

Report on the visit to the Indian Ocean Territories

Introduction

- 1.1 In October 2012, as part of its review of the annual report of the Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories undertook a visit to Australia's Indian Ocean Territories (IOTs) – Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands – with a view to holding meetings and discussions with members of the local communities about matters of mutual interest, and holding inspections of various facilities and locations on the islands. This was followed up with a meeting with officers of the Department in Canberra in November 2012, and a submission from the Department dealing with questions raised by the Committee.
- 1.2 During the visit, the Committee was able to hold discussions with a range of people within the community and discuss aspects raised in the Annual Report. The Committee was also given the chance to experience the natural beauty of both locations and experience something of the challenges and rewards facing those living and working in such remote communities.
- 1.3 The Committee wishes to thank all those who participated in facilitating the Committee's visit to the IOTs. The Committee is grateful for the efforts and hospitality of the people of the islands, especially the newly appointed Administrator of the Indian Ocean Territories, his Honour Mr Jon Stanhope, and his Executive Assistant, Ms Liyana Pereira.

The visit

- 1.4 The Committee travelled to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands on 21 October. On 22 October, the Committee travelled on the inter-island ferry to Home Island, the home of the Cocos Malay community, where it conducted public hearings and inspections. The hearings allowed a number of groups and individuals to raise matters of concern on record before the Committee (a list of organisations and individuals who gave evidence is available at Appendix D). Following the hearings, the Committee conducted a brief tour of Home Island, including visits to the Home Island Museum, Community Resource Centre and Oceania House. On 23 October, the Committee conducted inspections on West Island. The Committee visited the Community Resource Centre, the Cocos Islands District High School, the Health Centre and the Quarantine Station.
- 1.5 The Committee then travelled to Christmas Island where it conducted an inspection of the Christmas Island Immigration Reception and Processing Centre. On 24 October, the Committee witnessed the landing and initial processing of a boatload of asylum seekers. The Committee then held public hearings at the Christmas Island Court House (a list of organisations and individuals who gave evidence is available at Appendix D). In the afternoon, the Committee conducted inspections of the Christmas Island District High School, the Christmas Island Hospital and the Christmas Island National Park. The Committee returned to the mainland on the following day.

The report

- 1.6 The report addresses the evidence presented to the Committee on a range of issues of significance to the communities in the IOTs.
- 1.7 The remainder of Chapter 1 will set out findings from the inspections carried out on the islands.
- 1.8 Chapter 2 deals with questions of governance.
- 1.9 Chapter 3 deals with issues surrounding the economic development of the IOTs, including the future of the phosphate mine, tourism and the casino.
- 1.10 Chapter 4 examines service provision, including education, health care, telecommunications, roads and shipping.
- 1.11 Chapter 5 deals with local issues on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.
- 1.12 Chapter 6 deals with local issues on Christmas Island.

Inspections

- 1.13 The Committee was able to visit a wide range of facilities and localities on both Christmas and Cocos, and gained an insight into the work being carried on in a range of sectors, including education, health, community, immigration and the environment.

Education

- 1.14 The Committee had the privilege of visiting the Cocos Islands District High School and the Christmas Island District High School. The Committee was impressed by the facilities, especially the new trades training centre on Christmas Island, and staff at both schools and the clear commitment to educational excellence in these culturally diverse communities. The Committee noted the focus on managing learning in an environment in which many students come from non-English speaking and diverse backgrounds.
- 1.15 Christmas Island District High School has classes from Kindergarten to Year 12, allowing students to complete their school education on island rather than travelling to the mainland. The Cocos Islands District High School had classes from Kindergarten to Year 10, with primary school campuses on both Home Island and West Island and the high school campus on West Island. Most students travel to the mainland to complete year 12, but an increasing number are doing so through Christmas Island.
- 1.16 The Committee believes both schools are doing an excellent job for their communities and expects that the Government will ensure continued support and funding for both into the future.

Health care

- 1.17 The Committee also inspected the facilities of the Indian Ocean Territories Health Service – the hospital on Christmas Island and the health centre on West Island. The Committee held extensive tours of both facilities and held discussions with staff. The health centre and hospital are both well-equipped facilities with highly dedicated and professional staff. They are part of a hierarchy, with the health centre being an outpost of the hospital, providing a range of clinical services and a capacity for emergency response, with more serious cases being evacuated to Christmas Island. In turn, Christmas Island is able to provide a higher range of medical and surgical services with high level care being referred to the mainland. This system works very effectively, with a tried and tested system of emergency evacuation by air.
- 1.18 As part of its visit to the Immigration Reception and Processing Centre, the Committee was able to visit the medical facilities there and discuss

their operation with senior staff. The facility provides for the treatment of asylum seekers, with more serious or specialised cases able to be referred to Christmas Island Hospital or, if necessary, evacuated to the mainland. The Committee notes that the cost of treating asylum seekers at the hospital is recouped from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), as is the cost of emergency evacuation. Nonetheless, the Committee was made aware of concerns that patients from the Immigration Reception and Processing Centre were placing some strain upon the human and financial resources of the Christmas Island Hospital. The Committee believes that the hospital should be resourced to manage the additional burden placed upon it by the presence of large numbers of asylum seekers on Christmas Island, and that care should be taken to ensure that the provision of services to asylum seekers is not at the expense of services for residents.

