



TORRES SHIRE COUNCIL

**Submission to the
Torres Strait Region Inquiry**

Introduction

The Shire of Torres comprises all of the State lying between latitude 11 degrees south and the international border with Papua New Guinea. The two newly amalgamated Councils, Torres Strait Island Regional Council (TSIRC) and Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council (NPARC), are located within the Shire area referred to above. TSIRC includes the 15 island communities of the Torres Strait with its administrative headquarters located in Thursday Island. NPARC includes 5 Cape York communities administered from Bamaga.

The Torres Strait islands area covers 49,000 square kilometres. This includes the northernmost part of Cape York Peninsula, together with the inhabited inner islands (viz. Thursday, Horn, Prince of Wales, Friday Islands) and all uninhabited islands of Torres Strait. The Shire's administrative centre is located on Thursday Island, which provides the primary service centre for the region.

Torres Shire is the only Australian local government which abuts an international border (Australia and Papua New Guinea) and is in close proximity to the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya. This alone places the people of the Shire in a unique part of the country.

TORRES STRAIT

The Torres Strait is divided into five major island clusters, the Top Western Group (Boigu, Dauan and Saibai), the Near Western Group (Badu, Mabuiag and Moa), the Central Group (Yam, Warraber, Coconut and Masig), the Eastern Group (Murray, Darnley and Stephen), and the TI Group (Thursday, Horn, Hammond, Prince of Wales and Friday). This also includes the five aboriginal and islander communities (Bamaga, Seisia, Injinoo, Umagico and New Mapoon), on the Northern Peninsula Area of Cape York.

Three dialects: Kala Kawa Ya (Top Western and Western), Kala Lagau Ya (Central) and Meriam (Eastern) predominate with the 'Creole' language that emerged after the arrival of the missionaries. The Torres Strait is the body of water between Australia and Papua New Guinea where the Pacific and Indian Oceans meet and where there are 133 islands, sandy cays and rocky outcrops of which 38 are inhabited. The population of the Torres Strait at the last Census totalled 8,679.

The Torres Strait is culturally unique and whilst it is Australian, it is different from the surrounding areas of Papua New Guinea, Asia and the Pacific. A multicultural society has emerged from the history of beche-de-mer fishing and mother-of-pearl and trochus shell industries with the influx of Asian and Pacific Island traders. The fishery of the Torres Strait with the exception of trochus shell continues today and Waibene exemplifies the multiculturalism of the Torres Strait where people of many races and nationalities live and work harmoniously.

As the only part of Australia with an active international border and where the neighbouring country is visible from the shoreline, the Torres Strait has gained a strategic focus from Commonwealth and State governments. The issues of customs, quarantine, immigration and defense are administered daily from Waibene within a treaty that also maintains traditional cultural and trade ties between Papua New Guinea and the people of the Torres Strait.

HISTORY

The first inhabitants of the Torres Strait are believed to have migrated from the Indonesian archipelago 70,000 years ago at a time when New Guinea was still attached to the Australian continent. They were followed by new waves of migration.

The original inhabitants lived in small communities relying on fishing, hunting and the growing of crops for their subsistence. Trade in artifacts made of pearl shell, turtle shell, feathers, canoes and tools were very important in the life of Torres Strait.

Although it is likely that Chinese, Malay and Indonesian traders had explored the islands before him, the first navigator credited with coming across the islands is Spaniard, Luis Vaez de Torres, in 1606.

The discovery of pearl shell in the 1860s led to an influx of people from all over the region (Japanese, Malays, Filipinos, Micronesians and Europeans) especially on Thursday Island (Waibene) which became the main settlement. By 1877, 16 firms were established on Thursday Island employing 700 people and more than a hundred pearl luggers. Although the pearl trade stopped after World War II, cultured pearl farms still operate in the Torres Strait today.

Queensland officially annexed the islands in 1879. The Torres Strait islanders became citizens of Queensland in 1967 with full access to health and social services and freedom to travel and work in Australia. Many thousands of Islanders live in Queensland today, where they form a strong community.

In June 1992, the High Court of Australia recognized the native title rights of Eddie Mabo, an inhabitant of Murray Island (Mer), over his traditional land.

The High Court overturned the previous concept of terra nullius which stated that in legal terms Australia was empty of inhabitants when it was first settled by Europeans. Since the Mabo decision, several communities (Saibai Islanders and Mualgal people from Moa Island) have secured legal recognition of their native title rights over their islands. Several other cases are also in progress.

Main Issues

- land and water rights
- drug and people smuggling from Papua New Guinea
- recurring claims for more autonomy

Waibene, under the jurisdiction of Torres Shire Council, is also the administrative and commercial centre for the Torres Strait.

