



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...



*Locals outside a flooded Golden Casket, Holloways Beach.*



Image: Steve Cooper

▲ Machan's Beach SES on the job

The Barron River in flood ▶



◀ Cairns Post 06.03.08

## Should I stay or should I go?

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 zoom 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.**

*“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*

# The Barron River

Rising in the rainforests of Mt Hypipamee National Park, the river undertakes a 165 km 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 6000 years old. Although our First Peoples report past times as being much wetter, water levels reached in the Barrons since 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.

*“Cairns might have been to Smithfield what Fremantle is to Perth...”*

*John Orrell*



**Barron Waters (Lake Placid), Kamerunga, Caravonica**  
**March 1911**  
 Highest recorded flood – much of Kamerunga washed away.  
**1913**  
 Second greatest flood on record.  
**2010**  
 Manual flood barrier system installed.  
**2011**  
 Flooding associated with Tropical Cyclone Yasi.

**22 Nov 1876**  
 Old Smithfield established.  
**March 1877**  
 Major flooding – some people and several houses washed away.  
**8 March 1878**  
 Severe storm and cyclone.  
**17-29 March 1879**  
 “Tremendous flood” – Barron rises to unprecedented heights. Old Smithfield destroyed.

**12 March 1934**  
 Category 3 cyclone and flooding wash away the old Stratford Bridge. 75 die at sea.

**1939**  
 Heavy rain and a cyclone cause the river to change its course – mouth moves 2km north with new entrance just south of Machans Beach.

Location of river mouth pre 1939

## KAMERUNGA

Kamerunga Island • Holiday Park

## LAKE PLACID

## CARAVONICA

Cemetery  
 Site of Old Smithfield

Caravonica School

## SMITHFIELD

## KURANDA

Railway Barron Falls

## GORGE

## BARRON

## FRESHWATER CREEK

## FRESHWATER

## STRATFORD

## BARRON

## RIVER

## THOMATIS CREEK

## YORKEYS KNOB

## HOLLOWAYS BEACH

## MACHANS BEACH

Casuarina Point

**Throughout the lower river system**  
**30 March 1949**  
 Worst flooding since 1927.  
**17 March 1967**  
 Severe flooding accompanies TC Elaine.  
**March 1977**  
 Third greatest flood on record, associated with TC Nancy and Otto.  
**1 January – 6 March 1979**  
 Six main flood events occur!  
**1995**  
 Network of 13 rainfall and river height field stations established for flood warning purposes.

**1927**  
 Cyclone Billie – blew old Caravonica School off its site. A new school was built near the present site which made it more accessible for children to get to school without crossing the dangerous river.

**1990**  
 Cyclone Joy – Caravonica School lost its roof.

**1932**  
 Floods through Freshwater Creek causing

**11 February 1999**  
 Floods – worst flooding in FNQ in 30 years. Caravonica and Lake Placid evacuated.  
**5-6 March 2008**  
 Floods and flooding throughout the river system.  
**12 January 2009**  
 Floods – Barron rises to just below 10m. 900 calls for help.

Flooding destroys a footbridge on the Barron River, 1934.

1929

1935

## 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 Bidaggarra* -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 Bidaggarra* 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.



▲ Flooding destroys a footbridge on the Barron River, 1934.

◀ Pushing and pulling a car across floodwaters, 1916.

## 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 prospect 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 12 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.



*"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

*"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 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

# The Cairns Post

CYCLONE RONA SOUVENIR EDITION  
Monday, February 15, 1999



*"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

*"Yorkeys Knob has a great community spirit. Everyone sticks together and helps out."*

– Dave Anson

*"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

# Unsung heroes

They battled the wind and rain to help the people of Cairns and surrounds cope with Tropical Cyclone Rona. They were the heroes of the storm. **KAREN FORMAN-LINWOOD reports.**

"NO way. You can't single anyone out, you know, because everybody did a brilliant job."

That's what Cairns State Emergency Services committee Tom Spoonman said most sympathetically when asked for some names of people who worked beyond the call of duty during Cyclone Rona, which struck Far North Queensland's coast north of the city of Thursday, February 11.

Cairns state emergency committee executive officer Geoff Reynolds led the same way.

"Everybody worked so hard, they lifted us together with each other. Each had a task to do and knew their roles. Everybody deserves a medal, it wouldn't be fair just to pick out a few."

Cairns police community liaison officer Saurio Constable Phil Tori also was effusive about naming anyone in particular.

"There were plenty of heroes, but really, there were no many people, not just police, out there, making their own lives to help," he said. "It was a real community effort, a real pulling together. Something Cairns should be proud of."

It was the same with all the other major players in the cyclone relief effort — the FNQES, Cairns City Council, the radio stations.

Nobody wanted to single anyone out for attention, because there were just too many heroes out there that night.

Too many people putting their own lives aside to help people in need by the floods, delivering urgent medication and supplies, sending around houses in danger of submergence, rescuing stragglers, filling up off roads and their surroundings over damaged houses.

Of course, they all had plenty of stories to tell. "We were being looked after, but night, no workers, who refused to be named, said:

"When you think of the kinds of things we were doing, the walking through floodwaters, the driving on flooded roads with lost powerlines down, we didn't lose one life and there were only a few minor injuries... it was all spirit, nothing here we got through it really."

Rona was an unusual cyclone because it appeared and then struck in midday.

