



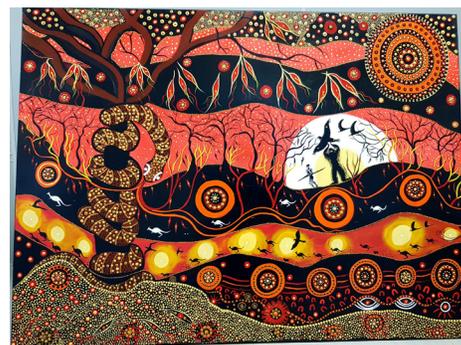
Long road to recovery

By Annick Thomassin, Australian National University (ANU), Linda Carlson, Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council and Janet Hunt, ANU

As the world is still caught in the turmoil caused by the coronavirus pandemic, it feels like a long time since the 2019-2020 bushfires crisis in Australia destroyed an estimated 18.6 million hectares of land and resulted in an unprecedented loss of biodiversity and properties. The territories of the Walbanga and broader Yuin Nation, custodians of New South Wales's South Coast region, were severely impacted. Large sections of the small town of Mogo, where many in the Walbanga community resides, were destroyed. This includes the houses of ten Aboriginal families and Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council's (Mogo LALC) office, art gallery and ranger shed. Mogo

LALC plays an important role for the local Aboriginal community, providing a meeting place for its members and a wide range of services, including important environmental stewardship activities by its ranger team. The Aboriginal community is resilient, but the fires have deeply scarred Country and affected the sacred bond connecting Walbanga with their land, waters, and animals, adding to their trauma. The scale of the devastation and environmental impacts are yet to be fully grasped and the impacts contaminants contained in the ashes may have on their river systems, marine environment and fisheries are still unknown.

Many in the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities directly impacted by the fire events are angry at the Federal and State governments' inaction on climate change, their negligence and mismanagement of Country. For years, concerns voiced by Aboriginal communities, scientists and fire services about increased fire risks have fallen on deaf ears and while cul-



"Fire", artwork by Linda Carlson

tural burning knowledge and practices are valued in northern Australia, Aboriginal communities in the populated Southeast struggle to have a say in managing Country. Walbanga rangers have been working for years to restore the health of Country to increase their resilience. They were hoping to restart cultural burning in mid-2019 but the land was already too dry. The rest is history.

The unfathomable scale of this bushfire crisis awakens many Australians to the importance of revitalising Aboriginal land management practices, and for Aboriginal philosophies, knowledge and practices to be taken ser-



Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council. Photo by Annick Thomassin



in Walbanga Country

Mogo Bushfire. Photo by Annick Thomassin

iously. But Aboriginal peoples will need to be in the driver's seat and properly resourced. This also needs to translate into work opportunities for the rangers and community. We must continue to hold governments to account.



"Moorindji" (Crazy), artwork by Sherrie Nye McCarron (photo cropped)

In February, the rangers began to return to Country and noted its heal-

ing power despite the sadness. It finally rained. The land was painted in fresh green, bringing some solace and hope of better days to come. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has now halted the ranger work. Some community members have channelled their anger, sadness and trauma into stunning artworks.

Mogo LALC, the broader Mogo community and the fundraising team (Annick, Janet and Karen Soldatic) would like to thank CICADA for circulating the GoFundMe campaign. Thanks also to everyone who contributed. We are now over \$66K, almost halfway to our target. There were also independent donations for which the community is grateful. While things have currently slowed down, there are exciting projects in the pipeline and we will provide updates later in the year. Hopefully the rangers will soon be back on Country. ●



"Minga" (Mother), by Sherrie Nye McCarron

Message to Uapashkush

Jon Altman, Dean Yibarbuk, Hilda Mosby and myself (Annick Thomassin) would like to thank Uapashkush for their message of support during the wildfire crisis that has afflicted Australia from September 2019 to February 2020. Your message really moved us. Please accept our best wishes from Melbourne to Arnhem Lands, from Canberra to Torres Strait. Take good care of yourselves in these difficult times.