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Caught in a Cyclone

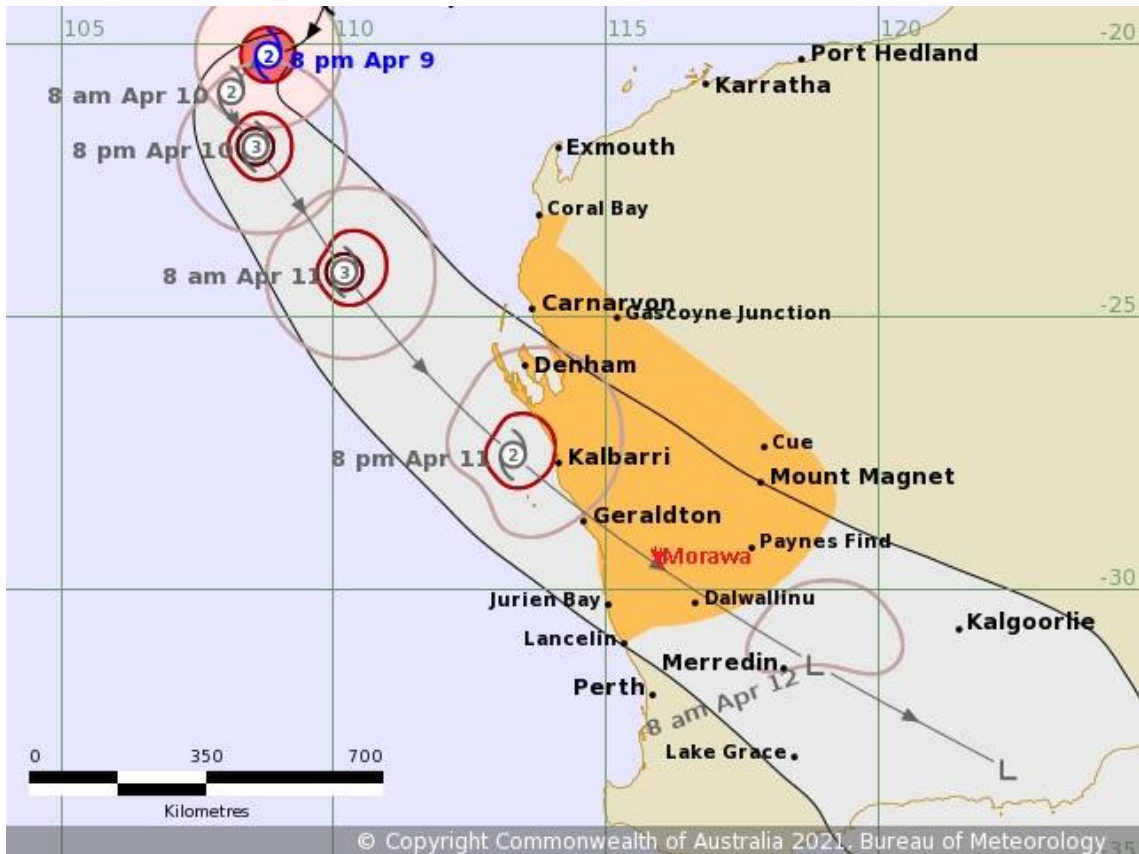
An account of experiences during Cyclone Seroja

It was initially something to look forward to: a trip north to visit family we hadn't seen for years. The drive would be a long one for us, the like not experienced since we gave up fruit-picking ten years previously. Back then, we regularly took 800 kms a day in our stride; but in recent times even the 150 kms to Perth was becoming a bit of a haul. Needless to say, the prospect of having to drive over 500 kms was somewhat daunting. The ultimate destination was Morawa, a small town in the mid-west wheatbelt. We had gone through there in the past while on our travels, but had never stayed; so it promised to be an interesting addition to our memoirs. It was certainly that, and much more.

As this was during the Easter break, we decided to stop over at our daughter's place, which would give us the opportunity to see the grandchildren while they were still on school holidays. It was roughly a three-hour drive north to their home in Wundowie, breaking the distance to Morawa considerably and easing us back into road-tripping. After the overnighter we headed off again, eager to catch up with our son and his wife.

Glad of the overcast skies which made the long drive to Morawa easier, we figured this was the precursor of the weather pattern lurking off the northwest coast. Being no strangers to cyclones, we had already survived a few, were familiar with the way they progressed and weren't at all concerned. Seroja, however, was different. It would have formed as a tropical low in the doldrums near the equator; then moved south, intensifying over the ocean. According to the Bureau of Meteorology, it was likely to swing in towards the coast before making landfall initially well north of where we would be staying. That being so, it would then likely continue in towards the interior, weakening as it went. Morawa might get a bit of a blow and some rain as it passed above, but nothing to worry about – we thought.

Then another smaller cyclone came on the scene and decided to drop down close to the big one. They circled each other for a while and this threw the usual predictions out the window. The suspected track of Seroja was hastily updated and looked as if it would cut a devastating swathe through the coastal communities before eventually swinging inland. We learned about this and our impending fate from our daughter-in-law. She works for the local council and arrived home from work with the latest news – Seroja apparently had us in its sights and the eye was heading straight for Morawa. A report on the TV that evening was troubling – visitors staying in the area were officially urged to leave immediately. Should we comply, we wondered? Deciding not to, we were glad of that when we saw news footage the following day showing roads south packed with cars and caravans nose to tail. For us, it would have been a nightmare drive. In the meantime, Seroja was picking up speed and just kept coming. The following account is what took place in Morawa, Western Australia during April 2021...



