

The Importance of Cultural Burning in Indigenous Communities and Their Stories

Veronika Vermes

Kwantlen Polytechnic University,

Bachelor of Arts with Major/Minor in English

Many Indigenous groups and communities in British Columbia, under colonizers' rules, have been denied their cultural practices. Many of these are banned through acts controlled by the government such as the Bush Fire Act of 1874. The use of cultural fires or controlled fires is a process that has been helping the land on which the Indigenous peoples have been settling before colonization interrupted this process by assimilating Indigenous communities into Canada. With this interruption, wildfires have spread more aggressively and more rapidly over the many years that Indigenous peoples have not had the chance to practice their culture. With the impacts that the fires have on communities, understanding the process and meaning behind cultural fire burnings is crucial for the further betterment of the land many people stay on as either settlers or people of the land. Slowly the government is understanding the roles which Indigenous peoples play on the land and in order to protect the land the government must put trust and decision-making towards Indigenous peoples and communities who know what is best. With reference from the government of Canada being involved and bringing media into the question such as CBC news, the impact of knowledge is a lot greater as it now can be seen by more audience members and help bring to light the importance of this Indigenous cultural practice.

In 1874, the government of British Columbia, Canada banned cultural fire burning to help further assimilate onto the Indigenous peoples. This was easily implemented by the government with the Bush Fire Act in 1874. Additional Acts banned Indigenous cultural practices and communication with the land, such as the Indian Act of 1876, further cascading the events at which Indigenous communities were and are forced to assimilate into Canadian rules. With this in mind, cultural burnings were a large part of controlling the Indigenous people just before the Indian Act was implemented.

As more and more wildfires are present and reaching larger hectares in British Columbia during the summer, one might think to listen to the people who know fire and managed it according to cultural practices. Then what are cultural fire burnings? Well, they involve “but are not limited to cultural and language preservation, fuel mitigation, food and medicinal plant

Land in Literature, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023 revitalization, and habitat enhancement.”¹ With careful processes that involve the knowledge of the Elders and/or fire keepers of a particular Indigenous community, the reestablishment of cultural burning can help mitigate and turn back fire cycles that have been altered over many generations of massive buildup of fires above and underground. As years go on, the relationship that Indigenous peoples have to the land is slowly being brought back into the colonized world. An example is “the Owl Creek Cultural Burn,”² which was brought by the Lil’wat Nation and supported by British Columbia’s Wildfire Service in Mount Currie. The reason behind this amazing project was to “introduce fire back to the landscape to try and revitalize the berry population for the benefit of the community and the grizzly bear habitat.”³ Furthering thus the importance that cultural burning has for the land and those residing on it. Fire burning is seen as a scary and disastrous element in the world by many non-Indigenous

¹ *Cultural burning* (2022) *Cultural Burning & Prescribed Fire*. Available at: <https://prescribedfire.ca/cultural-burning/> (Accessed: November 25, 2022).

³ *Cultural burning* (2022) *Cultural Burning & Prescribed Fire*. Available at: <https://prescribedfire.ca/cultural-burning/> (Accessed: November 25, 2022).

² *Cultural burning* (2022) *Cultural Burning & Prescribed Fire*. Available at: <https://prescribedfire.ca/cultural-burning/> (Accessed: November 25, 2022).

people. However, many Indigenous communities have been embracing fire for millennia. With this knowledge and traditional practice, some Indigenous communities have found great positions of power that can have some impact on the decisions made on their lands. Although it is not exactly as it should be, there is some progress which can help the government of Canada see the benefits to the land and thus benefit the Indigenous communities that have practices cultural burnings for a very long time. Research shows the positive effects that Cultural burning or as controlled fire burnings.

Many Indigenous communities with different cultural and connected values around fire, have taken the time to learn about the effects of wildfires and the need to provide them for the environment. Due to the large effect that wildfires cause to the land and the people on it, having the knowledge to control the effects is a large help for

Land in Literature, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023 people who may listen. Kira M. Hoffman, et al., as well as Amy Christianson, et al., discuss the importance of “fire mitigation”⁴ or “fire stewardship,”⁵ for the future of wildfire sustainable living in Canada. There are few active controlled fire groups in Canada at this time due to many obstacles that Indigenous communities must go through in order to carry out their traditions in controlled fire burning. Additionally, “one of the most challenging barriers to engaging in Indigenous fire stewardship is the lack of understanding by wildfire management agencies, decision-makers, and the general public of the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and fire.”⁶ Hoffman mentions that “Indigenous Nations have used fire as a tool for resource management and community protection for millennia,”⁷ but likely due to the issues mentioned above, not a lot of progress occurs.

