

Remoteness can be relative. Is Darwin remote? Is Alice Springs remoter? What is the perspective for people at Rabbit Flat, Victoria River Downs, Milikapiti, Pularumpi, Ngukurr, Lajamanu, Utopia, Alyangula, Kalkaringi, Yirrkala, Ramingining, Pepperminarti, and Borroloola?

Remoteness

Margaret Clinch contributes another dimension to the RAISS Conference in Darwin, 7-9 July

The Northern Territory has no monopoly on remoteness, although all Territorians are familiar with it.

Writers look at remoteness in two different ways. The first is the geographical distance from centres of population, and the second is separation from those who understand you, and with whom you identify—even though there may be people all around.

These definitions can overlap, and the concept of remoteness is more complex than you may have first thought. Remoteness assumes distance from something—but from what? We may be remote from Australian population centres, but relatively close to large Asian populations. In this short article we cannot explore all variations and their specific implications for us.

The remoteness factor is high in the Northern Territory, with an area of 1 346 200 square kilometres. Darwin is many hours flying time from other Australian capital cities. Distances within the Territory are great, with 1300 kilometres separating Alice Springs from Darwin. Long-distance travel by air or road is commonplace.

In earlier days, John Flynn recognised the problems of remoteness, and sought help from the wider Australia community, establishing a 'mantle of safety' through improved communication and medical aid. Roads and aircraft have improved the situation, as have telephone and television access. Computer networks have become an essential part of information services. Self-government gained in 1976 means that state-like decisions are made in Darwin, but statehood itself is still some way off.

Our total population is about 176 000, with about one quarter of Aboriginal descent. Main centres are Darwin (79 100), Alice Springs (25 550), Katherine (9 370), Nhulunbuy (3 920), and Tennant Creek (3 480). The rest is spread around in smaller centres such as Batchelor, Adelaide River, Timber Creek, Yulara, Jabiru, Mataranka and the Daly River, or on settlements, outstations, at cattle stations, mining locations, tourist facilities, or at temporary working situations on land or sea.

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THERE IS NO EQUIVALENT



Remoteness! An Aboriginal family uses two-way radio to communicate from their outstation (Photo Baz Ledwidge, NTU)

pia, Alyangula, Kalkaringi, Yirrkala, Ramingining, Pepperminarti, and Borroloola? Some Aboriginal people choose remote outstation life to retain their bush culture.

Total information resources within the NT are small because of the small population base. We must increase these resources, particularly where they deal with our major industries of mining, cattle raising, fishing, and tourism and where they deal with business and community life, new relations with Asia, and own local European and Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Most work units are small. Library workers are often isolated from fellow professionals. Loneliness can be debilitating. We all need information and support. We need someone to talk to, and if it is a colleague who understands our concerns, that is all the better.

New technologies reach interstate and international resources. Current developments in wider system access, and compact disk technology are pleasing. Computer networks share information throughout the Territory. On the ground it is flexibility and practicality. Service delivery is often by computer terminal/fax/telephone/mail, and/or through an agent who is not a library and information worker. We strive for the personal touch, as in the work of the NT Correspondence School Library.

The Northern Territory Library Service and the NTU were described in the first of these RAISS articles. Special Library services such as those of Health and Community Services, Mines and Energy, Primary Industry and Fisheries, the Conservation Commission and the Summer Institute of Linguistics and many others listed in ALIA's *Information centres in the Northern Territory* service their staff throughout the Territory. They maintain links with their interstate counterparts.

The Territory is growing, with its community in flux. The experience of others saves us time. Awareness of remoteness is a challenge, keeping us alert. We must innovate. We must use computer networks and systems—buying, borrowing, sharing, picking out the best from anywhere, adapting and developing where needed.

In some areas, such as solar energy, the Northern Territory is a leader in the field. Our tropical environment makes us different from the rest of Australia. We are not limited by what Australia can offer. One of the effects of remoteness is to enhance levels of perception by clearing away inhibiting structures.

The world is our oyster. Come and help us find the pearl!