

ROBERT LEWIS  
AN ATOM  
STUDY GUIDE



# 5 SEASONS

A film by Steven McGregor



## 5 SEASONS

(Steven McGregor, 2005) is a 52-minute documentary film about traditional Aboriginal culture in modern Australia.

It shows the way of life of a group of Indigenous Australians in eastern Arnhem Land.

By looking at one specific example of traditional life as it exists in the modern world, we can gain knowledge and understanding that will help us consider a range of issues associated with Indigenous culture today.

## SYNOPSIS

In these fast and modern times, the Numurindi people are still guided by the seasons and stories of the Dreamtime. This observational documentary focuses on Moses Numamurdirri and his family's fight to hold onto their culture and ways in an ever-changing world.

The Numurindi people have developed a culture where all things past and present, including the weather, are interrelated. This relationship extends to previous generations, together with the animal and plant kingdom. *5 Seasons* explores this intricate relationship through the eyes of the Numurindi people of southeast Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory's Gulf of Carpentaria.

In this region of Australia, western society operates on two distinct seasons, the wet and the dry. The Numurindi people operate on a calendar that has five seasons. The seasons dictate what their country will provide for them; when the Pandanus nuts turn red and fall from the trees, it is the time that the sea turtles are laying their eggs which are a delicacy. Turtle eggs are a much favoured food source for the people.

Moses Numamurdirri is a senior custodian for the region. He takes the viewer through the 12 months of the



five seasons, from the vast dried-up flood plains where salt-water crocodiles perish due to lack of water, through to the spectacular thunderstorms which isolate the communities due to roads being cut off by the rising rivers.

Moses provides an insight into a way of life that is rarely accessible to western society. He is a provider of not only food for his community but also strong cultural leadership. He combines his knowledge of the land and culture with the benefits of the modern world such as the 4-wheel drive and outboard mo-

tors for hunting turtle and dugong.

While enjoying the benefits of the modern world, the Numurindi people are still guided by the seasons and the stories of the dreamtime. This spiritual connection resonates throughout the documentary, giving the audience an evocative entrée to the world's oldest living culture.

## CURRICULUM AREAS

Teachers in middle to senior secondary classrooms can use *5 Seasons* as a valuable resource in:

### English

- Issues
- Communication

### Culture and Identity

- Community
- Kinship
- Language
- Ceremony
- Culture change and continuity





the first day of the main holidays, or the first day of the new school year? Or perhaps you might choose a religious event as your significant starting point – Christmas Day or Easter Sunday, Chinese New Year, or the end of Ramadan?

Draw up your calendar for the year, marking the significant times or periods in your life for that year.

2 The Australian year is based on the northern European seasons of summer (hot), autumn (vegetation dies back), winter (rain and cold) and spring (regeneration and re-growth).

Is that a sensible and appropriate division of the year for where you live? Do you see these changes happening in your area? Describe the main seasonal features of the place where you live.

3 Most people in our community have certain rights and responsibilities associated with being part of a family and community. List some of the rights and responsibilities you have as a family and community member. For example, you might say that you have the right to have birthday presents, and the responsibility to do certain jobs around the house. Record your ideas in **Table A**

The activities above have introduced you to three ideas – marking the year, seasonal change and living in a family and community. In the film *5 Seasons* you will see how these ideas apply to one person and community in a specific place in Australia, as well as exploring how traditional Aboriginal

**Geography / Place and Space**

- Sustainability
- Climate and seasons
- Stewardship

**Resources**

- Management
- Competing uses of a resource

**Civics and Citizenship**

- Rights and responsibilities
- Being a good citizen



tional seasons of summer, autumn, winter and spring.

**BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM**

1 Imagine that you have been asked to produce a calendar that traces your life for a full year cycle, but one that is not based on the tradi-

How would you organize it? Would you start with your birthday, and then describe the key moments in your year? Would you start with January 1, and use that as the starting point? Or would you perhaps start your year with

My rights as a member of a family and community	My responsibilities as a member of a family and community

TABLE A

culture exists in a modern and changing world.

## EXPLORING IDEAS IN THE FILM

### Place and space

The film explores the East Arnhem Land area of Australia.

