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River grabbing from the source: groundwater extraction and the self-perpetuating colonial practices of dispossession in Australia's Northern Territory

Sue Jackson [a,*], Erin O'Donnell [b], Matthew Currell [c]

[a] Australian Rivers Institute, Griffith University, Nathan, Queensland, Australia
[b] Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
[c] School of Engineering and Built Environment, Griffith University, Nathan, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous people of the Roper River in Australia's Northern Territory (NT) have strong legal rights to most of the land through which the river flows, including its bed and banks. Yet the settler-colonial state asserts control over its waters, whether flowing across or under the surface of the land. We show that the Northern Territory government has applied lessons from its colonial history of land grabbing to thwart Indigenous claims to water, including those established via the Aboriginal Water Reserve, a mechanism of settler water law. Our focus is on regulatory procedures in the Mataranka region, where groundwater extraction is occurring on a scale that puts at stake the very existence of the Roper River and its complex of sacred springs and wetlands and threatens to undermine vital socio-cultural practices. A river grabbing frame centres the river as a living, socially unifying, and hydrologically interconnected entity. It moves the focus of justice struggles from water conceived as a disembedded, divisible resource to the relations that underlie settler-colonial state domination. Here, river grabbing is materialised through rampant water hoarding, speculation and over-extraction, which are legitimised by a racialized system of water governance that entrenches and protects non-Indigenous water use. We contribute to literature on the political contingencies of dispossession by showing how the administrative exercise of state power in water planning and allocation processes perpetuates a colonial mode of extraction that denies Indigenous peoples' legitimate expectations for water rights and real power to make decisions over the region's future.

1. Introduction

In 2023, representatives of south-east Arnhem Land clans and language groups travelled to Australia's parliament in Canberra to advocate for protection of the Roper River in the Northern Territory (NT), a region heavily impacted by multiple waves of settler-colonial violence and resource extraction (Fig. 1). Ngukurr elder, Robin Rogers, explained to parliamentarians that the delegation had travelled for over 5,000 km so that "white men can understand what we're talking about" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2022). The journey across a continent was made in response to alarming rates of extraction from the aquifers that sustain the Roper River (Currell et al., 2024), as well as proposals to accelerate application processes for land clearing and water extraction to irrigate farms and enable gas exploration (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2023).

Indigenous communities in total comprise more than 70% of the population of the Roper River catchment and hold recognised legal rights to about 40% of its land area (Lyons et al., 2023), yet they have no real power to make decisions for the river. When travelling to Canberra Traditional Owners[1] also brought a statement supported by hundreds of people from their homelands which read: "All our songlines follow the water. We are all connected. If you take our water, you kill our culture. If you kill our culture, you kill our people" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2022). The statement demanded recognition of Indigenous water rights, including a ban on further water extraction, legal protection of environmental and Indigenous values, joint decision-making for

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: sue.jackson@griffith.edu.au (S. Jackson).

[1] We alternate between the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal and Traditional Owner reflecting local preferences, as well as statutory terminology used in the Northern Territory.

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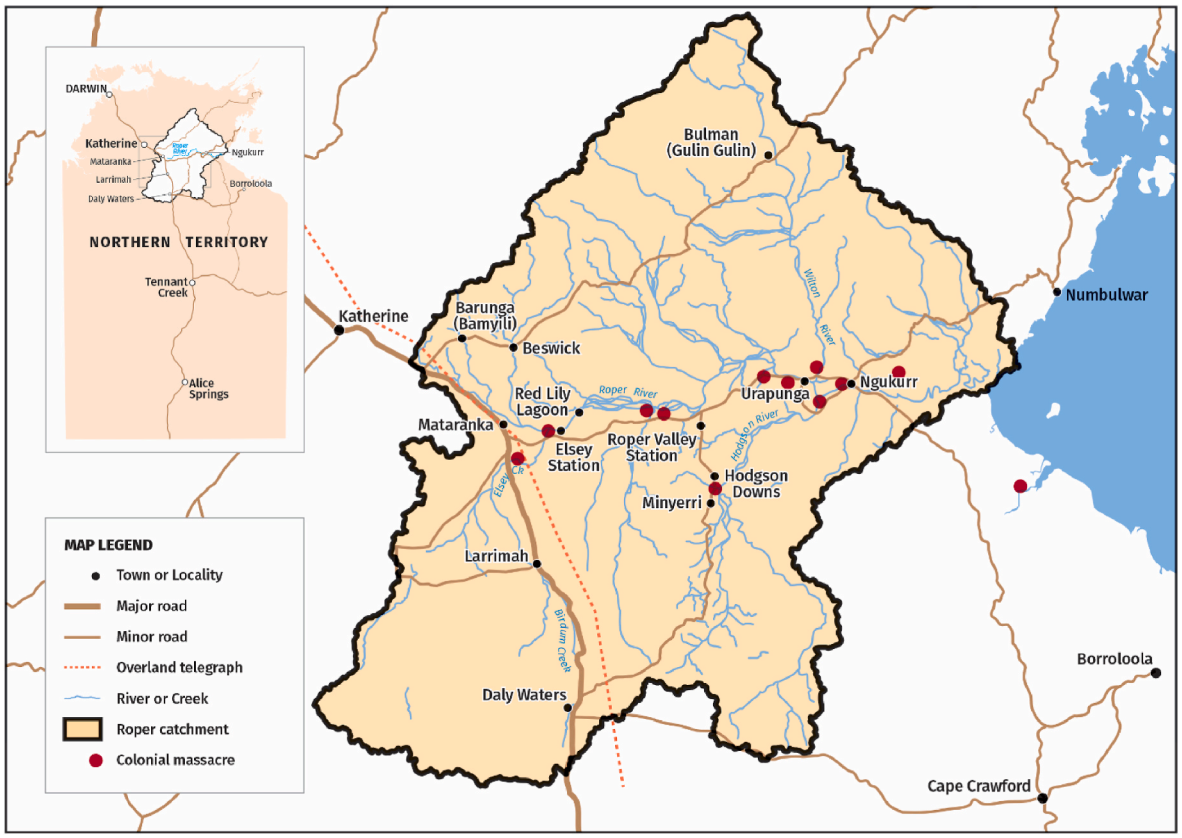

Fig. 1. Colonial massacres. Source: Ryan et al. (2018) reproduced in Lyons et al. (2023); see https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/.

water planning, and prioritisation of Indigenous scientific and cultural knowledge (Ngalakgan et al., 2021).

One of those organisations planning to "take the water" was the Northern Territory Land Corporation (NT Land Corp) which had acquired 5,712 ha within the catchment to create an agricultural precinct. An application for a 10 million m^3/year water licence made in 2019 was initially accepted by the NT Government; a volume that represented almost one-sixth of the total water made available for use in the area under water allocation rules (NT Government, 2024a). After a legal appeal, an independent review panel[2] declined the licence on the grounds that the water agency failed to comply with standards of procedural fairness, incorrectly applied scientific knowledge, and wrongly concluded that future Indigenous rights to commercially use water would be unaffected (Water Resources Review Panel, 2021). Almost immediately, the NT Government 'invited' the NT Land Corp to re-apply for the licence on local radio (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2021). A new application lodged by a lessee in 2024 for the same amount of water was recently approved. This licence will likely increase the value of the land ten-fold, and the water itself is expected to generate a return of almost A$11 million per year (Grafton et al., 2024). In a stunning example of public wealth transfer, this water is effectively being given away free, with the proponent only having to pay the small licence application fee.

