



21 September 2021

Inquiry Panel

The People's Inquiry into the US/Australia Alliance

Independent and Peaceful Australia Network

Dear Inquiry Panel Members

Submission to the People's Inquiry into the US/Australia Alliance

The Environment Centre of the Northern Territory ("ECNT") is the peak community sector environment organisation in the Northern Territory of Australia, raising awareness amongst community, government, business and industry about environmental issues and assisting people to reduce their environmental impact and supporting community members to participate in decision-making processes and action. Since 1983, ECNT has been working hard to protect the Territory environment. ECNT welcomes the opportunity to participate in the IPAN People's Inquiry into the US/Australia Alliance.

War presents great cost to the environment, not least of which is war's toll on our shared climate. So far as the march away from peace and independence is committing us to future wars, we correspondingly commit to those environmental costs of those wars and our ongoing preparations for them – accepting detrimental effects on ecosystems locally and in the other parts of the globe where Australian governments have involved our forces.

This submission addresses some of the impacts of past, present, and proposed future military activities on the environment of the Northern Territory, in particular exercises and infrastructure shared with American forces. In summary:

- The footprint of the military on the NT is quite considerable, with environmental impacts ranging from the effects of exploding munitions in the large training areas, the lingering impacts in the Top End to the proposed clearing of vegetation for more housing for Defence employees.
- Many of the environmental impacts of military activities are not transparent, as they occur on Defence land to which access is restricted. The military does its own environmental impact assessments of the training exercises that occur in the NT, including the exercises that involve foreign military forces.
- Defence is set to spend \$740 million in the next two years upgrading its infrastructure in the NT. ECNT is concerned that with the government rhetoric supporting continued military build-up in the Asia-Pacific region, the impacts of the military on the NT environment (and the global climate) will grow. Of particular concern is the possibility of a new port being created at Glyde Point, 40 kilometres northeast of Darwin, destroying what is currently a relatively intact ecosystem.

Overview of military infrastructure in the Northern Territory

The Australian military has a pronounced ‘bootprint’ in the Northern Territory, primarily in the Top End (see Appendix 1). Darwin is, among other things, a garrison town, hosting the RAAF Darwin Base, two army barracks (Larrakeyah and Robertson), and the naval base HMAS Coonawarra. Shoal Bay Receiving Station (a Defence communications facility) is located just 19 kilometres to the north east of Darwin. Further south, RAAF Tindal is adjacent to the town of Katherine. Hundreds of kilometres south, the joint Australian/US signals installation, Pine Gap, is located in the vicinity of Alice Springs in Central Australia.

There are four military training areas in the Top End and these sites have borne the brunt of increased training and war exercises:

- The Delamere Air Weapons Range, approximately 120 kilometres south of Katherine and RAAF Base Tindal, is the main air weapons range used by the RAAF. The 21,120 hectare range is used for “high explosive target practice using 500 pound to 2,000 pound explosives, as well as inert explosives and light weapons gunnery practice”.¹
- Kangaroo Flats Training Area, some 5000 hectares located 30 kilometres south of Darwin, is used by the Australian Army and the Army Reserve for inert and live fire practice.²
- Mt Bunday Training Area, more than 100,000 hectares located 120 kilometres east-southeast of Darwin, is “used by Defence for a variety of military training activities including mechanised battle group sized field firing and manoeuvre training and aerial bombing.”³
- Bradshaw Field Training Area is the newest and largest of the training areas, consisting of approximately 900,000 hectares, 150 kilometres west of Katherine and 270 kilometres south of Darwin. This site was formerly as pastoral station. It is now used by “Australian, US, and other forces from other countries (including Singapore) for infantry and armoured formation manoeuvre, ground and air live firing and bombing.”⁴

This list does not do justice to the history of military activity in the Northern Territory, particularly the Australian alliance with the USA, nor does this list show how closely intertwined military and non-military activities and practices are and have been, particularly in urban areas like Darwin. Case Study 1 seeks to elucidate this history and those connections in relation to Rapid Creek, the mainstream in Darwin. Rapid Creek has borne the historical impact of the RAAF base that encompasses the spring. In recent years, we have learned more about the scope of PFAS contamination, as have communities around

¹ <https://www.defence.gov.au/ID/ Master/docs/NCRP/NT/1303DelamereAirWeaponsRangeNT.pdf>

