WHAT IS BURNING IN AUSTRALIA

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Fire is inseparable from Australian ground; it is an intrinsic part of the Australian landscape and its ecology, and a key element to the maintenance of the land. Fire is the key element, where the term *element* is considered here both from the pragmatic and the very essential, *elementary* point of view.

In order to understand the spectrum of the enormous devastating fires that hit Australia again, one has to be ready to reflect this by balancing the edge of two worldviews, the Western and the indigenous one. It is these two *elementary* separated worldviews that have been affecting each other on Australian ground for 230 years. Fire exists in both of these worldviews; it acts and leaves its trace in both realities. It might at first sound unusual, but in any case, fire definitely does support life.

Where these two worldviews meet, it often occurs due to extreme hazardous conditions like the fires raging in Australia in 2019-2020. Earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, fires, droughts and similar scenarios create the necessity for this encounter comparable to a *coming together* after natural disasters that happen in any part of the world when people show solidarity and help each other. A growing enthusiasm is shared that creates the hope and joy of building something together again from the scratch as a community.

Each of these natural disasters, or as the author of this text would like to rename them, "natural reactions of planet Earth", each of these natural earthly reactions is connected to other classical elements apart from the element of Fire. Earthquakes are rooted in the element of Earth, tsunamis in the element of Air or Wind, floods and droughts in the element of Water and Ether. War, a very truly unnatural disaster, though played out on the very surface of the planet, is obviously rooted in the element of Fire, too. When soldiers attack, they scream: "Fire!!!" We tend to call these extended natural reactions climate crisis. In this undeniable crisis, the element of War is included, tightly connected to the element of Exploitation that evidently represents the root of climate crisis.

Therefore, *elementary speaking*, besides Fire, the other elements, such as Water, Wood, Air, Wind, Earth, Metal and Ether, play a key role for a well-balanced landscape, enabling a healthy and harmonious land as an environment for all creatures that inhabit it.

If you disturb any of these elements of the earthly cosmos, you create a major imbalance and create a fertile ground for a natural earthly reaction, you create a disaster. You rewrite Dreamtime[1], you interfere with the Law, you cut the Songlines[2], you break the relationships, you misuse the earthly

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[1] **About Dreamtime or Dreaming**: "It is a philosophy, a cosmology, a worldview and a way of life that explains how the world was created and our relationships to each other, …some say it isn't a proper translation of traditional terms like Lalai, Nytting or Tjurrkup…" Andrews 2019, p. 2
Yunkaporta's comment on English translation *Dreamtime* of Aboriginal term *Lalai*, *Nytting* or *Tjurrkup*: "I use many other terms that I don't particularly like, such as 'Dreaming' (which is a mistranslation and misinterpretation) because a lot of old people I respect, and who have passed knowledge on to me, use these words. It's not my place to disrespect them by rejecting their vocabulary choices. I know and they know what they mean, so we might as well just use those labels. In any case, it is almost impossible to speak in English without them, unless you want to say, 'supra-rational interdimensional ontology endogenous to custodial ritual complexes' every five minutes. So Dreaming it is." Yunkaporta 2019, p. 22

[2] **On Songlines, or Songspirals, or Song cycles**: "Songspirals are the essence of people in this land, the essence of every clan. We belong to the land and it belongs to us. We sing to the land, sing about the land. We are that land. It sings to us. Songspirals are often called songlines or song cycles. In this book we call them songspirals as they spiral out and spiral in, they go up and down, round and round, forever. They are a *line* within a cycle. They are infinite. They spiral, connecting and remaking. They twist and turn, they move and loop. This is like all

tools, you break the agreement. Using the words of the other worldview: you steal the land, you choke the culture, you steal someone's reality, you exploit the natural resources and its people, you grab for gaining, you ignore the know-how of territories unknown *to you*, you handle the land with ignorance, you pollute water, air, soil; you break the agreement.

Element of Fire

After some weeks of devastating Australian fires, social networks were flooded with posts containing beautiful photos of green buds and branches growing from black carbonized trunks, followed with comments such as: "The triumph of life over death can be seen in these photos of fresh, green plants emerging through the charred remains of Australia's bush."[3]

Image 1. Epicormic buds love ashes and love growing after the fire

Luckily, there is no typical, binary *life-death* division here. In this case, life needs death to regrow, and Death in the life of a plant is an inevitable part of Life itself, in a very literate sense. Many native Australian plants procreate with fire, including the Eucalyptus trees that constitute most of Australian forests. It is an interesting fact that Eucalyptus trees (gum trees) have highly inflammable characteristics and easily spread even more fires into their surroundings. It seems that these plants even love fire in their forests which makes the Australian continent highly inflammable, a land that is simply inseparable from fire.

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our songs. Our songs are not a straight line. They do not move in one direction through time and space. They are a map we follow through Country as they connect to other clans. Everything is connected, layered with beauty. Each time we sing our songspirals we learn more, go deeper, spiral in and spiral out." Gay'Wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 17

[3] *Life finds a way: pictures after the Australian bushfires*. https://brightvibes.com/1613/en/life-finds-a-way-pictures-after-the-australian-bushfires?fbclid=IwAR1-MdAJuxGWX9I9RirceJB8ymRVDct-OLv7MRdzAlbDCF1ixxWvukT4nVc

Still, what kind of fire is good for the country? Without fire, the seeds will not grow. Fire will create the necessary conditions for the soil to activate the seed and create the perfect conditions for the plant; the ashes will become a rich fertilizing source of food for the growing young plant. These types of seeds are called heat-resistant seeds. Ecology experts explain that some plants "have epicormic buds, which are set deep beneath thick bark and are insulated from intense heat. Many shrubs and grasses are also protected by fire by insulating layer of soil, meaning they can resprout quickly."[4] At the same time, burning promotes the growth of sweet grass for grazing animals since fresh green sprouts after a fire provide good food for grazing animals such as kangaroos.

Some of the Eucalyptus tree species keep the black carbonized bark for decades, the dead bark serves as a protection of the healthy living bark layers. In Victoria, the Sheoak National Park was hit by the devastating fires in 1983, known as "Ash Wednesday". Gum trees still have carbonized bark after 36 years and it is a common to see gum trees with carbonized bark that witnessed raging fires in different parts of Australia.