The once-peaceful country town of Morawa was on notice. The skies darkened and while the wind began to pick up, residents prepared by removing or securing loose objects. It was the best they could do in the time available; unfortunately for many, it wouldn't be enough. Seroja was due to impact sometime early next morning, perhaps around 3 am; it changed its mind and hit us before midnight. Roaring and buffeting outside, the winds in excess of 100 kph were ferocious. There would be stronger gusts too. Occasional crashes were heard, presumably fences being flattened, or roofs torn off. As for the trees, we knew they would be falling, but the incredible noise smothered that. And then the power went, plunging the entire town into darkness.

Next day it was as if nothing had happened; inside the house, that was: outside, however, it was obvious Seroja had left its calling card. The street beyond the front yard was strewn with debris, mainly fallen trees and branches that needed clearing before anyone could drive along it. In the back garden, a large portion of a side fence had been ripped apart. One of the double gates to the rear laneway was on the ground; while the other hung by a single twisted hinge. The neighbour's fence was down too; and we could see that a couple of nearby houses had lost roofs. Gone were the mobs of screeching corellas, replaced by an eerie silence broken only by the distant throbbing rattle of portable generators.

Still there was no power. Our son pulled out his generator which, wouldn't you know it, had been damaged during his recent move from New South Wales. Repairs took him most of the day, and it was a relief to all of us when he finally managed to get it working. That at least meant he could keep the fridge and freezer operating and it would provide power for some auxiliary light after sundown for a couple of hours. Perhaps the most disconcerting effect of the cyclone was the loss of Internet and

mobile phone coverage. The only way to communicate with anyone was to be within speaking distance; and that was quite unnerving. We knew we were well and safe; but there was no way to reassure family and friends of that.

Later in the day we were told there was a chance that the town water supply might have reduced pressure as a result of the power-out; and unless a generator could be rigged up to the pumping station, it could stop altogether. The bath was cleaned, then half-filled with water, just in case. Normal routines were abandoned in favour of makeshift ones. Although the generator was unable to cope with the electric oven, we had a gas hob for cooking and boiling water for hot drinks. A solar water heater meant showers were possible; but cloud cover reduced its efficiency and the electric booster wasn't working. The coming days were spent removing damaged fence panels and prising the back gate from its mangled hinge. Between times we took to crosswords and Sudoku while waiting for news of what was happening. It wasn't good.



The town had been smashed. Some families were unable to stay in homes that had no roofs and broken windows. One poor woman had been forced to shelter for hours during the storm under a blanket with her six children. People like them had to move to an evacuation centre that had been set up. As well as damage to property, streets had to be cleared of debris and emergency crews began to arrive to assist council workers who were already inundated. It was destined to be a long task. The council offices at least had a closed Internet signal and also land lines; but still no power so the rechargeable handsets were of no use. A rummage through some boxes in a storeroom produced one of the old telephones which was something. Once connected, apparently it kept ringing – outsiders trying to make bookings for the caravan park and the hotel, both of which were closed. Although the devastation of Seroja was reported on the national TV news as in the above photo, there were people who assumed it had just been a big blow and was now over. For those of us stuck in a crippled town it was unbelievable and frustrating that some outsiders could be so inconsiderate.

One aspect that hadn't been considered was money. People needed to buy food, fuel for their cars, and in particular for the generators if they had them. Without power, the

automatic teller machines weren't working; neither were the EFTPOS facilities in the shops; and, of course, the fuel stations couldn't pump gas without power. These conveniences came on and went off during the next few days at random; so it was only by luck that anyone could access them when they were actually working. Having no way to withdraw cash from bank accounts, nor pay by card, we had to rely on the reserve we had brought with us. Others in town weren't as prepared. There was even an issue for Council which was unable to pay its workers – and they had to eat too.

Help began to arrive from outside in dribs and drabs. One major bonus was 45 generators trucked in by the army. Unenviable was the task of deciding which residents had priority, and many would have to miss out. Thanks to our generator, we were able to get a TV working enabling us to catch up with the latest news. Apparently the main arterial roads had eventually been cleared and were open; so our plan was to head off south as soon as practical. Our greatest concern, however, was the lack of phone coverage: should we break down miles from anywhere, with no mobile signal we would be in big trouble!

Fortunately, this didn't happen. On our way back home we drove through towns that had fared no better than Morawa; some were in a sorrier state. This was partly due to the fact that none were fully prepared, because cyclones aren't expected that far south. We know from past experience that isn't true. Even so, and home safe now, we can't help but sympathise with the victims whose towns won't be returning to any sense of normality for months to come.

Such is the way of extreme weather patterns like cyclones, hurricanes and super storms. Not until ordinary folk are caught in the middle of one is the awesome power of Mother Nature truly realised; nor the devastating aftermath that has to be coped with once the fury has passed. It is certainly a sobering thought.

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