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ABORIGINAL RESPONSES TO CLIMATE CHANGE IN ARID ZONE AUSTRALIA

Regional Understandings and Capacity Building for Adaptation

Aboriginal Environments Research Centre

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**THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND**
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The role of NCCARF is to lead the research community in a national interdisciplinary effort to generate the information needed by decision-makers in government, business and in vulnerable sectors and communities to manage the risk of climate change impacts.

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ABSTRACT

500 words

This study takes an interior arid-zone region, the Upper Georgina River Basin area, as a pilot study in which to investigate and document Aboriginal perceptions and knowledge of climate change, and the capacity of regional communities to respond and adapt to climate change at a number of levels, specifically preparedness for specific types of climate change, land and riverine management, settlement infrastructure adaptation and enterprise-building responses. Based on these findings, a set of Regional Climate Adaptation Planning goals, principles and strategies will be generated. The relevance of aspects of this Climate Adaptation Plan will be extrapolated for use in other arid zone regions. The implications for climate change policy at different jurisdictional levels (including across state and local government boundaries) will also be analysed. The study will be carried out by a multi-disciplinary team of researchers and local community and business personnel who are already engaged in research projects in the region, led by staff of the Aboriginal Environments Research Centre at University of Queensland and Myuma Pty Ltd, an Aboriginal enterprise and training organisation at Camooweal in north-west Queensland. This project will be supplemented with an Arid Zone Field Station by University of Queensland which together with the Plan and baseline data will equip the region with an enhanced capacity to tackle climate change in the 21st century.

