

# The New York Times

## The Vanishing Point

By [VERLYN KLINKENBORG](#)

| March 26, 2010, 4:21 am



Olaf Otto Becker

Australians call the northernmost chunk of their continent the “Top End,” a breezy moniker, as though Australia were a boiled egg sitting upright in an egg cup waiting to be cracked open with a silver spoon. Just how much Top End there is is open to debate, the kind that gets worried out with maps drawn in the dust. While I was there last September, I saw dust maps that gave the Top End most of Australia north of the Tropic of Capricorn — about a third of the continent. Others included only Cape York and the rather wind-swept-looking peninsula that includes the roistering town of Darwin, the capital city of the Northern Territory.

The Top End I visited was vastly narrower — the river flats and hill country just inland from Van Diemen Gulf. But it was still an imponderable slice of terrain, long ridges of sandstone giving way to the flood plains that edge Kakadu National Park, a Unesco World Heritage site and the largest park in Australia — bigger than Connecticut and Delaware combined. To Australians, Kakadu and

the country around it feels like an ancestral reservoir, a cultural repository with Aboriginal roots and an oasis of native biodiversity. Here, the sandstone endures, the monsoon floods come and go, and then the fires follow — erratic and regenerative in the early part of the dry season, unforgiving in the later part. But this oasis is going dry almost unnoticed.

Australians call the northernmost chunk of their continent the “Top End,” a breezy moniker, as though Australia were a boiled egg sitting upright in an egg cup waiting to be cracked open with a silver spoon. Just how much Top End there is is open to debate, the kind that gets worried out with maps drawn in the dust. While I was there last September, I saw dust maps that gave the

Top End most of Australia north of the Tropic of Capricorn — about a third of the continent. Others included only Cape York and the rather wind-swept-looking peninsula that includes the roistering town of Darwin, the capital city of the Northern Territory.

The Top End I visited was vastly narrower — the river flats and hill country just inland from Van Diemen Gulf. But it was still an imponderable slice of terrain, long ridges of sandstone giving way to the flood plains that edge Kakadu National Park, a Unesco World Heritage site and the largest park in Australia — bigger than Connecticut and Delaware combined. To Australians, Kakadu and the country around it feels like an ancestral reservoir, a cultural repository with Aboriginal roots and an oasis of native biodiversity. Here, the sandstone endures, the monsoon floods come and go, and then the fires follow — erratic and regenerative in the early part of the dry season, unforgiving in the later part. But this oasis is going dry almost unnoticed.

This is a landscape that seems to ask, “Why have you come here?” There’s no hostility in the question, only the indifference native to a continent of punitive, natural harshness. Every traveler will have a different answer. Mine was mud, and also, more broadly, the difference between nature as a norm and nature as merely what is, whether it should be or not. Here, the grandeur of nature is well disguised by the impenetrable thicket of life itself.

For weeks after visiting Australia, I found myself thinking about mud: the living mud on the banks of Sampan Creek, which insinuates itself into Van Diemen Gulf, not far from Bamurru Plains, a safari-style eco-lodge that opened here a few years ago. When the wicked tide falls on the creek’s lower reaches, it leaves behind long, sloping shelves of ooze. In December, the monsoon comes, and when it does, Sampan Creek and all its fellow creeks and rivers break their bounds and spread their mud — an originating mud — out over the coastal plains. It daubs the fur of Agile wallabies grazing on the flood plains. The water buffalo seem compounded of it. The magpie geese glory in it by the tens of thousands. I saw a similar mud in the billabongs at Kakadu and beneath the freshwater mangroves at Wongalara, a former cattle station southeast of Kakadu

that has been converted into a nature sanctuary by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

On Sampan Creek, canoe-length saltwater crocodiles come creasing down the banks, slicking their tiled bellies across the mud. They slip into the silted current, eyes like dark and watchful bubbles. You may be on dry ground, termite plinths all around you, the astringent scent of crushed tea-tree leaves in the air, but a part of your mind will still be thinking of those estuarine eyes not quite looking at you, yet not quite minding their own business either.

One afternoon, I saw four young Australian men fishing in a Kakadu billabong. They were standing in a small pram with plenty of beer. Meanwhile, around the corner, a line of crocodiles waited their turn at the carcass of a water buffalo, which lay half in the water, its central cavity opened, its wet, white ribs showing. The crocodile at work seemed almost drugged by the turbid scent of decomposition. At long intervals, it drove itself up onto the rib cage, rolling sideways, then using its weight to tear free a mass of rotting flesh. It showed a white stump where its left foot had been, lost in some recent crocodilian controversy — the very antithesis of Captain Hook.

Throughout the Top End, I sensed an incoherence, an unresolved moral burden in the landscape. Take Kakadu National Park. It is a very recent creation, first proposed in the mid-1960s but not confirmed until more than a decade later. It is mostly escarpment country, gouged wilderness, a landscape of rock and time. And yet in some sense Australia has not yet decided what Kakadu should be — a reminder of just how new the conservation ethic is here and how hard it is to create coherent preservation schemes in a place where time collides the way it does down under. In some ways, Kakadu is an experiment in trying to resolve historical tensions rather than a place of natural conservation.