ENVIRONMENT

Physical Characteristics

Native Title

Native Title determinations have been made over several islands including large sections of Horn Island and Prince of Wales Island. The claimant group is the Kaurareg People.

The Kaurareg People, the Torres Shire Council and the State of Queensland are parties to an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) which commenced in 2001. There are no native title claims over Thursday Island.

POPULATION

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has provided the following estimated resident population figures for Torres Shire:

2001.....	3,600
2002.....	3,732
2003.....	3,798
2004.....	3,816
2005.....	3,781
2006	3,756
2008	3,785

POPULATION

It is interesting to note that Thursday Island is fast running out of usable land and is essentially approaching a capped population. This can be evidenced by the market sale price for real estate. The focus for expansion of the Shire is now Horn Island given the availability of land. Through its town planning scheme, Council has always maintained that Horn Island should be targeted for future expansion of the residential base. No such focus has been placed upon Prince of Wales due to the native title constraints. Again this is evidenced by Council's town plan. It is important that a conservative approach be adopted when calculating future population growth to ensure that infrastructure requirements and land availability are properly catered for.

CURRENT ISSUES

Main current issues faced by Torres Shire Council are:

Horn Island Airport

Torres Shire Council continues to urgently seek funding required to enable the Horn Island Regional Airport runway and taxiway to be strengthened with asphalt overlay to overcome surface damage. This would enable the regional demand for seating capacity to be met and maximum landing safety to be provided. Estimated cost is now \$7.2 million; estimated funding shortfall required is in the vicinity of \$2.8 million.

Council was extremely disappointed that its major application for the Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program was unsuccessful.

With Queensland Transport contributing a total of \$2.0 million and Torres Shire contributing \$1.26 million funds, Council implores the Federal Government to provide additional funding and come on board in a three way partnership to enable the urgent project to come to fruition in the near future. Torres Shire Council is in a position that its resolved loan borrowing of \$1.0 million cannot be increased any further otherwise the Shire's finances will be at an unacceptable risk.

Following suspension of the Q400 aircraft landing concession from December 2008, Council has been lobbying all possible funding sources to enable the urgent airport runway works to proceed. It must be pointed out that the Q400 will not be permitted to fly in or out of the regional Horn Island Airport until the required upgrade / extension works are completed.

Council has developed a comprehensive action strategy for a partnership funding approach to the relevant Federal and State Government departments and other agencies to achieve this significant amount of funding for this project. Other than the already committed funds of \$4.4 million; Council is faced with a funding dilemma with a shortfall well beyond its means.

State & Federal government's earnest consideration of this Council's funding dilemma is sought to assist us to overcome the region's major problem to achieve this necessary project for the airport, which contributes to regional/international aircraft transport, economic development, defence strategy/availability, tourism and government staffing.

With the main mode of local transport primarily being undertaken by regional and local aircraft, it is apparent that the many small islands are separated by large distances of water. Whilst we do have a minimal length of roadways unlike mainland Australia; it must be emphasized that local residents and visitors of the region rely heavily on an efficient air service.

This Council again stresses that the Horn island region airport is the only safe and quick access into the isolated Torres Strait region, which has many small island communities spread across the vast waterways covering square 49,000 kilometres. It is in fact our highway to Queensland's major cities, viz. Cairns, Townsville, Brisbane and beyond.

Freight

Torres Shire Council continues to seek the monitoring of the ever increasing freight charge increases. This high freight charges continues to have a far reaching affect over all commodities that Torres Strait residents purchase, including food, drinks, fuel, white goods, appliances, building materials, etc. Thus freight exacerbates continuing harsh economic circumstances which peg our community living standards with exorbitant prices to levels which are unacceptable elsewhere in Australia and which suffocate our potential for economic stability and growth with a heavy overburden of high priced basic living costs.

Council continues to seek the support of both Federal and State Governments for a bipartisan approach to fully examine the adverse economic circumstances confronting our families through the high cost of living. Council considers that a full investigation of a freight subsidy scheme that currently applies for Tasmania should be fully explored; particularly in view of Torres Strait's much greater distance from its main supply port (Cairns) and its significantly smaller population in comparison to Tasmania.

The continuing Sea Swift monopoly as the only sea freight provider is a major concern and the huge increases recently imposed by this company are direct evidence of why Government should continue to stringently monitor any future price increases.

Transport

Lack of public transport is a problem across the Torres Strait region. Torres Strait communities are in the very small minority of Queensland rural towns which do not have access to public transport. With the high cost of internal regional air travel, it must be noted that Government support, through Pensioner and Disabilities concessions, is not recognized for our constituents. The exorbitant inter regional airfares continue; current prices for return trip to the northern islands are in excess of \$800.