Images 2, 3. Carbonized gum tree bark from 1983 fires in Sheoak National Park, Victoria

It seems strikingly unusual, but many Australian plants anticipate the fires, the same way that many thirsty plants and animals anticipate the rain. From many Australians, indigenous and non-indigenous, I heard that it is the most common thing in the Australian bush to see rapid greening of the ground after fire. So, exactly what kind of fire do these plants love?

[4] Description of epicormic buds: „...dormant vegetative buds embedded beneath the bark that have a regenerative function after crown destruction, for example by fire.", EUCLID - Eucalypts of Australia. Centre for Plant Biodiversity Research. *Glossary: epicormic buds*. http://www.anbg.gov.au/cpbr/cd-keys/euclid3/euclidsample/html/glossary.htm#E

The statement *The triumph of life over death in Australian bush* indicates another fact: many of those who have been witnessing the raging Australian fires from the distance were identifying fires with death and apart from climate change, fire was seen as the very cause of death. Fire was represented here as a killer without mercy that rages and torments, and above all, that we should all be afraid of it, because fire equals death and we, in our Western civilization are horrified by death anyway. Since fire is a force of nature, this sends a subconscious message that we should be afraid of nature. People were searching for causes of the unstoppable spread of fires and found one in pyrocumulonimbus clouds[5] that spread fires by creating thunderstorms. In the BBC article[6] published in January 2020, eucalyptus trees were accused of spreading fires as if they were villains without mercy. Discourse used around these fires went completely in the direction of blaming earthly phenomena for the catastrophe. People felt powerless when confronted by these natural forces, panic increased around the topic of climate change and, once again, nature was found guilty and considered to be the one we should all be afraid of. This is a typical reaction to natural forces that derives from Western culture *don't know-how*; a profoundly problematic constellation of the perception that nature is something outside of you, an object which one should primarily handle and govern. Nature has been treated as an inanimate object that often misbehaves, while not adhering to the imposed rules and should therefore be restricted in many ways: it should be fought against, limited, redirected, erased, and strictly cultivated in order to obey the anthropocentric order of things.

In his highly appreciated book "Dark Emu", author Bruce Pascoe elaborates on the attitude toward fire of two different people, and their two different worldviews, the colonial (basically Western worldview) and the one of Australia's First Nations peoples. He cites Kohen: "While Aboriginal people used fire as a tool for increasing the productivity of their environment, Europeans saw fire as a threat. Without regular low-intensity burning, leaf litter accumulates, and crown fires can result, destroying everything in their path. European settlers feared fire, for it could destroy their houses, their crops and it could destroy them. Yet, the environment which was so attractive to them was created by fire."[7]

We have two worldviews colliding here; one fears fire in the landscape, and therefore fights against it. The other worldview appreciates fire, understands it on a multidimensional level and embraces it as a part of a lifecycle, therefore respects it in a spiritual sense as well, and has been using it in land maintenance for tens of thousands of years.

What has been happening on Australian ground since 1780's? European culture based on a worldview that is afraid of fire is violently overtaking the land which inevitably needs fire management similar to huge gardening where you don't water your plants, but you start a fire in order for them to grow. Of course, the way you should burn plants properly is a part of a very

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[5] *The bushfires in Australia are so big they're generating their own weather — 'pyrocumulonimbus' thunderstorms that can start more fires*. https://www.insider.com/australia-bushfires-generate-pyrocumulonimbus-thunderstorm-clouds-2019-12

[6] Reality Check team. *Australia fires: Have gum trees made the bushfires worse?* https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51132965

[7] Pascoe 2019, p. 165

developed system of fire management that renews the forest and keeps areas clean and nourished and above all, prevents big, intense and raging fires in dry seasons.

For hundreds of generations, Aboriginal people have developed the knowledge and skills to carefully use fire as a vital land management tool. “Fires burns off dead vegetation, long grass and thick scrub and it helps the underground larder of native orchids, lilies and yam daisies. The ash fertilises the soil and encourages new growth. A major food source, a tuberous plant Murnong or Yam Daisy was plentiful in the area and fire was an essential tool in maintaining its abundance.” [8]

Tim Flannery, in his intriguing book “Future Eaters”, elaborates on one point, among other interesting theses, which has been confirmed by many other authors. Flannery states that “European farming methods and the introduction of feral creatures had a catastrophic effect on our local eco systems: the extinction of many native fauna and irreversible damage to much of Australia's land.“[9]

He also writes about the inseparable connection between Australian land and fire:

"The use of fire by Aboriginal people was so widespread and constant that virtually every early explorer in Australia makes mention of it. It was Aboriginal fire that prompted James Cook to call Australia 'This continent of smoke'. Tasman, as early as 1642, saw smoke billow into the sky for days at a time, as did other early explorers. But it was that most poetic of explorers, Ernest Giles who, during his travels in Central Australia, gave us the most vivid image of the inseparability of fire and Aborigines:

The natives were about, burning, burning, ever burning; one would think they were of the fabled salamander race, and lived on fire instead of water.“[10]

Australia is constantly exposed to fires. Many different type of fires. Good and bad fires. There are fires that this landscape cannot live without. These fires are part of old Aboriginal fire management and they represent an intelligent tool for keeping the ecosystem balanced. These fires are useful for various reasons and one of them is preventing big wildfires. Inevitably, since Australian soil and landscape has radically changed from colonial times, Australia has been facing big fires every now and then, which claim many victims, like the loss of animals, plants, humans and property. The most famous of the worst kind of fires happened in 1939, which was called “Black Friday”, in 1983 “Ash Wednesday”, and in 2009 “Black Saturday”. For instance, the Black Saturday fire claimed around 200 human lives.

So many deaths and yet, life blooms rapidly afterwards. This is no wonder or a miracle as shown in romanticized social media posts of Australian landscape freshly sprouting after these raging fires. What we are seeing is a common characteristic of Australian plants that, put simply, love fire.

“The importance of fire to Aboriginal agriculture was evidenced by the fact that after the fires of Ash Wednesday 1983 there was, ‘a phenomenal flowering of tuberous perennials’. These had adapted to the horticultural intercession of man and fire and become a crucial part of the plant ecology.