On the Wednesday, it was nothing more than a low pressure system off the coast. By that evening, it had become a tropical storm, a category one cyclone which was heading west. No 9000 spot for aircraft that night, but a partnership cyclone watch was issued for the area between Cape Tullaghan and Townsville heading off the coast for a

few days before moving toward us, we didn't take all that much notice.

But, by lunch the next day, we knew Rona — not category three and heading for the coast at 10km/h, was a force to be reckoned with.

By that evening, it was in full force over Cairns and Port Douglas. Unprepared residents flooded supermarkets for food, batteries and torches. Service stations did a roaring trade in gas and fuel for generators and pumps, and garages became the FNQES' command centre for a long night.

Meanwhile, the local council disaster committee swung into action, opening the headquarters at Cairns City Council's Prefabricated building and putting all emergency services on full alert.

So, by the time the wind began to blow from west, and Tullaghan dam overflowed flooding the Bassett River delta, the volunteers were ready.

"They were doing things I didn't have any right asking them to do," Mr Reynolds said. Mr Spoonman said exactly the same thing.

"They were passionate, their houses were without electrical equipment," he added. "There are plenty of tales about workers using personal mobile phones for communication in lieu of the radio. They should have had and even of a private boat being used as an emergency rescue point."

Other tales that have filtered in include:

- SES workers making a makeshift boat to load a 14-month-old baby with a high fever out of Flooded Hillways Beach to get it to hospital;

- Volunteers wading through waist-high floodwater to deliver vital medication and oxygen to afebrile and heart patients cut off from the city by floodwaters;

- Volunteers wading through floodwaters to deliver essential bread and milk to the Northern Beaches after the only available helicopter was taken away after making just one drop;

- Volunteers wading through the night, wading through flood prone houses;

- Volunteers at Babinda who used their own boats for stragglers because the SES boat was not available;

- People working through the night to supply food to both the workers and the 1200 evacuees from Kalamook, Benmore and Ingham;

- Red Cross members, many elderly who repaired the cars of the evacuees;

- The elderly man who pushed his wife in a wheelchair through floodwaters to shelter;

- The police, the SES and the army who



**RISKING** life and limb: FNQES worker Jason Stephens tries to restore power to Lake Placid residents in appalling conditions. Picture: Andrew James

dedicated to get people evacuated. It was the first time army personnel have been used in the evacuation centre.

- The electricity workers who worked in atrocious conditions to restore power throughout the city.

- Unfortunately, there are quite a few negative tales, as well.

- Constable Tori said it appeared that whenever there was water, there were people up to no good.

- "The police occurrence sheet for each shift during the cyclone shows police were commonly faced with people who wanted to ignore standing and road closed signs," he said.

"It was a combination of people wanting to get from point A to point B and sightseeing, and it caused real problems for police officers."

"People had all kinds of requests and just wouldn't accept that if you cannot physically see a road, you can't use it. It wasn't just a matter of police not being there though, but they couldn't see that."

Police also were called to contain lights which broke out between frustrated motorists wanting to board the Redcross cruise vessel, which transported Cairns from Palm Cove to Cairns, while the Captain Cook Hwy was cut by floodwaters.

Continued Page 43

## And the foolhardy ...



"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

# A Northerner's Opinion

## THE FLOODS

NOW that it's all over, we can draw breath and begin to count the cost. To compare it with the Tasmanian bushfires is absurd — for one thing no one was killed — but, the long-term effects may be just as serious.

The cane farmer, already burdened by a crippling overseas price (whatever Mr. Nicklin may say), now has to salvage and straighten his battered cane and hope that some of his precious top-soil still remains.

Local shires will face the heart-breaking job of restoring miles of damaged, ground-out roads. How long this will take is anyone's guess.

It will be interesting to see just how much money the Federal and State Governments will shell out to help in a crisis of this kind. Or will they "keep the situation constantly under review," while "asking to be kept fully informed of all developments"?

The dairy farmer, carefully following the Government's advice, ploughing his land and undertaking pasture improvements, will have to re-build earth dams, re-sow fertilizer swept away and replace miles of damaged fences.



"LIKE HE SAID, IT DEPENDS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PERSON INVOLVED."

# More exclusive flood pictures



LOM Curves sets up fire hoses and draws a trap in the mud in front of the Aquatic to show Bob Ashby (back to Land Rover) and Bill Maclean the best way into Roodens Creek, near Mackean's Beach.



D.C.A. Men worked hard on Tuesday night sandbagging the Maclean's Beach end of the airport runway to prevent damage to a levee wall at the airport's northern boundary. When the water receded on Thursday, the bank was unimpaired. The runway's approach lights are on the right of the picture. LOHE's Hoopes, erector's a wheelbarrow load of sandbags against the levee wall. Four inches of water were inside the D.C.A. tanking on Sunday and it was a shallow swimming pool outside Amstel-ANR.



Kathie and his 15 year engine on Tuesday with sample.



Mr. Pomeroy's boat full of the water cut samples. An usual picture.

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*"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



Australian Government



*We get up again*



Queensland  
Government

This project has been made possible through funding provided under the Community Development and Recovery Package, which is a joint initiative of the Australian and Queensland Governments under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements.

Special thanks to George Skeen, Jessie Richardson, John Walters, the Cairns Historical Society and everyone who has shared their stories.