² <https://www.defence.gov.au/id/ Master/docs/NCRP/NT/0837KangarooFlatsTrainingAreaNT.pdf>

³ <https://www.defence.gov.au/id/ Master/docs/NCRP/NT/1199MtBundayTrainingAreaNT.pdf>

⁴ <https://nautilus.org/publications/books/australian-forces-abroad/defence-facilities/bradshaw-field-training-area/>

many other RAAF bases in Australia. At the same time, the growing presence of USA Air Force assets and stockpiles at the base has intensified current risks, while driving further construction that exacerbates run-off and seasonal flood events. Case Study 1 is adapted from a talk given by Dr Kirsty Howey, ECNT's Co-Director, earlier this year at a walkshop along a section of Rapid Creek maintained by Darwin Airport. It calls attention to the 'everyday militarisms' of Rapid Creek and the resonance between the lines drawn that delineate Defence land and the original lines drawn that alienated the Larrakia people from their country under settler law.

Case Study 1: What is the source?

Adapted from Dr Kirsty Howey's talk at the Encountering Gurumbai / Rapid Creek Walkshop on 24 June 2021, part of the AusSTS Workshop 2021, at the Gurumbai Walking Trail at Darwin Airport

"A river no more begins at its source than a story begins with the first page... If it has a beginning, it is located in a dark inaccessible place. Better study where it goes than where it comes from." – Dianne Setterfield, Once Upon a River

We know that this creek seeps, floods, stagnates, stops, meanders, and bends but its source is at once mysterious and mundane.

In the dry season it is fed in part from underground aquifers that discharge at two springs that are off limits to us - in there somewhere [on Defence land].

But there are other sources.

In the wet season, the gutters along the streets in suburban Jingili, Millner, Rapid Creek and Alawa overflow with stormwater flavoured with household waste, the water seeping to shallow aquifers that carve sinkholes under laneways, and crack ceramic pipes laid to contain sewerage six decades ago. In recent years, we have discovered that fire-fighting foam containing PFAS chemicals was used at the Defence training facilities here at Darwin Airport, polluting soil and water and changing forever the way we use this creek. The UN says these substances are tied to "significant adverse human health and environmental effects", but the Federal Government says we don't have enough information available. We residents are offered the promise of compensation, via a class action, but what have we offered the creek?

Rapid Creek is a drain for the waste that we have all created.

This is a representation of the source of Rapid Creek - Marrara swamp, a paperbark swamp, located some 9 kilometres from its mouth. It is itself a threshold. On one side cars zooming to and from Berrimah industrial estate, on the other the squawk of spangled drongoes and the creak of pandanus.

The swamp was cleaved in two by Amy Johnson Drive some decades ago. Untouched for millennia, the original violence was this – straight lines, a survey, a name for the new road

that celebrates not Larrakia ownership and care of this place, but a Yorkshire-born British pilot who flew solo from London to Australia in 1930 and disappeared during a flight in the Second World War. She was in Darwin but a day, but earned naming rights for the road.

But perhaps the name Amy Johnson Drive is apt, bounding as it does a Department of Defence airfield.

A sign, similar to the one we passed as we came here, although far more threatening.

“Commonwealth of Australia: Department of Defence

Sketching, drawing, painting or photography of the premises is prohibited

Defence Act 1903 (Cth)”

The Commonwealth marked out its territory via survey and declaration of a Defence Reserve during World War II, remaking Rapid Creek in the process. The American soldiers needed to defend our northern borders used Rapid Creek as the connector between their sweltering makeshift camp at what is now Aralia Street, Nightcliff, and this airport. They cooled off from the oppressive humidity at Yankee pools – a couple of hundred of metres from here – like Amy Johnson, they got naming rights too.

As anthropologist of Darwin Tess Lea has noted, Larrakia country is more saturated than most places with what she and her collaborator Astrida Neimanis called “everyday militarisms”. PFAS chemicals draining into Rapid Creek, constant rotations of American soldiers through Darwin, the vast areas of Aboriginal land cordoned off for training exercises, and of course this place right here, Darwin airport. Tess Lea reminds us that all air traffic at Darwin International Airport is controlled by the Royal Australian Airforce, for above us is the largest aerial defence training space in the world.

There is an operation on right now, called Operation Rogue Ambush 21-1, conducted by the Air Force out of RAAF Base Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal from 15 June to 2 July 2021. According to the media, “Air Force will deploy various aircraft and over 300 personnel to participate in the exercise... Residents and the local community are advised to expect heightened military flying operations in the area.” Last year, due to COVID, we were relieved from the deafening noise from the biennial Operation Pitch Black, which sees aircraft from the US, France, Canada, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand engaged in air combat exercises.