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[8] Cultural Centre Brambuk, Geriward (Grampians) www.brambuk.com.au
[9] *Eating the Future: The Last 200 Years*. http://www.abc.net.au/science/future/ep3/synop3.htm
[10] Flannery, T. (n.d.) The Future Eaters: An overview. Eco Books.
https://www.ecobooks.com/books/futureat.htm

Daryl Tonkin, long-term resident of the country near Drouin in West Gippsland, remembers the catastrophic fires of 1939, which he attributed to the increasing reluctance of the Europeans to burn and the habit of leaving the heads of felled trees unburnt.

Even so, the regeneration after the fires was incredible: 'A fire is good for a forest; the seeds cannot germinate without hot ashes to cover them. In the old days, the blackfellas who lived in the bush looked after the animals and birds by burning the bush for them… Plants that have been dormant for years will grow after fire.'

As recently as 1983, autumn fires at Anglesea, in south-western Victoria, resulted in an incredible flowering of tuberous plants the next spring. Grasslands are known to benefit from periodic burns but little recognition has been paid to the role fire played in the promotion of the tuberous plants that were staples in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander diet."[11]

How come that so little recognition has been given to the role of fire in the promotion of tuberous plants that were basic food staples in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders diet? Why did that seem so insignificant or uninteresting?

Image 4. Yam daisy or Murnong

Dandelion-resembling yam daisy or murnong tuber (*Microseris lanceolata*) was an essential plant important to Aboriginal diet. Murnong is a tuberous plant from which little sweet potatoes are harvested. It still grows in bushlands in Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory,[12] but incomparably much less than before colonial times. Part of Bruce Pascoe's success of the book "Dark Emu" was highlighting the fact how First Nations Peoples had developed a complex agricultural system developed over tens of thousands of years, and undoubtedly, thoroughly different to the European one. Bruce Pascoe showed convincing evidence how Aboriginal people lived settled lives. He demolished the myth of them being nomadic hunter-gatherer economies, but that they were instead living in sophisticated economies, with farming and irrigation practices, and

[11] Pascoe 2019, p.171
[12] Edible Australian Tucker Bush: Murnong Yam Daisy. https://tuckerbush.com.au/murnong-yam-daisy-microseris-lanceolata/

highly developed livelihoods. He mentions "…that people had worked their gardens so well and for so long that large earthen mounds had been created during the process – but so little consideration was given to this land management that, only a few years later, Europeans couldn't say who or what had created these prominent terraces.

This last observation is evidence of a deliberate farming technique, one which any modern farmer would recognise as good soil management. The fact that explorers and settlers report seeing such activity in so many different parts of the country is an indication that it wasn't an isolated technique. Cultivation was a feature of Aboriginal land use."[13]

Unfortunately, and unbelievable as it may sound, for most Australians this has been a hidden part of their history, deleted by colonial discourse at the time, until the first publication of the above-mentioned book in 2014. Aboriginal civilization was previously presented as primitive hunter-gathering society. Such a misinterpretation and misjudgement of Aboriginal economy and culture has been taught in school until very recently. This made "Dark Emu" a real revelation and an enormous contribution in rewriting World's history. What colonial history worldwide has in common is that indigenous people were disowned in the most brutal ways, and in case of Australia, undervaluing First Nations Peoples until contemporary times is tightly linked to the lack of recognition of what happened to the land that was taken from the indigenous population. What happened to the soil, and to which degree the landscape was transformed by Europeans and what consequences this brought to the environment was hardly recognized by the Australian public. One of the reasons for neither recognizing the Australian tuberous plants nor to the role of fire in the landscape and the connection of these two might be found in the colonial practice on which contemporary Australia was built: the dispossession of Aboriginal land.

Gradual disappearance of the tuberous plant yam daisy is tightly linked to the dispossession of the Aboriginal land which is basically all of Australia. As the British took away their land, the practices used by Aboriginal people to maintain the land, including fire management, began to disappear. First Nations Peoples were either displaced, or killed, or died from hunger or diseases brought over by Europeans.

"The disappearance of the yam daisy is directly related to the post-colonial fire regime. The introduction of sheep and the exclusion of controlled fire withdrew several crucial elements of the plant's ecological requirements. The only yam plants to be found today are on railway verges and other lands fenced off from livestock and where no superphosphate has been used."[14]

Bruce Pascoe used the diaries of many colonists to bring authenticity to the subject of Australian colonial history. By doing so, he basically reversed the idea of history using the same tools with which this idea was created in the first place: the journals and diaries of explorers and colonists. In 1909 the colonist Isaac Batey noted on yam plants: "Where once abundant they have become quite extinct for the district where the writer was raised in this 1909 might be searched without discovering a solitary example… Elsewhere it has been intimated that our domestic animals had eaten them out, yet there

[13] Pascoe 2019, p. 20
[14] Pascoe 2019, p. 168

was another factor of destruction in the soil becoming hardened with the continuous tramping of sheet cattle or horses."[15]

During the 19th century, non-native species were introduced to the Australian continent. Bruce Pascoe:

"European colonists cleared or damaged bush because they did not value it and introduced to more than sixty-five per cent of the continent mono-cultures of non-Australian species they did value… it is our southern Eurasian ancestors… who are actually nomads because we overpopulate… damage land in the process, then wage wars on neighbours to take their land in order to continues to over-populate, and on it goes."[16] The result of the introduction of so many species completely unsuitable and therefore harming for the Australian ground was the hardening of soil which made rivers flood higher than ever before.[17] Diaries also proof that the land once meticulously managed by Aboriginal people, radically changed just within a couple of decades after the arrival of the Europeans due to the general ignorance of the colonial settlers who, by denying the developed Aboriginal culture ignored the Aboriginal methods that were crucial for maintaining exactly that type of land.

