

# the water cycle in Australia



“ This global water cycle affects countries in different ways. Such is the vastness of the Australian land mass, that we can experience the monsoons of Asia, the deserts of North Africa – and everything in between ... ”

*This part of it that we saw is all low even Land, with sandy banks against the Sea, only the points are rocky, and so are some of the islands in this Bay. The Land is of a dry sandy soil and destitute of Water, except you make wells.*

William Dampier, *A new voyage around the world*, 1689

*I love a sunburnt country,  
A land of sweeping plains,  
Of ragged mountain ranges,  
Of droughts and flooding rains.  
I love her far horizons,  
I love her jewel-sea,  
Her beauty and her terror –  
The wide brown land for me!*

Dorothea McKellar, *My country*, 1904

We live on the world's driest and flattest inhabited continent with the lowest percentage of rainfall reaching our rivers as runoff, the lowest amount of water found in our rivers and the smallest surface area of permanent wetlands.

Australia is the largest continental land mass in the southern hemisphere, spanning several climatic zones. A tropical region extends across the top of the continent, from the tip of Cape York as far south as Mackay in Queensland, while on the west coast it extends south from Cape Londonderry to Broome. This tropical region features monsoonal rainfall and cyclonic storms.

Below this, on the east coast, a subtropical zone extends as far south as Coffs Harbour in NSW. The zone extends about 400 km inland and sub-tropical storms occur but no cyclonic

activity. On the west coast, the subtropical zone extends south to Carnarvon in Western Australia and east to around Roma in Queensland. However, this region is very dry.

South of the subtropical zone is a warm-temperate climate zone. This extends to the southern tip of Tasmania and features the widest annual temperature range, with frosts and snowfalls occurring in some areas. On the west coast the warm-temperate zone extends south to Esperance.<sup>1</sup>

Much of inland Australia is either arid or desert. Arid lands are classified as those receiving less than 200 mm of precipitation annually. Over 50% of Australia receives less than 500 mm. Over 80% receives less than 600 mm (about 20 inches in the old language).<sup>2</sup>

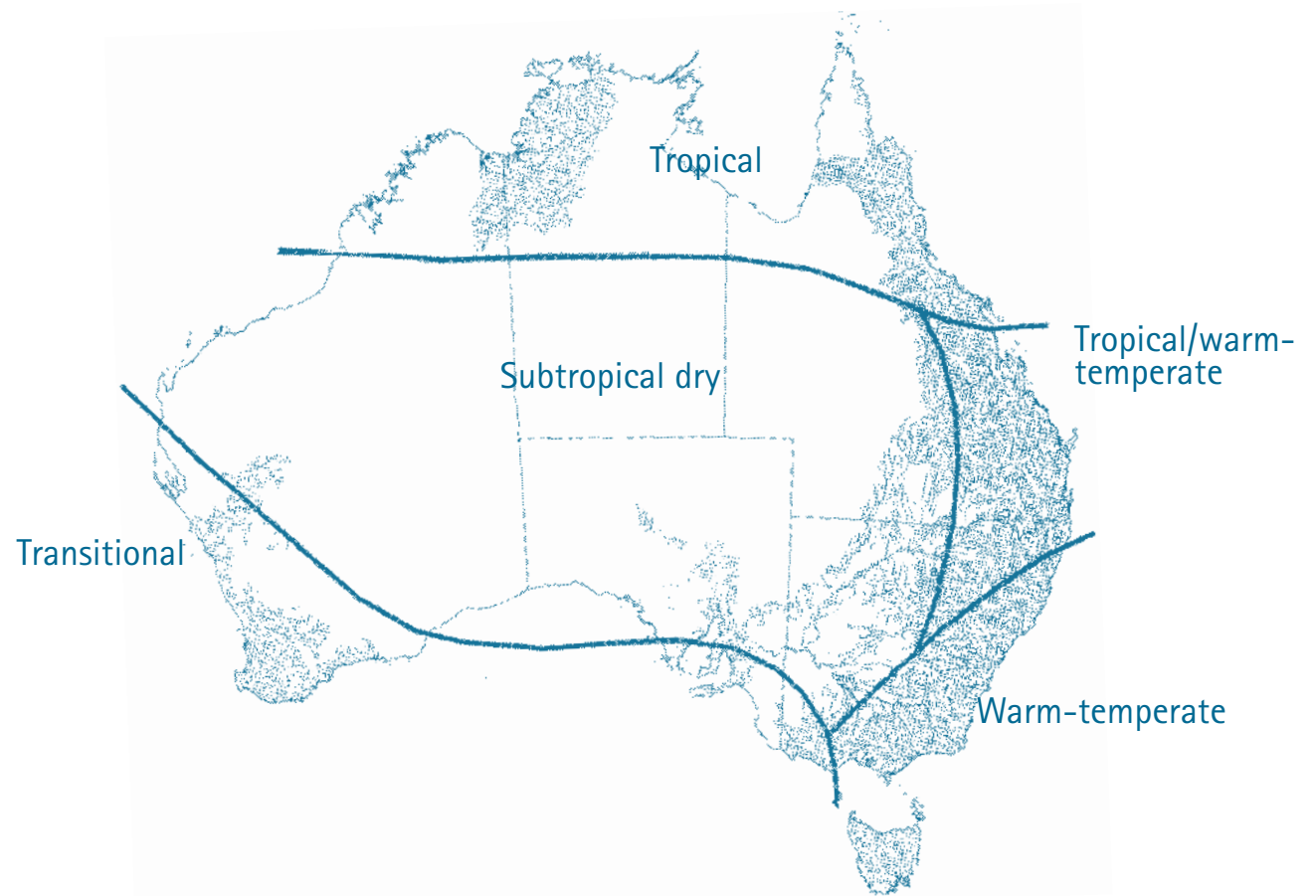


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## Figure 1. The major climate zones across Australia

The Australian continent features a wide range of climatic zones dispersed within three broad regions: the topical regions of the north, the arid expanses of the inland, and the temperate regions of the east and south.

Source: National Land and Water Resources Audit, *Australian catchment, river and estuary assessment*, NLWRA, Canberra, 2002, vol.1, p. 57.



## ▶ REFERENCES

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year book, Australia, 2005*, ABS, Canberra, 2005, pp. 16–19.
2. *ibid.*, p.16.

## Some other useful sources

- M White, *Running down: Water in a changing land*, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, Australia, 2000.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year book, Australia, 2005*, ABS, Canberra, 2005, pp. 668–77.