Approval of the NT Land Corp mega-licence is the latest episode in an ongoing process of both land and water grabbing. It is a manifestation of the settler ideology of frontier development via resource extraction which has shaped the preparation of a water plan for the major aquifer in the Roper River region and is motivating regulatory decisions that are altering the material flows of water (Currell et al., 2024; Ndehedehe et al., 2025). There is significant surface water-groundwater connectivity in this region, and during the long dry season, large volumes of high-quality groundwater sustain surface flows in springs, creeks and the mainstem of the Roper River (Karp, 2008; Currell et al., 2024). Water allocation decisions in this region are enabling groundwater mining on a scale that puts at stake the very existence of the river and its complex of springs and wetlands (Currell & Jackson, 2024).

The expropriation of the vital life force, water, threatens to extinguish not just dependent aquatic life and habitats but also the continuity of Indigenous cultural and religious practices. Water is of cosmological and ancestral significance for Indigenous people from the Roper catchment; it embodies, sustains and connects all life. Traditional Owners have recently observed hydrological changes to stream levels and water quality that jeopardise fishing and swimming and are harming other interactions with Country[3] (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2024). Most of the registered sacred sites in the area, such as springs, are dependent on groundwater flows (Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, 2024) and therefore at risk.

The latest water plan, the Mataranka Water Allocation Plan (WAP) (NT Government, 2024a, Fig. 2), also legitimises the denial of hard-won rights for Indigenous landowners to access water for commercial benefit which were recognised after amendments to Northern Territory water law in 2019. These amendments created an Aboriginal Water Reserve (AWR).

The settler state uses manifold processes to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their groundwater and thus their rivers (O'Donnell et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2023). These include asserting exclusive authority

[2] The Water Resources Review Panel is an expert panel assembled to review a decision of the NT Water Controller to grant a licence. The Panel then advises the Minister as to whether this decision should stand.

[3] 'Country', as used in this paper, is the Aboriginal English term that represents Aboriginal peoples' holistic and sacred understandings of their territories, including land and water, and their relations with them (Rose, 1996).

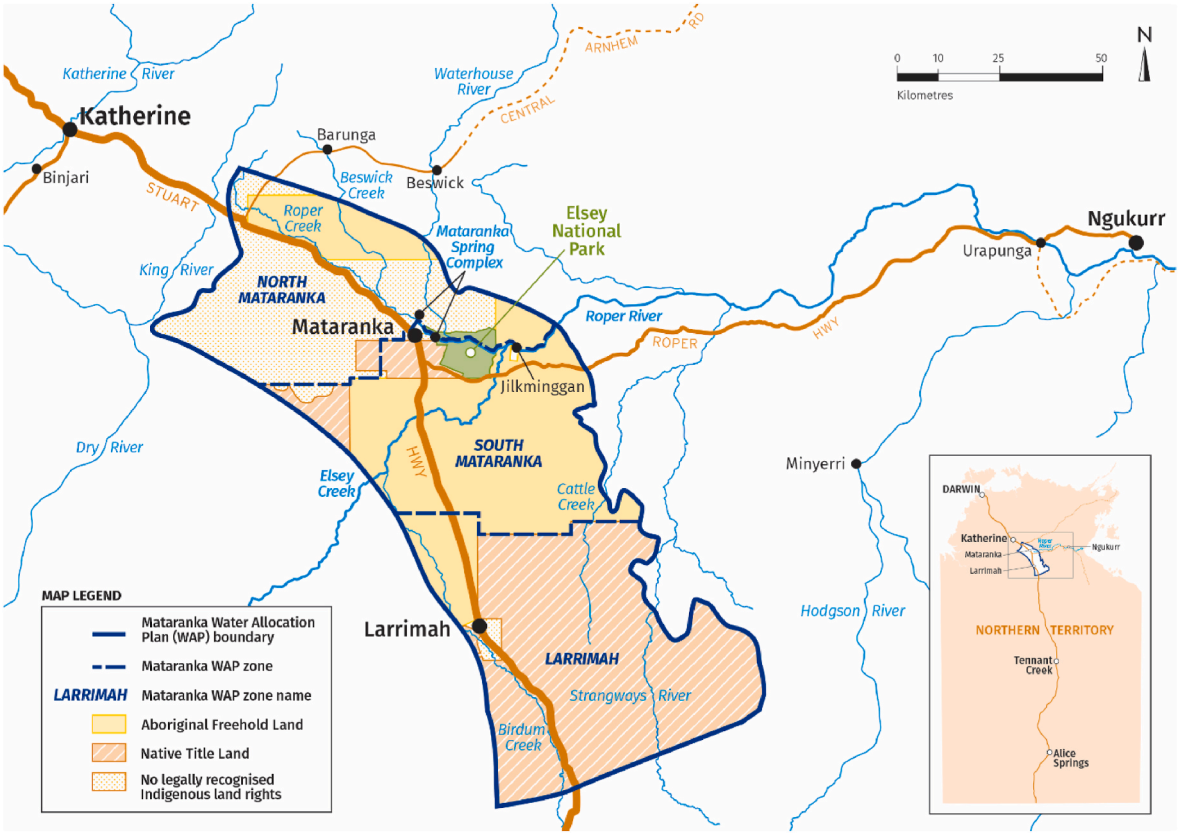

Fig. 2. Map of the Mataranka Water Allocation Plan area showing land held by Aboriginal people as freehold title (beige) and land over which Aboriginal people have non-exclusive native title rights (striped).

or jurisdiction over river waters and their interconnected aquifers; privileging techno-managerial hydrological knowledge over embodied Indigenous knowledges and institutionalising regulatory spaces of inclusion and exclusion that entrench and (re)produce inequities and insecurities in water access. Critical agrarian and environmental justice scholars have analysed similar processes in other regions of the world, revealing the interconnections between dimensions of discourse, authority, rules, and the actual distribution of resources (Boelens, 2008; Roth et al., 2018; Zwarteveen & Boelens, 2014).

Here, we focus on the rules regulating groundwater and how these unfairly distribute water, both between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and between industry and the river. Such extractive processes have typically been analysed under the gamut of *water grabbing*, a form of accumulation by dispossession that redistributes wealth from public to private capital (Bieler & Moore, 2023; Franco et al., 2013; Gasteyer et al., 2012). We prefer the term *river grabbing* because it signals our intention to challenge the techno-managerial discourse of water resource management and its conceptualisation of water that is anathema to the Indigenous peoples of this and other Australian regions (Laborde & Jackson, 2022; RiverOfLife et al., 2021).