Being displaced for Aboriginal people was the same as to be brought to the verge of extinction. As it is well known Aboriginal people have always had a sacred connection to their land. This has always been part of their Law, translated by Europeans into English as *Dreamtime* or *Dreaming*, and according to that Law, or *Dreamtime*, their migrations were allowed exclusively within a certain clan's territory, not anywhere else. Aboriginal people are part of a 65-thousand-year-old warless civilization. Inside of Dreamtime, a sophisticated structure of living that paid respect to the Earth, came from the Earth, co-creating with the Earth, inside that Law and that worldview no one had the right to fight for land. "It was all done not for a benefit of a prince, or a king, or a queen, or an army, or a god, it was done for Mother Earth herself. Not some esoteric being, but the Earth, the visible god of the Earth." These quoted sentences are an excerpt from Bruce Pascoe's talk at the Rainbow Serpent festival in Victoria in January 2019.[18]

Western written history is a history of war; it is a written and executed repetition of war talk. Wars are being perpetuated through war talk, repeating the war matrix, along with its execution. It is not that we haven't learned anything from history, on the contrary, we learned very well, we learned the *war talk* and *war walk*: the repetitive pattern of conflict and, therefore, history is repeating itself wrapped up in and protected by greed. At the beginning of this text, I mentioned the element of War being executed through the element of Fire. The problem is that the element of Fire is, as any other natural resource, being misused for destructive causes. Usage of this earthly element should be defined as the essential element of landscape, and protected the same way that water is protected, in a similar way national parks exist. Water is perceived as the element that gives birth to life that we are familiar with. Although being massively exploited as well, water is still perceived as something deeply nourishing. Fire is the same! Fire nourishes us and the land, it gives us warmth, it sustains life, *we stole fire from the gods*, don't you remember? The element of Fire is a natural resource and it

[15] Pascoe 2019, p. 21
[16] Pascoe 2019, p. 194
[17] Pascoe 2019, p. 23
[18] *Dark Emu: Black Seeds — Unveiling Precolonial Aboriginal Agriculture - Bruce Pascoe*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt-N3JJ7cuw

should be defined as such and protected at the highest level so that it will never again be abused. The most profitable industry, the war industry is based on the theft of the element of Fire. Corporate thinking feeds on the state of conflict and it needs fire to feed the conflict. Therefore it is producing war machines that maintain an inflamed status quo on Earth and all living creatures suffer from that out-of-control inflammation. Like bushfires, wars are raging and they went wild ages ago. Fire was kidnapped from its original home, misused and taken away from its original purpose. As it was abused, it went mad. Unresolved anger feeds conflicts, it continues the collective trauma on the entire planet, and this is then being passed on to future generations creating a killing machine. This killing machine is systems of war. We are living in systems of war rooted in the exploitation of Life. But – Fire supports life, so let us give this amazing phenomenon of Earth a chance to be perceived as an exclusively supportive element of nature and of our societies. Let us reshape and transform our attitude towards fires and our usage of fire. Fires kill because all our natural resources of the Earth are collectively misused. Bushfires went wildly out of proportion, they are even called wildfires, since the element of Fire, along with the other elements of our earthly cosmos have been horribly exploited. In comparison, mining exploits the element of Earth, and this has been addressed by environmental protection, and the same goes for hydropower plants and other industries that exploit the element of Water.

How can we define the element of Fire in order for this to become visible subject for legal and environmental protection and for the protection of the state of peace on this planet?

The misuse of fire is a war crime of the first degree. War is a misuse of fire. There is no war that can justify the misuse of the element of Fire. Therefore, the demand for peace is equal to the basic human right for the protection of natural resources.

It is not an esoteric perception that spotted this link, neither is this a philosophical argument, this is far from intellectualizing the disaster; it is about common sense. It's about witnessing the current situation, it is about love and being bold enough to think in a wider perspective about the Earth and about ourselves, the freedom to think in the esoteric way as well when necessary, to grasp a bigger context than the objects themselves, and the objectification of life, wider than discourse and more far-reaching than just discussions. It is about the blatant need for action that is aware of a greater dimension rooted in peace. This is a demand for peace.

Here another excerpt from Bruce Pascoe's talk at the festival Rainbow Serpent, about Songlines: "So those old people came up with this mighty solution and as we look around these hillsides, try to look past the Earth in its current predicament and think back to when those old people were looking around these hillsides, and where these old people were communicating along Songlines to people who lived in east coast jungles up in the north, and they were communicating with people who were living in the red deserts in the centre and they were communicating with people who lived in Broome. All those people communicating together and all coming to the conclusion that they would not fight each other for land… Because the easiest thing on earth is to fight, our whole political system is based on the adversarial system of a Western law where you fight. And there are winners

and there are losers. Politicians, sporting commentators speak gloatingly about the winners and the losers rather than speaking respectfully about all of us, all of us equal. "[19]

Life within the Dreamtime, within a cosmological patterning[20]; within the Aboriginal understanding of reality, was lived through, experienced and expressed in their Songlines, their communication tool and tool for Creation and system for the existential mapping of the World, of their paths, habitats and landscapes. Displacement did inconceivable harm to these people because it broke the highly functional chain of Dreamtime, the sacred values which kept them healthy, balanced and deeply connected to Mother Earth. It broke the Songlines, lines that are comparable to the common umbilical cord of that very culture to Mother Earth as well as the individual umbilical cord of each and every Aboriginal person to Mother Earth. Displacement broke the lines that enabled Aboriginal people to possess a highly precious understanding of how to keep their land healthy, balanced and happy. These lines reflected the relationships within a certain clan and between the clans, which was seen in their utilization of the land, their know-how, land management, and in the most interesting practice for this text, their fire management. Taking away the land from original custodians and trusted friends who understood it best and maintained it accordingly, resulted in a disappearance of their practices and their agriculture.

"To shape the land… It was a major totem, a friend. People knew when to use it and when not to. They knew if they released it according to universal law and local practice it would do what they wanted. If it did not then they, not it, had offended… Like songlines, fire unified Australia. It locked the landscape into long-term widespread patterns, because neighbours obeyed the same law, and co-ordinated their burning or non-burning."[21]

The colonial worldview not only denied the existence of a refined agriculture of the Aboriginal civilization, it completely denied the very existence of Aboriginal people. *Terra nullius* was claimed which basically means: "You do not exist." Bruce Pascoe's "Dark Emu" set the ground and began talking about Australia's colonial past and land rights in a new light. It was easy for the British to claim *Terra nullius* since they had denied all signs of any developed culture in order to easily grab the land and use all its natural resources. They simply claimed, these black nomadic savages have no agriculture. Since there is no agriculture, there are no settlers, since there are no settlers, no one owns the land. Inevitably "Dark Emu" shifts the discourse on land rights.

Yam daisy is proof and it has already started to bloom into a new discourse that shows some fresh paths to reconnect the broken Songlines. It will be the seed for the path, the gateway through which to overcome the horror caused by the mainstream predisposition of exploitation.

