How do Indigenous peoples use fire to manage country?

The Aboriginal peoples living in the tropical savanna have been looking after and caring for their country for tens of thousands of years.

Where people who live in cities and towns like to manage their gardens by planting, watering and weeding, Aboriginal peoples look after their country using fire.

But they don’t just light a match in any old place at any old time; Aboriginal peoples know how to use fire at the best times of the year and in the correct ways.

So what might these be?

Well, after the summer rains (remember, we’re talking about the North of Australia here) everything is green and the grass is thick and tall.

In the dry season the grass dries out and becomes brown.

And the longer the savanna is dry, the hotter and more damaging bushfires can become.

This picture shows a bushfire that can be described as a ‘hot burn’.

For more information on how you can help our environment, or to make some suggestions of your own, please go to www.coolaustralia.org
The Aboriginal peoples know that by choosing a time shortly after the wet season the grass will burn slowly and will be cooler. A cool fire means that the savanna won’t suffer too much damage.

However, knowing exactly when to burn is a bit of a balancing act: the grass and other small plants need to be dry enough to burn slowly but not so dry that the fire will become really hot and kill or damage the trees and animals.

Another way of managing the impact of the fire is to have many small cool burns. This means there is much less chance of having big fires later in the year when conditions become drier.

A cool burn is essential if you want to avoid harming the trees and larger bushes.

A cool burn means the bark should remain bark unburnt and the leaves should be unsinged.

*All the pictures on this page are of small cool burns.*
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A cool burn means the flames won’t move quickly allowing small animals to escape the flames, even the ones that can’t fly.

A cool burn also means that the logs on the ground don’t burn and the animals that live under the logs don’t lose their homes.

Have a look at this photo below: it was taken a minute after the fire and the ground is cool enough to stand on with bare feet!

After a cool burn the ground will not be hot, seedlings and seeds will not be burnt and there will still be patches of green grass.

The ground is cool enough to stand on straight after a burn!

With lots of small, cool fires there will still be plenty of food left for cattle, wallabies and other wildlife to eat.

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Local Indigenous knowledge is very important and goes deeper than picking a season and lighting small fires.

It’s also about having an intimate understanding of your landscape.

In the case of this picture (on the right) the local indigenous peoples know that the grass in the open is dry enough to burn, that the trees are on a different soil and that the grass below the trees won’t be dry enough to burn for another two weeks.

This Indigenous person (below) never wears shoes. He is an expert teaching others how to manage country with cool burns. Everyone else in this training program had to wear solid shoes.

**Warning** – Fires can be extremely dangerous and can easily kill people and destroy habitat. Only people with expertise and with the appropriate permissions should ever light fires.