

Life above the ground

Understanding surface water
in the Northern Territory



1 What is surface water?

Surface water is water found above ground — in rivers, streams, billabongs, lakes, wetlands and reservoirs. In the NT, this water is intensely seasonal, shaped by one of the world's most dramatic climate systems: **the tropical monsoon**.

The Wet season 1 November to 30 April brings floods, flowing rivers and teeming wetlands. The Dry 1 May to 30 September brings

clear skies and falling water levels — but the water doesn't disappear. It retreats to billabongs and deeper channels, where it sustains extraordinary concentrations of wildlife.



You can see it, hear it, and feel it. The Territory's rivers, wetlands and billabongs are among the most spectacular on earth — and they're a shared responsibility.

2 The NT's major water systems

The NT's river systems are among Australia's least-modified:

- ↳ **Top End rivers:** Daly, Katherine, Roper, McArthur, Victoria, South Alligator, East Alligator, Mary.
- ↳ **Arid Region:** The Finke River (one of the world's oldest rivers), the Todd River, the Plenty River.
- ↳ **Darwin water supply:** Darwin River Dam and Manton Dam.

These systems support communities, agriculture, fishing, tourism and extraordinary biodiversity.



3 Why surface water matters

Surface water is essential for:

- ↳ Human life and drinking water — towns, communities and remote areas.
- ↳ Agriculture and food production — irrigation of crops and livestock water.
- ↳ Ecosystems and biodiversity — fish, waterbirds, reptiles, mammals and plants depend on seasonal water cycles.
- ↳ Cultural significance — waterways carry deep cultural importance for Aboriginal peoples across the Territory.
- ↳ Tourism and recreation — the Territory’s waterways attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.



4 Surface water and groundwater together

Surface water and groundwater aren’t separate systems — they’re connected. Water moves between rivers and aquifers depending on the season. During the Wet, rivers can recharge aquifers. During the Dry, groundwater can discharge back to rivers, keeping them flowing when there’s no rain.

Managing both systems together is essential for the long-term sustainability of the Territory’s water resources.



For more information:

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