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[19] *Dark Emu: Black Seeds — Unveiling Precolonial Aboriginal Agriculture - Bruce Pascoe*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt-N3JJ7cuw

[20] Arabena 2015, p. 17

[21] Gammage in Pascoe 2019, p. 174

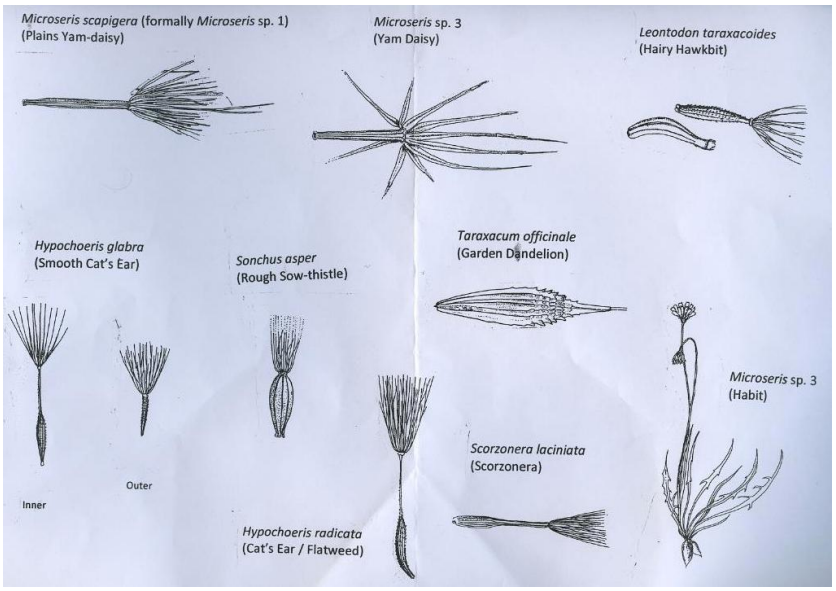

Image 5. Seeds from dandelion-like plants

The European farming management methods according to European knowledge turned out to be highly unsuitable for the Australian landscape. An important part of Australian colonial case is exactly the usage of wrong methods for this soil which caused Australia to suffer up until and throughout the whole 20th century as a direct result of such misuse. Improper land management and continuous denial to bring back the methods of old Aboriginal land management caused these catastrophic fires in the same degree as the global climate change.

The saddest and most shocking fact is that the extent of this catastrophe could have been stopped if an earlier focus was put on the re-implementation of the old Aboriginal methods of land management, primarily the practice of "cultural burning".

"Cultural burning" or "cultural fire management", as put by "The Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation", is a contemporary term to "describe burning practices developed by Aboriginal people to enhance the health of the land and its people. Cultural burning can include burning or prevention of burning of Country for the health of particular plants and animals such as native grasses, emu, black grevillea, potoroo, bushfoods, threatened species or biodiversity in general. It may involve patch burning to create different fire intervals across the landscape or it could be used for fuel and hazard reduction. Fire may be used to gain better access to Country, to clean up important pathways, maintain cultural responsibilities and as part of culture heritage management. It is ceremony to welcome people to Country or it could also be as simple as a campfire around which people gather to share, learn, and celebrate."[22]

The fires of 2020 would have happened in any case, simply because the land was too dry and previous years have been described by fire fighters as being too wet to perform hazard reduction burning. But, such harsh consequences might have been avoided if the crucial cultural fire management had been widely used all around the country. It is not unusual to have hot summers in

[22] Firesticks, Cultural burning: healthy communities, healthy landscapes
https://www.firesticks.org.au/community/

Australia. Still, preventative methods – such as cultural burning – were at their disposal, but not much recognition was paid to these practices that continue to be available, even nowadays.

Australia has not invested much into new research around that topic although only 10 years have passed since another devastating fire, Black Saturday in 2009, claimed about 200 lives; 36 years passed since Ash Wednesday in 1983 and 81 years passed since Black Friday in 1939. In 1939, there was no climate change and inspite of that, the landscape burned like hell. These fires were also fought by exceptional people such as Australian fire fighters and yet the prevention methods known for tens of thousands of years were ignored. How is this possible?

Why has there been no larger amount of funding throughout all these years directed to the research of effects of cultural burning in fire-sensitive areas? How is it possible to ignore any kind of potentially effective solution in preventing the devastating fires on a highly flammable continent in such pressing times of climate change? Who can be responsible for that? Is it the government? Is it the discourse around land rights? Is it an outdated worldwiew? Is it the people who chose this government? Is it the people who create and feed the sense of feeling powerless when faced by climate change and support the spreading of fear and panic rather than actively working on and implementing solutions for each local case on this planet? Who *burned* the collective solution-focused thinking that was in favour of *living together* and replaced it with fear, seeding hate and spreading violence? Why was it hard to come across the term "cultural burning" in any of the mainstream Australian media? If cultural burning is one of the possible solutions, and indeed it is, why wasn't it all over the covers of newspaper, blogs, and social media? How come that I was just lucky enough to meet someone on my travels through Australia who actually practices cultural burning? So many people all around the world were concerned about these fires and sympathized with all living creatures suffering from the fires; social media was literally burning simultaneously along with Australian fires. All eyes of the world were directed towards Australia, fully sympathising with Australia. Concern, sorrow, fear, feeling powerless due to being unable to help, feeling devastated when watching thousands of animals and plants suffering immensely, thinking where is this heading, how can this be stopped, is there any way to help from so far away; will all Australian forests be burned to the ground? Social media was drowning in this kind of sentiments without a single word or hashtag about cultural burning apart from a few specialized specialized web sites. How is this possible?

Element: Care for the Land

"Caring for country entails practical, ritual and metaphysical elements, such as the asking and giving of permission to access country or the performance of rituals that welcome, introduce or reintroduce people to country. It also involves burning off dry vegetation to clear it away for new growth when the annual rains arrive.
…caring for country involves refreshing images of Lalai[23] beings that are found in caves and rock

[23] *Lalai* stands for *Dreaming* or *Dreamtime*

shelters. Today, caring for country also includes removing litter that has been left in places visited by tourists and, importantly, making decisions about what can happen in country. "[24]

For someone who did not grow up in Australia – like myself – it is deeply shocking to come here and witness on spot the recent colonial history of that continent. Just to be reading and listening about it is deeply disturbing, painful and horrifying. It is another realisation that this history is just as shocking and terrifying as these raging fires, which apparently no human action could stop. Even for such an outsider and visitor as myself, it is more than obvious that an all-encompassing reconciliation regarding this issue is necessary on all levels and that this reconciliation is a burning issue for Australia.