In Darwin, more so than most places, it can be difficult to tell when war begins or ends.

Parallel to this walking path is a high fence topped with barbed wire, cutting us off from Rapid Creek’s source in Marrara Swamp. It is illegal to walk inside this ‘Defence’ land – between Rapid Creek’s source at Marrara Swamp and here, Rapid Creek is cut off from outsiders. We speculate about what happens beyond that boundary. What are the strange white circular shapes you can see on Google Maps? Why was this weir constructed?

Infested with weeds, plagued by gamba fires, Rapid Creek stands ready for another military incursion, when the Defence reserve can spring into action and realise its true militarised potential.

At least what is inside the straight lines that delineate the Defence reserve cannot be touched, providing a perverse sort of protection for the creek. Everywhere else in its catchment, and most recently next to Marrara swamp, more lines have been drawn on maps. A new subdivision at Boulter Road. The conversion of Malak caravan park for another tightly-packed new subdivision on McMillans Road. By the time environmental assessments and plans that reveal the true ecological impacts are publicly available and able to be commented on, it will be too late. It's drawing the lines that makes these destinies inevitable.

And lines on surveys are violent in other ways. For Larrakia people, the process of colonisation and dispossession was made tangible by the arrival of surveyor General George Goyder from South Australia. As Goyder drew gridlines on a map which would form the shape of freehold blocks to be sold on the London stock exchange, the Larrakia people were divested under imported British law of their traditional lands.

Straight lines on a map, that bear no resemblance to the place, that are dephysicalised, placeless and detached, are how settlers have made and are remaking Rapid Creek.

The impacts of the military on the environment of the Northern Territory

It is difficult to assess the full impact of military activities on the Northern Territory environment as the military is not transparent about the state of the land it manages, nor does it submit the majority of its activities to public environmental assessment processes. We submit that increased transparency about the environmental impacts of the Northern Territory are essential to ensure that the environment is protected to the fullest extent possible.

Managing the Defence estate for conservation

So far, the greatest impacts of the contemporary US-Australia alliance on the NT environment have been from increased training and war exercises, including on the training areas listed above. Clearly, the Department of Defence has set aside those lands for that purpose. Just as obviously, those areas are part of our precious local environment. Kangaroo Flats abuts the popular Litchfield National Park, while Mount Bunday is just a few kilometres from Kakadu National Park. While Kangaroo Flats is comparatively small and subject to lower impact activities, Mt Bunday and Delamere are quite large, and Bradshaw is huge at a whopping 900,000 hectares. The surrounding bush - and some of the actively managed land on the Training Areas - is of high conservation value.

Modern environmental policy has it that conservation objectives should be valued and pursued on all land. Far from consigning nature to parks, modern land managers have come

to understand that despite the primary human use of any land, despite the impact, risk or detriment that activity may present, no land manager has a license to sacrifice that land, or entirely neglect their responsibilities to conservation outcomes. As such, these training areas and weapons range represent a large area of native habitat where the primary activities of military forces should be weighed against and appropriately controlled in order to manage values on and around that land.

Even if the Department of Defence is living up to its strategic aim of “deliver[ing] a sustainable estate across Defence maritime, land and aerospace areas, activities and operations”,⁵ it would be impossible for the public to assess this as access to defence training areas is generally restricted and the reporting by Department of Defence on environmental status of all parts of its estate, is limited.

In this context, it is disappointing that the growing burden of increased foreign military presence in the NT has not prompted a public reassessment of the management of these areas through the appropriate commonwealth processes. We submit that the Department of Defence should be required to regularly report publicly on the state of the land that it manages, to publish its environmental management plans, and to manage its land so as to maintain and improve the state of the species and ecosystems that live there. An external public agency should be empowered to monitor its adherence to its management objectives. This agency could also help to ensure that the sacred sites that are known to be on Defence land in the Northern Territory are being adequately protected.

