



## Country, Climate, Colonialism (2023)

### 16 August: Decolonising Fire with Dr Melinda Adams

SARAH: Okay, I think we might get underway. Hi, everybody. Welcome to this very special webinar that we'll be starting very shortly in our Critical Public Conversation series with today's speaker, Dr. Melinda Adams. Before we do anything else though, we are going to have a Welcome to Country from the very beautiful Auntie Georgina Nicholson, who can't be with us in person today, but has recorded a Welcome for this morning's session.

SARAH: Thank you to Auntie Georgina, our relationship with the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people is really foundational to our work here in the Australian Centre. We understand the privilege and the arrogance of occupying Wurundjeri territory, and we seek wherever we can to make that relationship as right as it can be in the context of ongoing colonisation.

This morning's webinar is a particularly timely one that our CPC, our Critical Public Conversation series, this year has been focused on Country, climate, and colonialism. And as we have watched the absolute horrors of Hawai'i on fire, the island of Maui devastated by uncontrollable bushfires, we are reminded again of the harms of colonisation, the ongoing harms of colonisation that can lead to these kinds of ravaging fires. So this morning's speaker speaks directly to the counter to that and to the ways in which fire can protect and preserve when it is done properly.

So it's my great privilege this morning to introduce Dr. Melinda Adams. Just before I do that, a reminder of the technicalities of how we run these webinars. So, the chat function is disabled. We would love to have your questions at the end. There will be some time for Q&A at the end of Melinda's presentation, so please use the Q&A function. You can write in your questions at any time during Melinda's presentation. And when she's concluded her remarks this morning, we'll rejoin her on the screen and we will curate a set of interesting questions that will conclude today's session. So please use that Q&A function as much as you would like to do so.

But I am now gonna introduce Dr. Melinda Adams, who is an Indigenous woman, a scientist, and a cultural fire practitioner. She belongs to the N'dee San Carlos Apache Tribe and is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Atmospheric Science and Indigenous Studies at the University of Kansas. As a fire scholar, Dr. Adams concentrates on encouraging public participation in prescribed and controlled burns, getting more people fire certified and placing more Indigenous led cultural fire to the ground with allies, agencies, and Tribal members, decolonising fire as she describes it. Dr. Adams holds her bachelor of science from Haskell Indian Nations University, one of 37 tribal colleges located across the United States. Her Masters of Science from Purdue University and a PhD from the University of California Davis. Her research focuses on the revitalisation of cultural fire with Tribes at the intersection of ecology, environmental science, environmental policy, and Native American studies. Broader implications of this research include deploying cultural fire as climate adaptation strategy while mitigating the frequency and intensity of catastrophic wildfire.

Truly a presentation that could not be more timely right now. So I'm gonna hand over to you, Melinda, and rejoin you at the end of your presentation. Thank you.

MELINDA: Wonderful. Thank you so much for that kind introduction. Thank you to the Australian Center for the invitation to share work and to share space. It's been a fantastic speaker series so far



and very notable scholars and peoples to follow up with and hopefully be in conversation with as well. Also, thank you to Wurundjeri Elder Georgina. What beautiful and timely remarks they were able to share with us and bring us into this space in a very uplifting way. I did wanna echo the comments earlier about Lahaina and the devastating effects that we're only seeing a small fraction of with news media outlets and pieces that are being distributed, and I wanted us to also be mindful of our Kanaka Maoli relatives, Native Hawaiians that are experiencing these devastations on the front lines and whose aid is not coming fast enough. Us here in the continental United States also feel those same effects when wildfire hits our Indigenous communities. And so I did want to share solidarity, and space, and empathy with our Kanaka relatives that are experiencing devastation in this moment.

My intent is not to glorify or to say that fire is only good. Fire takes a lot from us in the context of colonialism and the structures of which it's built and felt. So, while I try to emphasize the stewardship lessons that fire brings, we must also acknowledge the devastation and loss and force that it brings as well. So just some remarks and awareness of our relatives in Hawai'i.

