



Traditional Owners from across Victoria have gathered to take stock of Australia's unprecedented bushfire disaster which has caused so much hurt across the state. Together they have delivered this statement:

With 34 people having lost their lives, over 6,500 buildings destroyed and 18 million hectares of Country incinerated, families and communities are hurting.

Not least of all, Aboriginal communities and Traditional Owners.

We have a deep spiritual connection to - and cultural obligation to care for - Country.

When we say Aboriginal people are a part of Country, what we mean is that we belong to the natural landscape rather than it belonging to us. It is our Mother and it nurtures us.

Our ancestors proudly maintained land, water, language and culture for over 60,000 years.

Through many changes to the climate and environment, we have learnt in great detail, the natural processes of Country, it's many seasons and the behaviours of its plants and animals.

But never has it changed as dramatically as it has over the last 200 years and never has it changed with such threatening consequences as we have all experienced in recent weeks and months.

When you smell smoke in the air this bushfire season, it's not just the scent of a looming health hazard for Victoria's young and elderly, but also, you are smelling the destruction of our cultural heritage and the beautiful Country that we belong to and have Cultural Obligations to care for.

So when we look at what has been lost this bushfire season, we despair. We despair, but don't we surrender.

Last week Prime Minister told the National Press Club that "We must learn from the Indigenous Australians and their ancient practices and how to improve our resilience to these threats. They know more about this than we ever could and they stand ready to work closely with us" and on this, he's absolutely right.

Australians are at a major turning point in the way we look at our amazing continent. The way we place ourselves in the landscape, how we care for our Country and how we need to come together to create a safe and prosperous environment for future generations.

Amidst the shock at the devastation, it could be easy to jump to rash conclusions that provide a short-term reprieve. But we Traditional Owners hold a longer-term perspective which must be heard.



Governments need to change their way of thinking about land management. Simple, crude, per-hectare fuel reduction targets have the very real side-effects of stripping the land, rivers and streams of their moisture and the soil of its nutrients, threatening biodiversity, making way for pests and contributing to making future bushfire conditions worse.

Aboriginal Cultural Fire practice is not simply about fuel reduction, although fuel reduction is a key part.

Instead, cultural practices are applied all-year-round, adapting to changing seasons and climates, because its focused on a detailed, on-Country understanding of the diversity of plants and animals present in the landscape and holistically manages and cares for Country on an on-going basis.

To the Premiers' credit, the Victorian Government has been proactive, even long before this fire season, in partnering with Victorian Traditional Owners. The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Parks Victoria and the Country Fire Authority supported Traditional Owners to develop the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy, launched in May 2019. An enabling piece of work, the Strategy communicates our future together managing 'right fire, the right way'.

The strategy lays out in more detail how Traditional Owner knowledge's and systems can be respectfully integrated with contemporary practices across the state to finally see Aboriginal Country Management practices contribute to the health and safety of the whole Victorian community.

It's time to deliver the resources needed to put that strategy into action.

Empowering and resourcing Traditional Owner knowledge systems would help address the effects of climate change on the land, through practices of care and custodianship. But it must not perpetuate well-established systems of exploitation. It must happen in true partnership.

As the state and federal recovery effort continues, we hope governments take the right lessons from this disaster and that Traditional Owners' voices will be heard, because when we empower Traditional Owners, we tap into ancient knowledge systems which can help us create a more harmonious, safe and prosperous future for all Victorians.