Public environmental impact assessment of military activities in the Northern Territory

In the past few decades, various Defence activities have been subject to public environmental impact assessment processes under NT law, including the upgrade of Tindal airfield in the 80s, and the establishment of the Bradshaw training area in the late 90s. The former was subject of a Public Environment Report, through the old Conservation Commission, which ECNT provided comment to. The later was subject to a more rigorous Environmental Impact Assessment. To be clear, both precede the establishment of the NT EPA, the Commonwealth EPBC Act and the bilateral agreement on environment, that define our modern environmental laws and assessment framework. More recently, the housing project proposed by Defence Housing Australia for the Lee Point development has been subject to assessment by the NT Environment Protection Authority.

However, the military exercises carried out in the NT have not been subject to environmental assessment under NT law. While the Department of Defence is subject to the EPBC Act, it carries out its own internal environmental impact assessments to determine whether the proposed activities meet the EPBC Act threshold of causing a “significant

⁵ See the Defence Environmental Management website: <https://www.defence.gov.au/environment/>

impact” on the environment.⁶ This means that there is no external review of the environmental impacts of joint training exercises with US and other forces.

Case Study: Environmental assessments for Exercise Talisman Sabre 2015 and Talisman Sabre 2017

Talisman Sabre is the name given to biennial joint military exercises between Australia and the US, which often also include other allied forces. The purpose of the exercises is to “train our respective military force elements in planning and conducting Combined Task Force operations to improve the combat readiness and interoperability between the ADF and its allies.”^a The exercises are held in different parts of Australia each time and involve “thousands of troops on land, sea and in the air and major assets such as Australian and allied warships, fighters, bombers, helicopters and armour and artillery.”^b

The 2015 and 2017 Talisman Sabre exercises both included significant NT components. The Department of Defence commissioned AECOM to prepare ‘Public Environment Reports’ before both exercises “to communicate to the Australian public and relevant stakeholders the activities planned..., the potential for environmental impacts and proposed environmental risk mitigation measures.”^c While Public Environment Reports were the name of a familiar process under NT environmental law, the PERs for the Talisman Sabre exercises were internal to the Department of Defence. As the Department of Defence judged that the exercises were “unlikely to have a significant impact on Matters of Environmental Significance...following implementation of the management controls”^d, it did not refer the exercises under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act (Cth) - the routine process which would reasonably be expected to apply for a proposal of this scope and significance. In our view, the Department of Defence processes did not meet best practice environmental assessment standards.

2015 saw the largest ever NT component in that year’s Talisman Sabre exercises. Coinciding with the largescale importation of foreign military hardware, the regular event for the first time incorporated exercises on the Top End Coast. The 2015 environmental assessment process conducted by the Department of Defence was not well publicised. The report included acknowledgement of amphibious landing activities at Fog Bay – a known turtle-nesting site where, just a few months before the marines were to land, a rare sighting of a large pod of pseudorca (False Killer Whale) was observed. Significant details (including marines landing on the beach at Fog Bay beach) were relegated to a subsequent process that the public had no access to. Public communications were ignored until the final report was published. The departmental advice informing that report was also hidden.

In an exercise of this scale was to be conducted by any other proponent, we would have expected that an environmental impact assessment (EIS) would have been prepared rather than a PER. Although labelled a Public Environment Report, giving the appearance of conforming to the standard procedure of the same name, the assessment was an internal process that did not fulfil the same requirements and procedures that are provided by NT and Federal law for community engagement and transparency. The NT EPA confirmed (via personal communications) that, although they provided comment for the first draft, they had no more access to the Fog Bay assessment than the public: ie, none.

⁶ See the Defence Environmental Assessment and Approval Strategy (v3) available on this page: <https://www.defence.gov.au/estatemangement/Governance/Policy/Environment/EIA/Default.asp>

The 2017 process did not refer the exercises to the NT EPA under the NT Environmental Assessment Act, and therefore the NT EPA did not have a role in the process, which was not announced on their website. However the Department of Defence did call upon the NT EPA to make response to the draft report. The Department of Defence again claimed that their self-assessment satisfied them that the exercises did not require referral under the EPBC Act

Summary

The Department of Defence's internal processes in 2015 and 2017 appeared to mimic relevant processes in environmental law but there were important differences. As the processes were internal, the public was denied the opportunity to contribute to decision making around the scoping of the assessment. This would have been a significant opportunity for public input which would have given greater assurance to all stakeholders that all likely risks and impacts are given due consideration.

While the reports reflect features of relevant federal environmental legislation, the process fell well short. Bypassing the Assessment Bilateral Agreement (2014) denied NT authorities their role, and severely curtailed public participation and an appropriate level of scrutiny. The Department offered no rationale or project alternatives and avoided making any reference to past environmental performance.

