



INQUIRY INTO ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORIES

Submission by Island Care Christmas Island
to the inquiry by the Joint Standing Committee on the National
Capital and External Territories

April 2021

BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Introduction

Environmental considerations must be at the forefront of the recommendations from this enquiry in addressing the challenges and opportunities to build a sustainable future for the Indian Ocean Territories.

To eliminate barriers and make the most of opportunities community groups, all levels of government and businesses must be engaged in delivering innovation and outcomes to harness their skills, knowledge and experience.

Island Care Christmas Island is a not-for-profit environmental organisation run by volunteers. Since 2001, members have engaged and collaborated with community, government and organisations to help protect the unique environment of Christmas Island through education and activities. Recent activities include:

- the removal and audit of marine debris from the Island's beaches;
- facilitating recycling efforts;
- assisting the community to transition from single-use plastics;
- advocating for better waste management and source reduction;
- litter awareness and reduction programs; and
- supporting citizen science initiatives.

The natural environment is valued by the community as evidenced in the *Our Christmas Island 2030 Strategic Plan* of the Regional Development Organisation which clearly indicates the community wants to be known for its natural environment and tourism. The Strategic Plan provides strong evidence that future economic prosperity is based on the preservation, and strategic and sustainable use of the natural resources for tourism, agriculture, renewable energy and other sustainable development.

The main reason people visit Christmas Island is its unique nature, including the annual red crab migration, endemic forest and sea bird species. It has a healthy marine environment with unique hybrid fish, the world's largest population of coconut/robber crabs and endemic plants in a rainforest like no other. The Island's future relies on a healthy environment to support its ecotourism industry, potential new industries, the social fabric of the community and its significant strategic value to Australia.

Encouraging innovation and investment that addresses sustainability challenges and provides economic opportunities. This could include innovative approaches to waste management, and capitalising on the unique environmental qualities that represent the marketing and strategic advantage of the Islands in the long term.

Island Care supports initiatives to create a sustainable economy and community. Many reports over many years have identified the barriers and challenges which inhibit investment, however, recommendations are not always implemented.

An outstanding item is the completion of the Christmas Island Strategic Assessment which seeks to allocate land to provide certainty to investors and assist the transition from mining to a sustainable

diverse economy. While there is limited transparency in the process, concern remains the Assessment may be used to extend the footprint of the mine or enable environmentally destructive development despite the goal for sustainability.

It has long been recognised that waste management needs improvement to create effective and sustainable approaches to reduce waste at the source and waste going to landfill.

Island Care has worked with the community, the Shire of Christmas Island, the Government of Western Australia through Keep Australia Beautiful, the Christmas Island District High School, business and the Christmas Island Tourism Association to address waste management issues.

Shared successes have included:

- An ongoing program of beach clean ups and audits involving many volunteers and organisations on Christmas Island. The Marine Debris project not only attracted volunteers from across Australia and internationally it left a legacy of cleaner beaches for wildlife and visitors to enjoy and data. Data from clean-ups is recorded in the Australian Marine Debris Initiative database managed by the Tangaroa Blue Foundation. This information is used to inform and influence government decisions such as the Australian Government's *National Plastics Plan 2021*. Data is also used to support global efforts to reduce marine debris. The Shire of Christmas Island now has carriage of the Christmas Island Marine Debris program.
- The Christmas Island District High School incorporates marine debris clean-ups and environmental considerations in its curriculum and supports recycling and anti-litter campaigns.
- The ongoing Bin the Butt campaign is successful in reducing cigarette butt litter at Flying Fish Cove through awareness, installation of butt bins and providing portable ashtrays for smokers.
- There are a number of initiatives in place to reduce plastic waste through collections which are sent to various mainland recyclers (eg oral care, express post bags) and more recently to Eco Crab Industries, a plastic recycler. The Shire of Christmas Island has facilitated this business by providing premises, which are shared with Island Care.
- Awareness campaigns and provision of cloth bags eased the transition away from single-use plastic bags. Some businesses are reducing reliance on other single-use plastics ahead of further bans being in place.

The Australian Government has a role in facilitating innovation and continual improvement, through creating policies and strategies which build capacity, develop new solutions and work with the local community, government and business to:

- stop useful items going to landfill,
- reduce the waste coming to the island such as polystyrene boxes used for cold and frozen freight and single-use plastics,
- compost and mulch green waste;
- recycle waste for other purposes eg plastic and glass;
- stop high value waste such as metals and e-waste going to landfill; and
- manage the increasing volume of marine debris collecting on the Island's shores. The proposal to create a Marine Protected Area around Christmas Island may support and fund some initiatives.

Identifying how the community can contribute to citizen science, and capitalise on jobs flowing from government investment, including in education and research.

The opportunity to further develop citizen science is welcomed. Investment in developing skills and programs is needed to supplement and enhance the local capacity.

Most of the citizen science on Christmas Island is undertaken by volunteers throughout the year eg. marine debris audits. Reliance on volunteers is not sustainable, however, they are integral for successful programs.

There are opportunities for citizen science to grow and provide jobs. This is evidenced by the success of Bird'n'Nature Week (a commercial tourism operation), the Marine Debris Project (supported by the Government through Keep Australia Beautiful), volunteers working at the Christmas Island National Park and field trips by Singapore schools. The field trips involved the Christmas Island High School and tourism operators but ceased when flights to/from Singapore became too unreliable.

Island Care is working with the Christmas Island National Park to develop local citizen science programs.

Socially responsible development that addresses the social impact of cost of living and geographic isolation; and supports community needs and aspirations.

Given the environment underpins the community and the economy, any socially responsible development must also be environmentally responsible.

Strengthening and diversifying the IOT economies; and identifying future infrastructure needs to support sustainable economic growth.

If economic growth is to be diversified and sustainable it must take into account the unique and fragile environment; build community capacity; utilise existing skills, experience and partnerships and meld these with new ideas, collaborative and innovative approaches. All too often the community is consulted and not engaged, or in some cases even recognised, which results in sub-optimal outcomes and further disengagement. Opportunities to build both soft and hard infrastructure has diminished over the years with grant programs being cut and a reliance on volunteers to fund raise and deliver outcomes.

Future infrastructure needs include:

- ongoing repair and maintenance of roads to enable access to beaches for clean-ups and general visitation;
- accelerate development of the Light Industrial Area to remove industrial and other waste from the prime commercial and tourism precinct of Settlement;
- investment in the National Park and its staff to provide services, such as citizen science programs;
- renewable energy including the transition of the government fleet to electric vehicles and installation of solar panels on government premises; and
- reuse, repair, repurpose aged and derelict buildings eg the CI Club, the CI Resort, the 'Virgins' Castle'.

Infrastructure builds must be supported by investment in training to ensure Christmas Islanders have the skills to support initiatives and create skilled local jobs to retain youth.

To reiterate, environmental considerations must be at the forefront of the recommendations from this enquiry in addressing the challenges and opportunities to build a sustainable future for the Indian Ocean Territories.

Thank you for the opportunity to raise issues with the committee, if you have any questions please contact [REDACTED].

Lin Gaff
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