



WATER SERVICES  
ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



CENTRAL  
LAND  
COUNCIL



# THE STRUGGLE FOR GOOD QUALITY DRINKING WATER IN ALPURRURULAM

CASE STUDY PREPARED BY  
CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL FOR  
**CLOSING THE  
WATER FOR PEOPLE AND  
COMMUNITIES GAP**

IMPROVING WATER  
SERVICES TO FIRST NATIONS  
REMOTE COMMUNITIES

# CASE STUDY FOR WSAA REPORT: CLOSING THE WATER FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES GAP IMPROVING WATER SERVICES TO FIRST NATIONS REMOTE COMMUNITIES NOVEMBER 2022

## Traditional Custodians acknowledgement

Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA) acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's First Peoples and as the traditional owners and custodians of country throughout Australia. We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and community and we pay our respects to Elders past and present.

WSAA acknowledges that water is core to life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is essential to their identities, cultures and livelihoods. Protecting and managing water is a custodial and intergenerational responsibility.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the rights of all other citizens, the right to self-determination and the right to retain their cultural identities, languages, kinships and expressions.

As is clear in this report and in calls to Close the Gap, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not enjoy the same level of participation in Australia's

economic and social prosperity compared to the non-Indigenous population.

This is particularly evident for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in regional and remote areas. Such long-term and deeply entrenched inequalities are shaped by the impacts of past government policies and decisions, inter-generational trauma, and structural disadvantage.

Governments across all levels must work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and recognise, acknowledge and embrace their histories, knowledge and culture as well as these structural challenges in designing policies and services. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be closely involved in the development and implementation of policies and programs that impact on them.

The WSAA report was prepared on Ngunnawal, Ngambri, Gadigal and Wurundjeri country. This case study was prepared on Arrernte and Ngunnawal country.

## Produced by Central Land Council

From left: Evie Rose, Georgia Stewart, Jackie Mahoney, Pam Corbett, Lesley Reilly and Di Newham, in collaboration with Eric Vanweydeveld for Water Services Association of Australia



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Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA) is the peak industry body representing the urban water industry. Our members provide water and wastewater services to over 24 million customers in Australia and New Zealand and many of Australia's largest industrial and commercial enterprises.

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# The struggle for good quality drinking water in Alpururulam

The community of Alpururulam has been engaged for over 12 years in a protracted negotiation with the Northern Territory Government to secure safe and palatable drinking water.

This case study demonstrates how the long-standing struggle for water access, quality and infrastructure in remote communities in the Northern Territory is deeply embedded in historical legacies and exacerbated by an inequitable regulatory and resourcing regime.

It demonstrates the urgent need for equitable access to safe and palatable drinking water, but also points to the broader issues of water injustice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As outlined in the case study, without bold policy and legal reform that takes Aboriginal peoples' rights, needs and interests into account, we run the risk of focusing only on technical solutions and perpetuating longstanding issues of drinking water insecurity and inadequate services in remote Aboriginal communities.

## Where is Alpururulam?

Alpururulam is a Northern Territory (NT) Aboriginal community located in the Barkly region near the Queensland border and within Lake Nash Station. The community is home to nearly 400 Alyawarre people.



MAP 1 Alpururulam SOURCE Google Maps



PHOTO 1 Lake Nash station, Georgina River and Alpururulam waterhole in partial flood, 2020

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

# Fighting for land, fighting for water

Ilperrelhelame waterhole, named Lake Nash by pastoralists, is a sacred source of life for many Aboriginal groups who lived, visited and travelled by the waterhole for millennia.



PHOTO 2 Alpururulam, 2020

Bularnu people were traditionally responsible for the land, and shared cultural and spiritual ties, important travel paths and hunting and foraging areas with their neighbours, the Wakaya, Warluwarra, Ayerrerenge and Alyawarre peoples.

As a constant source of good water in dry country, the waterhole also attracted pastoralists from the 1860s. During this period, across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were defending their sacred waterholes from violent invasion in what has been called 'the battle for waterholes,' as places of water became key sites of colonial struggle.<sup>81</sup>

Along the banks of the Georgina River, Aboriginal peoples were violently dispossessed and exploited for cheap labour on new cattle stations.<sup>82</sup> The European advance reached the Alyawarre people, who lived further from the river, a few decades later. Many fled via the major travel path of reliable soakages to the culturally significant Ilperrelhelame, also known by then to have fairer station owners in comparison to everywhere else.

“It was to the Alyawarre that the rituals of Ilperrelhelame were entrusted. It is because of their endurance and their refusal to be driven from Ilperrelhelame that the stories of that place are still sung.