The public were left unconvinced that our shared natural environment was being adequately protected given a process which bypassed a standard level of scrutiny that other projects routinely receive - let alone the level of assessment that may be reasonably expected of any proposal of this scope, were it coming from any other proponent.

Public access to information about the environmental impacts of later iterations of Talisman Sabre has become even more woeful. We firmly recommend that future exercises should be assessed under the same transparent regulatory processes that would apply to any other proponent seeking to carry out similarly damaging activities. We note claims by Defence that their internal processes avoid the requirement for referral of their operations under the EPBC Act. We do not recognise that this is a valid interpretation of their responsibilities.

Notes

^a <https://www.army.gov.au/our-work/army-operations/major-exercises/exercise-talisman-sabre>

^b <https://www.army.gov.au/our-work/army-operations/major-exercises/exercise-talisman-sabre>

^c See the Executive Summary of the final Public Environment Report for Talisman Sabre 2017: <https://aecom.com/content/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/TS17-PER-Part-1-Body.pdf>

^d See the Executive Summary of the final Public Environment Reports for Talisman Sabre 2015 (p iii) and Talisman Sabre 2017 (p I): https://aecom.com/content/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Talisman_Final.pdf ; <https://aecom.com/content/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/TS17-PER-Part-1-Body.pdf>

More recently, we have seen the Delamere Air Weapons Range Redevelopment Project, completed in 2019. The environmental impacts of the redevelopment were, again, assessed through a purely internal Department of Defence process. The Department satisfied itself that “it is not anticipated that a referral will be required under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cth)”.⁷ Without seeing the internal report, we can

⁷ Department of Defence “ Delamere Air Weapons Range Redevelopment: Statement of Evidence to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works” (August 2015) at [26]. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Public_Works/Delamere

only accept that this may be a technically accurate evaluation of the proposal. Nonetheless, Delamere is home to two threatened bird species, and this was a lost opportunity for the operation of the weapons range to be considered in the context of modern environmental law. We submit that the Delamere redevelopment should be subject to a full environmental impact assessment.

The Department of Defence has consistently failed to bring its proposed activities in the Northern Territory for external environmental assessment, which has allowed the impact of growing Australian-American war preparation to fly under the radar of our established environmental planning tools. Given that the Joint Force Posture Initiative still has many years to run, we would like to see this resolved promptly. The \$747 million investment in upgrading military training bases in the NT, as well as the rest of the \$8 billion of military infrastructure investment in the NT proposed for the next decade,⁸ along with any further so-called 'war games' activities in NT should fully submit to Territory and Commonwealth environmental assessment processes. It is highly inappropriate that this one department is enabled to 'opt out' of the same environmental planning, assessment and accountability frameworks that all other land managers cooperate with.

Defence resource use

The environmental impacts of military activity in the Northern Territory beyond the impacts of so-called 'war games'. For instance, Defence Housing Australia manages a significant number of properties in the NT, and is currently planning on developing an 800 lot residential subdivision at Lee Point, of which 30% of the housing will be allocated for Defence members.⁹ This development is of particular concern to local residents as the proposed Lee Point development abuts the Casuarina Coastal Reserve, which is an important site for migratory shorebirds and turtle nesting, as well as providing habitat for a number of other threatened flora and fauna species. The development would involve clearing 110 hectares of vegetation.¹⁰

Defence installations also use energy and water. This energy is most likely to be from fossil fuels, consistent with the predominantly fossil-fuel-powered electricity system in the Northern Territory. For instance, the Pine Gap Joint Defence Facility, established in 1969, was powered by diesel generators, only switching to natural gas in the early 2010s. The facility has the right to extract 250 megalitres of water per year – the equivalent of 100 Olympic-sized swimming pools – from the aquifer that supplies Alice Springs from now until 2284 when the aquifer is set to run out.¹¹

⁸ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-28/prime-minister-to-announce-nt-military-training-base-upgrade/100099756>

⁹ <https://nteconomy.nt.gov.au/industry-analysis/defence>

¹⁰ See the NT Environment Protection Authority's Assessment Point 88 relating to Lee Point: https://ntepa.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/593703/assessment_report_lee_point_urban_dev.PDF

¹¹ See the Alice Springs Water Allocation Plan 2016-2026, available here: https://depws.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/271415/FINAL-ASWAP-AS-DECLARED-BY-MINISTER-IN-2016-.pdf

These more 'everyday' environmental impacts contribute to accumulating climate and biodiversity crises, which are already affecting the Northern Territory's environment. As the climate continues to change and water becomes more of a concern in the Top End, the military may be competing for water against other beneficial uses.

