



North Kimberley Land Conservation District Committee

30th August 2017

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Dear Mr Willis,

Members of the North Kimberley community have recently become aware of an article "Burning Issues" in your latest Newsletter (Issue 91, August 2017) regarding burning practices in the North Kimberley.

Many of the claims in this article are inaccurate, or deliberately misleading.

Firstly, your suggestion that land managers are only keen to burn because they get paid to do so is incorrect. Land managers undertake early season burning because this is the only effective means for controlling intense, damaging, late dry season fires. In some instances income from carbon projects provides the much needed funding that allows land managers to get out into the country to undertake these, and other, management programs.

Secondly, you refer to another letter that suggests that aerial burning undertaken in June is too late in the season for prescribed burning. Land managers across the North Kimberley assess the timing of prescribed burns regularly. It is the duration and size of the wet season, recent fire history and local conditions that determine when burning is undertaken by an individual manager or organization. In some years this means that burning is finished by June, and in some years it will continue into July. Blanket rules about which dates are suitable for burning do not apply. The conditions dictate when burning is undertaken.

Thirdly, you reference fire scar mapping as evidence of the harmful impacts of prescribed burning. Recent analysis of fire scars undertaken by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy demonstrates important changes that have occurred since the introduction of widespread and concerted early dry season burning programs. The analysis was not restricted to AWC properties, but covers Kimberley regional fire patterns. The analysis includes 2016, one of the worst fire seasons in recent years in the Kimberley, and yet still demonstrates real and measureable improvement in fire management. Some salient points from the analysis are listed below. (For the full report please see *Smith J, Wilson, R, Barton T, Webb T, Cooper T, Kanowski J (2017)*)

Across the entire region:

- The annual fire extent has averaged 34% each year, with fluctuations from this figure driven mainly by the amount of rain that fell in the previous two wet seasons.
- The seasonality of burning has shifted from predominantly late to a mix of early and late dry season fires. During 2000-06, late fires made up over 71% of the annual fire extent each year, on average; during 2010-16, this figure had been reduced to an average of 56%.
- The Annual Fire Extent has been reduced from an average of 33% in the period 2000-2006 to 30% in the period 2010-2016. Taking into account changes in the seasonality of fire, and associated changes in the area burnt in a fire scar (early dry season fires leave 25% of vegetation inside fire scars unburnt, on average), the average actual area burned has been reduced from 30% in 2000-2006 to 25% in 2010-2016.
- The availability of unburnt vegetation, defined in terms of proximity to burnt areas, has improved throughout the region. The distance from burnt areas to the nearest unburnt vegetation has decreased by about one quarter from 1.7 km (the average in 2000-06) to 1.3 km (the average of 2010-16).
- The overall extent of long-unburnt vegetation across the region has remained unchanged at about 34%. However, the availability of long-unburnt vegetation (i.e. 3+ years old), defined in terms of proximity to burnt areas, has improved throughout the region. The distance from within burnt areas to the nearest long-unburnt vegetation has decreased from 2.9 km in 2002-06 to 2.4 km in 2012-16.

The attached maps, from the same report, also show clearly the improvement that has occurred in fire management since the introduction of prescribed burning programs across the region

Figure 1. The distribution of vegetation of different ages throughout the Kimberley region, at the end of 2006, and the end of 2016.

Figure 2. The distance to the nearest vegetation that had not burnt for at least 3 years, at the end of 2006 and the end of 2016.

Furthermore, it must be noted that early season burning programs that shift the seasonality of fire from predominately late fires to a mix of early and late fires do reduce CO₂ emissions. You rightly state that trees and shrubs hold more carbon than grass. Early season fires burn principally grass and usually don't kill shrubs and trees, while late season fires burn grass, shrubs and trees (and often kill them). Therefore late season fires release more CO₂ per hectare of land burnt than early season fires. Further, by implementing a program of early season burns that produce fire-breaks across the landscape, early season fires reduce the extent of late

season fires, further reducing the CO2 emissions.

Fire management is a complex issue and one that land managers across northern Australia continue to grapple with. Our systems aren't perfect but they are improving. There is no doubt that early season burning, usually delivered aerially, is the most effective means of reducing the impact of damaging late dry season fires that threaten biodiversity, infrastructure and pastoral productivity over vast tracts of very remote country. It is the late season fires that are most damaging to the wildlife and vegetation of the Kimberley that we all value so much.