Through a detailed examination of the groundwater regulation regime, we show the active and specific ways the settler-colonial state undertakes river grabbing. Our analysis is based on public policy and legal documents and scholarly literature relating to the area of the Mataranka WAP, which encompasses the territories of the Jawoyn, Yungman, Mangarrayi and Wabuluwyn peoples. We rely heavily on grey material from several sources: (i) water planning documents published by the NT government; (ii) public submissions on draft water plans; (iii) NT court and administrative review decisions relating to water allocation in the Mataranka area; (iv) NT and Commonwealth agency reports and websites; and (v) online media reports. The NT water licencing data portal (NT Government, 2024d) was systematically searched in early 2025 to support the analysis of water rights distributions over the period 2010–2025. We searched current licences from the Mataranka plan area, checked date of issue and renewal against key dates relevant to the AWR policy, calculated volumes granted, and assessed whether the AWR was considered in decisions to renew or grant licences.

First, we introduce our conceptualisation of river grabbing. We then explain how dispossession has materialised in the NT, and more specifically the Roper River region, over several loosely defined phases involving both land and water. These stages are framed as "regimes of dispossession" which Levien refers to as "socially and historically specific constellations of state structures, economic logics tied to particular class interests, and ideological justifications that generate a consistent pattern of dispossession" (2012, p. 383). The rest of the paper examines the Mataranka WAP as a leading example of river grabbing enabled by groundwater extraction rules and racialized water governance.

2. River grabbing

Water grabbing is the "capturing of control not just of the water itself, but also of the power to decide how this will be used" (Franco et al., 2013, p. 1654), driving not only increased extraction and speculation, but also the imposition of specific water use regimes that "incorporate people … into new economic arrangements" (Franco et al., 2013, p. 1656). This unequal power dynamic and the violence of this imposition is intensified in settler-colonial contexts, where Indigenous ontologies of water are also dominated and excluded (Parsons et al., 2021).

In such contexts, where conflicts over water are inherently ontological (Jackson et al., 2023), theoretical framings of expropriation, destruction and exclusion need to be highly attentive to the politics through which water (as well other 'natures') are defined and known. Western science and its technologies of commodification and management facilitate expropriation and accumulation by imagining and

engaging with water as a unit or volume of H_2O and treating it as a divisible resource, disentangled from its social relations and the living cultural landscapes through which it flows (Jackson et al., 2023). However, Indigenous water cultures of Australia stress the sentient, agential and relational nature of waterbodies which are consistently referred to as living beings (Laborde & Jackson, 2022; Langton, 2006; Martuwarra et al., 2020), an idea that is also being taken up in non-Indigenous legal orders (O'Donnell et al., 2024). By focusing on the *river* as the site of struggle, we centre its existence as a living and life-giving entity rather than the units of water that the term water grab conjures.

In seeing water as further entangled with Country, we explicitly connect colonial processes employed in acts of land grabbing to those now used to grab groundwater which, in this region, is the source of the river. Hence our use of the term *ground/river water* which blurs the simplistic managerial boundary between surface water and ground water regulation. *River grabbing*, therefore, responds to the materiality and interconnectedness of water flows and the colonial processes that continue to dominate and control them.

Literature on the contingent nature of dispossession affirms the need to understand dispossession as a political process and not a determined outcome of capitalist expansion (Kenney-Lazar, 2018). Geographical work on dispossession, emphasises the extra-economic means (coercion, the law, violence) by which dispossession actually takes place (Levien, 2012; Glassman, 2006) and how these are deployed by states or "other coercion wielding entities" to "help capitalists overcome barriers to accumulation" (Levien, 2012, p. 914).

We document the colonial processes that are facilitating river grabbing and imposing a new water management regime on Indigenous peoples, by focusing on the administrative tools of water planning and water licencing. We focus on these processes as both politically violent and administrative because settler state domination of Indigenous peoples has "become increasingly expressed through administrative means" (Chatterjee, 2023, p. 811). To expose the nature and outcome of these administrative processes in facilitating river grabbing, we apply Chatterjee's (2023) heuristic of domination, legitimation, pacification, and deceit to water governance and groundwater rules in the NT. In naming each element, the actions of the settler-colonial state come into focus as a "self-perpetuating process", where practices of land dispossession, "can set precedent for and be reworked into later programmes" of river grabbing (Chatterjee, 2023, p. 805).

3. Self-perpetuating processes of land and water grabbing along the Roper River

Land was the primary focus of settler resource regulation throughout the initial phase of invasion, occupation and colonial domination (1863–1970). Nonetheless water remained critical to all land uses and so defined the value of land. The land restitution era (1970's-present) saw the return of substantial tracts of land to Aboriginal Traditional Owners, but this land was granted with limited rights to water. The grant of freehold title under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976* (Cth) (ALRA) does not include minerals and, under the Act, minerals are defined to include water. The *Mabo* decision of 1992 and the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth) made possible limited recognition of Indigenous rights to inland waters under Australian law. Under this Act, rights to hunt, gather and fish for the purposes of satisfying the personal, domestic or non-commercial needs of native title holders can be exercised free from the licensing or permit restrictions that otherwise apply to such activities.

We define 1992-present as the water rights era, because of the emergence of an Indigenous water rights agenda (Jackson et al., 2023). In this contemporary period, partly coterminous with the land restitution era, Australian water law was restructured to encourage the development of water markets. Land and water titles were separated, and water came to be regulated and managed as its own policy domain; a process that continued the dispossession and exclusion wrought by colonisation (Hartwig et al., 2021).

3.1. Colonial domination, pacification and legitimation (1863–1970)

Like all Australian jurisdictions, the NT has a long history of expropriating Indigenous territories. Explorer reports of abundant water supplies, rich soil and luxuriant native grasses were one of the considerations that encouraged the colony of South Australia to annex the NT in 1863 (Merlan, 1978) and then grant large land parcels to settlers. The earliest land grabs were enacted through the grant of pastoral leases, an attempt to legitimatise the theft of land, and most of the NT was held by settlers by 1881–82 (Crough, 1992).

From the 1870s, the colonial government expropriated Aboriginal lands of the upper Roper River (Fig. 1), carving out leases from the territories of the Jawoyn, Yungman, Mangarray and other peoples. Within fifteen years the entire region (which comprised a quarter of the NT's pastoral country) had been leased to just 14 landholders, all but two of whom were wealthy businessmen and investors from the eastern colonies (Roberts, 2009).

Pastoralism was to have a "shattering impact" on Aboriginal people of the area (Merlan, 1978, p. 71). Settlers took up the land by inflicting "deadly violence" which continued until at least the late 1930s (Merlan, 2018, p. 141). About 15% of the population of the Gulf region (containing the Roper) was killed in the first 30 years of the pastoral boom and no perpetrator was charged (Roberts, 2009). The killing was racially disproportionate: about 20 settlers were killed out of between 600 and 800 men, women and children (Roberts, 2009). Massacres occurred on several Roper River stations where Aboriginal people were "systematically hunted" (Merlan, 1978, p. 82). Many of those sites were located along waterways (Fig. 1).