For one thing, Kakadu is one of the few truly national parks in the country — administered by federal, not state authority, for the simple reason that it sits on Aboriginal land. One of the great sticking points in the park's recent history is whether Australians should pay an entrance fee. At present, the answer is best summed up by the empty site of the former east entrance station, expensively built and expensively bulldozed when fees were rescinded in 2004. The fees have just been reinstated.

Then, too, there is the critical shared management of Kakadu with its traditional owners, many of whom, mostly Aboriginal Bininj/Mungguy, still live within the park. They're conservators of the land and their traditions within it, visible in its rock art and its sacred sites, but the Aborigines hunt and fish throughout the park practically at will. They also harbor non-native animals like buffalo and, notoriously, a herd of shorthorn cattle visible in the grasslands around Yellow Water, for reasons that are both spiritual and carnivorous.

The park's Aboriginal heritage is also overlaid with the more recent history of white holdings within its boundaries. The strangest and most significant is the Ranger uranium mine, which is still being worked within the park's borders. And then there is Jabiru — a town established to service the Ranger mine. The streets are quiet, utterly domestic in feel. Apart from the vegetation, and the flying foxes hanging dormant in a tree at midday above the elementary school, Jabiru could be a suburb of Dallas.

Like much of Australia, the Top End demonstrates that nature favors invasive species over native ones, at least in the short term. They proliferate. They burgeon. But what matters isn't only what invasive species do to the balance of life in the wild. What matters too is what they do to our minds, since that's where the difference between native and invasive is finally assessed.

In their proper element, for instance, cane toads are no more loathsome than any other toad, though they are poisonous. On the flood plains east of Darwin, they will be clustering near the oil lamps by night, bobbing for insects and getting underfoot.

Or they'll be lying tire-flattened on the Arnhem Highway (the east-west road between Darwin and Kakadu) or splayed out, on their backs in a dusty paddock somewhere, their digestible meaty bits eaten away by the few birds that have already somehow learned how to eat them without fatality. For cane toads are relatively new to Australia, which is not their proper element.

Cane toads explain the wistfulness you hear among some Australians when they talk about their roadkill. "You used to see a lot of pythons dead on the highway," said Sab Lord, a legendary bush guide, as we drove one day across the Top End toward Darwin. The toads have spread outward across the country from Queensland cane fields, where they were introduced to help control beetles, and they have decimated the reptiles and birds that have eaten them. As a result, the roadkill census — which is how most people see most wildlife — reveals fewer and fewer native reptiles and more and more cane toads, which hark back to the Americas. The first cane toad arrived in Darwin only recently, and believe me, it was not welcomed.

I didn't fly halfway round the world from New York to see cane toads. But then that's the point of flying halfway round the world — to see what you didn't expect to see.

I didn't expect to see swamp buffalo in the Top End, either, and yet there they were, some domesticated and bucolic, some feral and simply rancid with anger, but all descended from the few Indonesian buffalo brought by the British to the Cobourg Peninsula in the 1820s. In the 1980s and '90s, the government tried to shoot out the buffalo, to control disease. But the buffalo are making their way

back, crossing out of the Aboriginal reserves, where they were never shot out, into Kakadu and the flood plains north of it. There, on places like Swim Creek Station, where Bamurru Plains is sited, the buffalo are a cash crop, gathered by airboats and helicopters in February during the monsoon and shipped back to Southeast Asia for human consumption.

One night, I walked back to my tent-cabin from the lodge at Bamurru Plains through the corkscrew pandanus palms. The full

moon was high, cane toads were clustering in the dim glow, and the wallabies were moving through camp nearly silently. The water buffalo out on the flood plain had receded from view — drifting at sunset for the night into the woods, just up the trail from me. From outside, the inward-sloping walls of the tent-cabin looked opaque. But when I stepped inside and doused the lights, the sheer canvas seemed to vanish, and I was left with only the faintest scrim between me and the outer world, which lay in silhouette under the moon.

Out there was a realm of exceeding flatness, where saltwater and freshwater are fighting over the land. Each has its season. Freshwater has the monsoon, when rain drowns the country. Across the Top End, Aussies lead visitors to high spots, extend their arms and say, like so many Noahs, “All this will be under water during the wet” — the local name for the monsoon. Saltwater owns the rest of the year, and it’s always seeking to work its way inland, always trying to claim another portion of solid earth. As the planet warms and the oceans rise, this coastal fringe will be one of the drowned lands.

But for now there’s still a temporary truce between saltwater and fresh. One sign of it is the chenier just beyond the lodge at Bamurru Plains. A chenier — the name is Louisiana French — is a historic, hard-packed ridge of sand and shell rubble laid down by the sea.