There is no provision of public transport (except some school transport) within Torres Shire. Only private ferry operators provide inter island Horn – Thursday Islands service and there is no subsidy allocated from government for this. Thus all residents, including pensioners, pay full rate at all times. The same situation exists where water taxis are used between Thursday, Horn, POW, Friday and Hammond islands. Everyone pays the full expensive rates.

Waste Management

Council provides a twice weekly garbage collection service using 120 litre wheelie bins for residential, while 240 litre bins are used for commercial purposes. This and other waste is accepted at the Thursday Island Waste Transfer Station.

The amount of waste is approximately 5,000t per year. The facility accepts general waste and limited regulated waste, and also temporary storage of used tyres, batteries and waste vehicle oil. Waste collected is transferred by truck and barge over to the Horn Island Landfill site.

Recycling efforts are minimal due to stringent quarantine requirements. Urgent attention is needed to reduce waste to landfill and prolong landfill life by increasing recycling and resource recovery.

Key issues raised by the community include:

- Banning of plastic bags
- Disposal of end of life vehicles
- Recycling cardboard, aluminum, steel and glass
- Prolonging the life of the Horn Island Landfill
- Cost of waste transport
- Quarantine issues.

Regional management issues are currently being reviewed with the main issue being looked at as follows:

- Overcoming quarantine restrictions to enable productive recycling to occur.
- Better organized waste disposal methods.
- Motor vehicle disposal – possible solutions.
- Review of what products are being brought on to the islands.

Local Government Association Queensland and Waste Contractors Recyclers Association Queensland are continuing investigations into the logistical, environmental, inter-governmental, social, legal and financial issues associated with possible solutions to the problems identified in the recent site inspections and meetings conducted within the two Councils of the Torres Strait region. A future report will be prepared when these investigations are completed in the near future.

Health

The increased access to Health Services throughout Torres Strait Communities (including Thursday Island, Cairns and other southern towns) being accessed by Papuan- New Guinean residents is burdening the already limited health services for our constituents.

The close proximity to the international border and the free movement of international visitors under the Torres Strait Treaty to access government services in Torres Strait continues to put pressure on these services, particularly health.

Practical solution needs to be implemented in providing the essential services access on the PNG mainland. Possible solutions maybe a major upgrade to the Daru Island hospital or building an appropriate Health Centre at centre villages such as Mabadauan directly opposite Saibai Island where ongoing support programs can be accessed.

AusAid's funding to PNG can be quarantined for specific essential infrastructure development throughout the coastal villages of Western Province directly through the Torres Strait and utilising arrangements under the Torres Strait Treaty and increase the local workforce from both PNG and Torres Strait in the development, operational and maintenance of these essential infrastructures such as water, sewerage, roads, housing, education, health and transport...etc .

Since 1975 there has been no development throughout Western Province of Papua New Guinea and residents of these isolated communities have no access to essential services at their individual villages. Over the 40 years, international residents from these villages have illegally accessed services throughout these island communities of Australia.

There have been lots of diplomatic discussions and resources sharing since PNG's Independence but sadly nothing practical and tangible has been implemented for the grassroots villages to enable them the equity of access to goods and services similar to their Australian neighbours across the island communities.

It is most important to recognise the availability of good quality and affordable food in view of the ongoing health problems of the Torres Strait, such as:

- Obesity in the Torres Strait is 55% higher than the Australian average.
- Diabetes – the highest national incidence of type 2 diabetes exists throughout the Torres Strait Islands.
- Consumption of fast foods and high sugar drinks is a major concern within the Torres Strait.

One contradictory factor is that while people in remote areas pay significantly more for food, the price of cigarettes and tobacco products is still similar to the prices of larger mainland centres.

Education

Torres Shire endorses the establishment of the Torres Strait Institute to be focused on the fundamental spiritual, cultural, social, environmental and economic needs of the Torres Strait in accordance with Ailan Kastoms.

It supports Tagai State College's 'Yumi Education and excellence' plight to implement the introduction for whole of Government strategy on Indigenous languages and a National Indigenous Languages Policy.

The importance of Indigenous Languages is:

- Sense of identity and belonging
- Providing a key to unlock education participation
- Providing improvements in mental health
- Providing improvements in literacy and numeracy
- Being taught alongside English not subordinate to
- Being taking out of the 'too hard' basket before it is too late
- Embed cultural knowledge into the curriculum.

Fisheries

The Torres Strait is largely marine culture and sustainable management of the marine environment is essential for economic development, including fishing and tourism industries. Transport costs in relation to the fishing operation throughout our region such as freight and fuel costs present a large barrier to economic success. Assistance to alleviate these extra financial costs is critical.

Support for the establishment of a regional local fish corporation/ authority is paramount for the ownership and management of fisheries throughout Torres Strait.