LYON AND PARSONS, 1989

Ilperrelhelame remains a strong place of ceremony. To ensure their knowledge would be passed on, the Bularnu, Wakaya and Warluwarra peoples exchanged sacred knowledge with the Alyawarre and some were entrusted with the Law of that place.

Over the next few decades, the Alyawarre people, like many Aboriginal peoples across the NT exploited for cheap labour, became skilful stockmen and a vital part of the pastoral industry that displaced them. Working at Lake Nash Station meant they could stay on country with family and continue cultural practices.

81 Pamela Lyon & Michael Parsons, 1989. *We are Staying: The Alyawarre Struggle for Land at Lake Nash*. IAD Press, Alice Springs, NT.

82 Lyon & Parsons, 1989, *We Are Staying*

However, despite the fundamental role they played in propping up the pastoral industry, Aboriginal workers and their families were often treated as inferior and provided with extremely poor living conditions. For the Alyawarre living at the Lake Nash Station, it was a constant battle to secure even basic essential services for the community from the pastoralists, who resisted providing anything that they thought would encourage families of workers to stay.<sup>83</sup>

However, many older community members remember drinking plentiful, good water when they lived near the station homestead and the Georgina River. Community leader Jackie Mahoney recounts that during the station times, “people lived in windbreaks and humpies, with nice sweet water from the river, the waterhole full all year round. When people lived on the station they were never sick. Had a lot of water, people were healthy.”

However, increasing tensions and deteriorating living conditions led to calls for Alyawarre people to have a secure place to call home and to facilitate permanent essential services. Station owners first pressured people to move to Bathurst Downs, country to the south known to Alyawarre as poison country. The community refused to leave their home.

After protracted and somewhat strained negotiations between the station owners and the Central Land Council (CLC) working on behalf of the Alyawarre people, the ‘community living area’ of Alpururulam was excised from the surrounding Lake Nash pastoral station in 1983.

While still on culturally significant country, the excision was granted on a rocky, wind-exposed hill with poor water. This land was of lesser value to the pastoralists compared to the shady banks of the Georgina River where people had lived and travelled for centuries, and the Lake Nash homestead now lies.

“Lake Nash, we call it Alpururulam” is our home. Our old people have been born here, and children and their children. We have all grown up here, lived here and worked here ... There is water here in the river all year round. Water for drinking, washing, swimming. We get fish there too, good tucker! We have good school, medical treatment and can buy all our food here. That land Bathurst Downs is dry country, poison country. Its no good to live there...We go hungry down there. It is not our home. Lake Nash is our home. We want to stay here.<sup>84</sup>

**ALPURURULAM COMMUNITY LETTER  
TO NT CHIEF MINISTER, 1982.**



**PHOTO 3** Children swimming in Alpururulam waterhole, 1985

83 Lyon & Parsons, 1989, We Are Staying

84 Lyon & Parsons, 1989, We Are Staying

“We were fighting for that land, same like we are fighting for this water. The old people were fighting for the place we have now. We left that good water behind.”