So good morning in Australia and good evening here in the continental United States. (Melinda introduces herself in Language) My name is Melinda, and I am excited to talk about cultural fire with you all today. And in my experience in the fire world, a lot of fire scholarship can sometimes be centered in science and maybe not have as much Indigenous pedagogy or Native ways of being intertwined within the way it's articulated and demonstrated. And so to make space for that and to honor our Australian relatives or relatives in what is now known as Australia, our Aboriginal relatives, I wanted to invite people in the room, although we can't see each other's responses, to maybe contemplate how you say in your Indigenous language or the language that you're trying to learn, whether it be Indigenous or not, how you say the following words just as a way to acknowledge our ancestral names that sometimes, on cultural burns, they're invited back to us or they're recalled back to us.

So I like to start these presentations that tend to lean very science heavy with remembering our relationality, remembering our relatives and our ancestors, and to try to build relationality around those languages that they remember and that they recognise. So while we do this firework, those languages are also recalled to us on the land through our plant relatives, through our fire relatives, through being in community and kin with one another, with both ourselves as Indigenous peoples, but also our allies that we're forming partnerships with. So I just invite you to contemplate that, and to remember it, and to hold onto it while you're on the Land, and, if you are in the fire world, as we're trying to place good fire to the ground. So I appreciate you. If we could see each other, we can't today, but if we could see each other's responses in the chat, it's really a beautiful experience to see the commonalities and connections that we all have through language and Indigenous languages.

This is the title of my presentation, and I do. I try to work on decolonising or Indigenising our approach to fire because, as we'll see in the presentation and certainly as relatives in what is now known as Australia have pointed out to me, a lot of fire policy and fire law has been compartmentalised by no burn or restricted burn policies. And I'll unfold a little bit about what that looks like, particularly where this work and partnership is centered and what is now known as California. So what you're looking at right now is a cultural fire demonstration that I was fortunate to be a part of. And in our cultural fire demonstrations, we use plants to start and carry fire. So what you're looking at is a native plant species that's culturally significant to the Tribes that I work with, and to my cousin tribes, the Navajo Dene Nation, the reed species, that burns quite nicely and quite calmly to carry fire. So you're looking at us carrying fire forward and actually training agency staff on



how to put good fire on the ground. This work was held while I was a grad student at the University of California Davis under my primary mentor, Dr. Beth Rose Middleton Manning, just an incredible scholar and mentor of mine, and also through support with the Southwest Climate Adaptation Science Center. As most of us have seen in the news, the occurrence and severity and frequency of wildfire is on the rise and data is telling us that it is only going to get worse.

There's a lot of factors that play into why climate modelers are projecting these statistics for us. And so I'm sure a lot remember, around the world, pictures of 2020, and the rise in gigafires and the hazy orange sky. So this is from 2020 from the August complex fires that took place in what is now known as California. And I, at the time, lived about 40 miles west of where these orange hazy skies were. So experiencing the air particulate matter, the displacement of peoples having to evacuate and certainly the apocalyptic orange sky kind of becomes a norm during the summer months, at least on the west coast. So this is just to kind of contextualise what we're experiencing and how this year in particular, other parts of what we know as the United States, are starting to be more alert or starting to see the effects with their own eyes of wildfire. I was on the east coast this summer and experienced the orange hazy sky from fires in Canada over on the east coast. So, this is to say that it's not just a problem that's happening in the west, this is a problem that's affecting all of us worldwide.

And so, for people in California specifically, but it's not uncommon within Native and Indigenous Tribes from all over, fire was very much a part of our Land stewardship connectedness and our relationships that we held with what we call more-than-human relatives or more-than-human kin. And so, the work that I uplift in cultural fire research and partnerships is that of M Kan Anderson and her ideas behind Indigenous people's presence of fire and having good fire as part of an ecological response to care for plants. So, it's not always recognised that these good fires or cultural fires were intentionally placed knowing the ecological benefits, but also the cultural benefits that we held within our Tribes as part of our Land caretaking and tending to our Lands. So Indigenous Peoples have shaped and maintained these ecosystems, including a vast variety of ecosystems and ecotones, including coastal prairies, valley oak savannas and montane meadows. Lightfoot and Parrish used this term "pyrodiversity practices" that supported what they term political economies and access to place-specific habitat biodiversity.