Community

- 1.19 The Committee visited the community resource centres on both Home Island and West Island in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. These provide accommodation for the Group Training Centre, the Parks Office (Home Island) and the Tourism Association (West Island). The Community Resources Centre on West Island provides a range of services that would otherwise be unavailable to the community, including the local community newspaper, *The Atoll*, and access to an automatic teller machine. The importance of the community resources centres to the community on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands cannot be overstated.

Immigration

- 1.20 The Committee visited the immigration detention facilities on Christmas and Cocos, as well as witnessing the landing of asylum seekers newly arrived at Christmas Island. The visit gave the Committee first-hand experience of the magnitude of the task facing the Australian Government in dealing with the volume of arrivals, and the limitations of the available facilities.
- 1.21 The immigration facilities on Cocos are rudimentary – rooms and tents with cots in the old quarantine station – a makeshift solution to a new phase of the asylum seeker problem – direct arrivals from Sri Lanka. The Committee believes that a more permanent and better appointed facility, built to the required cyclone standards, is urgently needed.
- 1.22 At the time of the visit, conditions at the immigration facilities on Christmas Island were crowded, with families, single women and children

being housed in the old construction camp at Phosphate Hill rather than the main facility.

- 1.23 The Committee was impressed with the professionalism of all involved, from departmental officers and employees of Serco, to law enforcement officers and defence personnel.

Environment

- 1.24 The Committee had the privilege of visiting the Christmas Island National Park and discussing environmental issues with officers of the Parks Service. Christmas Island has truly unique flora and fauna and protecting this unique environment presents significant challenges. Evidence of the challenges, and the community's willingness to meet them, can be seen on road signs, fences and crossings designed to protect the Island's crabs from road traffic, and the road closures that occur during the annual migration of the Red Crabs.

- 1.25 The Committee was shown rehabilitation sites, where strips of rainforest that had been destroyed by phosphate mining were in the process of being regenerated. The Committee also saw sites where regeneration was likely to take hundreds of years due to the more or less complete removal of everything above bedrock. The Parks Service officers emphasised that the loss of canopy in sections of the island had implications for the breeding of some species of native birds. They were anxious that no further areas of rainforest be lost to mining whether inside or outside the National Park.

- 1.26 The main point brought home to the Committee, however, was the real and growing threat to the native fauna represented by invasive species, but particularly the Yellow Crazy Ant, a species which forms super colonies and preys upon anything within reach. Impacts on certain species had been catastrophic – particularly the Red Crabs, which are a key species in Christmas Island's ecology – and the ants may have been responsible for a number of extinctions.

- 1.27 The Committee is aware of the report of the Expert Working Group (EWG), led by Associate Professor Bob Beeton, on Christmas Island, which was formed in February 2009 in response to the possible extinction of the Christmas Island Pipistrelle, then expanded to examine all threats to Christmas Island's ecology. The EWG stated that 'the extremely high biodiversity values of Christmas Island are in a parlous state':

The cause is the intrinsic vulnerability of Christmas Island, as an oceanic island, to the direct impact on its biodiversity by a

succession of human-related changes to the landscape and by introductions of non-indigenous species.¹

- 1.28 In response to questions by the Committee on what the Australian Government was doing to combat the threat of invasive species on Christmas Island, the Department of Regional Australia noted that:

The whole-of-government response to the expert working group's final report has been coordinated by Parks Australia, in consultation with the Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism; the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; the Department of Immigration and Citizenship; and the Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport.

It includes a formal response to each of the expert working group's 32 wide-ranging recommendations. It analyses the implications of each recommendation and identifies lead responsibilities for actions to be undertaken. The response also emphasises the need for systematic approaches to address the island's ecological problems as well as a need for additional resources if effective recovery of the island's biodiversity is to be achieved.²

- 1.29 The Committee is of the view that as a matter of urgency the Australian Government should commit funds sufficient to carry out the recommendations of the EWG.

Recommendation 1

- 1.30 **The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, as a matter of urgency, commit sufficient funds to give effect to the recommendations of the Expert Working Group on Christmas Island, as set out in its final report.**

1 *Final Report of the Christmas Island Expert Working Group to the Minister for Environment Protection, Heritage and the Arts*, 2010, p. 9.

2 Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport, *Submission 6*, p. 17.