At Bamurru, it looks like a slightly raised roadbed, a foot-high levee. During the wet, water fills the flood plains and advances right up to the chenier, where the guides park their airboats. You’d be tempted to say that the coastline, some three miles to the north, had wandered inland. But the floodwater is fresh — runoff from the rugged sandstone escarpment further inland, which sheds water like oilskin. And in this harsh but delicate landscape, where the overriding ecological concern is the balance between saltwater and freshwater, the buffalo trails act as unwanted capillaries, breaking through the all but indiscernible high ground and allowing saltwater to infiltrate the swamps.

I’d spent the morning on an airboat with a Scottish guide named Kat, flat-bottoming our way into the paperbark swamps. It wasn’t merely the mud that seemed primeval. It was also the abundance of life — the jabirus stalking the open shallows and the endless chatter of magpie geese. Ducks rose in whistling

clouds, and from the tops of the paperbarks, sea eagles watched us drifting among the shadows. So did the crocodiles disguised as floating swamp scum.

This was nearly the end of the dry season, and the shrinking floodwaters had concentrated the flocks and extended the grassland, where buffalo and horses grazed in the distance. And because large mammals are endemic in the American imagination of nature — in my imagination, that is — it was hard to perceive them as historically “unnatural.” There they were, after all, their presence as undeniable as that of the wallabies and striated herons.

But the horses are wild, the feral relics of white men who came to this district for the buffalo shooting in the late 19th century. The horses — “brumbies,” in Australian — stand hock-deep in water and develop swamp cancer: tumorlike, pustulant growths on their legs and bellies and noses. This is the northern edge of a continent-wide herd of feral horses and donkeys — about 300,000 horses and more than five million donkeys nationwide.

At Wongalara we flew low over the brush, stirring a small herd of horses and donkeys. They loped ahead of our helicopter, casting scornful glances in our direction. The true work of restoration can't begin until these animals are gone.

At Wongalara, too, I watched a pitfall trap being set for small, nocturnal marsupials — which is mostly what the Top End has for native mammals. The trap is a long wall of toughened rubber belting. Mammals run into the wall and scurry down its length, only to fall into a plastic bucket set into the ground. In the morning, they're weighed, counted and released. But scientists are finding almost nothing in the traps anymore. The marsupials are ideal prey for feral cats, millions of them, which are also devastating small reptiles and ground-nesting birds. There are now indications of a full-blown population crash.

Wherever I went, I felt I was looking at a hidden landscape. What I needed most were guides to what could not be seen, to what was invisible. I don't mean the Aboriginal spirits inscribed in the rock of Kakadu itself. I mean the species that had gone or were going missing. As the days passed, I found myself becoming more and more a tourist of the vanished and the vanishing.

Saltwater crocodiles have rebounded since hunting was banned in 1971, and they now pervade nearly every body of water in the Top End. But for many other species, time in the Top End is now over. What makes it all the harder is this: The species becoming invisible through extinction were largely invisible to begin with.

Perhaps it would be easier just to take the Top End at face value: the uranium mine, the cankered horses, the missing mammals, the plague of toads. Perhaps it would be easier just to give in to the “naturalness” — to stand, as I did, one

day, on a sandstone ridge with Sab Lord and look out over a beautiful grassland enclosed by rugged hills. Out on the plain, a herd of horses grazed beside a copse that might almost have been aspen. It looked more than natural. It looked like a pictorial vision of natural completeness, or would have if we'd been in New Mexico. But as we walked down the hill, Sab and I saw a small monitor a type of native lizard — peering out of the stony shade. “That’s the first one of those I’ve seen this year,” Sab said, and there we were, back in the extinction we had never left.

## ESSENTIALS / KAKADU, AUSTRALIA

Getting There and Around Virgin ([vaustralia.com.au](http://vaustralia.com.au)) flies from Los Angeles to Darwin with a stop in either Brisbane or Melbourne; flights on Qantas ([qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au)) stop in Sydney. Good places to begin planning a trip to the Top End are Tourism Australia ([australia.com](http://australia.com)) and the Northern Territory Visitors Bureau ([northernterritory.visitorsbureau.com.au](http://northernterritory.visitorsbureau.com.au)). Sab Lord ([lords-safaris.com](http://lords-safaris.com)), who grew up on a station in what later became Kakadu, is an indispensable guide for the area. Arnhem Land, the Aboriginal reserve east of Kakadu National Park, is closed to visitors, except to guides with permits and their clients. The best way to grasp the environmental problems facing Australia is to explore the work being done by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy ([australianwildlife.org](http://australianwildlife.org)). It has established nearly 20 sanctuaries, including Wongalara.

Lodging There are good camping sites throughout the park. Go to [kakadunationalparkaustralia.com](http://kakadunationalparkaustralia.com). Bamurru Plains One of a small group of Wild Bush Luxury holdings in Australia, notable for safari-style rooms and first-class food. 011-61-2-9571-6399; [bamurruplains.com](http://bamurruplains.com); doubles from about \$1,650. Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn The building, shaped like a crocodile, is in the national park. 1 Flinders Street, Jabiru; 011-61-8-8979-9000; [holidayinn.com](http://holidayinn.com); doubles from \$330.

Link to online article: <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/26/the-vanishing-point/?ref=travel>