So good fire has been a part of the term that they've used as California Indians or Indigenous Peoples of what is now known as California. It's been a part of their cultural heritage, and many are fire-adapted communities that used fire in good ways and continue to do so for the ecological and cultural benefits of their spaces and their People. However, due to colonial-entrenched policies, the modality for policy since the 1850s have been persistent no-burn policies. So, all fire was considered to be bad fire, and that has links to how we perceive, how the public perceives fire right now, which is a negative connotation or that wildfire is the only fire or that all fire is bad fire. So, these policies have led to a disruption of Native Peoples on Land. So, it coincided with Indian removal, including the Dawes Act and the Indian Removal Act. This had large-scale repercussions for Indigenous communities in that area of the world, including denial of inherent responsibilities to land of cultural identity, of kinship systems.

So, they not only removed fire from the landscape that shaped these beautiful mosaics and separated forests from grasslands from different types of ecotones. It also removed larger pieces of Indigenous identity and closeness to Land. So, this denial of stewardship wasn't just with plant interactions, but also access to hunting and fishing rights, and, again, those responsibilities that we have held and continued since time immemorial. Some of those policies and kind of the mindset that carries them forward are still upheld. And so there are many barriers in place in the United States



and, in particular, the state of California for cultural fire practitioners or Indigenous Peoples leading fire. That includes public perceptions that all fire is bad fire could still be perceived from people that are trying to get good fire on the ground. Lots of certifications and lots of different processes to try to apply for permits or try to get permissions to burn. Resources. Right now, a lot of the agencies that are fire-related are of the mindset of fire suppression, not necessarily putting good fire to the ground to mitigate against those fuel loads, to mitigate against those occurrences of wildfire. And there aren't enough trained staff to have people on the ground to be able to put fire on the ground. And policy, land, and tenure. It's difficult for cultural fire practitioners to be able to obtain those permits and certifications to steward fire, and it's more complicated when we bring in the context of what's called federal recognition, so a working relationship with federal agencies in the United States and those that are unrecognised tribes. So, it's very complicated for Indigenous Peoples to even try to burn their own homelands.

So, some pictures to the right. A colleague and fire practitioner, this is Danny Manning and he's a Maidu tribal member. He's also assistant fire chief of Greenville Rancheria. He's visually showing us the difference between basketry materials that they use for baby baskets or cradle boards. The difference between no burn sticks on the left and then those that have been treated with good fire to the right. So, the quality and, from what I hear, the quantity of sticks that are available after good fire for the basket weavers and tenders, there's a visual difference, which means there's scientific methodologies that Indigenous Peoples have and carry that are intertwined with good fire placement. And in the bottom is another Cal Fire workshop where Indigenous Peoples are training Cal Fire in good fire placement.

So, the research that I partner with Tribes with and do my best to try to be a good relative and working in relationship with Tribes looks at a multiplicity approach to good fire. So, this talk and an extension of my work tries to focus on climate futurity, envisioning what our ancestors and relatives would want to see as a future of abundance, as a future of us being able to express ourselves culturally, a future of good fire for our cultural fire practitioners and people that work with fire stewardship. And this comes from Mvskoke relative and geographer Laura Harjo: "It's the act of living out the futures we wish and the creation of the conditions for these futures."