Especially when you find yourself surrounded by the captivating beauty of Australia at exactly the time when the land is burning and suffering from raging fires, it is almost impossible not to spot the link between these two burning manifestations in this present time. For both of them are equally painful for this outside observer. Still, these two issues do not get equal treatment in the media or within the conventional discourse of modern Australian history and yet they might be sharing the very same cause. Colonial times left a trace on Australian ground that is very recognizable in contemporary times. Scars are visible at various levels, social, political and environmental. These scars are mentioned here not just in the metaphorical sense; they are palpable and can actually be touched with bare hands in the landscape. How do I support this statement? Dried riverbeds, forests with monocultures of gum trees where various species of gum trees should be growing together, terrible drought desolating the Australian land… At first sight, one would consider these to be typical signs of climate change, which is a global destructive phenomenon, almost impossible to be stopped at this point. When it comes to Australia, however, this is only partially true. Yes, without any doubt, and without denying climate change, which is of course also happening here: at that particular time when the wildfires started to rage, they were not able to stop because the landscape was very dry. Still, how come that the landscape was that parched? Is it due to climate change? The overall answer is yes. But, the correct answer is – not exclusively and not primarily. The only correct answer about the reasons in the background, according to the author of this text, will only be found by approaching these highly burning issues with a complex analysis based on the interconnectedness of the following elements: fire as broader phenomenon, fire management, thorough understanding the changes that took place in the soil and landscape since colonial times and the additional changed circumstances of climate change. Furthermore, recognizing the history of agriculture, land and land management, land rights and rights to land management, authority over land and fire management, the appreciation as well as resumption of old Aboriginal land and fire management methods. This will once again give back voice and space to Aboriginal communities in the areas of land management, returning the natural resources to their traditional custodians and show a clear willingness for indulging and fully embracing the Aboriginal understanding of interconnectedness of land, creating a community, society embedded in Earth and the interconnected dynamics of these elements in the universe.

[24] Rose 2011, p. 45

Element of Land and Element of Together

Every landscape on this planet consists of ecosystems that are created by the kinship between species. Plants of the same habitat share a kinship that keeps the ecosystem balanced enabling it to function in an optimal way. Breaking such a kinship results in an imbalance and, in addition to other consequences, brings about changes in the climate.

"Sections of the bush were burnt periodically to promote lush growth, in what most commentators assume is an attempt to attract game. That is probably one of the peripheral functions but more and more evidence indicates that fore was part of a planned program of cropping or, as some researchers referred to it, fire-stick farming."[25]

"Firestick farming" is a term Australia will be hearing more and more about. A firestick is a tool in Aboriginal fire management; a short burning branch (or branches) with which one can set fire to a desired area of the bush planned for a *clean burn*[26]. "Firestick farming" represents fire management that is nowadays called cultural burning and is practiced in some areas of Australia. The fact that it is not widely used is also a reason for this year's wildfires that left the entire world speechless. In 2009, the year of the devastating Black Saturday fires, the Firesticks organisation was founded in Queensland. They carry out, educate and promote cultural burning.

Cultural burning is far more than a new method in the spectrum of hazard reduction burning; it is a recognized official Australian wildfire prevention technique. Cultural burning sets focus on re-establishing the kinship between the species in a certain ecosystem; it pays full attention to fire relationships of the area. It is part of the thousands of years old holistic Australian know-how, passing down for many generations the knowledge of what is good for that particular land and all the creatures living on it. In that sense, this is the most efficient wildfires prevention technique, as it helps bring back the lost qualities of the soil, forests, bush, waters, etc. by paying attention to all the native species of a certain area and acknowledging them.

Aboriginal women explain it in the book "Country of the Heart" on an example of North Australia in this way:

"The term 'cultural fire' connotes human agency, but the fires of North Australia are more complex than that, as the story of the Chickenhawk tells us. Smoke is part of a communicative web in which many living things are involved and pay attention. The firebirds sense the smoke and come circling around, preparing to dive in as soon as there is an opportunity. Some of them are fire-makers themselves. They swoop down, grab a firestick, carry it away and drop it ahead of the fire, thus encouraging it to keep moving."[27]

Therefore, a firestick is a tool to bring fire to the land that desires it. That fire is considered to be good fire. A firestick is a communication tool and serves as a medium and co-creator between landscape, fire, the humans applying it, animals and spirits which all collaborate in this process. It is a common connection and represents the lost link between all those above-mentioned co-creators of

[25] Pascoe 2019, p. 167
[26] Rose 2011, p. 51
[27] Rose 2011, p. 51

good fire; it is the one that carries the potential of creating small, healthy and harmonious community living in accordance with the ecosystem. Therefore, cultural burning is holistic fire management which is also a social tool for relearning community living and recognising oneself as an intrinsic part of a healthy, responsible, engaged and peaceful community.

"'Burn grass': this is what we call the procedure of burning the country. We call it, simply, 'burn grass' or 'burn grass time'. This is the time to burn our country. It is part of our responsibility in looking after our country. If you don't look after country, country won't look after you.

'Burn grass is an ancient as time itself. Very briefly, the Chickenhawk took a firestick from a fire that was lit for a big ceremony and flew to Kurrindju, and as he flew across the country he burnt it.

'Burn grass' takes place after the wet season when the grass starts drying. This takes place every year. The country tells you when and where to burn. To carry out this task you must know your country. You wouldn't you just would not attempt to burn someone else's country. One of the reasons for burn is saving country. Right across our country we have very dense grasses, even ranges and timbered areas. If our country wasn't burnt, then spear grass would form a thick underlying mat of mulch, even in as little as three years. If a fire was lit either purposely or through natural causes, especially through the height of the dry season, it would do unfold damage to the flora and fauna. The ecosystem would suffer."

