

# The Age

## Top End's fragile balance on brink

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**By David Hancock**  
**Daly River, Northern Territory**

One of northern Australia's most pristine river systems is under threat from broadscale tree clearing and large irrigation schemes, according to Aboriginal and environmental groups.

Traditional owners of land around the Daly River in the Top End, and conservationists from the Wilderness Society and Northern Territory Environment Centre, claim the Northern Territory Government faces a campaign similar to the Franklin River and Jabiluka protests if it goes ahead with development south-west of Darwin.

The NT Government recently approved the clearance of 7000 hectares around Stray Creek, close to the Daly, and intends to approve development of another 140,000 hectares at nearby Douglas Station.

The Daly, one of northern Australia's largest river systems, rises in Arnhem Land as the Katherine River flows through Katherine Gorge in Nitmiluk National Park and joins the Flora River south-west of Katherine to become the Daly.

The Daly has the biggest diversity of freshwater turtles of any Australian river system, providing one of the best habitats for the threatened pig-nosed turtle and other uncommon species such as whip-rays and sawfish.

Wetlands at the river mouth are rich in migratory birds and nurseries for fish.

Aborigines, environmentalists, anglers and the tourist industry are concerned that uncontrolled development will endanger species.

They fear land clearing will erode habitats, expose fragile soils to extreme wet season downfalls and that irrigation will alter the balance between groundwater and river flows.

John Daly, of the Nganginerri Aboriginal clan, lives at Nauiyu (formerly Daly River settlement), downstream from the proposed agricultural development.

"We don't want another Murray," he said. "They are not looking at the environment and our culture - they are only thinking of the dollar value.

"People around here are really active - traditional owners still practise sacred rituals. It might be only a rock bar or piece of riverbank but they are sacred sites to us."

Henry Boer, of the Environment Centre NT, said: "There are not many river systems left, except in the Top End . . . where environmental and heritage values are intact."