Following this violence, a coercive form of interdependence emerged in the pastoral industry. Indigenous exclusion from the benefits of resources relied on permanent non-Indigenous presence, which in turn relied on the exploitation of a 'pacified' Indigenous labour force. Decades of cattle grazing set in train processes of ecological degradation that impoverished the land for hunting and gathering by Aboriginal people (Gleeson, 1985) with waterbodies especially vulnerable to harm (McGrath, 1987; Merlan, 1986).

In the Mataranka area, the Mangarrayi people were able to continuously occupy at least a portion of their traditional lands throughout the pastoral era where they pursued a strong ceremonial life (Merlan, 1986). The extensive nature of pastoralism, the shortage of settler labour and Mungarrayi bush skills provided conditions that allowed the maintenance of Indigenous traditions, albeit unequal in terms of economic exchange.

To intensify agricultural land use, colonial legislators extended liberal tenurial provisions to farmers from the beginning of the 20th century: perpetual leasehold with no rent payable for the first 21 years or the life of the settler, whichever was the longer, in the first 5,000 cases (Richards, 1982). These provisions were complemented by the *Advances to Settlers Ordinance of 1913* which gave cash for improvements and farm equipment.

Impressed by the richness of the soil, the clarity of the water, and its central location along the new telegraph line, the Administrator of the NT envisaged Mataranka (Fig. 2) as a future capital for the nascent jurisdiction (Gleeson, 1985). He established a governmental experimental farm at Mataranka in 1912 but, as was to become standard practice in the NT, the government wildly overstated the suitability of the region for intensive farming. The experiment was declared a failure by 1923 when the settler population was barely more than 150 (Gleeson, 1985).

The colonial agents who worked hard throughout the first one hundred years of white settlement to centre Mataranka in the NT's development imaginary could not conceive of a strong Indigenous land base, and by the time a land restitution process was in place in the

1970s, the NT Government had crafted administrative devices to prevent Aboriginal people gaining rights to valuable land. These manoeuvres were to shape the prospects of equitable participation in water-based economic activities and the development path that is now being pursued at the risk of the customary economy, as well as crucial sites of religious significance. It is to those devices that we now turn.

3.2. Maintaining white possession during the land restitution era: perfecting land grabbing (1970's-present)

In 1976, the federal government passed the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (ALRA) enabling Aboriginal people to claim communal, inalienable freehold rights to land. It was Australia's first statutory scheme for making claims based on 'traditional' connections to land. When passed, the legislation looked like it would very significantly redistribute property because the NT had so much unalienated Crown Land. For this reason, the NT government consistently challenged land claims, going to great lengths to preclude land from claim by altering its status as claimable (Jackson, 2023). We compare this mode of power with those that Chatterjee (2023) describes as deceitful.

There were several notorious cases that involved manipulation of the statutory land use planning regime. In 1978 the NT Government gazetted town planning regulations that declared large areas of land around four major towns – Alice Springs, Darwin, Tennant Creek and Katherine – as "land adjacent to towns". This action was designed to render the land unavailable for claim (Jackson, 2023). Another deceitful strategy involved passing land to government-owned corporations, which also had a similar effect. In 1986, the NT Government created the NT Land Corp to "acquire, hold and manage" land assets, including land "for future strategic use" (NT Land Corporation, 2024). It played a key role in undermining land claims. The Conservation Land Corporation, which held title to every NT National Park (Smith, 2011), served a similar purpose.

NT Land Corp was, and remains, effectively a state-owned private corporation, acting as an arm of the government to acquire land for future use, yet sufficiently independent that it is not subject to public service standards of transparency (Edgar, 2008). According to Smith (2011, p. 196) the sole purpose of this corporation was to engage in "land grabs" at the expense of the Traditional Owners and act as a repository for land. Smith (2011) calculated that, between them, the NT Land Corp and Conservation Land Corp thwarted one in every five Aboriginal land claims lodged between 1977 and 1997.

This form of land grabbing was applied to the Roper River catchment. The judge hearing the first Aboriginal land claim (Mataranka) anticipated that the successful grant of Aboriginal freehold title would enable Traditional Owners to control "wider areas on which they can camp, fish, hunt, and gather, as well as carry out ceremonial and ritual practices" (Maurice, 1990, p. 77). Immediately before the Mataranka claim was lodged in 1983, the NT government, which opposed the claim, acquired Mataranka Station, a large pastoral lease. The government made much of the land surrounding the town the subject of a Crown Lease perpetual in favour of NT Land Corp and other areas of environmental significance were acquired by the Conservation Land Corp (Maurice, 1990). By changing tenure in this way, the NT government rendered this land unavailable for claim.

The "river people" of the region (Maurice, 1990), including the Mungarrayi, eventually demonstrated to the satisfaction of the settler legal system "a powerful and continuing traditional connection" to those portions of their territories that were still eligible to claim (Gray, 1998, p. 89) and those lands were returned. The bed and banks of several sections of the upper Roper River were also returned in 2004, after a 22-year delay due to objections from the NT government (Olney, 2004). As per the ALRA, these 'riparian' claims were not couched as claims to the water in the river or aquifers (through which much of the river water flows). Designated land parcels were restored to Aboriginal control as communally held 'Aboriginal freehold' and, as freehold title, there are associated rights to use water but only for 'traditional', not commercial, purposes (Jackson et al., 2023).

Through the course of three land claims (Elsey, Mataranka and Upper Roper River) Traditional Owners also demonstrated their knowledge of the mythology governing customary ownership and management of their estates and, in doing so, attested to their great religious and cultural significance (Maurice, 1990). Evidence of important ancestral accounts, popularly known as Dreamings, was given. The Land Commissioner was told - as Australian Parliamentarians heard more than thirty years later - that creator beings were responsible for giving form to the present state of the world and that these ancestors continue to live in it. The Land Commissioner saw the watercourses and wetlands as a "rich heartland", with the Roper River and Roper Creek being "dotted with sites of profound and continuing totemic significance" (Maurice, 1990, p. 78). These sites and others were of ceremonial significance not only to the land-holding groups and closest communities, but to others further afield who are related through ritual and who participate in regional ceremonies (Maurice, 1990). The Land Commissioner was also convinced that water provides a critical foundation for Indigenous subsistence and recognised the use of the river as a right that ought to be primary, when evaluated against the claims of others such as commercial fishers (Maurice, 1990).

The Land Commissioner saw economic opportunities in a grant of land close to Mataranka: "[t]here will always be the possibility of either developing the land themselves or leasing it for development. With a land base the opportunity for participation in equity in any development is vastly increased" (Maurice, 1990, p. 91). However, the NT government would not countenance Aboriginal ownership, especially ownership of the iconic Elsey Station, which is a site of literary significance as the setting of the frontier story, *We of the Never Never*[4]. A radio news account spoke to the racist sentiment of the 1990s:

> Once the news got out, Territory Parliament was in an uproar. The government said the new owners would ruin Elsey as a cattle station and cause untold damage to the Territory economy. Aborigines were taking over the land at a terrifying rate, a sure sign of the imminent death of the cattle industry (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1999).