And so I look at the ecological benefits of cultural fire, which includes plants for basketry materials that my Indigenous Elders, and relatives, and Aunties want to see return. And I also look at soil analyses to see how we can get our soils healthier with the placement of culturally-led, Indigenous-led lower-intensity cultural fire. I of course tie that to policy and leveraging power back to cultural fire practitioners to be able to set more good fire to the ground. And all of that is grounded in Native American studies pedagogy, like in the academy, the university viewpoint of Native Studies. But for us, our Native ways of being, which is embodied knowledges, story sharing. Auntie Elder Georgina was telling us about how stories and songs carry information and messages. And so that's very much a part of the work or how I try to be in relation with the Indigenous Peoples that I work with that are different from my own Tribe. And so I use Chairman Ron Goode, one of our Elders that we work here with in California. He's a chairman of the North Fork Mono tribe. He refers to cultural fire as ceremonial fire and acknowledges that it's a coating of protection to cultural burning of resource restoration and land rejuvenation.

One of the maps that, as Indigenous scholars, we try to use more of, this Native Land Digital shows you the ancestral homelands that you occupy. So you punch in what state or what country you're in, and then the original Native Peoples of those homelands appear. And so this is a little geographic representation of the Tribes that I've been able to work with in California. And now my work has stretched across to the Midwest where I am still cultural burning and cultural learning with Native



Peoples in this area. But just to give a visual representation. And I also wanna acknowledge the top right picture that's Auntie Elder Diana Almandariz, who is Maidu, Hupa, Yurok, a fire practitioner and carrier, and just expert person.

So now I wanted to try to tell the story, but I realise I'm running out of time, of a policy that was enacted for the first time after the expertise of cultural fire practitioners across California. We were able to enact this policy in real time, AB 642, which a lot of fire certifications need to be held to be considered a, quote, "burn boss". And so, we were able to receive that certification as Indigenous cultural fire practitioners and lead a workshop with Cal Fire to be able to place good fire to the ground. And so it was a beautiful day filled with Indigenous knowledge that was shared. We had an intergenerational family burn that was demonstrated by all women. So I like to think it was rematriating fire that showed a calmness and an easiness to working with prescribed fire that was led by Auntie Elder Diana and her family, and showed the power of cultural fire in Indigenous relational ecologies.

Envisioning a climate future because we had our youngest person, Diana's granddaughter, who carried the last flame to give the biggest burn of the day that ended in quite a success, and plentiful, and very healthy plant materials that were returned. Cultural fires are intergenerational and intertribal, which is very different from how agency staff may place fire to the ground. And so this is one of the very first Cal Fire cultural fire workshops that we held. It was called Leok Po, which is Patwin or Southern Wintun for good fire. So this work, hopefully, it answers the call by Hupa Yurok scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy to support more biocultural sovereignty, our right to steward our own land, and use fire stewardship to restore those lands, and our cultural identities, and our cultural practices. This work can intervene by addressing land dispossession and removal because we don't get to learn the science of how well fire is treating our plants and our soils without learning about erasure displacement and removal, and how we can and should do better, and how we can and do have a climate futurity that centres Indigenous perspectives and ways of being in practices.

So now, just very quickly, I'm at the University of Kansas. I've actually come home. My family is here in Kansas and it's also the place of my Tribal college where I went to school as an undergraduate, where, on any given day, there's 138 different Tribes that are represented. So now I get to be an Indigenous mentor and mentor students into placing good fire, getting fire certified, but, more importantly, culturally reunifying with inherited lessons, ancestral good fire. So I got here in January, and in March, we had my first cultural fire burn that I led, burning tall grass prairie, a culturally significant ecosystem to Indigenous Peoples of the plains.

So here are some references and I also just had a paper come out with Chairman Ron Goode of the North Fork Mono tribe, and the lovely Dr. Erica Tom who's a scholar and a researcher as well. We talked about climate grief and cultural fire as a way of mitigating that grief and building climate futurity. So I'm so sorry that was quick, but I look forward to questions and conversation. So a'shoog, thank you.

SARAH: Thank you, Melinda. I can see lots of love and applause coming through in the reactions there. That was a wonderful presentation. And from this very, very flammable kind of continent, a lot of those images are very resonant. We have a couple of questions come through already and I have a couple of my own. The first question that's come in is from Michelle who asks what the spiritual benefits of cultural fire are and how many different reasons for using fire are there?