- Use an atlas to locate the following places in the Arnhem Land area. Create a sketch map of the area and mark their location on the map.
  - Maningrida
  - Flinders Peninsula
  - Gove Peninsula
  - Kakadu
  - Cobourg Peninsula
  - Oenpelli
  - Groote Eylandt
  - Tiwi Islands
- The film shows the Arnhem Land landscape and environment in some detail. Summarize the image of the environment that you remember most from the film.

### Environment

- The area shown in the film is part of the northern savanna landscape. Savanna is a grassland-woodland mosaic vegetation type found in tropical and subtropical regions with long dry periods and receiving more rainfall than desert areas but not enough to support complete forest cover. A savanna is characterized by scattered trees or scattered clumps of trees and



drought-resistant grasses. Fire often plays an important role in maintaining the vegetation.

What is your reaction to this environment? Would you like to live there? What are the attractions of it, and the elements that you might dislike?

- A key idea in the film is the Aboriginal awareness of their environment that leads them to divide the year into five natural 'movements', as opposed to the European division of the year into 'wet' and 'dry'.

See **Table B** for list of the five seasons.

Use the information given in the film to fill in the last column to describe what the land looks like for each of the seasons.

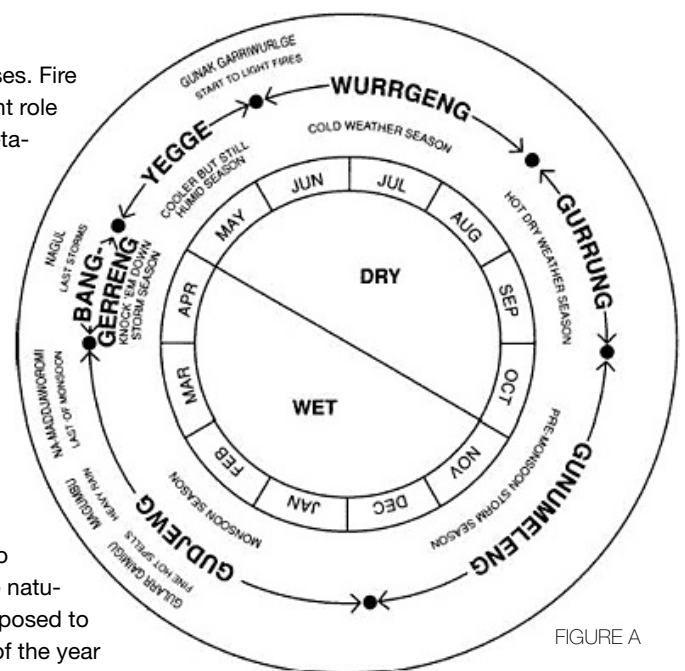


FIGURE A

- Figure A** shows the various systems for defining the year – months, 'wet' and 'dry', and Aboriginal seasonal divisions. It is for the Kakadu region. (from [www.deh.gov.au/parks/kakadu/artculture/seasons.html](http://www.deh.gov.au/parks/kakadu/artculture/seasons.html))

Aboriginal Name	Months	Weather/Season	Environment
Migirarrga	May to July	Cold weather time	Environment
Durrmala	August to October	Hot, dry winds	
Barra	October to December	Rains coming	
Barra Amilmilariri	January to February	Heavy rains	
Mariga	March to April	Floods recede Cool weather coming	

TABLE B



Create a similar chart for the east Arnhem Land seasons, but include also the European seasons on it.

Why do the Aboriginal seasons differ between Kakadu and the neighbouring Arnhem Land area? Why are these preferable to the European seasonal markers?

What does *5 Seasons* help you to understand about Indigenous people and the environment?

## Sustainability

- 9 Here are some observations that Aboriginal people have made that lead to predictions.

*In the Tiwi Islands local people always know when there will be big thunderstorms – when there are high tides in the middle of the day.*

*In the Kakadu area the flowering of the rough-barked gum and the spear grass is a sign that the wind will soon blow from the southeast, and the dry season will start.*

*Scientists studying the areas have confirmed the connection between the observation and the prediction in each*

case.

