fiction of settler societies worldwide and it is all too easy to ignore the achievements of displaced peoples. Given the ubiquity of fire practice by indigenous cultures worldwide, our task now is not to debate whether indigenous fire has or had an influence on ecosystem patterns and processes, but to begin to explore how, when, and why different peoples practiced fire management over the ages (Coughlan and Petty 2012) in order to better understand the role of anthropogenic fire in ecology.

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