

Submission to the Review of Coastwatch

This submission has been lodged in response to call for submissions into the review of Coastwatch. Broadly, it will address how:

1. Improved detection and prevention of quarantine breaches;
2. Identification and response to suspected illegal entrant vessels (SIEVs) and illegal foreign fishing vessels (FFVs);
3. Prevention of unauthorised landings;
4. Deterrence of illicit drug importations;
5. Monitoring of pollution damage to the environment; and
6. Improved community response and interaction with Coastwatch strategies.

This submission will address these points from the perspective of the Torres Strait region, the Torres Strait Protected Zone and the international maritime boundary between Australia and Papua New Guinea. However, in other northern islands and communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia the proposed Torres Strait region model may be adopted to be applicable for these communities.

New technologies, operated by Torres Strait Islander communities, such as videoconferencing and high capacity Internet access will augment the policing, illegal immigration detection, customs and quarantine detection and defence force activities in the Torres Strait (Australia-Papua New Guinea international border zone).

The basis of this submission has come an earlier article written by this writer on the development of a unique Networking the Nation Remote Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund \$8 million funding application made by the Torres Strait Islanders Media Association Inc. to install and operate state-of-the-art telecommunication infrastructure at each inhabited Torres Strait Island to enhance the services and operations of the 27 Commonwealth and State Government agencies operating in this region and to better meet the education, employment, training, socio-economic, cultural and linguistic needs and to increase production, promotion and revenue generation of the local cultural industries of the region's inhabitants.

The Networking the Nation Secretariat advised the Island Co-ordinating Council that it was granted \$100,000 to further research and develop the initial \$3.3 million Island Watch RTIF application. A consultant will be employed to begin this work in the near future with the goal of lodging a further RTIF application in either the next funding rounds of September 2000, or March or September 2001. The commissioning of the consultant will allow all key agencies involved in the Coastwatch initiative to further discuss and identify potential benefits to key commonwealth and state agencies that could flow from the Island Watch initiative.

Torres Strait Islands Remote Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund

In February 1998 the Torres Strait Islanders Media Association Inc (TSIMA)ⁱ registered a unique and innovative telecommunications proposal under the Federal Government's Networking the Nation Remote Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (RTIF). The project, *Island Watch*, aims to meet both the local people's cultural, linguistic and telecommunications needs and to augment and enhance a wide range of Commonwealth, State and local Government and key statutory authorities' services within the Torres Strait Islands region.

TSIMA sought up to \$8 million from the RTIF to establish high capacity digital telecommunication links at and between each inhabited Torres Strait Islands and to the Australian mainland. TSIMA lodged an application in June 1998 with the RTIF Secretariat for funding to hold a consultative and planning meeting of island-based community organisations to further discuss the *Island Watch* proposal. If this application is successful, the meeting will be held at Thursday Island in October 1998.

The digital links will comprise a combination of Very Small Aperture Technology Satellite (VSAT) uplinking sites and terrestrial ISDN links greater than 128 kbps to effectively deliver adequate real-time videoconferencing, high capacity digital links for audio, visual and text transmissions and audio-visual recording and playback equipment and on-line access points.

The communication hubs for *Island Watch* will be either based at the existing Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Schemeⁱⁱ community-licensed and operated radio and television media outlets on each of the inhabited islands, or at a new telecommunications centre combining both BRACS' roles and the *Island Watch* functions.

The original February 1998 submission, lodged with the Networking the Nation initiative in March 1998, was successful and \$50,000 was granted to TSIMA Inc. to conduct a regional Community Consultative Forum (19-22 October, 1999) and a Torres Strait telecommunications survey (completed February 2000). The meeting was held at Thursday Island and it was well attended by key community leaders, organisations and representatives from the Torres Strait Regional Authority and the Island Coordinating Council, Qld Health and Qld Education.

A second stakeholder consultative meeting was held in Brisbane on 6 December, 1999. Invitations to this meeting were sent to key stakeholders, such as the Australian Defence Force, Australian Federal Police, Qld Police Service, Commonwealth Dept. of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Customs Service, Australian Fisheries Management Authority, AQUIS, Commonwealth and State departments of primary industries, CSIRO amongst others. However, representatives from the Australian Customs Service, Qld Education, Qld Dept. of Training and Industrial Relations and Legal Aid Qld were able to attend this meeting. It was

disappointing that representatives from key stakeholder agencies were not able to attend this meeting despite invitations being sent with which allowed up to five weeks notice.