It is unclear how much the Defence Force contributes to Australia's greenhouse gas emissions.¹² While the internal Department of Defence assessment of its Talisman Sabre exercise in 2017 acknowledged that the exercise would produce greenhouse gases, they do not state how much and argue that "these would be insignificant in the context of Australia's overall greenhouse gas emissions and are an unavoidable by-product of this crucial exercise to maintain and enhance ADF capability."¹³

PFAS contamination in Katherine and Darwin

As in other parts of Australia and the world, PFAS from defence bases has caused water contamination in the Territory. As the ABC reported,¹⁴ the Australian government was warned by the US government in 2000 that the firefighting foam it used contained "potentially pose a risk to human health". Defence did not phase out use of that foam until 2012 and did not start to tell people about possible contamination until 2015.

PFAS - Per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances – are a class of synthetic chemicals widely used for their heat, oil, stain and water resistant qualities. One property that was particularly useful to the Defence Department was their ability to put out liquid fuel fires.

Unfortunately, these chemicals "do not break down and instead accumulate in soil, water and human bodies."¹⁵ The Department of Defence has carried out investigations into contamination from three areas in the NT, two sites in Darwin - RAAF Darwin and Robertson Barracks, and RAAF Tindal, near Katherine:

- Katherine's drinking water supply was contaminated with PFAS. Defence has paid for a treatment plant to remedy drinking water contamination.¹⁶ The residents of Katherine filed a class action law suit against the Department of Defence in relation to alleged land value reductions due to the contamination crisis and, together with Williamtown in New South Wales and Oakey in Queensland, have received a \$212.5 million settlement from the Federal Government.¹⁷

¹² https://www.foe.org.au/the_mystery_of_the_australia_defence_force_carbon_bootprint

¹³ See the final Public Environment Report for Talisman Saber 2017, p107:

<https://aecom.com/content/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/TS17-PER-Part-1-Body.pdf> .

¹⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-09/defence-admits-delay-in-informing-residents-of-contamination/9027706>

¹⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-10/pfas-compensation-cold-comfort-for-residents-with-contamination/13226616>

¹⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-19/katherine-water-restrictions-due-to-pfas-chemicals-to-continue/9675566>

¹⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-10/pfas-compensation-cold-comfort-for-residents-with-contamination/13226616>

- In relation to RAAF Darwin, PFAS has contaminated Rapid Creek and Ludmilla Creek – measures have been taken to provide advice to residents about eating fish and crustaceans in those creeks.
- In relation to the Robertson Barracks, there is PFAS contamination in the local stream which drains into a permanent swamp. The whole area is part of the Shoal Bay area of conservation significance. Effects on the aquatic ecosystems cannot be ruled out. Measures will be taken to discourage recreational fishing the stream.

While the Australian Government maintains that there is “limited to no evidence of human disease or other clinically significant harm resulting from PFAS exposure at this time”,¹⁸ other health authorities disagree. As the ABC reports, the European Environment Agency has “‘high certainty’ of other links to liver damage, kidney and testicular cancer.”¹⁹

Contamination from legacy Rum Jungle Uranium Mine

Also noteworthy is the continued environmental impacts of the abandoned Rum Jungle Uranium mine, which serves as a salutary reminder that the environmental impacts of militarism extend beyond the deployment of military equipment to the processes that create it. Rum Jungle Uranium Mine, approximately 100 kilometres south of Darwin, was set up by the Commonwealth government in the early 50s at the behest of the joint American and British Combined Development Agency. The Agency funded the development of the mine and purchased uranium from the mine for the purpose of making nuclear weapons. Processing at the mine ceased in 1971. Some rehabilitation work was done during the 80s which stabilized the site to the standards of the day, including significantly reducing (at least for a period) the metal loadings in the local Finniss River. Left unremediated were the catastrophic effects on the two sacred sites in the area – one of which is now the main pit of the mine.