Law Enforcement

In 1980's as part of introduction of the 1985 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Service Act, major services such as Health and Education were transferred from the Department of Native Affairs to the mainstream State Government specific portfolio. Unfortunately Law responsibilities were overlooked and remained with Communities to be administered by each individual councils under their by law system instead of being transferred over to the State's

Justice Portfolio. As part of the latest Queensland Crime and Misconduct Review, Torres Shire

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supported greater empowerment for local PLO's under a pilot project to review their responsibilities and powers and appointed as 'Special Constable' which are endorsed by both State and Federal Legislation. This will enable these local officers to carry out their policing duties in their communities and provide safe communities to both domestic and international visitors.

Border protection, arising from increasing numbers of illegal immigrants coming to Australia by sea from the north via Torres Strait, is also likely to require the provision of additional resources from Australian Government.

With the present global security threats and our Nation's regular strategic planning, empowerment as Special Constable, is paramount for local Indigenous law enforcement officers within the communities throughout our isolated communities.

Economic Development

With our vital location and international border, Torres Shire believes that that it and the Torres Strait region can provide brokerage for new initiatives and knowledge throughout the region, state and for our neighbours to the north including Papua New Guinea, Indonesia and South Pacific Islands and beyond. We seek the assistance of the Queensland Government to pursue these objectives. The Shire believes that this region can act as a base to launch excellent initiatives for our developing international region; with a practical example being the operation of Aus Aid and other similar agencies form Torres Shire to assist in the desperately needed assistance in the years to come.

Torres Shire Council has taken the initiative to drive the development of sustainable tourism in the Shire and formed a joint government, industry and community Tourism Steering Committee to coordinate and oversee the development and implementation of a Torres Shire Tourism Development Plan. Torres Shire strongly supports the development of tourism within the Torres Strait region and seeks to implement the 71 recommendations of this recently adopted plan over the next few years.

Integrated Service Delivery - Regional Governance Partnerships

Last year Torres Strait leaders reached a milestone in shaping a regional partnership by developing a unified vision to guide whole of government planning and program delivery in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area.

The Mayors & Councillors of the Torres Shire Council, the Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council and the Torres Strait Islands Regional Council achieved the historic

outcome with the Torres Strait Regional Authority Board at a two day forum held on Thursday Island during early November 2008.

The region's leaders unanimously committed their respective agencies towards a unified vision "Empowering our people, in our decision, in our culture, for our future" That would shape the destiny for this strategically important part of Australia.

Territory Government

The Federal and Queensland Government's support is sought for the region's aspiration for self autonomy, management and determination through Territory style governance. Torres Shire residents and Torres Strait people look forward to a stronger working relationship with these Governments if this new governance is achieved.

The Torres Strait Territory Coalition, formed by the elected leaders of the Torres Strait Island Regional Council, the Torres Strait Regional Authority and the Torres Shire Council are spearheading the movement on behalf of the people.

The Coalition aims to provide residents with clear, accurate and relevant information on territory governance to help them decide if this is the path that they want to pursue and to help them genuinely participate in the consultation to assist in creating a model that works best for the region.

To design a model of territory that suits the Torres Strait, consultation has been recently undertaken within all Torres Strait communities to get feed-back on what they think would work best in the region.

Some of the questions asked were:

- What would the new government be responsible for?
- What should the governing structure be?
- Should the new government have two houses of parliament or just one?
- How would the Territory Government be elected?
- Do you want representation in the Federal Senate and Legislative Assembly?

The Torres Strait Territory Coalition will continue to keep residents informed to help them make the best decision about the future of the region. However, the movement towards territory governance will take time. It is a complicated process that, if done properly, will not happen overnight.

The next steps toward territory are:

1. Conduct community consultations on the various types of territory government available and work with communities to understand their wants and needs
2. Based on community feedback, design a model that is believed will work best for the region

3. Consult with communities on the proposed model to make sure they have got it right
4. Hold a local government referendum to determine if the public still want to move toward territory status and to see if the public approve of the proposed model of territory
5. Leadership discuss the final outcome with the Queensland and Federal Governments

Summary

Torres Shire Council appreciates this opportunity to present this submission as a proactive and positive endeavour to ensure that Torres Strait region the best servicing and governance for our diverse region. Council wishes to be assured that the State Government of Queensland and Federal Government provides the highest level of delivery of quality and meaningful services for all residents of the Torres Strait region. Of course equitable and adequate funding is paramount for all services that improve and maintain a quality of life for Torres Strait residents, equal to that of our mainland counterparts.

We commit ourselves to providing further evidence to your inquiry if hearings are conducted here in the Torres Strait or elsewhere.

Authorised by

***Mayor Napau Pedro Stephen & Councillors
Torres Shire Council***