The outcomes from both these meetings allowed a second Networking the Nation funding submission to be researched, written and lodged (March 8, 2000). Also, key agencies (Australian Customs Services, Australian Defence Force, Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, Australian Federal Police, Bureau of Meteorology, Education Qld, Qld Health, Legal Aid Qld, TAFE and the Island Coordinating Council) responded to the Torres Strait telecommunications survey conducted on behalf of TSIMA (Dec., 1999 – Feb., 2000). However, a large number of key agencies did not respond to the survey questionnaire conducted by a commercial telecommunications form.

The March 8, 2000 Networking the Nation funding submission was lodged by the Island Coordinating Council, in partnership with the Torres Strait Islanders' Media Association Inc. It sought \$3.3 million to pilot high capacity digital videoconferencing (and Internet Access Terminals) at four islands (Saibai, Murray, Yam and St Pauls {Moa}); and funding to establish an Internet Point of Presence at Thursday Island. The outcome of this funding submission will be announced at the end of May, 2000. Further funding submissions will be lodged before the expiration of the NTN initiative in 2002

Communications in the Torres Strait Islands

In the Torres Strait region the larger islands, Thursday Island, Prince of Wales and Horn Island, have limited telecommunications access. The other 13 islands have little or no telecommunications access and in some areas basic telephony is delivered through microwave transmission equipment. Most households on these islands have telephone access and facsimile access, but there is little spare telephony capacity for Internet services.

The goals of Island Watch

The *Island Watch* proposal has two broad goals. These are to:

- Supplement and augment existing and future Commonwealth and State Government services ranging from administration, customs, health, education, immigration, judicial, fisheries and primary industries, quarantine State and Federal surveillance and police services; and
- Maintain, enhance and promote Islander cultural industry production in arts, crafts, audio-visual information and multimedia products and inter-island administration and communications through high capacity digital videoconferencing, audio-visual communications and telecommunications equipment installed at the BRACS station located on each inhabited island or in a new BRACS-*Island Watch* telecommunications' centre on each island.

Augmenting Government Service Delivery and Effectiveness

There are 27 State and Commonwealth Government agencies delivering a range of services in the Torres Strait region. This large number of organisations ranges from customs, immigration, quarantine, State and Federal Police, foreign affairs and trade, fisheries management, primary industries, tertiary education providers, Defence, State and Federal health and medical organisations and key bodies such as the Torres Strait Regional Authority (*TSRA*) and the Island Co-ordinating Council (*ICC*).

Digital telecommunications linkages could greatly assist the 27 Commonwealth and State government agencies' inter-organisational and outreach communications and enhance the wide range of services these organisations deliver in the region. Furthermore, digital audio and visual telecommunications access will allow greater communication and co-ordination between the peak administrative bodies, the Torres Strait Regional Authority and the Island Co-ordinating Council, and their island-based offices.

For example, the enhancement of some of these organisations' services and operations would be in the following areas. These are:

Policing roles

In the area of sea or air craft monitoring if a vessel enters Australian territorial waters at the international sea border between Australian and Papua New Guinea near Saibai Island the quickest possible response from any authorities' vessels based at Thursday Island to investigate this movement is around 45 minutes. The duration of travel to cross the PNG-Australian territorial border to Saibai Island is around three minutes.

The *Island Watch* model would seek greater training and employment support from the relevant policing authorities, and other relevant agencies, to employ, either full-time or part-time, local people to utilise the digital *Island Watch* equipment to conduct daily surveillance for suspicious sea vessels in their area. If a suspicious vessel was sighted a local person employed, either part-time or full-time, to monitor such movements would record digital images of such vessels and its travel movements transmit these to a central telecommunications centre at TSIMA's offices on Thursday Island.

TSIMA would then broadcast, via its community-licensed AM radio station, an alert to all the Torres Strait island communities about such a vessel and also transmit the digital images of such a vessel to the relevant authorities at Thursday Island or on the Australian mainland and to the 14 island-based BRACS-*Island Watch* operators. BRACS would then broadcast radio and television alerts about such vessels via the respective local Islander-operated community radio and television outlets.

