Lake Eyre

SPECTACULAR, DRY OR FLOODED
Lake Eyre fills to capacity only a couple of times a century and when it does, it is Australia’s largest lake. It is also the lowest point in Australia, sitting 15 metres below sea level. The lake is spectacular whether dry or flooded. When it is empty, its surface is covered in a crystalline salt crust, which has been formed from the evaporation of floodwaters over thousands of years. When the lake floods – which happens about once every eight years – either from its catchment areas, primarily the Warburton River, or heavy local rainfall, the salt crust starts to dissolve.

Lake Eyre is the lowest point in the Lake Eyre Basin, an enormous drainage basin that covers approximately 1,140,000 square kilometres – almost one sixth of the Australian continent. The basin extends across parts of South Australia, the Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales. It is one of the largest internally draining systems in the world. (In other words, the river systems drain inland rather than towards the sea.)

THE LAKE IN FLOOD
Lake Eyre in times of flood is an incredible sight, attracting waterbirds in huge numbers. It has been named a BirdLife International Important Bird Area for its role in hosting major breeding events of banded stilts and Australian pelicans, as well as more than one per cent of the global populations of silver gulls, red-necked avocets, sharp-tailed sandpipers, red-necked stints and Caspian terns. During times of flood, the lake contains several species of freshwater fish that can tolerate varying degrees of salinity, such as the Lake Eyre hardyhead and bony bream, but as the salinity rises, the fish die and brine shrimp begin to hatch and breed.

HISTORY OF THE LAKE
The lake is named after explorer Edward John Eyre, who was the first European to sight it, in 1840. The lake has two sections, Lake Eyre North and Lake Eyre South. Lake Eyre North was originally thought to be permanently dry. There were occasional reports of sightings of water in the lake, but these were said to be mistaken. It was only in 1949, the first recorded filling of the lake, that it became clear that Lake Eyre North did at times hold water.

Lake Eyre and its surrounds – an area of about 13,500 square kilometres – were declared a national park in 1985.

THE TRADITIONAL OWNERS
In a landmark case in 2012, the Federal Court granted the land’s traditional owners, the Arabana, native title to more than 68,000 square kilometres in northern South Australia, including Lake Eyre, which has great meaning for the Arabana. Native title gives the Arabana unconditional access to the lake and surrounding area for hunting, camping, fishing and traditional ceremonies. The lake is now officially known as Kati Thanda–Lake Eyre in recognition of the name used by the Arabana.