MELINDA: Oh my. Oh, thank you so much for the very rich question. I'll try to give you a succinct answer. So in terms of the spiritual benefits, I really only want to speak about my experience



because I don't want to speak for other people or other Indigenous peoples because they can speak for themselves. But what I can share with you is our Land connection and responsibility that we have to place these fires just as our ancestors have. Of course, there's spiritual connections just in that experience alone, not enough time on the land, not enough time with each other. So that's fulfilling a spiritual obligation that we have. And moreover, if I am kind of leaning on my elders who have taught me fire placement and really just how to be a good relative, I'm hearing Chairman tell me we want to center our culture, our ways of being. So he refers to it, like I said, as ceremonial fire. And some of that is protocol. So instead of gearing up with a hard hat, and yellows, and greens, we build a circle and we ask who you are and why you're here. And we share prayer and we share songs as that protective cover that he mentioned earlier in his definition of cultural fire. And I'm a believer in that as well, and that's how good fire should be placed. So in terms of the spiritual benefit, it's recalling those songs, those stories, and those spiritual obligations we have as Native peoples to demonstrate these fires. I hope that was a succinct answer.

SARAH: Thank you. I'm gonna jump in with one of my own now 'cause I know you tuned in for at least a bit of Victor Steffensen's webinar a couple of weeks ago, and it's really hard to not draw some comparisons and, too, that I wanted your reflections on if we could. The first one, Victor framed his talk around what the Land remembers and his argument was that the Land remembers people who approach with fire in the correct way. I'm sure I'm bastardising what he had to say a bit, but that placing fire on the ground in the way that you describe it is a part of being in relationship with Country. So I'm interested in your reflections on how what Victor had to say resonated with the kind of practices you are describing.

The other is a less, I guess, a more just materialistic question. Victor talked about the fact that, over the summer here of 2019, 2020, we had another round of it felt like half the continent was on fire, incredibly damaging fires. And he felt at that moment that perhaps this was gonna be the time when cultural burning practices were going to actually get a hook into policy, that there was gonna be a change in the way governments thought about managing the landscape in relation to fire, but that seemed to disappear. You seem to be describing quite a different situation where state agencies are now taking very seriously the sorts of burning practices that you work with. Is that right? And I'm fascinated to know how that came about.

MELINDA: Sure, and that's definitely been a question in other parts of the continental United States, that folks have had. And I am excited, but, just because I'm a younger scholar, nervous about the connections worldwide. There's certainly a moment right now where the interest has peaked, at least for the government agencies that are following governor advice and governor proclamations to start to shift mentality from no burn to starting to train agency representatives on how to do good fire. Unfortunately, it's taken these last several years of megafire gigafire in at least California to have peoples that are in charge of decision-making need to diversify and invite voices into the decision making, to the decision-making table to benefit all Californians. So unfortunately, it's been disasters that have opened up that line of communication sort of end of pipe approaches, which, as Native Peoples, we do our best to be proactive to protect community and to protect our lands and our waters for the futurity, for our children and our grandchildren, our seventh generation modality of thinking and being.

And so there's momentum right now in California, and I imagine it's spreading across the west with curiosity in good fire. And I can speak to the difference between California and the Midwest because that's been my experience. So disasters kind of on the brain, that's shifting some of the policy. The governor doesn't really have a choice but to invest more monies and in invest in more boots on the ground to get more good fire going, which is why you see the workshops that I kinda story told my





way through. And this is the work of the practitioners. This is Chairman. This is Auntie Elder Diana. This is them having those lived experiences and informing policy. So one last example. so now I'm in the Midwest where fire doesn't get as a knee-jerk reaction, people family burn, people pile burn. It's a little bit more embedded in just land keeping here in the Midwest where Tribes have used fire for ecological benefit and for cultural connection since the beginning of time. This is where the prairie is, and prairie is dependent on fire as an ecosystem service. So I'm here, but, in my experience, just what I've had, there aren't enough people who engage in fire practices, prescribed and controlled, enough to educate community or enough to have it be an entire culture. So yes, we're not as apprehensive here about fire because wildfires just doesn't occur here, but there's still a gap in that fire culture. So I'm all about, like I said, just getting more people fire certified to protect our lands and our waters, to have cultural reunification of Indigenous Peoples back to those stewardship lessons and spiritual and cultural obligations. I hope that's- -