Because of the severe environmental damage, the Rum Jungle site was not returned to its Kungarakan and Warai traditional owners as part of the Finniss River Land Claim. From 2009, the Northern Territory Government has been funded by the Commonwealth government to research and maintain the site, and in recent years, work with the traditional owners to come up with a rehabilitation plan and carry out an environmental impact assessment process.²⁰ Almost seven decades after mining began at the site, funding for the full rehabilitation of the Rum Jungle site was finally included in the 2021 Federal Budget, but the sum was not disclosed for commercial reasons.²¹

¹⁸ <https://www.pfas.gov.au/about-pfas/affects> (accessed 24 August 2021)

¹⁹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-10/pfas-compensation-cold-comfort-for-residents-with-contamination/13226616>

²⁰ See the Northern Territory Government’s webpage about the Rum Jungle Rehabilitation Project: <https://industry.nt.gov.au/industries/mining-and-energy/mine-rehabilitation-projects/rum-jungle-mine/rum-jungle-mine>

²¹ See ECNT’s press release about the Federal Budget allocation for the rehabilitation of Rum Jungle: <https://industry.nt.gov.au/industries/mining-and-energy/mine-rehabilitation-projects/rum-jungle-mine/rum-jungle-mine>

Summary

The environmental impacts of military activities and decisions in the Northern Territory vary from resource consumption to damage from munitions to longterm contamination of human bodies. These impacts are not transparent as the Department of Defence is not required to report of them. The public has limited opportunities to scrutinize these impacts, particularly as many of them occur on Defence land to which public access is restricted. The public is for the most part denied the opportunity to comment on proposed military activities before they occur as the Department of Defence does not usually follow the same public environmental impact assessments that would have been required of other proponents proposing activities of such scale.

Looking ahead

Training area upgrades

The Federal Government has committed to \$8 billion worth of upgrades to military infrastructure in the Northern Territory over the next decade, including an initial \$747 million investment into upgrading the Robertson Barracks Close Training Area, Kangaroo Flats Training Area, Mount Bunday Training Area and Bradshaw Field Training Area to “support greater involvement with the US and other allies to conduct ‘war gaming’ exercises at the four Northern Territory bases”.²² We are concerned that these upgrades will facilitate even greater environmental impacts on those training areas and the areas that surround them, again without the public having the opportunity to comment in a public and transparent environmental impact assessment process.

Constructing a new port at Glyde Point?

As regards the larger \$8 billion fund, we are very concerned that this could include funding for the construction of a new port at Glyde Point, 40 kilometres northeast of Darwin (see Appendix 2). In 2019, there was reporting from the ABC about plans to build a new port outside Darwin to accommodate visiting US Marines and Glyde Point was touted as the likely location. Any deep water port there would require dredging and substantial construction works, impacting predominantly intact terrestrial, coastal and marine ecosystems.

Glyde Point has been eyed for development multiple times over the last few decades and each time has been resisted by the Environment Centre NT and others because of the significant environmental values of the site. In 2003, the NT Government proposed a port facility and heavy industry site, with accompanying residential development. That proposal did not go ahead but the idea for a deep water port was revived ten years later which again did not proceed. We are very concerned that this time the proposal might succeed, if the weight of the Australian and US militaries are put behind it. Appendix 3 is a report about

²² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-28/prime-minister-to-announce-nt-military-training-base-upgrade/100099756>

the values of the Glyde Point area that was prepared for ECNT and the Australian Marine Conservation Society in 2006 and outlines why this site is particularly precious.

Nuclear risks

In addition to the increased environmental risks from new investments in military infrastructure in the NT, ECNT remains concerned about the risks to the Northern Territory people and environment from military activities involving nuclear material. ECNT has a long history of opposing a broad array of nuclearist activities in the NT, from mining and milling to dumping, and extending to the unsafe and unwanted visitation of foreign nuclear-capable war machinery. We are very much aware that the growing foreign military presence has only increased the visit of nuclear capable war machines, with no matching progress on policy or scrutiny. Our past activities have highlighted both our living harbour's status as licensed for nuclear visits, and our hospital system's lack of preparedness for catastrophic nuclear scenarios. We oppose the increased risk of visitation by nuclear armed foreign war machines, and we seek greater scrutiny of this highly contentious and widely opposed implication of foreign military engagement in our Territory.

Conclusion

ECNT endorse IPAN's initiative in launching this inquiry, and we welcome further attention to and improved consideration of the environmental risks and impacts that come from a reluctance to pursue independence.