*Suggest what connections there might be in each case, and then look at the explanations that follow.*

*The scientists have discovered that in the case of the thunderstorms – when the tides are high during the day that sharpens up the temperature contrast between the land and the water – meaning the sea breeze convergence produces much bigger thunderstorms. In the case of Kakadu, scientists suggest that falling humidity associated with the start of the dry season triggers the phenomenon observed.*

- 10 How could Indigenous people's knowledge of the environment be used by other managers of the area to promote sustainability?
- 11 Sustainability doesn't mean *not* using the land and its resources – it involves using them in such a way that the resources will continue to be available for future generations. Do you think that Moses is using the resources sustainably? Give specific examples.
- 12 In the book *An Intruder's Guide to East Arnhem Land* (Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 2001) writer Andrew McMillan is surprised to see some Indigenous people using the land in a wasteful way: he describes the needless killing of a female turtle, the theft of turtle eggs from an area that was culturally out of bounds, and the senseless killing of a goanna. How do you reconcile the apparently contradictory images of Aboriginal use of the area in the

Songs	
Dance	
Stories	
Art	
Language	
Laws	
Roles	
Relationships	

TABLE C

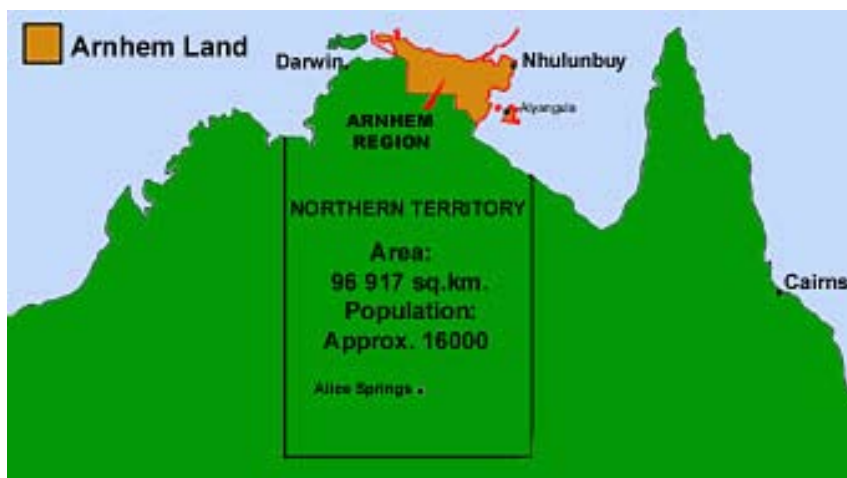
book and this film?

What does *5 Seasons* help you to understand about Indigenous people and sustainability?

## Culture

‘Culture’ is a group’s ideas, beliefs, relationships and practices that are its way of life.

13 Identify examples of the various elements of the culture of the Indig-



igenous people of eastern Arnhem Land that we see in this film in **Table c**

- 14 Why do you think these elements developed over time?
- 15 What happens if they are lost?
- 16 Culture involves both change and continuity. Give examples from the film of continuity, and change, in the culture.
- 17 Does it matter if the various elements of culture change over time? Does it weaken or lessen the culture? Explain your views.

What does *5 Seasons* help you to understand about Indigenous people and culture?

## Community, Leadership and Citizenship

A community is a group of people in a defined area whose activities and contacts have an impact on each other.

There can be many communities in your life – for example you are a member of a school community.

- 18 List some other communities that you are a member of. (For example, are there communities to do with sport, or religion, or ethnicity, or the local area where you live?)
- 19 Identify the various communities in Moses’ life.

Citizenship is a concept that we usually apply to non-Indigenous society – it is rarely used in discussing Indigenous

society. Citizenship involves behaving in a way that exercises both rights and responsibilities for a person’s actions that affect others in his or her society or community.

- 20 How does Moses act as a leader in his community?
- 21 How does he exercise citizenship rights to the land, community and culture?
- 22 How does he exercise citizenship responsibilities to the land, community and culture?
- 23 Would you say he was a good Australian citizen?

What does *5 Seasons* help you to understand about Indigenous people and citizenship?

## Land use and resource management – Fire case study

The film emphasizes Moses’ relationship with and management of the land. One of the key traditional Indigenous management tools used in the area is fire.

The attitude of Indigenous management about the use of fire can be seen in this statement by Bill Neidjie, an Indigenous custodian of the Kakadu area:

*This earth ...  
I never damage,  
I look after.  
Fire is nothing,  
just clean up.  
When you burn,  
new grass coming up.  
That mean good animal soon ...  
Might be goose, long-neck turtle,  
goanna, possum.  
Burn him off ...  
new grass coming up,  
new life all over.*

Bill Neidjie, Stephen Davis and Allan Fox, *Kakadu Man*, p35, Mybrood P/L, Sydney, 1985.