JACKIE MAHONEY AND PAM CORBETT, 2022

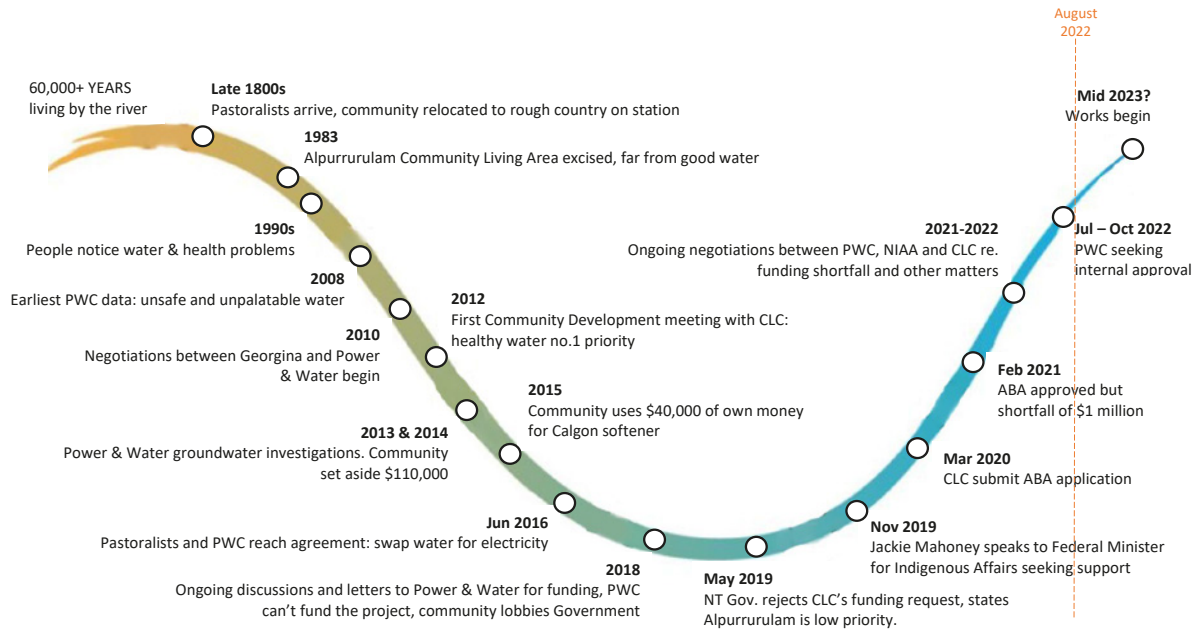


FIGURE 1 The drinking water story in Alpururulum SOURCE Central Land Council



PHOTO 4 Kids with cups, Lake Nash station, late 1970s

# Worries for water

Shortly after the bore was drilled as the new water source, community members recall noticing problems with the drinking water quality.

Alpurrurulam residents continue to report significant environmental health impacts from the poor water quality. The water makes some people feel sick; showering in the water causes itchy and irritated skin; people buy soft drinks rather than drink the poor tasting tap water and worry about kidney health.

Community members on low incomes pay premium prices to buy bottled water from the local store, and rubbish piles up. The mineral build up from hard water damages household appliances and hot water systems, so residents pay to replace them and wait lengthy periods for contractors from Tennant Creek to repair services. Residents report that people leave Alpurrurulam because of the poor-quality water.

“In the 90s, just after the new community and bore, people started getting sick when they moved to the community. People could see white stuff from the taps. When they moved to the new place, people started needing dialysis.

JACKIE MAHONEY, 2022

“It makes you itchy. You need a special cream from the shop. People with sensitive skin were treated for scabies, but it wasn't scabies.

ALPURRURULAM RESIDENT, 2022

“Whitefellas don't drink the water. They only drink boxed water.

ALPURRURULAM RESIDENT, 2022



PHOTO 5 Scaling on tap, sink & wall in Alpurrurulam, July 2022

# The drinking water

Alpurrurulam's drinking water does not meet the standards of the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines (ADWG); and may not have for decades.

According to Power and Water data, the drinking water in Alpurrurulam has:

- Levels of fluoride that exceed health guidelines (1.7mg/L, when they should not exceed 1.5mg/L) and have done so since publicly reported data has been available from 2008 (ranging from 1.5mg/L to 1.8mg/L).<sup>85</sup> This means people have been drinking unsafe levels of fluoride for at least 14 years. While some fluoride in drinking water is beneficial for oral hygiene, exceedances can cause skeletal fluorosis over time (weaker teeth and bones) and can make the drinking water look, taste and smell unacceptable. The margin of safety for fluoride is lower for people with kidney problems, whose fluoride retention may be up to three times the normal rate.<sup>86</sup>

- Unpalatable levels of total dissolved solids and hardness.<sup>87</sup> Total dissolved solids are 900mg/L when they should not exceed 600mg/L, and hardness (as CaCO<sub>3</sub>) is 500mg/L, more than double the 200mg/L guideline.<sup>88</sup> These levels have also stayed relatively constant since publicly available records began 14 years ago. According to Power and Water, these 'aesthetic' concerns are at levels that 'significantly affect taste', and can cause 'severe scaling' of critical water and health infrastructure, affecting safety and operational costs.<sup>89</sup>

Good, safe drinking water is a fundamental requirement for people to continue living at Alpurrurulam. The implications of not resolving the problem include ongoing health issues and, ultimately, more people moving away from Alpurrurulam.



“That’s why we’re fighting for this water. It’s not only for us, it’s for them too ... For our old people who fought before us and our kids’ future.

JACKIE MAHONEY AND PAM CORBETT, 2022

85 Power and Water Corporation, 2021, [Annual Drinking Water Quality Report 2021](#); Power and Water Corporation, [Past drinking water quality reports: 2008-2021](#).

86 NHMRC, NRMCC, 2011, [Australian Drinking Water Guidelines Paper 6 National Water Quality Management Strategy \(2011\) – Updated January 2022](#), National Health and Medical Research Council, National Resource Management Ministerial Council, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p673.