Collaboration on fire management has improved greatly over the last 5-10 years in the North Kimberley and we are now seeing traditional owners, pastoralists, NGOs and government departments working closely together to deliver early season prescribed burning and also to engage in fire suppression activities to try to stop destructive late season fires when they occur. (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-11/massive-gibb-river-road-bushfire-may-threaten-communities/7922408>)

Articles such as the one in your recent newsletter are destructive and divisive and do not help achieve the aims that all land managers in the north Kimberley strive towards – the protection of our land, biodiversity, assets and livelihoods.

The members of the North Kimberley LCDC are dismayed that such views are being expressed and promoted without dialogue with the land managers. We would be happy to provide additional information on fire management in our region for your staff, guides and guests should you desire it, and would like to invite you to attend our next meeting, to be held at Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary on 8th October, so you can speak directly with land managers about this issue.

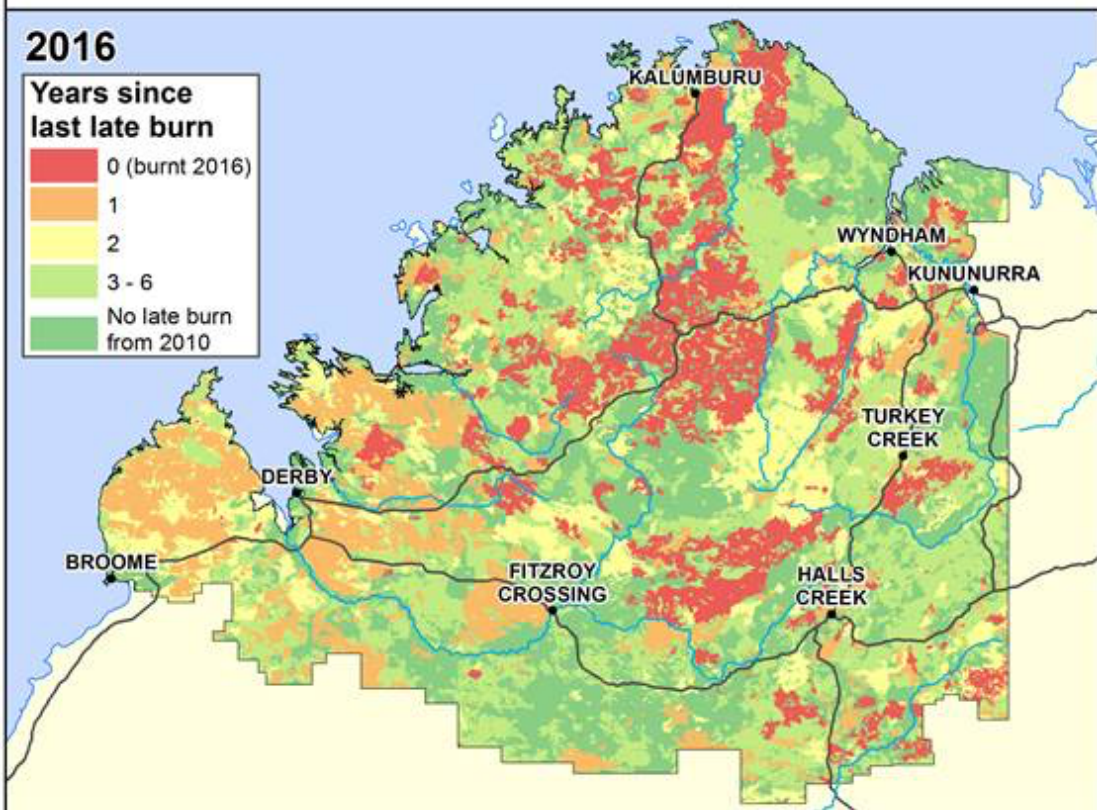
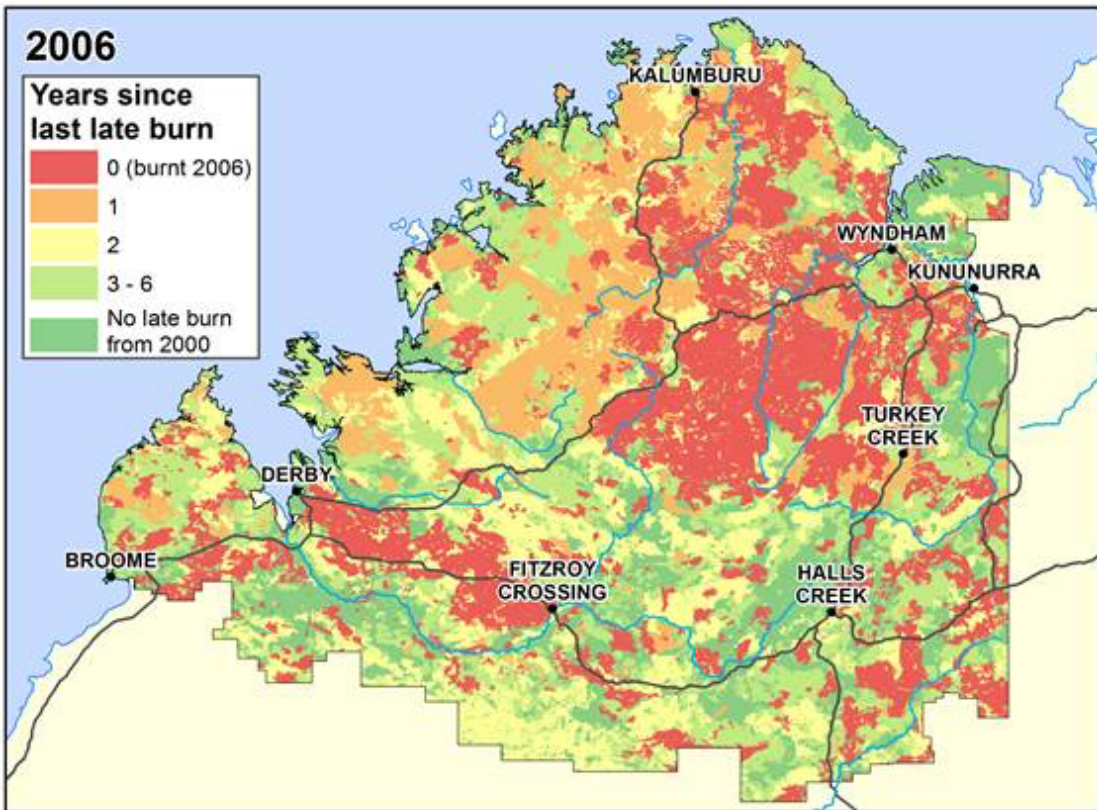
We appreciate and share your concerns about the protection of the magnificent North Kimberley but request that you do not continue to promote misinformation about this complex issue.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cecilia Myers". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cecilia Myers