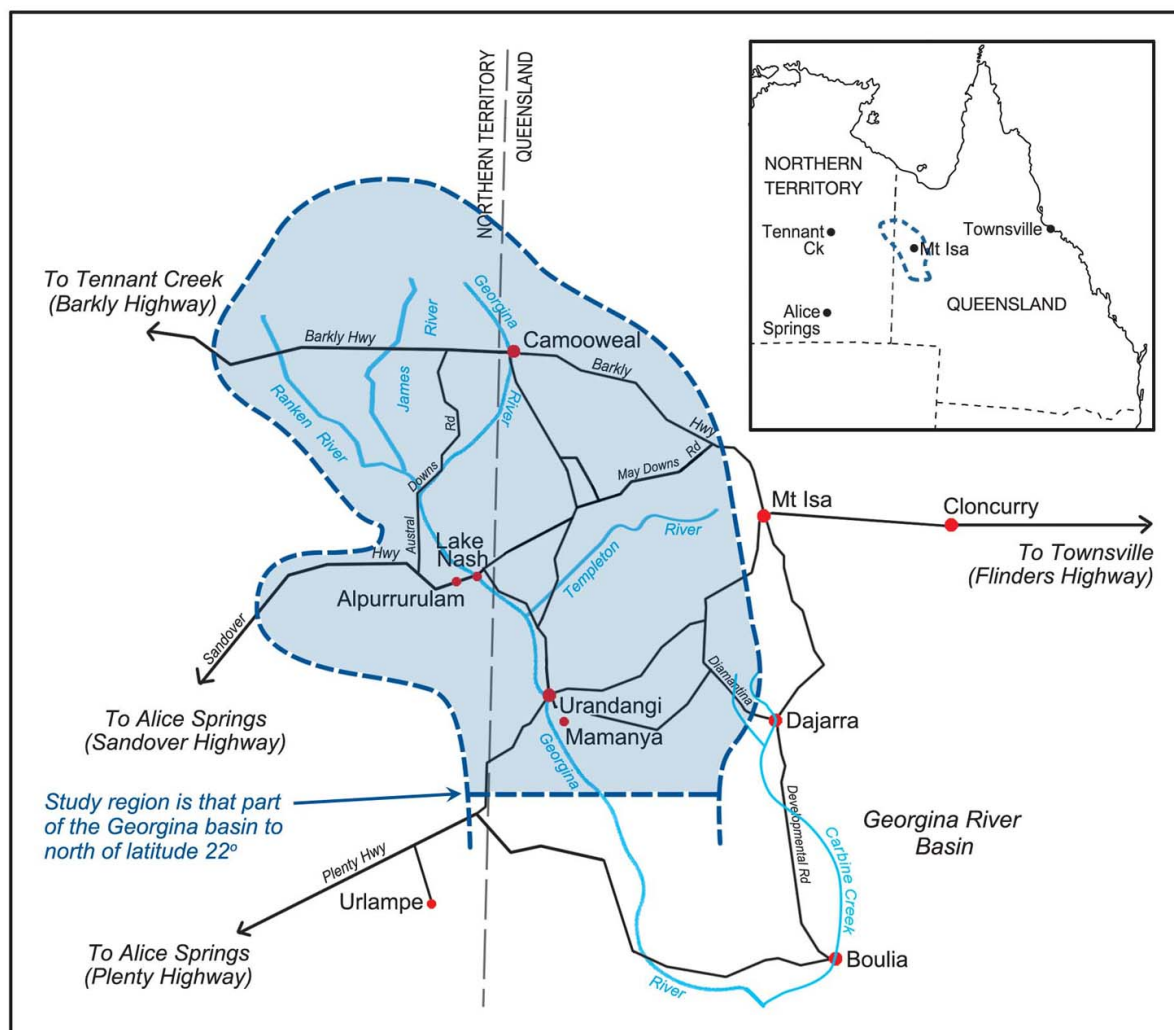


Figure: Map of the study region showing the five main communities and extent of the upper Georgina River Basin.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1200 words max 2 pages

To date, our interview and workshop findings point to the following outcomes:

1. Climate is Changing. Most respondents are experiencing hotter weather but also changeable weather, however, some respondents also mentioned that the climate seems cooler in winter, not necessarily contradictory. Anecdotally, and from the literature, the conditions in 1960s, e.g. were much drier and dustier with less vegetation. Also people are spending less time out in the elements – in houses, looking after children; office work, compared to previous times of more hunting & gathering, droving, etc
2. Predictability of the weather is a real problem. It is due to a lack of being able to predict the weather as easily as they could in the past that Aboriginal people are changing the way they act on Country, e.g. hunting at different times / when the conditions are right rather than following previous practice for season-based activities.
3. People are uncertain about climate. This theme focuses on people's uncertainty and lack of knowledge about reasons for the changing weather together with certain feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability against natural forces. Big weather events in other parts of the world (as well as in Australia and the region) are accepted as usual now by some (few). Most people demonstrated belief in normal cycles e.g. bush tucker will come after rain. Weather prediction more difficult for some.
4. Country has changed over the decades and culturally important places and significant species are changing. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents have experienced big weather events and have observed changes... e.g. 1940s and 1960s are identified with the big dust storms. Some recognition that climate change has caused/ influenced the changes, e.g. damage from bushfires; goannas don't know when to come out of hibernation because of changing patterns.
5. There was limited general (formal) knowledge on climate change, its causes and effects in the region, nationally or globally. Knowledge of climate change relates to the age, gender, experience, work, education, etc. For example, middle-aged stockmen shared experiences. Few people acknowledged human causes for climate change.
6. People are dealing with change in many aspects of life. Questions about climate change provoked responses about the social and cultural changes that they are living through. Climate is only one factor that effects how people live especially in remote arid regions and they are worried about how they will live. Aboriginal people are dealing with a lot of change and climate is not a high priority in day to day understanding of living: costs of food, power, fuel; health; breakdown of family traditional relationships – impacting on childcare; loss of knowledge as old people pass
7. Living on Country is important. This theme connects people's knowledge of their country to their cultural obligations which make it imperative for them to live on their country. As the 'old people' pass on, people are concerned about the transmission of appropriate knowledge. Being on Country is integral to knowledge/cultural maintenance and well-being.
8. Resilience is grounded in cultural values, beliefs and practices. People expressed commitment to 'traditional ways' and also to stay living in their community. With the exception of interviewees from Camooweal, people believe that they would have community support in an environmental crisis.