- 24 What effects does fire have on this environment?
- 25 Why would Indigenous people in the area want to encourage this?
- 26 Does this action seem controlled or random? Explain why.

Look at the following information on the nature and impact of fire in the savanna area of northern Australia.

Tropical savanna covers twenty-five per cent of the Australian landmass.

<http://savanna.ntu.edu.au/centre/>

It is the vegetation and area that burns most frequently. There are different types of fires, depending on the timing of the fire. Most fires are started by lightning strikes. Early dry season fires tend to be low-intensity, as the fuel still contains moisture from the preceding wet season; later dry-season fires can be high-intensity, as the fuel has

dried out. The intensity of the fire also depends on how long it has been since the last fire: frequent fires thin out the fuel available; long gaps between fires leads to a build-up of fuel, and consequently much fiercer fires.

## Air

In a typical year tropical savanna burning releases about 80 million tonnes of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) into the atmosphere. This compares with about 70 million tonnes from Australian vehicles and industry each year. However, the following growing season takes up about the same amount each year in the savannah.

## Soil

Each fire reduces the nitrogen content of the soil, impoverishing it.

## Water

The effects of savannah burning on streams can be dramatic. It creates erosion, and consequently a degraded water quality. Some water-borne vegetation benefits from this infusion of nutrients in the water.

## Animals

The major effect of fires on animals in the area is indirect – it changes the nature of the habitat and food supplies, and creates the risk of predation due to loss of cover. Some animals become ‘winners’, with easier prey available, and others become ‘losers’, as they turn into easy targets. Small mammals

such as bandicoots are very vulnerable to fire, as they cannot escape. Larger species such as dingoes easily outrun it, and can move into unburnt areas. Tree-dwelling species such as possums are especially vulnerable to late season high intensity fires. There is no one type of fire that benefits all species.

## Birds

Many take advantage of fire. Flocks of black kites gather at fire fronts, eating insects and other small animals flushed out by the flames. After fire, scavenging birds such as hawks and kookaburras feed on dead and injured animals, and on exposed seeds and nuts, and a few weeks later on insects attracted to new growth. Birds such as Partridge Pigeons and finches and honeyeaters, who often nest on the ground or very low in trees, lose habitat.

## Reptiles

Predatory and scavenging reptiles such as snakes and goannas ‘clean up’ after fires.

## Insects

Fires have little overall effect on them, regardless of the type of fire.

- 27 Create a table that summarizes the impacts, benefits and dangers of fire in the area for each of the seven aspects of the environment listed above. (see **Table D**)

There are different uses of the area that includes Arnhem Land – by Indigenous

Aspect	Impact	Benefits	Dangers

TABLE D



people, cattle graziers, tourist companies, and conservationists.

People who use the area have different ideas about how it should be managed. Management is about control. But it is also about choices. So, do we manage bushfires for the benefit of people and property, in which case the environment will change; or do we manage it for the environment, which means that people have to change the way they live?

Here are some ideas to help you consider that issue.

Aboriginal people have been in Australia for perhaps 60,000 years. For all that time they have had to live with fire.

We do not know exactly how Aboriginal people have used fire over time in different places. However, we do know that Indigenous people used it for thousands of years for warmth, hunting, communication, ceremonies, cooking, warfare, encouraging regrowth, and providing a fire-safe environment. Different patterns were used in different places, and probably at different times.

Most historians describe Aboriginal use of fire as 'firestick farming' – the deliberate use of fire to control the nature of an environment. This seems usually to have been to create a patchwork of different stages of regrowth in different areas.

- 28 What would be the advantages of having different stages of growth in different areas?
- 29 What knowledge or expertise would be required for this to be achieved?

When Europeans invaded Australia they disrupted these traditional burning practices. This led to the creation of a denser bush, a different environment – except in areas where Europeans cleared the land for crops and animal grazing,

- 30 Why would Europeans have wanted different fire regimes to those of the Aboriginal people?
- 31 What impact would the creation of

denser bush have had on bushfires?

Traditional Aboriginal management techniques are still used in parts of northern Australia today. When undertaken under Indigenous custodianship, burning today is concentrated in non-pastoral, relatively high-rainfall regions. Traditionally, fires are set in the early- to mid-dry season, so that frequent low-impact burning keeps fuel loads low – the 'clean up burning' that Bill Neidje refers to in his words.