Yours faithfully,

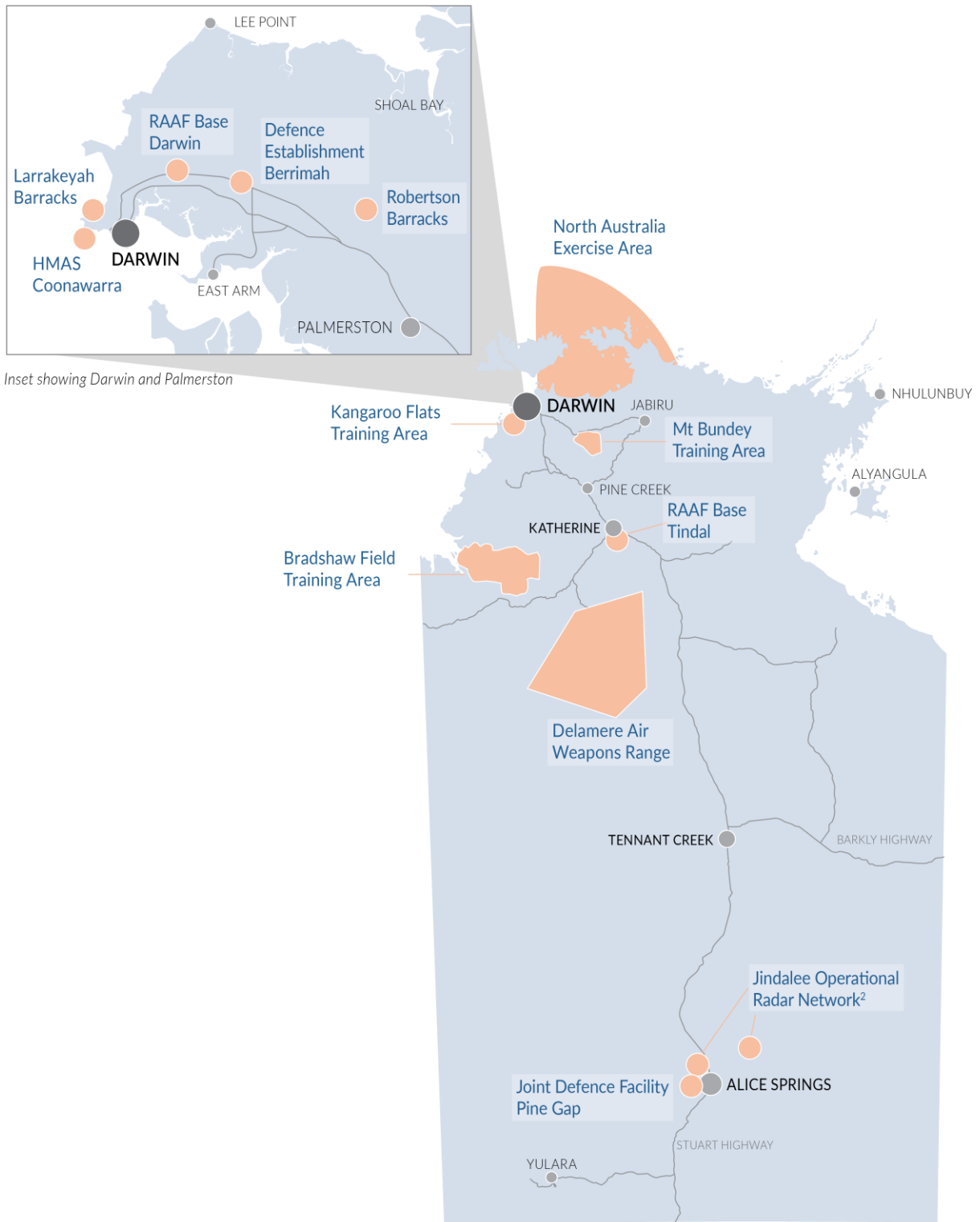


Shar Molloy
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Appendix 1 – Major Defence Sites in the Northern Territory



Source: Department of Treasury and Finance; DefenceNT; Department of Trade, Business and Innovation.

Note from source: this map was produced from various sources. Department of Treasury and Finance cannot guarantee the accuracy, currency, or completeness of the information. To be used as a guide only.

Appendix 2 – Map of the Darwin region, showing the location of Glyde Point



Appendix 3 – Rainforest to Reef: An assessment of the conservation values of the Gunn Peninsula/Vernon Islands area and the impacts of the proposed Glyde Point heavy industry and residential estate (April 2006).

Attached separately.