

Aboriginal people and the 2022 northern NSW floods

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Abstract

In early 2022, Australia's east coast was beset by intense rainfall that caused widespread flooding throughout Queensland and New South Wales. While hundreds of townships and thousands of people were impacted by the floods, people living in the northern rivers region in NSW experienced the worst of the catastrophe. Widespread flooding occurred throughout the townships of Lismore, Ballina, Kingscliff and Byron Bay, while many smaller communities were severely impacted and others cut off from emergency services and supplies such as food, water, electricity, telephone and internet services, and medicine. Whilst all people living in the northern rivers region experienced hardship and distress, Aboriginal people were acutely impacted both as a significant portion of the population, as a marginalised group within larger towns and communities, as well as the experience of discrete Aboriginal communities. This paper seeks to quantify those impacts and explore the experiences of Aboriginal people affected. To do this we map the areas affected by the floods and use census data to produce an Indigenous population profile within the disaster zone. We then contextualise these statistics with a series of qualitative interviews with Aboriginal people impacted by the flooding disaster. These qualitative interviews reveal the fear, anxiety, and distress experienced by Aboriginal people during the crisis, and how community members rallied to evacuate and support one another at the height of the crisis. The interviews also reveal the impacts on culture and heritage, as well as how Aboriginal communities from elsewhere rallied to provide immediate relief and volunteer their time and energy to support the communities affected.