Living with Water
Learning from experience

In this region we live with water – everywhere!... Whether it’s the rainforest, a stream or river, tidal inlet or the ocean, this is the wet tropics.

During days of heavy rain, dry creek beds can quickly become torrents. Rivers may swell and rise rapidly, causing flash flooding. Plants and trees drip steadily, releasing further water. When it all coincides in one area or with a high tide, Cairns can become a very wet place indeed!

We love Cairns for this damp, tropical climate and we need fresh water to live. But sometimes there’s just too much of it.

Living With Water is a project telling stories about what happened and what we did at times when Bana Bidagarra, the Barron River, flooded. It explores the river’s history and the experiences of people affected by the flooding. Through this legacy of experiences we are learning how to manage better during future floods, as well as celebrate a staunch community spirit...
Torrential rain associated with Cyclone Rona fell in Cairns throughout 11 February 1999. River heights for the Barron were predicted to reach up to 9.6m, with Lake Placid being flooded by between 1.4 – 1.6m of water. It was the first time that local disaster management authorities put an emergency evacuation plan for Lake Placid and Caravonica in place.

“It’s a go! Caravonica is a go!”

Residents were advised by radio broadcasts, emergency services and neighbours door-knocking. Some were alert to the potential danger because they could hear the river, others realized conditions had been worsening overnight, others were surprised an evacuation was necessary. “Picked up the small, vulnerable things, put them on the table, bed – books, paper etc – tried to improvise sandbags for the front door”

“Taped windows, lifted white goods and furniture up and put linen and clothes in plastic bags in cupboards, turned off gas, water, power”

This is what some residents took when they evacuated:

“Three changes of clothes for each of us, passports, birth certificates, hard to replace papers, esky with drinks”

“Food, child, dogs, pillows, clothes and a gas bottle. And first aid”

Many residents talked about the importance of being ready for flooding.

“I don’t think anyone can afford to be complacent or underestimate the danger associated with a situation as just witnessed. A respect for nature is paramount”

In the river delta at Yorkeys Knob, a lake formed across Yorkeys Knob Rd and the canefields. Thomatis Creek ran so strongly down the road there was a current too powerful to walk against, as a resident discovered floundering 200m to the petrol station.

“Never think you’re prepared for every contingency and get lulled into a false sense of security. ... one thing is for sure, I’ll always have plenty of fuel on hand for the generator”

In the Courier Mail of 12.2.99, Cairns Mayor, Tom Pyne, said,

“This whole exercise proves that a community which works together has a far better chance of coming through such emergencies. The community spirit and courage displayed by so many residents ... was the key to the population’s resilience in the face of Cyclone Rona, a wild excess of nature.”

The effects of this flood, those of 1967, 1977 and 1979 and the Barron’s history of flooding lead to detailed investigations into future management. As a result, flood mitigation works were undertaken at Lake Placid in 2010 and recommendations made about flood protection for the delta communities. We cannot prevent flooding, but we can reflect on what’s happened and be more ready for next time. At Caravonica School, new staff and students are briefed about likely events. The principal keeps gumboots under her desk and there are gates instead of fences. People have come to video water running through the school grounds, but the community always comes to help.

“Life here is just full of situations – you have to be prepared and flexible to cope”.

Resilient communities are connected, prepared, supportive and adaptable. This is especially important in flash floods, as there may be little warning. In living with water, resilience matters.
The Barron River

Rising in the rainforests of Mt Hinchinbrook National Park, the river undertake a 165km journey through the Tablelands, Barron Falls and the Barron Gorge before flowing into the sea. Its catchment covers 2,300 sq.km of agricultural land, national park, sugar cane, beaches and residential areas. It is thought to be 6,000 years old. Although our First Peoples report past times as being much wetter, water levels reached in the Barronside European settlement have continued to test human endeavour. Since the 1879 flood which destroyed Old Smithfield, major floods have regularly occurred from ‘the greatest on record’ in March 1911 to the present day.

“One minute the cyclone was out there, the next it was on top of us along with the flooding. There was water everywhere.”
- Former Mayor of Cairns
   Tom Pyne

“Cairns might have been to Smithfield what Fremantle is to Perth…”
John Orrell
First peoples, first experiences

The Djabugay (Tjapukai) speaking people have lived in the rainforests behind Cairns from time immemorial. Their river story is of their greatest ancestor, Gudjugudju, the rainbow serpent, who transformed into Buda-dji the carpet snake. In the dreamtime Buda-dji created all the rivers and creeks of the Barron Gorge National Park. There are many stories of our First Peoples’ lives with Bana Bidagarra -the Barron River, place of bark canoes-, such as Burrawungal, a dreaming story of the Yirrganydji (Irukandji) people about Lake Placid. These fascinating stories are told in more detail at sites such as Din Din (Barron Falls), the Stratford Heritage Trail and Dungarra (Redden Island).