SARAH: Yeah, thank you. These are very similar. These conversations are somewhat familiar, so thank you. A couple of questions have come through asking about the interconnection or the relationship between fire and water, so how cultural fire and cultural burning help with caring for waters. That one in particular is from one of our local water policy experts here at the University of Melbourne. - Wonderful.

MELINDA: Thank you so much for bringing that question into the conversation. So certainly with the burn demonstrations that I've been a part of, the practitioners try to invite fire agency and water agency folks because they see them as interconnected. And I can't quite remember which space I'm in that kind of thinks we're just about fire, but certainly Indigenous cultural fire practitioners understand that relationship. In fact, my little beaded medallion, it's purposely fire but water surrounding it because they're never separate. So for placing good fire, I know I've heard from practitioners who have anecdotally and visually have seen the benefits of water storage throughout the course of their lifetime. Plants just do better. They're greener. They're in more abundance. So certainly they have that observation that is science over time. For myself, the burn that was on the very first slide was a wetland island burn. It was about five whole acres of just dried over brush plant materials. And honestly, I was a little bit nervous about what was going to happen because we didn't quite think there was enough water in the water table to sustain the plants that were gonna grow back. But, actually, the picture behind me is of that plant coming up healthy, having plenty of water and looking more green than it did before we burned. So those are evidences that point towards the water holding capacity, the positive benefits of purposely placed culturally-led fire.

And for me, I'm a person that studies soils and so water holding capacity is one of the indicators that I look for post cultural fire. And so I'm happy to be offering that to the cultural fire literature world that I have done these soil analyses and I've seen nutrients increase. I've seen a shift in favor of carbon storage with the fire placement that I've had at this particular place in California with cultural fire practitioners. And I've seen plants presumably hold water better from the data that we're gathering. So, certainly, there's more room for that type of research, but certainly also listening to our cultural fire practitioners who have been telling us this, that there's a water benefit to culturally placed prescribed burns.

SARAH: Fantastic, thank you. I have a very important question here from Leilani who is just 11 years old. She's, I think, with the Harvard Academy. And she asks, "How do you keep your fires contained using traditional methods?"

MELINDA: Thank you, Leilani. What a wonderful inquisitive question, and I hope you saw some of the slides that showed little ones just as old as you out there carrying fire with us. So I'm so excited



that you're excited about fire. Yes, safe fire and a fire that's guided by community values and community care, so that's a lot of the protocol that we go over before cultural fires are burned. One of the other things that makes it different is that, instead of showing up and burning the same day, we actually take a few days, if not weeks, to build the relationship to the place that we're going to burn, and to know it, and to care for it before we even start a fire. So a lot of that could look like labor, like going and making pile burns, and raking over, and getting the plant materials ready, and listening to our elders and our basket weavers that know where we need to place good fire to see the rejuvenation and to make the Lands look better, to make the plants look better. And so we have that even before we have the day of the fire.

And the day of the fire, like I said, we circle up, we go around, we see who's there, we see who might feel a little bit anxious about fire placement, and we invite them to kind of have a front seat, maybe even to place the first burn to really visualize and see and build that connection to fire. So those definitely aren't how government agencies would conduct a fire, but they are a way that separates that from cultural fire, more community family burning to show you that it's safe. So that's the care and the protocol that we have with the practices that they demonstrate, but also we have practitioners that have been doing this for decades, that have inherited these knowledges for decades and centuries. So that's how we know that fires won't get out of hand, and then we also take those precautions with, like I said, community care. We also have water, we also make fire breaks and we also know the plants intimately to know how well, how high, and how fierce they'll carry fire. Thank you, Leilani.