"'Burn grass time' gives us good hunting. It brings animals such as wallabies, kangaroos and turkeys onto the new fresh feed of green grasses and plants. But it does not only provide for us but also for animals, birds, reptiles and insects. After the 'burn' you will see hundreds of white cockatoos digging for grass roots. The birds fly to the smoke to snatch up insects. Wallabies, kangaroos, bandicoots, birds, rats, mice, reptiles and insects all access there area for food. If it wasn't burnt they would not be able to penetrate the dense and long spear grass and other grasses for these sources of food. "[28]

As closure of this text and as the final and crucial element for a better understanding of the key importance of cultural burning in times of bushfire emergencies I bring here the full talk with Oliver Costello, a co-founder of the Firesticks organisation. The talk was lead at the Yabun festival in Sidney, on 26th January 2020.

Cultural burning: THE KEY ELEMENT

Q: What is the difference between back burning and cultural burning and hazard reduction burning?

Back burning is when you already have a fire and you backburn into it and you want to create that fire back into the other fire so that will put the fire out and stop the fire from coming further. It works like that, says it's a fire over here and I am standing here and I want to put this fire out, if I light a fire here, against the wind, so the wind is going this way, it will back burn into it. So because I am standing here and I might have my feet on water, I can put it out one each, so you got only fire on the other side and it will backburn into it. That's a principle that we do it cultural fire management and the western culture management does the same thing.

[28] Rose 2011, p. 48

Hazard reduction is prescribed...
there are different types of hazard reduction, but prescribed burning is a form of hazard reduction.

Hazard reduction could also be like mowing, slashing the grass and other types of vegetation management, but when you're using hazard reduction burning it's called prescribed burning in kind of technical terms. So what that means they are trying to reduce the fuel in a certain area, so when a wildfire comes they have a strategic advantage to be able to suppress the fire or they've got recently burnt area they can use to help the fire prevent from running through.

Cultural burning is really about burning for the culture of the land. All the plants and animals have fire relationships. When they come together in a place, that's like the country type, that's like where they come together, so we have to breed the country to imply the right fire. There are always indicators; fuel is an indicator, but it's not the only one. We're also looking at where the parent trees are, we're looking at the soils, and all the other plants and animals, we're looking at the things we know belong there because of the kinship. So, when some things belong there we can deal they belong there. Other things we maybe know they don't belong there and maybe we're not sure, and so if we imply the right fire for that country, the things that don't belong there, they will probably not persist, they might get killed by the fire. But, if they belong somewhere else, we have the responsibility to protect them where they belong as well.

So cultural fire management is not just about the burn here and burn there, it's about the whole cultural fire regime. Cause if we want have impact on the species that doesn't belong somewhere, you always have to look after that somewhere else. That's a responsibility that comes out of it.

Cultural burning is a much more holistic way of managing the land, and in a technical sense there are a whole lot of differences too. So, hazard reduction concentrates on fuel... Sometimes hazard reduction burning can be ok...On fuel management that ...like dead grass, leaves, logs, all these stuff that fire needs to burn. So you can't burn dirt, you know what I mean... Dirt doesn't burn. The only things that burn in dirt is like organic matter ... So above the soil land is all that stuff that builds up, dead matter, leaf, dead sticks and lots of other stuff. And then you have things like grass and like small shrubs, bushes, and then you got trees, and big trees… And they're all gone to like organic matter that can burn ... So what agencies do? They look at all that fuel in the landscape, we need to reduce the fuel by this month so they develop a burn plan and they burn it.

Often they burn it in wrong way; they burn the canopy and maybe they burn the species that belong there and they kill them and there's whole like negative impacts that comes after hazard reduction when is done in the wrong way.

Q: Basically – they break the kinship of the species?

They break Cultural Law. So, we have Law that is about what belongs there. Some things that belong there you might have a negative impact on they might get burnt by the fire. But if they come back more, then that's ok. But if they don't come back then you're in trouble.

There are all these responsibilities that we have, to look after the canopy... Not in all forest types, but in most forests types the canopy is sacred, and it's the place to be protected because it regulates the light, the moisture in the soil, it's a habitat, it's quite a lot of food resources. So, if you're burning

that, you're breaking that law and if you're burning in other people's country without their authority, you're breaking the law. Most of, if not all the fire agencies are actually breaking lots of cultural laws they don't even know about. That is why it is so important the work that Firesticks is doing is actually not just teach people, this is how you burn it in a technical sense... Say you do it in an appropriate cultural sense, under the laws which is ... The local people are the ones have the authority. They might not be the one to do the burning, but as long as they have the authority to decide who's doing it and not to do it… Because our country our customs... when you're a guest in someone else's land, or when you're traveling someone else's land, they might give you responsibilities... So if someone has told you, this is your camp, these are the foods you can eat, and this where you can travel and go. It might also say you can burn here to; because to look after that camp you should burn on it, you should burn around it, you should cleanse it, cause otherwise, custodians are gonna come and have to clean up after everyone. When people learn the law, they understand, these are the appropriate ways to do business, to support people on country

Q: When you talk about cultural burning and that the things are not maintained as they should be... Like maintaining the land completely in the wrong way... you started your earlier talk with that this is what happened as well with (this year's fires), although you had fires in 2009 ...

There were many bad fires. The most recent fires are the worst fires by now...

Q: So you said that this is a direct result of colonization...

Yes.

Q: So, which are the most important factors that changed the landscape when we talk about colonization that brought consequences into today, into the contemporary time? Which are those factors, maybe for example the settlers introducing new species, cattle, plants? And – what about mining? Carbon emission has of course something to do with it, but this is maybe easier to understand because everyone is talking about climate change and reduction of carbon emission, but no one really talks about the specific case of Australia where you really had the entire landscape radically changed in just a few decades. So, do you consider this the kind of radical change of landscape, which still has consequences nowadays, like the fires that we are witnessing in 2020?