⁴Hoffman, K.M. *et al.* (2022) “The right to burn: Barriers and opportunities for indigenous-led fire stewardship in Canada,” *FACETS*, 7, pp. 464–481. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0062>.

⁵ Hoffman, K.M. *et al.* (2022) “The right to burn: Barriers and opportunities for indigenous-led fire stewardship in Canada,” *FACETS*, 7, pp. 464–481. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0062>.

⁶ Hoffman, K.M. *et al.* (2022) “The right to burn: Barriers and opportunities for indigenous-led fire stewardship in Canada,” *FACETS*, 7, pp. 464–481. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0062>.

⁷ Hoffman, K.M. *et al.* (2022) “The right to burn: Barriers and opportunities for indigenous-led fire stewardship in Canada,” *FACETS*, 7, pp. 464–481. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0062>.

with the stories give perspective on the importance fires have on the land, the animals, the vegetation, the environment, and the people who live on it. Storytelling too is an important way to increase awareness of the cultural side of what fires bring to communities as a way of life.

Although there is more recent interest by the government in cultural burnings or controlled burnings, boundaries need to be set to help preserve the Indigenous cultures and communities that practice cultural burning and use it to help keep their lands full and safe. The many positive outcomes of controlled burnings are that it “significantly reduces wildfire risk by lessening fuel loads, enhancing pyrodiversity (the frequency, timing, and severity of fire)”⁸ in the long run, in comparison to the current state of wildfires burning in an uncontrolled manner.

Below are two images that help describe the differences. On the left, there are controlled fires showcasing the positive outcomes that they provide such as nutrient rich soils, a layer of carbon storage, and new plants. On the right, the

Within Indigenous communities, the act of fire burning, and the awareness of cultural burning have become increasingly crucial in Indigenous storytelling. The act of storytelling in Indigenous cultures is a way to express oneself and teach others and people within the community about the importance of many parts of one’s culture, it connects people to each other and the land they are on in a way non-Indigenous people would not understand. Storytelling also helps bring importance or attention to important issues concerning Indigenous communities and the people visiting on the land. Some instances that may concern people, as mentioned in the videos, are the floods that have increased in depth and are flooding people's homes, farms, and land. The increased wildfires concern the safety of Indigenous peoples who must seek shelter from such rapidly growing fires and who must fight back those fires as they increase over the years. As the importance of storytelling grows great, so does the need for listeners to be present. The value that the stories provide helps outsiders view the importance of cultural burning in a representative

⁸ Hoffman, K.M. *et al.* (2022) “The right to burn: Barriers and opportunities for indigenous-led fire stewardship in Canada,” *FACETS*, 7, pp.

464–481. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0062>.

image showcases the apparent difference in positive impacts on the environment. There is little to no positive impact as it focuses more on destruction rather than providing a new beginning, no nutrients left and is all evaporated, a large exhaust of CO₂ release.⁹

In building efforts to continue positive controlled fire increase by Indigenous communities it would also provide many opportunities for the Indigenous communities and people involved.

Amy Christianson, et al. provide different examples in their article on fire mitigation with inclusivity to providing jobs, community governance, as well as local agreement and communication with members of the same community. Over time, the impact of the use of fire mitigation or controlled fires will be necessary in the eyes of the peoples not only for cultural reasons but for economic ones as well.

Having the ability to practice one's culture is a right that not many Indigenous peoples may have. The positive outcomes cultural burning has on

Land in Literature, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023 some Indigenous communities is a great advance into furthering Indigenous peoples' lives and their practices. The ability to access one's Indigenous knowledge and bring it forth to the world where there is destruction, the impact at which controlled fire burnings and cultural burnings will have on the Indigenous communities can further the impact that what not practicing one's culture can have. Storytelling of such cultural practices helps people understand the need to continue this practice. Storytelling acts as a connector between the land and the people. The benefits cultural burning has on the land such as the betterment of the soil, atmosphere, plants and animals, and the opportunities for communities to fear less the terrible impacts that wildfires have due to their increased size and burning power. The fear of fire will decrease if let be the Indigenous peoples who know their land and the opportunity to help fix what colonizers broke.

⁹ *How indigenous 'cultural burns' can replenish our forests* / CBC news

(2021) CBCnews. CBC/Radio Canada. Available at:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/what-on-earth-indigenous-fire-forests-1.6194999> (Accessed: November 25, 2022).

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