Where traditional burning in the north has been disrupted by European settlement the situation is different. Where burning was largely controlled in the past, today it is caused by lightning strikes. There is a trend towards more frequent and larger, hotter fires. The increase of monsoon rains creates more vegetation, which in turn fuels larger fires. This is seemingly tied to climate change: four of the ten highest annual rainfalls for the region have been recorded in the last ten years. As much as half the area is currently burnt every year, or two years.

These newer fire patterns differ from traditional Aboriginal burning, where small patches were burned as people moved through the country, creating smaller and less intense fires. This tended to create a mosaic or patchwork, rather than a single environment.

Studies in the area concluded that too frequent burning had the worst impact on the ecosystem. For optimum maintenance of current biodiversity and ecosystems the need was for burning every three to five years.

A problem is that there are now several different sets of demands on the environment: the demand of some Aboriginal people to maintain their traditional practices; the demands of many conservationists to reduce the impact of 'artificial' management processes; the demands of pastoralists for the maintenance of an environment that suits their grazing animals, rather than the natural environment; and the demands of tourists for a smoke-free, unburned,

'undestroyed' environment.

- 32 Explain how different expectations might affect the way the area is managed today.
- 33 Imagine a conversation between people with competing interests in the area. List the main points that each would make.
- 34 Can all competing ideas and interests be accommodated? Or must priorities be set? And if so, what are the priorities you would give for the area? Discuss your ideas.

What does *5 Seasons* help you to understand about Indigenous people and management of the savanna environment?

## Facing the future

Moses worries about the future.

- 35 What pressures do we see in the film that make him worry about the future?
- 36 What other pressures, not necessarily mentioned in the film, might also exist?
- 37 Give examples from the film of Moses trying to protect the future through young people.
- 38 Can Indigenous communities resist change? Collect a file of newspaper and other media reports on challenges facing various Indigenous communities, and discuss the success or failure of those communities in dealing successfully with the challenges they face. Try to decide what the key factors are for success in dealing with these challenges.

What does *5 Seasons* help you to understand about Indigenous communities and the future?

## 5 Seasons as a documentary film

Documentary films usually fall into three main categories:

Arnhem Land is an area of 97 000 sq. km in the northeastern corner of the Northern Territory, now controlled by the Northern Land Council and inhabited by local Aborigines. It extends from Port Roper on the Gulf of Carpentaria around the coast to the East Alligator River where it adjoins Kakadu National Park. The region was named by Matthew Flinders after the Dutch ship Arnhem which explored the coast in 1623.

The coast has one of the longest histories of exploration of any area in Australia. It is likely that the first Aborigines, making their way across the Indonesian archipelago some 40-50 000 years ago, arrived on the Arnhem Land coast. Certainly by the fifteenth century Indonesian and Malaccan sailors and traders were regularly visiting the coast.

In 1644 Abel Tasman sailed along the coast and in 1803 Matthew Flinders, as part of his circumnavigation of Australia, charted the complex coastline. The inland areas were explored by Ludwig Leichhardt, who travelled through the area on his 1844-45 journey from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, and David Lindsay, the South Australian surveyor, who, in 1883, was commissioned to explore the central and eastern sections of Arnhem Land. He met with strong resistance from the local Aborigines. At one point over 300 men attacked his party.

The area continued to be explored throughout the nineteenth century but much of it was inaccessible. The northern coast, for example, is characterized by mangrove swamps and tidal rivers. Inland from the mangrove swamps are areas of tropical jungle, swamps and gorges. Thus the Aborigines of the region, who have lived in Arnhem Land for at least the last 25 000 years, tend to live near the coast where fish are abundant and life is relatively easy. The reserve is noted for its rich examples of rock art and Aboriginal artefacts. The stone axes found in the reserve are

some of the oldest in existence.

The Church Mission Society established the first mission station in Arnhem Land in 1908. In 1916 the Northern Territory Administration bought Paddy Cahill's cattle station at Oenpelli and in 1920 the 2400 sq. miles around the station were converted into an Aboriginal reserve. At the same time the Methodist Overseas Mission established a mission on Galiwinku. The mission at Galiwinku, a large island 500 km from Darwin, is now one of the largest communities in Arnhem Land with a population of over 1000 people.

In 1931, after pressure from a number of organizations, Arnhem Land became an Aboriginal reserve. A number of mission stations, with populations hovering around 500 people, now exist in the area. Notable are the ones at Maningrida, Milingimbi, Numbulwar and Yirrkala.