The conservative NT Government also tried to prevent Traditional Owners from regaining control of a large system of wetlands downstream, as well as Elsey Falls on the Roper River, both of which were of conservation value and high tourism potential. To legitimise their intent to dispossess, the government used nationalistic political rhetoric: the Minister for Lands told parliament he was acting in the 'public interest' by "trying to secure this access for all Australians" (Hansard, 1991, p. 323). By gesturing to the 'public good' and evoking the threat that the land claim posed to 'Australians' or 'Territorians', who were always imagined as white, the Minister exploited the racial trope that proved a winning electoral strategy for twenty-five years (Smith, 2011).

In 1993, the federal government passed the *Native Title Act*, which codified the ways in which native title could be recognised and the circumstances in which it would generate exclusive or non-exclusive possession of land. Several native title claims to the Roper River area have since returned varying degrees of control to Traditional Owners of more land within the catchment. With non-exclusive native title determined over several pastoral leases within the Mataranka WAP, Indigenous people now hold rights and interests over most of the WAP area (Fig. 2).

[4] An enduringly popular autobiographical novel published in 1908 that explored colonial life in the Australian 'outback'.

4. Northern territory water laws: enabling capitalist accumulation

The NT government has applied the lessons of land grabbing more explicitly to water since the 1990s, when land and water started to be treated separately in law throughout Australia. It introduced the Water Act 1992 as part of a hegemonic legal apparatus that affirms the state as the locus of decision-making. The legislation presumes there is no need to address the "method of governance itself" (Curran, 2019, p. 2), nor seek ways to enable Indigenous laws and governance practices to co-exist with those of the settler state. With its commitment to managing water in the 'public' interest the state maintains a "deceitful silence on the question of colonisation and dispossession" (Chatterjee, 2023, p. 805).

The *Water Act* is the source of power to grant rights to take and use water and undertake statutory water planning[5]. The NT Water Controller (appointed by the Minister for Water Resources) has the power to grant, renew, refuse and amend water permits and licences. In doing so they must consider several factors, including any relevant WAP and existing "water availability" (s 90(1)). Applying for a licence requires provision of details such as how and where the water will be used, land on which to use it, and funds to establish infrastructure. These requirements have operated as barriers to Indigenous access (Cooper & Jackson, 2008; Nikolakis & Grafton, 2021).

To rectify this exclusion from economic development, Aboriginal organisations proposed an Aboriginal Water Reserve (AWR), and from 2019 the law required an AWR in all water plans with eligible Aboriginal land (Godden et al., 2020). Defining eligible land involves a two-part test, firstly, exclusive possession of land, and secondly, an area of eligible land in a WAP greater than 1 ha, with water resources on, under, or adjacent to the land (s 22C). Once the eligible land is present, AWR volumes increase in a stepped scale, so that:

- 0–10% eligible land within a WAP reserves 10% of the consumptive pool for the AWR;
- 10–30% eligible land reserves the same percentage of consumptive pool for the AWR;
- the AWR is capped at a maximum of 30% even where eligible land is greater than 30%.

Despite the stated commitment to reserve water for exclusive Aboriginal use, the NT Government has again used its administrative powers, and the NT Land Corp, to undermine both the AWR and Aboriginal control of water more generally. These administrative processes thwart Aboriginal water rights in three ways.

First, the government has failed to prepare WAPs, which are the instrument that triggers access to the AWR in most regions. In January 2025, WAPs covered only 15.9% of the NT, leaving eligible Traditional Owners unable to access a Reserve throughout most of the jurisdiction.

Second, water use in several WAP areas has been (through previous licencing decisions) permitted to reach limits imposed under the Act, leaving zero water available in the AWRs for those plans, even though there are large 'notional' volumes allocated (O'Donnell et al., 2022). Unlike most of Australia, water licences in the NT are available with negligible fees and no ongoing charges. As per the initial colonial era in which land speculation was rife (Crough, 1992) the NT government has enabled the acquisition of water licences for future speculative uses, as well as the hoarding of more water than is needed. Section 5 illustrates this dynamic in some detail.

As with land, the NT Land Corp also has a role in driving water acquisition, by applying for large water licences on a speculative basis. The business model rests on sub-leasing land and water to private enterprises (NT Land Corporation, 2025) and this was further enabled by an amendment to the *Water Act* in 2021, which allowed 'head licences' (speculative licences acquired to support future sub-division and development) to be issued more readily. Again, this serves to obscure the transfer of natural resources to commercial interests (O'Donnell et al., 2022).

Third, licence renewal processes occur without public notice or reconsideration of the factors assessed in the original application (listed in s 90(1)). It appears from our analysis below that applications to renew a licence are granted, except in rare circumstances. In doing so, the administrative renewals process effectively secures perpetual use by those who were granted access before the AWR was introduced, and the effect in this case is to entrench and protect non-Indigenous water use. In toto, these manoeuvres exemplify the legitimation and pacification role of the AWR and demonstrate the severe limitation of pursuing recognition pathways within liberal settler state systems of water governance (Jackson, 2018; Roth et al., 2015).

We will analyse the rules enabling water speculation and hoarding in more detail to show how they facilitate river grabbing in the Roper River catchment, but first, we provide an overview of the Mataranka WAP, which was declared in December 2024.

5. The Mataranka water allocation plan

The Mataranka WAP establishes water extraction arrangements for the Tindall Aquifer – an extensive fractured and cavernous freshwater carbonate aquifer in the Mataranka region that forms part of the wider Cambrian Limestone Aquifer (Lamontagne et al., 2021; Currell & Ndehedehe, 2022). The WAP applies to an area of approximately 9,282 km^2 and encompasses the upper reaches of the Roper River and its main headwater tributaries – Roper, Elsey and Beswick Creeks, and the Waterhouse River. All these streams are sustained by outflows of water from the Tindall Aquifer via numerous springs and seeps, and all would dry out during the annual dry season without flows from the connected aquifer (Karp, 2008; Lamontagne et al., 2021).

The stated objective of the WAP is to ensure that water is allocated within the determined Estimated Sustainable Yield (ESY). The ESY is effectively a cap on the maximum amount of licenced extraction across three water management zones: North Mataranka, South Mataranka and Larrimah (Fig. 2). This includes a notional (but small) allocation to the environment, and to an AWR. Approximately 36% of the land within the WAP is eligible land for an AWR (NT Government, 2024b).

Currently the main use of water in the plan area is agricultural crops (mangoes, melons, and cotton), comprising over 97% of commercial licence volume (the remainder is allocated for mining, tourism and town supply). The Plan stipulates an ESY that allows current extraction rates to double, despite evidence of declining dry season groundwater levels near the springs, caused by existing extraction for irrigation (Currell & Jackson, 2024; Ndehedehe et al., 2025). We therefore argue that the ESY is inadequate to achieve environmentally sustainable water extraction.

The Mataranka WAP exemplifies two drivers of river grabbing. In Part 5.1, we demonstrate that the settler state has relied on administrative mechanisms of obstruction to allow water to be allocated to almost entirely non-Indigenous users. In Part 5.2, we highlight specific water licensing processes that enable hoarding and speculation at the expense of both the environment and Aboriginal water use, leading to (1) more water being allocated than is used; (2) failure to revoke unused licences; and (3) failure to consider the AWR when licences are renewed. Ground/river water grabbing both endangers the ecology of the connected aquifer-river system and obstructs Aboriginal access to water.

