Chapter 7
Hazards from Floods

7.1. Introduction

The Great Australian Floods, 1974

Stark contrast between “droughts and flooding rains” has long been known in Australia. In January 1974, monsoons rolling in from the Timor Sea moved across the northern part of the continent bringing a torrential deluge to the northwest and the Gulf of Carpentaria region (see front map). In Western Australia, 48 cm of rain were recorded in a 17-hour period in mid-January, with Broome and Darwin being partially flooded and evacuated. Flood waters spread from horizon to horizon in the outback regions, where in normal times dusty, dry river systems are exposed to the burning sun.

By January 20, flood waters had risen over telephone poles in northwestern Queensland. People isolated by rising waters waited desperately for help in what was the worst flood the region had suffered in this century and Australia’s greatest national disaster. Six major towns in western Queensland became isolated by the floods. On January 31, heavy rainfall in the far west of Queensland amounted to 14.3 cm. Copper production was cut in half at the great Mt. Isa mines to conserve coal supplies. As flood waters moved toward the Gulf of Carpentaria, rivers merged and spread over 150 km across the Gulf country, while farther south, in New South Wales, the rain continued week after week, flooding large areas of the northwest, where inundated grazing land was littered with the carcasses of hundreds of thousands of sheep. Aerial food drops were made to Alice Springs and other isolated communities in central Australia and Queensland.

Disaster grew as, toward the end of January, cyclones moved down the Queensland coast. The Brisbane River, that runs through Brisbane (population 800,000), the capital of Queensland, burst its banks. By January 30, this normally placid river presented an incredible sight from the air (see Plate 7.1); it was now more than 3 km wide, spreading from the university area of St. Lucia, through the industrial suburbs. Upstream from St. Lucia, water stretched for kilometers along the river’s flood plain as far as the eye could see toward the city of Ipswich. Debris from houses, farms, and industry bobbed along the top of the water, headed for the ocean.

Flood damage in Ipswich and Brisbane was great. In Ipswich, 1,200 houses were ruined and the heart of Brisbane was paralyzed by the floods, with 20,000 persons made homeless. The casualty toll was at least 15 persons dead.

Strikingly, there had been repeated warnings that another flood disaster in Brisbane could occur. In the event, the 1974 flood did not quite match the torrential fury of an earlier one in 1893, when in three weeks, 10,000 of Brisbane’s
Plate 7.1. An aerial photograph showing the inundation of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia in the great flood of January 1974. (Photo mosaic by Mapmakers Pty. Ltd., Brisbane, Australia)