During the Second World War over 5000 servicemen were stationed on Gove Peninsula (qv) and after the war prospectors found vast deposits of bauxite in the area. In the early 1970s Narbarlek prospected for uranium in the reserve and in 1979 permission was granted to mine yellow cake.

During the dry season, and with the appropriate documentation from the Northern Land Council, it is possible to drive into Arnhem Land. The current attitude of the Northern Land Council to such journeys is that there must be some reason beyond sightseeing or simply wanting to travel around the edges of the continent. Consequently applications to travel through Arnhem Land are not easy to obtain. It is private property and should be respected as such.

[www.walkabout.com.au/locations/NTArnhemLand.shtml](http://www.walkabout.com.au/locations/NTArnhemLand.shtml)

- 'fly on the wall' – where the camera is apparently a neutral and non-judgemental recorder of what is happening, leaving the viewers to respond to what is happening in their own ways;
- 'impartial adjudicator' – where the film presents all sides of an issue fairly, in a balanced way, and without imposing the filmmaker's own values on the material, and leaves the viewers to make up their own minds on the basis of the material presented; and
- 'active participant' – where the filmmaker deliberately shapes the material presented to convince the viewers to accept the point of view

and argument being presented.

39 Which of these styles is *5 Seasons* closest to? Justify your answer by referring to specific elements in the film.

Look at this statement by the filmmaker, and answer the questions that follow.

#### ***About the making of the film***

While researching a short film that featured an Aboriginal Albino character, Steven McGregor found, that apart from a series of photographs in the Perth based newspaper *The West*

Australian, information regarding this subject was virtually non-existent.

By a stroke of luck the persons featured in the photographs (Mari and Murphy) just happened to be friends of the director's mother, who works for the Northern Territory Government Health Department and regularly visits remote Aboriginal communities. It was through this connection that Steven first learnt of Moses and his family.

'It struck a chord in me', says Steven.

The producer (Priscilla Collins) was also intrigued, it was she who initially contacted Moses and sounded him out

regarding the possibility of featuring his family in a documentary. Moses was all for the idea.

Originally the film's driving theme was to be the albino aspect, but after spending a week at Numbulwar, on his own time and money, Steven began to see a broader, more diverse documentary. He decided to incorporate a range of storylines connected by a central character, Moses.

*Moses fascinated me in the way he was held in the community and how he related to the people. He's a larrikin and has a quick sense of humour, but he also knows who he is and where he's from. The strength of his character embodies a presence that transfers to screen. After spending time with Moses and other people within the community, I became intrigued with Numbulwar and its range of characters. I came to realize that the film was moving away from the central theme of albinos.*

Numbulwar is not a perfect community. It has its faults and has experienced tragedy through alcohol and petrol sniffing. Its young people are caught in a dilemma between two worlds, do they embrace the western world and forsake their own culture, and is it even possible to find a balance? For Moses and the other elders there is a real fear that within the next 30-50 years their stories and language may be lost forever. Moses identifies that he and the other elders of the community are responsible for the preservation of their culture and to instil pride in their young men and women, ensuring their culture lives beyond them.

*While many Non-Aboriginal Australians head overseas in their thousands each year to experience ancient cultures abroad, they are reluctant to explore one of the worlds oldest civilizations, on their very own doorstep. Through making this film I wanted to give the viewer an honest look at Aboriginal culture, in particular, at a coastal Aboriginal community, and hopefully create a better understanding of what this country means to Aboriginal people and why it's so important to have a strong connection to land, this country.*

*The combined elements of community structure, culture, conflict between young and old and seasonal changes make a provocative statement, not only for Numbulwar but for any Aboriginal community existing and surviving in the twenty-first century.*

- 40 What was the filmmaker trying to achieve?
- 41 Do you think he has succeeded?
- 42 Write your review of the film.

## Further resources

### Internet

- Indigenous weather knowledge: [http://www.bom.gov.au/iwk/climate\\_culture/Indig\\_seasons.shtml](http://www.bom.gov.au/iwk/climate_culture/Indig_seasons.shtml)  
East Arnhem Land tourism: <http://www.ealta.org/>  
Co-operative Research Centre for savanna: <http://savanna.nyu.edu.au/centre/>



This study guide was produced by **ATOM**. <[damned@netspace.net.au](mailto:damned@netspace.net.au)>

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