The Djabugay and Yirrganydji bama (people) are traditional owners of the country including Barron Gorge National Park and the path of Bana Bidagarra as it winds through the lowlands, into the sea. Before Europeans arrived and ‘discovered’ the river, bama traversed this country widely, developing trails which linked the coast with the uplands. You can experience some of their travels today through boating on the river and exploring Dungarra and the Barron Gorge park track network.

Old Smithfield

Had history been different, downtown Cairns could have been located just across the canefields from where you now stand – the site of Old Smithfield. Today our only physical reminder of the fated township is the lonely headstone here in Old Smithfield Cemetery. It’s likely that at least 24 burials occurred here between 1877 and 1893, but the consecutive floods which struck the settlement have left only this grave behind.

Chosen because it offered an easy river supply route from Trinity Inlet to the Tablelands goldfields, fresh water and pasture for the packers’ horses while a road was constructed, the original Smithfield was laid out amid lavish celebrations on 22 November 1876.

“Soon stores were doing business and small steamers plied the route between Smithfield and Cairns. The prospects for the little settlement seemed bright. Had the planners only lifted up their eyes to the gum trees, the celebrations might not have been so elaborate. Debris from previous floods could be seen, feet high above a man’s head, in the branches of those sturdy trees.”

(J Orrell.)

Old Smithfield suffered heavy flooding over the next three years. Cairns Police Magistrate, Edmund Morey, noted as early as February 1877,

“during floods the current in the Barron is too strong for either boat or steamer to steer and in any emergency, the people of Smithfield must rely upon themselves.”

Which they did, surviving a severe wet season in 1877 and floods and a cyclone the following March.

But in March 1879, rain began to fall on St Patrick’s Day and continued for 22 days. There are reports of fresh water washing as far out as Double Island, 10km north and 1.5km from land.

“Clifton and Aplin’s store had been washed of its stumps to a distance of 30 yards. The manager escaped through the roof … Louis Kopp’s farm was completely destroyed and when the boats arrived Mr and Mrs Kopp had occupied the top rail of their stockyard for 24 hours.”

The town which could have been Cairns was abandoned.

The remaining headstone may belong to Mrs Kopp, who eventually died in 1893, or to an unknown sailor, or to 11-day-old Rebecca Crossland, daughter of town blacksmith Edwin Crossland. This could explain the iron headstone and the fence enclosing the grave, which he is thought to have made.
“Cyclone Joy was the most frightening because it just sat there in the ocean for two days, waiting. It was Cat (category) 3 and we were getting these winds and had no power. As a Cat 3 you don’t think it’s going to be big but it was.”
– Frosty Westerveld

“It’s unreal, I’m expecting to see a shark or crocodile swim by any minute.”
– Oscar Joachin, taken from The Courier Mail, 13 January 2009

“It is a sea of mud. It is mud, mud, everywhere. We’ve had a river running into our back patio off the hill bringing boulders and rocks.”
– Beryl Coulson, Lake Placid, The Courier Mail, 13 January 2009

“People have caught fish on our sports oval. I’ve wandered thigh high through water to get horses back to where they belong.”
– Elaine Elma, talking about reoccurring flooding at Caravonica State School
“In all my 39 years I’ve never seen bloody water around like this one ... it’s one of the highest floods I’ve seen and it certainly caused some problems.”
– former Cairns Mayor Tom Pyne to the Cairns Post, February 1999, regarding Cyclone Rona

“A guy jumped in the river on a dare and his body was found four days later at the airport.”
– Simon Mills

“Worst flood I remember was 1979. One lady was having a baby and had to wade to the ambulance at the end of the road. My husband took a boat to help across the cane field. We were without water and cut off for 10 days.”
– June Corrie

“Yorkeys Knob has a great community spirit. Everyone sticks together and helps out.”
– Dave Anson
"I left my wallet and umbrella at the service station and hurriedly left with my two containers and a total of 15 litres of fuel for the generator. By now, the water on the road was well above my navel and all the reflector posts beside the road had disappeared and I had to guess where the road was."

– Werner Schmidlin on his quest to get more fuel for his generator prior to Cyclone Rona.

"There were plenty of heroes, but really, there were so many people, not just police, out there, risking their own lives to help. Something Cairns should be really proud of."

– Constable Phil Tori following Cyclone Rona, The Cairns Post, February 1999
“Had we known the water was to rise to this height we would have shifted it last night rather than this morning. It would have been easier walking then with the water up to our chests. Many a time we bumped our shins on submerged chairs etc.”

– Mrs Altmann, the principal’s wife, on efforts to move furnishings, fridges and even a piano at Caravonica State School during the 1977 flooding

“You need to be prepared. It’s your responsibility.”

– Jerry Hulls
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