5.1. River grabbing via administrative obstruction

Delays in completing the Mataranka WAP over more than 15 years have facilitated egregious and excessive grants of water, including to individuals well-connected to government, at the expense of Traditional

[5] Administered in 2025 by the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security.

Owners.

Water licencing in the vicinity of Mataranka started in 2003, and until 2010, the licenced volume was relatively low, with a total volume of <5 million m^3/yr (NT Government, 2024b). As water became a site for investment, the government commenced water planning and issued a draft plan in 2009 (NT Government, 2009a). Mangarrayi, Yungman and Wubalywan people vigorously pursued their rights to water at this time. The NT Government was aware that Indigenous landowners had "expressed concern" about the effects of proposed increases in extraction by commercial interests, including "that water will not be available if they wish to develop their land for economic benefit in the future" (NT Government, 2009, p. 19). In response to Indigenous advocacy, the NT Government proposed to reserve 25% of the 'consumptive pool[6]' for Aboriginal economic development[7] (NT Government, 2011).

Traditional Owners considered the proposed Indigenous Reserve to be inadequate:

> I don't understand how we can have 67% of the land[8] and they only give us 25% of the water. We have to fight hard for that water because the connections and links between the people are tight. We are bonded together. This water planning, there was no consultation with the majority of the landowners (A.M.) (Barber & Jackson, 2011, p 47).

> That water should be 50:50 split, between [I]ndigenous and government. People can have the water from us if they want it. We will give the permit (R.S.) (Jackson & Barber, 2013, p. 13).

A change of government in the NT in 2012 halted implementation of the Indigenous Reserve for the next 5 years. Instead of finalising the WAP, the new conservative Country Liberal Party (CLP) quickly granted several very large licences, including one to a candidate in their party, Tina MacFarlane, the owner of Stylo Station (formerly held by the NT Land Corp) (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2016). MacFarlane received a licence of 5.8 million m^3/yr for 10 years, then equivalent to approximately 15% of the consumptive pool (Notice of Water Extraction Licence Decision, 2013). The granting of this licence was questionable on multiple grounds.

First, the licence, which was double the total amount of water extracted in the Mataranka water planning area in 2011/12, was justified based on new hydrological modelling that used a shorter (and wetter) baseline period, that followed (and excluded) an extended drought. Selecting a baseline period of 40 years after 1967/68 thus had the effect of almost doubling the ESY. When originally applied for in 2010, the application was denied by the Water Controller on grounds that 'it is highly unlikely that the amount being sought for these developments will be available' (*MacFarlane v Minister for Natural Resources, Environment & Heritage,* 2012).[9] The water department's assessment of the licence had initially indicated that the increase in extraction was "not sustainable" and could cause "detrimental effects to the flow at Bitter Springs" (Department of Land Resource Management, 2013).

Second, there were claims of nepotism and special treatment, given MacFarlane's connection to the CLP. Other landholders in the region had agreed to not submit applications while the Mataranka WAP was under development (*MacFarlane v Minister for Natural Resources, Environment & Heritage,* 2012).

Third, the licence was larger than the proposed Indigenous Reserve, which at that time was to be 4.875 million m^3/year (NT Government, 2011).

By 2014, a further 12.433 million m^3/yr was granted to five agricultural and industrial parties, including 2.166 million m^3/yr to NT Land Corp (Water Extraction Licence Decision, 2014). In assessing these applications, a new Water Controller noted that although no WAP was in place, and the government had abandoned the Indigenous Reserve policy, the total extraction would be within the 'upper limit' proposed for the consumptive pool in the draft plan.

This round of allocations marked the start of a major increase in ground/river water extraction near Mataranka by commercial agricultural interests, facilitated at the expense of both the environment and the Aboriginal community. In addition to being denied commercially valuable access to water, the concerns Traditional Owners held for their Country were not acted on. In many forums Traditional Owners sought recognition of the role of water in maintaining Country, the presence of key plants and animals, and in supporting hunting and fishing activities and other socio-cultural practices (Barber & Jackson, 2011; 2012). No on-ground studies were undertaken by the water management agency, instead the draft plan of 2011 pushed the need to identify Indigenous water dependent sites and quantify water requirements for Indigenous cultural purposes to a later date (NT Government, 2011). These and other critical ecological studies remained incomplete when the Mataranka WAP was released a decade later.

The draft plan of 2024 attracted much criticism for changing the methodology and rules used to derive the ESY and for further delaying critical work needed to establish ecological tolerances to varied flow regimes (Currell & Jackson, 2024; Brodie, 2024). The additional water available for extraction under the ESY (Table 1) puts the environment at grave risk (Currell et al., 2024; Currell & Jackson, 2024). The plan was also criticised for denying Traditional Owners a legitimate means of shaping its development (Currell & Jackson, 2024; Northern Land Council, 2024).

As a result of the licencing decisions described above, even with an overly permissive and contested ESY, the North and South zones of the WAP are now considered to be 'fully allocated', meaning that there is insufficient water to meet the notional AWR established by law (Table 1). Only 4.574 million m^3/yr (less than half) of the AWR is available for the economic benefit of Traditional Owners (the government calls this the 'provisioned' water) (Table 1); this is also less than

Table 1
Aboriginal water reserve in the Mataranka WAP.

Groundwater zones	North Mataranka	South Mataranka	Larrimah	Total
Estimated sustainable yield (million m^3/yr)	2.744	24.492	35.238	62.474
Consumptive pool (million m^3/yr)	2.410	23.781	35.008	61.199
Aboriginal eligible land (% of land within WAP area)	19.5%	74.0%	10.3%	32.4%
Notional Aboriginal Water Reserve (% of consumptive pool, capped at 30 % in each zone and in total)	19.5%	30.0%	10.3%	30.0%
Notional Aboriginal Water Reserve (million m^3/yr)	0.458	7.121	3.592	11.171
Provisioned Aboriginal Water Reserve (million m^3/yr)	0.047	0.935	3.592	4.574
Provisioned Aboriginal Water Reserve (% of notional AWR)	10.3%	13.1%	100.0%	40.9%
Provisioned Aboriginal Water Reserve (% of consumptive pool)	1.9%	3.9%	10.3%	7.5%

Note: all figures obtained from Mataranka WAP (2024).

[6] Consumptive pool: a term used to describe the view that there is a fixed volume of water 'available' for extraction with acceptable social, economic and environmental consequences.

[7] At this time the reserve was referred to as the Strategic Indigenous Reserve.

[8] This figure was based on the inclusion of non-exclusive native title land. When the policy became law in 2019 the definition of eligible land did not encompass non-exclusive native title.

[9] *MacFarlane v Minister for Natural Resources, Environment & Heritage* [2012] NTSC 98, see p 7.

the proposed Strategic Indigenous Reserve of 2011. The problem is most acute in the South Zone (Fig. 2), where the proportion of eligible Aboriginal land is very high (74%) but the AWR is only 3.9% of the consumptive pool (Table 1), rather than the 30% to which Traditional Owners are entitled under the NT policy (NT Government, 2017).

