

# Australian Women-in-Fire Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (AUSWTREX)

## Connection and healing

Friendships formed during AUSWTREX have continued beyond the program. Despite coming from different places, many shared similar experiences of how government policies and practices had impacted their families and connections to community and culture. AUSWTREX enabled Indigenous women to connect with others who shared similar experiences, leading to positive impacts on identity and wellbeing.



*"Without knowing it, I'm actually healing a lot being around so many strong women."*

## Confidence and empowerment

All participants left AUSWTREX with increased confidence and a sense of empowerment. Alongside building new skills, the program created space for existing knowledge and leadership qualities to be recognised. Participants felt pride after taking on new challenges and achieving things they would not normally attempt.

*"You give them the opportunity, give them the platform, they'll step up on it and they will own it. You just got to give them that space."*

## Reciprocal exchange

AUSWTREX provided a rare space for Indigenous women in fire to connect with other women working across Australia and overseas. Participants exchanged knowledge about different burning techniques, learning from women who practise cultural and hazard reduction burning. For some, it was their first opportunity to experience a cultural burn, or to use their skills to protect cultural heritage.

A 12-day program delivered by QFD and QPWS saw 37 Indigenous and non-Indigenous women enhance their fire practitioner skills and share cultural and western burning knowledge. This research project aimed to understand the impacts for Indigenous women who participated in Australia's first WTREX program. NIDR carried out interviews and participant observation, providing valuable insights to strengthen and support Indigenous women in this workforce.

## Cultural, personal and professional growth

AUSWTREX went beyond a networking and training program. Participants found companionship within a workforce described as challenging and isolating for Indigenous women. For many, the most meaningful learnings from the program emerged through the development of relationships with other Indigenous women in fire.

## Reincorporation

Reincorporating or returning as changed people to unchanged environments presented both opportunities and challenges. Some women returned to workplaces where their experiences were valued, while others faced negativity and limited recognition of their experience and skills.

*"I think our work doesn't really understand how big of a deal it was."*

This research highlights the capability and skill of Indigenous women working in the Australian fire and land management sector. It demonstrates that investing in culturally supportive programs can positively impact the wellbeing of this workforce, benefiting both First Nations women and the broader sector.

## Safety and support

AUSWTREX provided a safe and supportive space to connect and learn alongside other women in fire. This was significant for participants who are often the only woman, or the only Indigenous person, in their workplace. Learning and working in an encouraging environment meant participants felt safe to challenge themselves in ways they haven't otherwise been able to.

*"I just felt it was just amazing being there because usually here at work, our ops are mainly males... I feel like I'm going to get criticised or judged if I do something wrong..."*



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