Absolutely. The fires we are seeing now … (That's) why I said they are direct result of colonization… because colonization is still here, still happening and it's suppressing people from ability to manage their land... much as because of access to land, but also suppression of people's abilities to manage their own resources, so traditionally we didn't have a monetary economy. Our economy was based on our resources, so our responsibility was to look after these resources so that we could exchange knowledge and we could have sustenance and food and lots of that stuff... and we can share that with other people, so that's how we maintained our economy. In a modern sense we had our land taken away, we don't have access to the resources, we don't have monetary reparations for that. There's no compensation, there's no financial compensation for the lack of access to our resources and use of our resources. So what we're saying, since colonization is that there's been suppression of fire, there's been a takeover of the fire management regime; some of the early settlers picked up some of the fire management and that's continue today. A lot of the fire management you see in Australia is a derivative of Aboriginal fire management, but it's lost its culture. It's lost its identity, it's

lost that authority, and that's a critical thing; we get lots of farmers and foresters saying stuff like, yeah we burnt like the old way, and they support us, and we really appreciate their feedback cause we want them to burn the right way and some of them have burnt pretty well in the areas, others have burnt really badly, so we don't want to say it's all good because otherwise we'll just perpetuate the current situation. We are saying, it's good that some paid attention and started to mimic our old people, but you haven't taken on the full set of values; because otherwise this wouldn't be happening. That's that sort of challenge around being able to kind of have that kind of dialogue about regaining that recognition that should be there around the roll because it's not just burning, there's a lot of whole cultural practices which are really critical, being out of access resources, hunt, gather, camp, maintaining cultural lives. Ceremonies like language, song, they are all of part of fire management, because there are values that are part of the identity, so we're not just saying we just want to teach people how to learn to fire, No, no, we want show you how our culture manages the land and how that can be really important pathway for you to respect us and for us to support. People who live here, people who want to live in this landscapes, they're better of using us to manage them, than what's currently happening. Because under the current regimes, there's more biodiversity loss, there's more livestock lost, more human loss, more property loss than we've ever seen since the settlement of Australia. And it is only going to get worse, because the land is getting sicker and this has been happening for hundreds of years. Some parts of the landscape have had more active fire management and its legacy should issues are not as bad. Good example is in Northern parts of Australia they developed indigenous fire programmes linked to carbon abatement, some of those landscapes only saw Aboriginal people, some of those landscapes maintained cultural burning forever, but lots of them that are in decline and the fires started getting bigger and bigger. That has happened over decades, cause in a lot of those areas people are still leaving fairly traditionally up until 50, 60 years ago, and from then on sort on those massive declines. They've been able to fix a lot of their country in last 10 or 15 years, they were able to stop a lot of these massive wildfires. They have really different ecology and I'm not saying it's the same... They have very different ecology, they have very like annual fire seasons that are quite hot, the fire seasons in the ... south, because of the subtropical, where I come from its very subtropical… It's quite different ecology and climate, but it's the same principle. Instead of us having these really large annual fires, which to be honest, we might start seeing, but it takes time for the fuel to build up and it's a different fuel, and it is much more diverse system. But, it's the same principle: if you look after the land, you burn it, you still have wild fires and some of these wild fires will have negative impact, but that will be much smaller, they'll have less impact when you're managing the land because they don't have the levels of fuel and because one burn here and one burn there is not a fire regime. When you have a proper fire you have a mosaic of landscape areas that have been actively managed over tens of hundreds of years, so through that succession you have different ages between fires, you have different types of ecosystems that have different responses to fires, and when the wildfire happens, the fire behaves very differently so it doesn't have the ability to turn into a firestorm, because it simply doesn't have the fuel. And because of the moisture and the soil, cause we do not burn the canopy, we did a hot fire here, we burnt all the fuels, yes... it builds up yes, but you scorched the canopy, so you got fuel on the ground within weeks or months and it all dries out cause there is no canopy anymore and some...the ground gets hot and there's a lot of areas where there's all these midstory fuels that are all dried out too. It's easy for fires to burn through areas and even few weeks ago... The fires have come back... of course they are! And then people say we did a backburning here five years ago, and fires gone through that, Of course there's a fire coming through

here! We understand this knowledge and people are always telling us, you know it's climate change, it's bla bla bla... We actually understand what you're talking about, but you don't understand what we're talking about. I acknowledge that climate change is having a massive impact on the fire regimes, and yes, windows for burning are moving... but under our processes, we had different windows that we can burn in, cause we are burning under different conditions. We're storm burning, we're burning early season burns cause they wouldn't bother burning cause they say that's not effective. Early season burning, that's all the stuff that we do early, and that's those windows that are moving around...

Climate's a big challenge and we are not disregarding it, but we are also saying that, our baseline is managing the land and that's what we can do, we can't stop the rest of the world from polluting the atmosphere, we can talk about how important is to understand the impact it is having on us, but we can get started managing that impact, we can actually start helping the land to be resilient we can help mitigate the response, the impacts of the climate change, we can help create the pathways for the animals and plants to move as climate change changes the climate and their ability... That's all the knowledge we have; if a tree only survives in certain microclimate and we understand that, we can start to manage the land around that and they can move without that microclimate change... We understand that knowledge, it has been happening for thousands of years.

Q: How many states have implemented cultural burning by now, have they done it at all? What are the levels of prevention that have actually been done at the Australian level, or at least at state level? Or we can talk about New South Wales, because in 2009 it was Black Saturday, and you said you cofounded Firesticks in 2009. What was done for prevention, were you contacted, in way: „…we really urgently need your skills and knowledge"?

Basically, there are forms of cultural fire management happening all over the country, but the challenge is, it's not resourced, and we're not recognized... There's some really great people in agencies and government and we've seen some great support from areas, but, it takes time for things to happen. We've been running national indigenous fire workshops, and we've had state agencies New South Wales, Victoria and this year, 2020 we gonna be in Queensland. We've been getting support for the fire workshops, but we actually need investment in a national training programme, we actually need investment in on ground fire practitioners to be able to implement the burning, because having a little project here and little project there, that's good as it can be. We're getting these great outcomes; we actually need a whole reshift... We need to reshape the landscape, we need the whole shift, so at the moment, 99% of the resources is going to government agencies or other NGOs. I guess I reckon Aboriginal organizations getting about 1 percent. I haven't done the math on it but I reckon it's pretty close to real reflective of the investment. They spent hundreds of millions of dollars in preparing for fires, and managing well fires in responses... We are sort of operating on tens of thousands. I think there is a lot more work to be done there. In response, we have known that these wild fires are coming, we didn't expect them to be so significant, because we've been out in the landscape seeing all that unhealthy country and when the weather conditions are right, it's all going to burn. That's really obvious to us. And that's what we're trying to get the message out there and say, now's the time to start to listen, now's the time to start …. the resources. We're not asking for new jobs, we're asking for old jobs back, we're not asking for the new investment, we're asking for the investment that should have been there from the beginning. We hope that people will start to listen and start to come and work with us.

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