

## TEACHING NOTES

# Looking after Country with Fire

## Aboriginal Burning Knowledge with Uncle Kuu



Victor Steffensen, Illustrated by Sandra Steffensen

Teaching notes by Torres Webb and Kathryn Meldrum

Recommended for ages 5+, year levels F–4

## SYNOPSIS

*Looking After Country with Fire* is a picture book for 5- to 10-year-olds that demonstrates respect for Indigenous knowledge, following the success of Victor Steffensen's bestselling adult book *Fire Country*.

Mother Nature has a language. If we listen, and read the signs in the land, we can understand it.

For thousands of years, First Nations people have listened and responded to the land and made friends with fire, using this knowledge to encourage plants and seeds to flourish, and creating beautiful places for both animals and people to live.

Join Uncle Kuu as he takes us out on Country and explains cultural burning. Featuring stunning artwork by Sandra Steffensen, this is a powerful and timely story of understanding Australia's ecosystems through Indigenous fire management, and a respectful way forward for future generations to help manage our landscapes.

At the back of the book, you will also find lyrics to a song written by author Victor Steffensen with the same title, 'Looking After Country with Fire'.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victor Steffensen is an Indigenous writer, filmmaker, musician and consultant. He is a descendant of the Tagalaka people through his mother's connections from the Gulf Country of north Queensland. Much of Victor's work over the past 27 years has been based on the arts and reviving traditional knowledge values – particularly traditional burning – through mentoring and leadership, as well as on-ground training with Aboriginal communities and many non-Indigenous Australians. He is a co-founder of Firesticks, an Indigenous-led organisation that aims to re-invigorate the use of cultural burning. Victor's first book, *Fire Country*, was published in 2020 in the wake of Australia's worst bushfires and has sold over 13,000 copies since its release.



## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Sandra Steffensen grew up in the small, tropical rainforest village of Kuranda. After then moving to Sydney and living there for 15 years, Sandra moved back to Far North Queensland 13 years ago, lured by her childhood memories and connections to the local landscape. Sandra's maternal grandmother is from the Tagalaka people from the Gulf Country of north Queensland. She teaches Visual Arts specialising in the practice of ceramics. Sandra uses the sgraffito technique to adorn her functional pieces with intricate illustrations of the local landscapes and the wildlife inhabiting them to remind us of the beauty and the role they play in this world.

## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

**Learning areas:** English; Science; Humanities and Social Sciences (Geography); The Arts

**General capabilities:** Literacy; Personal and Social Capability; Ethical Understanding; Critical and Creative Thinking; Intercultural Understanding

## THEMES

### Theme 1: Rationale for managing Country with fire

- Looking after Country as a land management approach (pp. 3–4, 11)
- Impacts of not managing Country appropriately (pp. 15–18)

### Theme 2: Principles for managing Country with fire

- Country has to be burned at the right time (pp. 5–8) when foliage is ready to be burned. It has to be lit in the right place.
- Fire has to be cool, slow and low.

### Theme 3: Benefits for managing Country with fire

- Maintains cultural connections with Country (pp. 4, 11, 13)
- Regenerates Country (p. 12)
- Prevents wild fire that is destructive (pp. 15–18)

## COMPREHENSION

### Before reading

- Looking at the title and cover illustration, what do you think this book is about?
- Has anyone heard about managing Country with fire or been on Country to watch Aboriginal peoples do it?
- What do you know about fire? Are there good fires and bad fires?
- How do you think people might use fire for good?

### After reading

#### All levels:

- Uncle Kuu tells us about how fire helps Country. What does Uncle Kuu say about being safe with fire? What must we always do?

#### Levels F-1

- How many different animals can you find in the book?



- How do you know when the grass is ready to burn?
- How does fire help Country and the animals that live on it?

**Levels 2–4**

- What are the principles of Aboriginal burning practices?
- What are the benefits of fire for Country?
- Why are Aboriginal fire practices better for Country?

**WRITING ACTIVITIES**

- Ask students to write down any new vocabulary learnt from the book; for example, regerminate (p. 5).  
Ask: *What does the word mean? Can you put the word in a sentence?*
- Ask students to write a story about a time that they went to the bush.
- Ask students to imagine that they are one of the animals illustrated in the book. Have them write about the benefits of fire from the animal's perspective.
- Write a letter from Country to the people of Australia highlighting the important reasons for using Aboriginal fire management practices.
- Students write a review about *Looking after Country with Fire*, or record a podcast recounting the story. This might also work as an oral presentation to the class supported by an illustrated poster.
- Ask students to create an infographic about the importance, approach and benefits of managing Country with fire.

**CREATIVE ACTIVITIES**

- **Create an animated video:** Ask students to create an animated video about the importance, approach and benefits of managing Country with fire.
- **Create a poster or painting:** Ask students to create a poster or painting that portrays Happy Country (when Country is managed using Aboriginal fire practices) and Sad Country (when Country is ravaged by wild fire). Different media could be used for the poster or painting.
- **Create a safety poster:** Fire can be dangerous if not managed by someone who knows what they are doing. Create a poster that focuses on fire safety.
- **Non-fiction report:** As a class, discuss why fire is important to some Australian ecosystems. Ask students to think about and research Australian ecosystems and/or species within those ecosystems that benefit from fire. Consider answering these questions in a report:
  - Which ecosystems and/or species benefit from fire?
  - What does fire do to help the ecosystems and/or species?
  - What happens to the ecosystems and/or species if there is no fire?
  - The report can be a poster, a series of illustrations or collages of images students have cut and pasted to a poster, a written journal or a podcast
- **Write your own picture book:** Ask students to create their own picture book, from the perspective of one of the animals illustrated in *Looking after Country with Fire*. Students could also create their own picture book about an adventure that they had in the bush. Encourage students to think about different mediums when creating the pictures for their book. Will they use pencils, felt tip pens, crayons, paint, collage or a mix of all mediums?



## RELATED READING

### Books

*Fire Country*

Written by Victor Steffensen

*The First Scientists*

Written by Corey Tutt

Illustrated by Blak Douglas

*Welcome to Country Youth Edition*

Written by Marcia Langton

*Finding Our Heart*

Written by Thomas Mayor

Illustrated by Blak Douglas

*The Bushfire Book*

Written by Polly Marsden

Illustrated by Chris Nixon

*We Will Live in This Forest Again*

Written by Gianna Marino

Illustrated by Gianna Marino

*Bushfires in Australia*

Written by John Lesley

*Fire*

Written by Jackie French

Illustrated by Bruce Whatley

*Bindi*

Written by Kirli Saunders

Illustrated by Dub Leffler

*The Fire Wombat*

Written by Jackie French

Illustrated by Danny Snell

### Websites

*Firesticks Alliance*

[www.firesticks.org.au](http://www.firesticks.org.au)

*The Living Knowledge Place*

[www.livingknowledgeplace.com.au](http://www.livingknowledgeplace.com.au)