SARAH: There are lots of people in the Q&A, Melinda, who know you. I'm gonna ask one question from one of them in a moment. Also lots of people who are wanting to connect with you after this to access your slides, to have a closer look at some of the books you put up at the end. So we'll touch base with you after this and we'll communicate with people who've registered for today about how they might get some of that, that more information, including your website.

But here is a question from Barb Satink Wolfson who says, "First, you rock, Melinda," which I think is important to note that you do indeed rock. And Barb asks, "Do you have any suggestions for ways I can support cultural or ceremonial fire for those who are unable to live on their ancestral lands?" She says she's the UC fire advisor for the Central Coast now.

MELINDA: Hi Barb, wonderful to see you. Thank you so much for coming. Of course I remember you. Yeah, so I think Barb has been connected with the Southwest Climate Adaptation Science Center that I mentioned earlier, and those are all across the United States through USGS, the Geological Survey, which is a government branch of the Department of Interior for us here in the continental United States. And so certainly finding opportunities to attend but also financially support our cultural fire practitioners in their burn demonstrations, that has been plentiful and helpful in getting good burns on the ground. Also, I've been made aware that even supporting Tribes that are not federally recognised in their federal recognition petition has gone a long way in gaining access to resources and gaining access to Land that they could be stewarding with good fire. So I think those two approaches are helpful. And then also using your positionality within the job that you hold or the circles that you're a part of to reinstate the benefits of good fire, but also how it's collectively helping to mitigate against the devastating effects of climate change. Those all help leverage the message of cultural fire practitioners and getting good fire on the ground.

SARAH: A question here from a teacher who says that in Australia we are a country that needs fire in order to have healthy environments. What can this person do to teach their high school students about the importance of fire in a way that can battle some of the colonial perceptions around fire?





MELINDA: Right, thank you. So definitely understanding that, on a grander scale, and I think I've said this a few times, it's about so much more than the fire. It's about Indigenous people's access to protect their own homelands. So even saying that it's not good policy or, yes, colonialism happened and is still happening, using your positionality to educate, again, your circle definitely helps, by extension, the message of good fire. And I also want to make a plug for a California-specific, native woman-led organization. They're called [Redbud Resource Group](#). They're a fantastic group of a collective of native women that works specifically on K through 12 and I think beyond a curriculum that talks about the difficult topics in a age-appropriate way, and they include good fire and the benefits of it. So I definitely wanna recommend Redbud Resource Group and a part of my work just in decolonising fire. It's trying to reshape the perception that we have just worldwide in my small space, just worldwide of understanding our responsibility to fire.

You're saying that your area of the world is fire adapted. A lot of places in the world were fire adapted and fire dependent to mitigate the effects or to not have wildfire or natural lightning strike fire occur. So we just need to get back to that, understanding that these landscapes need fire. We need more people that are able to hold fire safely and we need more Indigenous people that are leading these cultural fire efforts in California, in the West, and definitely worldwide. - Yeah, that is absolutely true.

SARAH: Here in Australia, it blows my mind still that we can live on a continent where Indigenous Peoples have managed the landscape beautifully and successfully for tens of thousands of years. And in just over 200 years we've turned it into a tinderbox, but there still this great resistance to really fully engaging with Indigenous knowledges around managing landscape through fire. It's just colonial brick wall of ignorance there.

MELINDA: I think the fear... And if I'm hearing scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy, whom I cited in the presentation, I think there's this fear that if we have access to Land, we're gonna take it all, we're going to do something that's self-serving, but really we understand that we're in this together. We want to better our Lands for the benefit of all of us, for Natives and allies and people in community. That's a message that most of the people that I work with want to get across, is that we're trying to look out for our future as Indigenous peoples, but yours too, as neighbors in community as wanting to envision a climate that's better than what we're experiencing right now.