5.2. River grabbing via licencing

In the Mataranka WAP area, state administrative actions have enabled river grabbing through increased groundwater extraction rates. We see three administrative procedures at play: (1) water hoarding and speculation by allocating more water than is needed; (2) vague and inconsistently applied policy that obfuscates water recovery for Aboriginal use; and (3) licence renewals that lock in existing water use to the detriment of Aboriginal people.

5.2.1. Water speculation and hoarding: licenced volumes far exceed what is used

Since it was first reported in 2014, volumes of water used by licence holders (primarily irrigators) have been significantly less than the total licence volumes. Total water use remains less than 50% of cumulative licences across the WAP area (NT Government, 2024b, p. 50). Despite this gap between licenced and extracted volumes, licences continue to be granted (and renewed); total allocations within the WAP area now exceed 33.3 million m^3/yr (NT Government, 2024b, p. 49). Given that water is effectively free in the NT, this 'over-licencing' is a form of water hoarding, whereby existing licence holders can obtain more water than they need and prevent others from accessing it. The under-utilisation of licences is framed by the government as an "opportunity for new development to occur based on trade of existing entitlements" (NT Government, 2024b, p. 50), in addition to provisioning the AWR (although current policy limits this, see Part 5.2.2).

Allocating far more water than is being used means that in the North and South Mataranka zones, no additional allocations can be made without exceeding the ESY for each zone. Although one licence holder is an Aboriginal corporation (Top End Farms, with 3.95 million m^3/yr[10]), the allocation of licences to almost entirely non-Aboriginal users in advance of declaring the Mataranka WAP (and thus creating the AWR) has effectively deprived the Traditional Owners of access to a further 6.597 million m^3/yr (Table 1). This occurred because there was no water left to provision the AWR once the WAP was finally declared. The administrative enabling of ground/river water grabbing and water hoarding well above the volumes required to support licence holders' commercial irrigation operations thus obstructs Aboriginal access to water for economic development.

The Mataranka WAP also enables a future increase in water use through new licences, focused within the Larrimah zone. However, this is highly problematic, given the connectivity of the aquifer (Karp, 2008). Since the onset of large-scale extraction for irrigation, dry-season minimum groundwater levels near the Roper River have declined between 0.5 and 1.0 m below previously recorded minimum levels (Currell & Jackson, 2024). If the full licenced volume is used in future, this is likely to cause further groundwater declines, and adversely affect aquatic life in the connected Roper River, Mataranka Springs and other sites of importance.

The Mataranka WAP is therefore deceptive not only in so far as it undermines Aboriginal access; it also downplays the strong connectivity between regional groundwater flow paths, surface water and dependent ecosystems, and fails to guarantee protection of places and species of importance (Brodie, 2024; Currell et al., 2024; Currell & Jackson, 2024). The WAP will allow groundwater extraction rates to effectively double (Table 1) and significantly exceed recharge rates in the Larrimah zone – where the largest consumptive pool has been made available. This will inevitably draw down the groundwater resource over time (Brodie, 2024; Knapton et al., 2023; Currell & Jackson, 2024), further reduce flows of groundwater to the Roper from the Tindall Aquifer and potentially reverse the groundwater flow direction from areas of high cultural and ecological significance, back towards regions of intensive extraction (Ndehedehe et al., 2025; Currell & Jackson, 2024).

As these impacts – supported by a considerable body of evidence – have not been adequately accounted for in the Mataranka WAP (Currell & Jackson, 2024; Northern Land Council, 2024), the ESY is arguably not sustainable at all. In failing to adequately demonstrate the full hydrological and ecological impacts of extraction at the proposed ESY (including studies of ecosystem tolerance to varied flow regimes, work scheduled to occur years after the plan's commencement (NT Government, 2024c), the NT Government is requiring Traditional Owners to decide whether further use that might benefit them economically (via the AWR), but harm the environment, would be acceptable.

5.2.2. Entrenching exclusive use through vague policy and administrative inaction

Allowing unused water to be retained by those advantaged by the favourable decision-making environment of the past decade is detrimental to Indigenous rights and interests. The NT Government has proposed that the Water Controller recover unused licenced water in the North and South zones and allocate that water to the AWR (action 4.5.1, NT Government, 2024c). Yet the Mataranka WAP contains no targets or a timetable to recover sufficient water for the AWR.

To recover water, the NT Government will apply its Unused Licensed Water Entitlements Policy (NT Government, 2020), which states that:

> If a licence holder has an unused licensed entitlement in three consecutive periods, the Controller will consider reducing a maximum annual entitlement by the average of the unused licensed entitlements. An unused licensed entitlement is the difference between the minimum amount of water a licence holder is required to extract (minimum extraction requirement) and the actual volume of water extracted by the licence holder in any period (actual extraction volume).

Older licences often fail to specify the minimum extraction requirement, but more recent licences, such as licence TLAM04 (NT Land Corp in Mataranka South), which was renewed for ten years in 2024, state:

> The Licence Holder must extract at least 90% of the Extraction Limit in at least one year (which year commences on 1 May and ends 30 April) of any three consecutive years for the duration of the licence.

However, there is no public reporting on water use by licencees, making it impossible to confirm how the unused water policy is being applied. Given that reported water use in the Mataranka WAP area is less than 50% of total licence volume and has been since 2014, water licences are clearly underused, yet the vague wording of the policy and lack of data on individual use provide a smokescreen for bureaucratic inaction. Once grabbed, ground/river water largely remains with the licence holder.

Any water returned under Unused Licence policy is re-allocated for use in the following priority order: (1) environmental and cultural (where required); (2) public water supply (where required); (3) Aboriginal water reserve (where required); (4) the general consumptive pool (NT Government, 2020). However, despite noting that there may not be adequate water available to fully provision AWRs when a WAP is declared, the AWR Policy notes that: 'The Controller of Water Resources will not cancel, refuse to renew or reduce existing licence entitlements for the primary purpose of provisioning an [Aboriginal Water Reserve]' (NT Government, 2017, p. 6). It is not clear what this means, but on its face, it appears to undermine the priority order set out in the Unused Licensed Water Entitlements Policy.

There are no public records relating to the application of the unused water policy in the Mataranka WAP area. NT Water Portal data

[10] This licenced amount is not included in the AWR.

(accessed January 2025) shows that the only licences that have been reduced in volume are those of the Aboriginal agricultural enterprise owned by CentreFarm[11] on behalf of three Aboriginal Land Trusts (Beswick, Mungarrayi, and Wabuluwyn). Centre Farm is a not-for-profit company established by Traditional Owners to identify and develop commercially viable opportunities on Aboriginal land. It currently focuses on primary industries such as horticulture and, in the Mataranka region, is yet to commence farming while it engages in an extensive process of community consultation over the selection of crops, their location and ways to protect sacred sites and the wider environment. On renewal in 2025, two CentreFarm licences (in the over-allocated Mataranka South zone) were reduced by 40%, from 1.65 million m^3/yr to 1.10 m^3/yr and were renewed for only three years. Given the apparent lack of action with respect to the under-used water licences of others, which comprise a far greater volume of water, both in terms of the total licenses, and the amount of 'un-utilised water', this appears to be a highly selective application of an already vague policy.

