

Save Litchfield National Park from gamba catastrophe

An open letter to the Honourable Chief Minister and Members of the NT Legislative Assembly from businesses, organisations, scientists and environmental professionals.

We are asking the NT Government to protect Litchfield National Park from ecosystem collapse due to the spread of invasive, highly flammable gamba grass. We request the Government commit to implementing in full the gamba management option for the Park which was researched and costed by Charles Darwin University scientists [in their 2023 report](#):

- Expand the Park's current (10,525 ha) gamba grass "eradication zone" to a much larger (74,331 ha) zone, thereby protecting most places people like to visit, along with key areas of biodiversity (see map).
- Immediately begin a five-year eradication programme within that enlarged eradication zone, requiring investment of \$1.3 million annually. This would include employment of a full-time coordinator to plan and support all gamba control and survey work. Such certainty of funding over multiple years could support expansion of capacity and jobs in the weed management arena.
- Follow the eradication programme with ongoing maintenance at a much-reduced annual cost (\$111,000), including annual aerial surveys and subsequent control of newly identified infestations.



Adapted from Rossiter-Rachor et al (2023)



Photo: Michael Douglas



Photo: Samantha Setterfield



We acknowledge and support the work that's been done to manage gamba in the Park to date. Furthermore, we welcome the Government's recent announcement of \$250,000 annual funding to control gamba grass in the Park. However we believe this amount (less than a fifth of what scientists say is required over the next few years) would fail to protect the Park into the future. It would mean gamba control continues to focus on the current eradication zone - which is small and includes practically no visitor sites - instead of the much larger zone proposed by scientists (see map).

As tourism goes, Litchfield is the NT's jewel in the crown - our most-visited national Park. It's "Darwin's backyard" where we love to go on weekends and holidays. It's a drawcard for national and international visitors and a vital source of income for hundreds of Top End businesses. More than \$20 million has been spent on the Park's facilities in recent years.

Endemic, vulnerable and threatened species - such as the northern quoll, northern brush-tailed phascogale, partridge pigeon, ghost bats and black-footed tree rat - make their home in this "Biodiversity and Visitor Class 1 Park" (the highest possible rating for an NT national Park).

Local Indigenous families hold precious many cultural sites within the Park.

Yet Litchfield is heading towards “an endpoint of ecosystem collapse” due to repeated high-intensity wildfires fueled by gamba grass - *unless immediate and substantial action is taken*.

This is the conclusion reached by Charles Darwin University scientists after years of exhaustive research and analysis (Rossiter-Rachor et al, [The cost of not acting: Delaying invasive grass management increases costs and threatens assets in a national Park, northern Australia](#))

Without urgent and sustained action, say these scientists, the Park’s ancient savanna woodland will be replaced by four metre tall, highly-flammable gamba monocultures, whose wildfires will “impact on all key visitor assets in the Park” as “infestation rapidly worsens over the next decade”.

Avoiding action could lead to an “endpoint of irreversible collapse” - meaning loss of key species, ecosystem services and function (Bergstrom et al, [Combating ecosystem collapse from the tropics to the Antarctic](#))

Likewise, the [Park’s own Plan of Management](#) states that gamba grass and wildfire are the two key threats into the future, and that "management of Gamba grass is essential to ensure the long term safety of visitors and the integrity of the Park".

We therefore ask the Government to commit to implementing the management option outlined above. We also request the government return to the previous policy of publishing regular “Report Cards” for each national Park, so ordinary citizens can keep track of how Litchfield’s natural heritage is being protected (the only report card published for Litchfield was in [2015](#)).

The “*cost of not acting*” on gamba in Litchfield has been spelled out by CDU scientists: each year that this threat is not taken seriously will make gamba catastrophe more and more costly and difficult to avert. If we leave it much longer, this will become inevitable. Continued inaction would be at a huge cost to our businesses, plants and animals and to all Top Enders.

As stated in the [NT Parks Masterplan 2023-53](#), “we have an opportunity to ensure the diversity and integrity of the Territory’s natural and cultural heritage remains intact, both now and for future generations”.

We therefore hope that you will carefully consider our request to act urgently for the future of Litchfield National Park.