Chair, North Kimberley Land Conservation District Committee



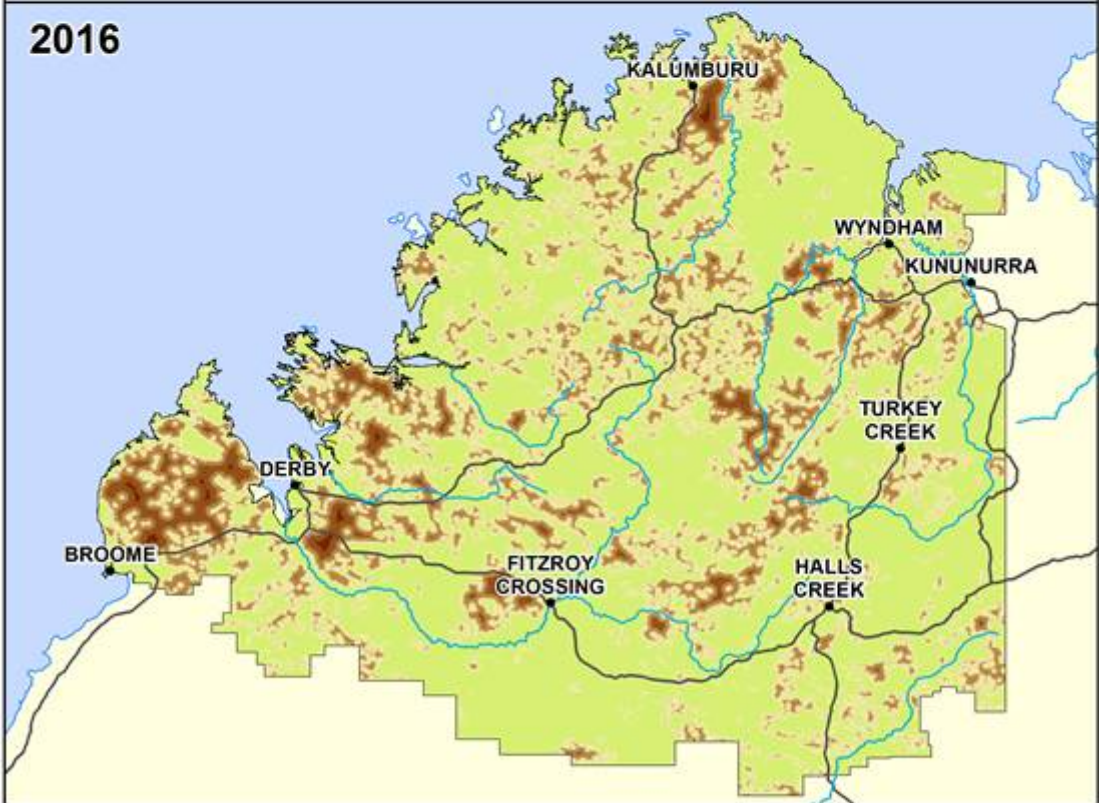
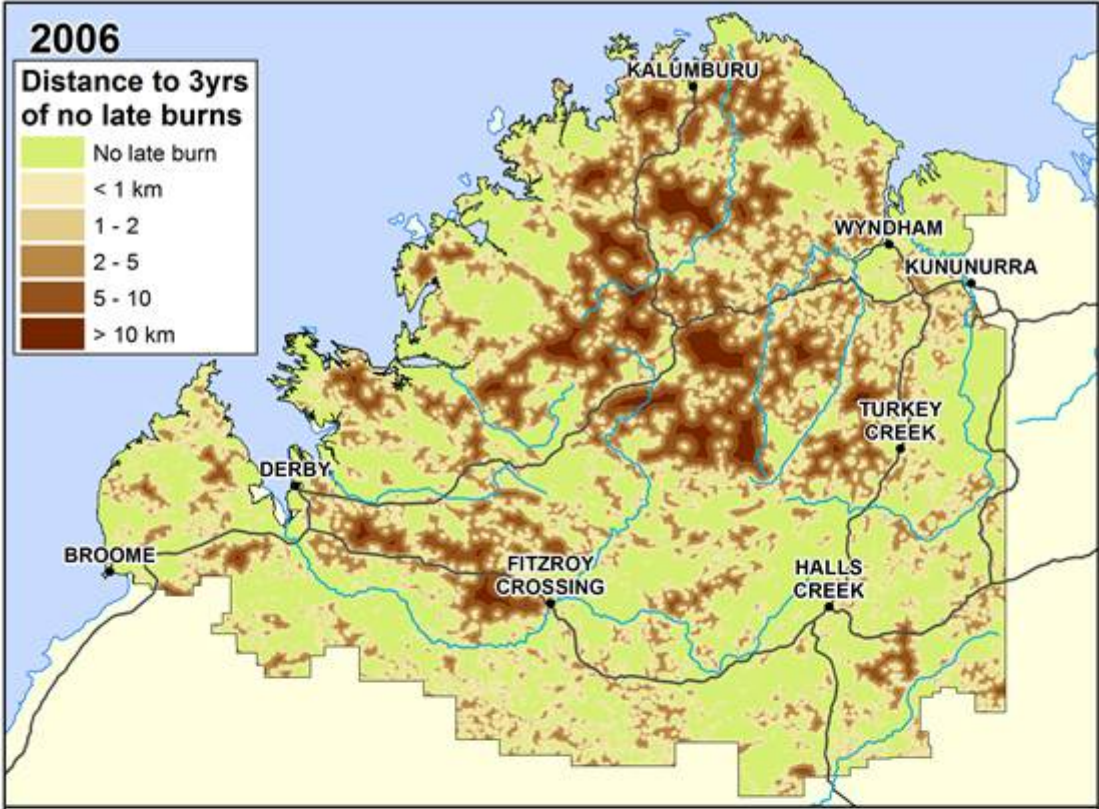
Kimberley Fire Patterns

Years since last late burn compares the number of wet seasons that have passed without late season burning in 2006, with the number have passed without late season burning in 2016.



Fire scar data supplied by North Australian Fire Information (www.firenorth.org.au).





Kimberley Fire Patterns

Unburnt and early season patches <20ha have been omitted from the analysis.



Fire scar data supplied by North Australian Fire Information (www.firenorth.org.au).