The Unused Licence policy, much like the AWR policy, appears progressive on its face, but the lack of transparency and apparent selectivity in its application obstructs Indigenous water rights claims.

5.2.3. *Renewals: entrenching water use for existing water users*

In the NT, water licence terms tend to be ten years, unless there is good reason for longer (such as public water supply). At the end of this period, licence holders can apply for renewal. Unlike a new application, the water licence renewal process is not transparent, as there is no advertisement of the licence renewal and no opportunity to comment on the renewal application (s71A Water Act, 1992). In the Mataranka WAP, 22.455 million m^3/yr extracted for agriculture, mining and industry was renewed between 2022 and 2025 (NT Water Portal data). This has occurred largely without public scrutiny and, as we will show, with no apparent regard for the need to fully provision the AWR.

In 2017, the NT Government committed to consider the future requirements of the AWR when granting licences (NT Government, 2017, Clause 3.9.1). Yet the Water Controller does not appear to be doing so when undertaking a licence renewal, which has been legally and administratively streamlined in comparison to the licence application process.

The NT water portal shows that in the Mataranka WAP area, 12 licences (22.383 million m^3/yr) were granted prior to 2017 (when there was no requirement to have regard to a future AWR), and all of these have been renewed since 2017. Since the AWR policy came into effect the Water Controller has renewed 16 licences (22.455 million m^3/yr) and did not once consider the effect of renewing the licence on the AWR (NT Water Portal data). Less than 50% of licenced volume is currently used, and if we apply this average to the renewed licences, it means that an estimated 11.228 million m^3/yr was renewed despite not being needed by agricultural, industry or mining users. This volume is larger than the total shortfall for the AWR (6.597 million m^3/yr), and if the renewal of licences had (a) considered the AWR Policy and (b) applied the Unused Licensed Water Entitlements Policy, the AWR could be fully provisioned, with no cost to existing consumptive users (although there may be costs to the environment, as described in section 5.2.1). Instead, the interests of existing water users, largely privileged by applying for a water licence during a period when there was no policy requirement to consider the AWR, are locked in and Traditional Owners are locked out.

Our analysis has focused on the distributive outcomes, however further comment about the "structural deceit" (Chatterjee, 2023, p. 806) at the heart of the planning process is warranted given our interest in river grabbing as a process of capturing control (Franco et al., 2013). In addition to denying Traditional Owners the benefit of a fully provisioned AWR, the NT Government was criticised for not providing any means of sharing power in the governance and management of the river, as a representative Indigenous organisation commented:

> The [Draft Mataranka WAP] … fails to take into consideration cultural values and sites prior to determining the consumptive pool and fails to correctly define risks to cultural sites and values. Moreover, the Plan represents a failure to genuinely involve Traditional Owners in its development and in the proposed implementation activities (Northern Land Council, 2024).

Traditional Owners refused to legitimise the consultation process run by the NT Government and resigned from the Plan's Advisory Committee. By walking out before the WAP was declared they would not validate a process that channelled critical matters of governance and the survival of the river through narrowly defined administrative practices. Rather than allowing dissent to be dissipated, or pacified, through consultation (Curran, 2019), Traditional Owners are continuing the fight to be recognised as the river authority. In resisting the deceit of a governance regime that evades fundamentally political questions of colonisation and dispossession (Chatterjee, 2023), they have established the Ropa Woda [Roper Water] Governance Council (2025), which would institutionalise their authority to govern the river.

6. Conclusions

River grabbing constitutes an attempt to gain control, to displace plural worldviews with a narrow construction of rivers as resource, and to impose this conception on the human and more-than-human communities of the river. It is a grab both for the waters that sustain a river and for authority over how it is defined, utilised and managed. In the Roper River, river grabbing is embedded in the ongoing expropriation of Indigenous land and waters and the deliberate, sometimes violent, imposition of a new water management regime that explicitly displaces Indigenous conceptions of the agency, sentience and vitality of rivers and their jural relationships. In an example of Chatterjee's (2023) "self-perpetuation" dynamic, the settler-colonial state directly draws on, and reworks into contemporary water regulation, practices that were formerly used to expand, maintain and legitimise control over Indigenous lands.

State attempts to recognise Indigenous water rights have never been perceived as fair by the Traditional Owners of the Roper, nor has the evasion of fundamental questions of sovereignty, authority and responsibility for Country which sit at the heart of state water governance. Hoarding, speculation, and environmentally destructive over-extraction have been enabled by colonial land and water tenure regimes, authoritarian powers bestowed on corporate bodies such as NT Land Corp, and more recently by the regulation of water access through allocation plans and licences.

We highlight the role of the NT Land Corp, first as a land repository to stabilise the possessive control over land that was threatened by Indigenous restitutions schemes. This strategy reduced the land area to be returned to Indigenous people and later, after the AWR was introduced as a safeguard, it reduced the land eligible for consideration in calculating the AWR, and thus how much water Traditional Owners could legally access. NT Land Corp is now operating in a similar capacity, by acting as a repository for water.

Although the NT Government is legally required to establish the AWR, it has presided over a prejudicial process characterised by delays and lack of commitment to prioritising water recovering for Indigenous use. In Mataranka, over-allocation of water to almost entirely non-Aboriginal users has deprived the Traditional Owners of access to 6.597 million m^3/yr. Had the NT Government applied its own policies consistently, the Mataranka AWR would be fully provisioned, likely at no cost to existing commercial water use (although we note that this may still compromise the health of the aquifer and the Roper River due to inadequate assessment of the sustainable yield).

These modes of power also pervade the consultative processes of ground/river water allocation, themselves tokenistic exercises of

[11] Trading as Top End Farms.

recognition within settler-colonial structures, and the generation of knowledge relied upon to legitimise decisions about environmental and social impacts of extraction. Promises of further research into the socio-cultural impacts and possible mitigation measures have been made for almost fifteen years, during which time the state has facilitated the very dispossession that was feared by Traditional Owners and allies when extraction first began to increase (Currell & Jackson, 2024). In repeatedly pushing the assessment of impacts into the future, water planning profoundly devalues Indigenous territorial and economic relations.

The bureaucratic exercise of state power in water allocation planning and licencing subverts attempts by Indigenous people to reclaim authority over rivers under their law by precluding any meaningful inquiry into the causes of river dispossession and obscuring the continuities between older and more current forms of dispossession. Indigenous resistance and declarations of the right to care for the living Roper River intensified in 2025 with the creation of the Ropa Woda Governance Council (2025).

By focusing on *river grabbing*, we demonstrate the devastating impact of colonial processes on embodied, interconnected, living and life-giving waterways. Our empirical analysis of groundwater rules in the NT exposes the ongoing violence of colonial administration in driving unsustainable extraction from rivers and their connected aquifers that threatens both the life of rivers, as well as the relational ontologies and jural relationships through which river Country is known and experienced as kin.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sue Jackson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Erin O'Donnell:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Matthew Currell:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data will be made available on request.

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