

**2005: A year of extreme weather – a blip or a sign of things to come?**

A media briefing organised by the Australian Science Media Centre  
9.30 am – 11.00 am, Friday 16 December

**What's in Store for Australia in future? A Matter of Time?**

Mr Richard Whitaker, author of “Australia’s Natural Disasters” (New Holland, October 2005

***“.....it is only a matter of time before a severe cyclone strikes a more populated part of the Queensland coast” - Mr. Jim Davidson, Regional Director, Bureau of Meteorology, Queensland.***

Most tropical cyclones affecting Australia strike the northern coastline of WA. Between 1970 and 2002 there were 42 severe tropical cyclone coastal crossings and 34 of these were in WA – only 3 struck the east Queensland coastline. Fortunately much of coastal WA is sparsely populated, but the situation in Queensland is very different, with several major cities, such as Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton, Cairns and even Brisbane lying within the strike zone.

In 1918 an extremely powerful cyclone, possibility category 5, scored a direct hit on Mackay producing immense damage.

In 1954 a possible category 3 cyclone crossed the coast near Coolangatta, producing tremendous flooding over Lismore and Grafton in NSW.

In 1971 tropical cyclone Althea, a category 4 system, produced significant destruction over Townsville and nearby Magnetic Island.

But the rarity of these extreme events in Queensland has resulted in a general complacency and an assumption that we're unlikely to see a repetition within our lifetime. This has led to the construction of buildings less than a few metres above mean sea-level along parts of the Queensland coastline and well within the zone of possible storm surge inundation. This, in turn, has greatly increased general community vulnerability to a severe cyclone.

Here we will review the 1918 Mackay cyclone and use this as a model for describing what could happen if a similar event were to occur this summer.

**Biographical note**

Richard Whitaker has been a meteorologist for over thirty years, and was Senior Operational Forecaster in NSW for 9 years during this time. He has had extensive experience in weather presentation on radio and television as well as in designing graphical displays for the print media. From 1999 to 2001 he worked with the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) as a rapporteur for the Committee of Agricultural Meteorology. He has been author, co-author and consultant editor of nine books about the weather, including publications for Time-Life and Reader's Digest. He was the NSW Manager of the Special Services Unit, the commercial arm of the Bureau of Meteorology, from 1992 to 2002. He is currently a Consulting Meteorologist with The Weather Channel and is also “The Weatherman” on Angela Cattern's Breakfast show on Vega FM Radio in Sydney.