

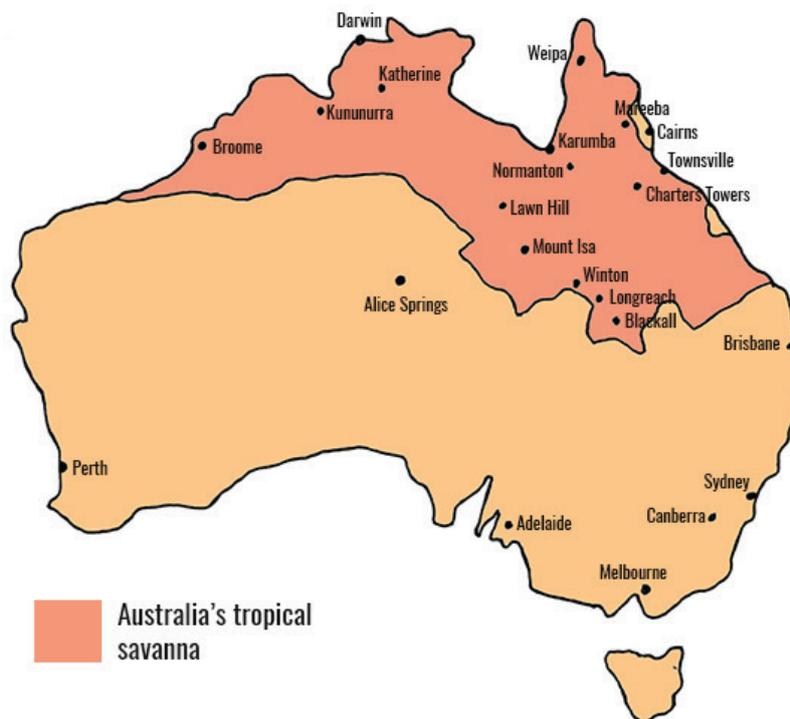
About The Tropical Savanna

Introduction

The tropical savanna is the landscapes of dense grass and scattered trees that stretch across northern Australia, from Broome to Townsville. This type of land covers a huge area; around 1.9 million square kilometres, or around one-quarter of mainland Australia's landmass.

There are also tropical savannas in Africa, Asia and South America. They all have similar tropical climates compared with Australia's tropical savanna.

Where is the savanna?



Traditional custodians

The tropical savannas are home to a rich Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal land covers substantial parts of the region, such as Arnhem Land in the Top End (Northern Territory). Aboriginal people have a long association with the land, ranging over tens of thousands of years, and have a great deal of traditional knowledge around land management. They are involved in all aspects of land use in northern Australia; they are pastoralists, miners, tour guides, park rangers, entrepreneurs and community leaders.

Plants and animals

The tropical savannas are also home to an extraordinary variety of plants and animals, not just in the rainforest patches that dot the region, but also in the grassy woodlands. The tropical areas of the world tend to have high levels of biodiversity, but northern Australia has managed to maintain substantial natural habitats for plants and animals.

Vegetation

This is an example of an Australian savanna landscape with small trees and the ground covered in grasses.



The small plants are grasses and shrubs. There are many species of grass. Each is adapted to survive in different types of soil and the amount of rain or seasonal rain they receive. They grow during the wet periods and become brown during the dry periods. They grow new green shoots from their base after rain.

The trees in the savanna are often small and spread out. Near water courses, other species of trees grow much larger. Most of the trees are eucalypts. Eucalypts have their seeds in woody gum nuts. Eucalypts remain green throughout the year.

Tropical savanna can take many forms. They can be grasslands with few trees. They can be woodlands with small or larger trees. There may also be patches of rainforest in places like deep gullies.

Animals

The savanna is home to a range of native animal species, including birds, mammals, reptiles and insects.

Seasonal changes

People often refer to two seasons in the tropical savanna; the wet season and the dry season. The animals and plants are adapted to these changes in rainfall. They are able to grow and reproduce when there is water available. They also have adaptations that enable them to survive the long dry period each year.

Ecology and fire

The plants of the savanna are adapted to survive fire. Grasses grow new green shoots from their roots which remain safe underground. Many shrubs and trees shed seeds or have seeds in the soil that germinate after fire and rain. Eucalypts will survive fires unless the fires are extremely hot.

During fires, a few animals can survive in holes and burrows. Most animals will leave an area when there is fire.



Conservation

Weeds are becoming a bigger problem in the savanna, taking over from native grasses and shrubs. Some areas have feral animals such as buffalo, pigs and cane toads. Over grazing can damage the environment and create conditions where invasive plants and animals can thrive. Very hot bushfires do a lot of damage to the plants which in turn impacts animals by reducing the amount of food and quality habitats that are available.

Pastoral industry

Northern Australia is also home to a pastoral industry that raises beef cattle. Northern Australia holds some of the largest cattle stations in Australia, including the legendary Victoria River Downs. Pastoralists in northern Australia face many struggles, such as the variable climate, poor soil, invasive weed species and changing fire regimes.

Tourism trade

Aboriginal culture, the cattle station lifestyle and the natural environment are major attractions for an increasing tourist trade to the savanna country. Such visitors are often Australians who have retired and are taking extended self-drive trips.

Mining

The largest money generator in the tropical savannas is mining. Some of the world's largest mining operations are working in northern Australia. Metal resources in the region include bauxite, copper, lead, zinc, silver, nickel, tin, gold, manganese, uranium and magnesite. Other mineral resources include diamonds, mineral sands, phosphate rock, kaolin, limestone and silica, while energy resources include coal and petroleum.

Defence force

The Australian Defence Forces continue to be an increasing presence in the tropical savannas. As part of the Australian Army's expansion of its ready deployment force, the 1st Brigade has been moved to Darwin. As part of this expansion, the Army is also managing larger amounts of land in the tropical savannas. It has taken over what was formerly Bradshaw Cattle Station in the Victoria River District as a training area, and also manages the Townsville Field Training Area, in north Queensland.