87 Power and Water Corporation, 2021, [Annual Drinking Water Quality Report 2021](#)

88 Power and Water Corporation, 2021, [Annual Drinking Water Quality Report 2021](#)

89 Power and Water Corporation, 2021, p62-63.



# Battle to fix the water

For over 12 years the residents of Alpururulam, with the assistance of the CLC and cooperation with native title holders and pastoralists, have advocated for funding for a new borefield within the pastoral lease to improve the community's water quality.

Since its inception in 2012, the Alpururulam community development working group's highest priority has been improving the drinking water quality. In 2013 the community put \$110,000 of their own lease money aside to contribute to the cost of the required infrastructure.

In 2015, the community funded Power and Water Corporation \$37,000 to install and operate a Calgon dosing machine (water softener) for five years. After the first year, Power and Water started funding the softener system.

Power and Water have also worked to find an alternative, long-term water source; drilled and cased the bores; determined that the bores have a good flow rate and water that meets the ADWG; and provided indicative costings for the infrastructure project at over \$5 million.

However, due to its governance structure and budgetary constraints Power and Water cannot fund the project. Alpururulam is serviced by its subsidiary body, Indigenous Essential Services, which the CLC understands has an inadequate budget per year to service the needs of 72 communities across the NT. Funding for capital projects is provided through grants from the NT Government's Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development (LGHCD) at their discretion, subject to normal governmental budget processes.

Power and Water have made unsuccessful bids to the NT Government for the funding and the CLC has been informed that the water problems in Alpururulam are not regarded as a high priority considering the critical needs of other water stressed communities. As such, despite the strong support of all stakeholders: Alpururulam community residents, native title holders, Lake Nash station lessees and Power and Water, the project remains stuck in a regulatory and resourcing impasse.

Not surprisingly, the NT Government has been supportive of the CLC applying for funding for the infrastructure through the Aboriginal Benefits Account (ABA). Established under the Land Rights Act (NT) 1976, the Commonwealth pays monies into the ABA based on the value of royalties generated from mining on Aboriginal land in the NT, to be used for the benefit of Aboriginal people.

After years of unsuccessful lobbying, in March 2020 the CLC applied for a grant from the ABA for the construction. COVID delays meant that the grant wasn't approved until a year later. While this was a step forward for the community, it is not a long term or equitable solution for Aboriginal communities to have to pay for infrastructure and essential services with their own money.

“Only in remote communities must Aboriginal people fund essential services themselves that other Australians take for granted.”<sup>90</sup>

LES TURNER, CEO OF CLC

The approved ABA funding also falls short by \$1 million. Since February 2021 the CLC, on behalf of Alpururulam residents, has been involved in negotiations with Power and Water and National Indigenous Australians Agency to overcome the shortfall, among other project matters.

As of October 2022, Power and Water are in the process of seeking the funding from the NT Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics and approval from NT Housing. Works for the project are anticipated to begin in mid-2023.

90 Central Land Council, 2021. 'Alpururulam's water woes coming to an end' Land Rights News, July 2021, 12

# Water justice

While an end to the ongoing battle for good drinking water in Alpururulam is in sight, the community will have waited over 13 years. That means exposure to poor quality water for the school years of an entire generation of children.

This case study demonstrates the urgent need for equitable access to safe and palatable drinking water, but it also points to the broader issues of water injustice for Aboriginal people.

The push to develop and implement technical solutions to drinking water problems is just one part of a far more complex legacy and points to the need for far greater understanding of historical and political structures that shape drinking water service provision, and for formal acknowledgement of the disruptions between Aboriginal peoples and their lands, waters and cultures.

As summarised by Hartwig et al.: "...the dispossession of and damage to Indigenous peoples' lands and waters fractures spiritual and customary relationships with their territories. It interrupts economic and cultural activities, and erodes social and political systems."<sup>91</sup>

These relationships must be restored through a proactive water justice agenda.

A proactive water justice agenda in the NT will require recognition of Aboriginal peoples' ongoing and active stewardship of water in policy and law. It will require a sophisticated and ongoing conversation with Aboriginal people, policy and lawmakers to ensure Aboriginal rights, expertise, and knowledge of water are enshrined in governance. It will require that the long-term underfunding of infrastructure in remote communities is recognised in decision-making about current and future infrastructure funding and need. It will also urgently require a greater investment in water resource investigation and infrastructure replacement.



**PHOTO 6** Central Land Council presented on Alpururulam drinking water concerns at Voices for the Bush Conference, August 2022. From left: Evie Rose, Georgia Stewart, Jackie Mahoney, Pam Corbett, Lesley Reilly and Di Newham.

91 Lana D. Hartwig, Sue Jackson, Francis Markham & Natalie Osborne, 2022. 'Water colonialism and Indigenous water justice in south-eastern Australia', *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 38:1, 33

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