SARAH: That's a very generous attitude. Someone, Oscar, in the chat asks if you could say a bit about how economic arguments have been successfully made for cultural fire and cultural land management 'cause I guess that is the settler discourse.

MELINDA: And it's certainly advantageous to be looking at it from that perspectives. And just very briefly, the not necessarily culture fire practitioners, they are aware of this and build good arguments for it, but certainly the people that work in Prescribed Burn Associations, so neighbors getting together to share resources to place fire on the ground, those that are 501c3s, like non-governmental organisations that are just trying to take care of their lands and do it in community. So what they've been contemplating and trying to share with agencies is that it's going to cost a lot less to put fire on the ground than to clean up and restore devastating effects when wildfire comes through. Certainly, it costs a lot to be able to rebuild communities in that way and to get back to economies. And so the point that they tried to make is that a small investment now is going to lead to a big payoff in the end if we can mitigate some of the acreages that are lost through ravaging wildfire. So thank you so much for bringing that into... It's not my area of expertise, but certainly there's relationships that we're building with economists to try to make that point. - I think we've maybe got time to squeeze in



one more quick question-

MELINDA: Great, yeah.

SARAH: Which kind of flows from this, which is someone asking what can be done to put in place better policies to incorporate Indigenous knowledge and wisdom into practice. How can we make this non-negotiable for governments who need to act on this?

MELINDA: Right. Oh, that's a big question. I wish I have-

SARAH: That's just a little one.

MELINDA: - The short and accurate answer to give to you. So the one that I've been using the most in my research to point to is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UNDRIP, which is worldwide. They're 30 some, I think, if I'm being accurate, proclamations that are made to protect Indigenous ways of being and culture, which includes our Land stewardship lessons. It's a wonderful proclamation right now, but it's not a law. It's not enforceable. And so working with officials, working with political representatives to try to find some threads of enacting those declarations which speak to our Land care responsibilities as Indigenous Peoples and exercising our cultural sovereignty, that would be one part of policy that could be enacted. And then there's movements right now that are happening in California and like the story that I told. It was one piece of legislation that we're able to see played out on the ground. That was in November. And so seeing more of these demonstrations by Indigenous peoples, at least in that space that we take up, can benefit getting fire on the ground and mitigating against wildfire. So I can only imagine the momentum that that's building for places elsewhere, especially in the West and how that will feel the effects of other places. And so now we're in communication with other Indigenous Peoples worldwide to kind of compare notes and to see where the opportunities and barriers are.

So there are definitely Indigenous fire coalitions that are being formed right now. Of course the urgency. I was just at a conference that was talking about how wonderful it is that TEK is being recognised, at least in our country, at the federal level. So right now Indigenous leaders are building a manual. Literally, they're together and they're conceptualising what a best practice is for using an integrating traditional ecological knowledge into all government agencies, which is exciting. But a comment that was made was, "Why does it take the state of urgency or almost climate collapse for you to listen to our traditional ecological knowledge and how important it is? And then what if we don't have the time and this space to be able to demonstrate it and all of its positive effects?" So putting us in between a rock and a hard place, and that shouldn't be the way the TEK is approached, or utilised, or deployed. But that sense of urgency, it has positive benefits to helping us leverage more power back to cultural fire practitioners. So hopefully there's... I like to lead with climate hope, so hopefully there's hope in people that are in positions of power to get more power back to Indigenous cultural fire practitioners.

SARAH: Melinda, thank you. That's a wonderful note to end on, climate hope in a time when climate catastrophe seems like all we can see ahead, is a wonderful place to end. So thank you very, very much for joining us today. Just before I wrap us up, I just wanna remind everyone that our next Critical Public Conversation is coming up on Wednesday, the 13th of September. Fiore Longo will be joining us, who is a research and advocacy officer at Survival International, to speak about "Colonial Conservation: A green assault on Indigenous land." So I hope lots of you will be able to join us then, and thank you again to Melinda Adams. We will make sure there is some information from her



available on our website, given the huge amount of interest we've seen in the Q&A. Thank you, everyone. Goodbye.