Also, videotaped footage of the vessels would be logged and used to identifying any suspicious vessels if they re-enter Australian territorial waters or, alternately, the digital images could be shared with the relevant Papuan New Guinean authorities to conduct joint Australian/PNG investigations. The regular monitoring of sea and air traffic would allow both Australian and Papuan New Guinean authorities to effectively and economically monitor, investigate and arrest any illegal drugs and firearms activities in this region.

Illegal Immigration

The State and Commonwealth Department of Immigration departments do not currently have the resources to place permanent officers on all inhabited islands to monitor and detect illegal immigration. There are a number of local people on a few inhabited islands that are employed part-time to monitor and administrate immigration activity in this region.

Under the *Island Watch* model, illegal immigration could also be monitored in the ways suggested above. Moreover, the local BRACS radio and television alerts would allow each of the inhabited Torres Strait Island communities to enact 'grass roots' surveillance processes in conjunction with the respective authority's, or authorities', detection and monitoring procedures.

Primary industries protection

Livestock and primary produce disease detection, quarantine and eradication procedures would be strengthened through the *Island Watch's* digital recording and transmission equipment and the real-time videoconferencing facility. Local people trained and employed through State, Federal and commercial bodies' funding contributions, either as part or full-time primary industries officers would utilise the *Island Watch* recording, transmission and videoconferencing and on-line equipment at each inhabited island to monitor any outbreaks of diseases harmful to livestock and plant produce. Some of the current serious insect epidemic and disease threats in the Torres Strait region are the European Bee, Spiraling White Fly and Fruit Fly infestations.

If local livestock (for example, chickens, pigs, and, possibly, aquaculture produce) or plants such as bananas, papaws and mangoes are suspected of bearing any dangerous diseases or insect infestations these images would be videotaped, via microscopy analysis, and transmitted as digital or in real-time videoconferencing images to the relevant State, and, if necessary, Federal, primary industries agencies for initial assessment, examination and remedial action.

The governmental response would depend on the analyses' results and, if warranted, preliminary quarantine procedures could be enacted until professional primary industries, and quarantine, officers can travel to the region. For example, the 1995 Papaya Fruit Fly infestation is believed to have traveled through the Torres Strait region before it was detected in Qld where it devastated the multi-

million-dollar banana industry. The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and Qld Department of Primary Industries' quarantine measures initiated to combat and control the epidemic cost \$62 millionⁱⁱⁱ.

Organisation administrative gains

The presence of a BRACS-*Island Watch* telecommunications outlet on each of the inhabited islands offers the potential for significantly enhanced communication, training, service delivery and co-ordination of many of the 27 Commonwealth or State Government agencies operating in this region. These agencies would hire or lease either videoconferencing time or on-line access to utilise the *Island Watch* telecommunications system to achieve increased administrative and operational co-ordination of their respective services.

Currently, there are a small number of island-based staff working for some of these agencies, such as the Australian Customs Service, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and the State Government Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The island-based staff communicate with their respective agencies via two-way radio transmissions and telephone, facsimile and email access via the existing Plain Old Telephone System network.

Island Watch's real-time videoconferencing could be used to enhance each agencies' regular operational training while reducing, or stabilising this ongoing cost. Training material that could be cost-effectively and directly delivered to staff based at each island which would reduce the current amount of training-related travel to a necessary minimum.

Island Watch's operational costs

It is envisaged that the Government, commercial and community hire and lease of the *Island Watch* infrastructure would adequately cover the administration, staff wages and repair and maintenance costs, and the satellite space lease and ISDN costs to run the system. Initial revenue projections indicate that the BRACS-*Island Watch* initiative would generate around \$2 million per year which is based on an average usage rate and fee cost from each of the 27 agencies of \$77,488 per annum^{iv}.

Other revenue collection could come from the commercial and peak representative bodies, such as the fisheries, primary livestock and plant produce groups, each organisation's annual contribution would be further decreased. This projected level of revenue does not include the potential earnings that could be derived from local island administration usage, island-based community demands or commercially usage. This source of potential revenue earnings could be at least around \$100,000, or more, per year that would decrease the operational funding commitment for all organisations that utilise the BRACS-*Island Watch* system.

The annual operational costs for the BRACS-*Island Watch* would be significantly less than the very high costs for remedial action by most agencies to combat and control plant and animal disease outbreaks, illegal immigration and the attendant threats to public health, illegal fishing or pollution of oceans and illegal drug and gun running. The operational costs of the full *Island Watch* model would be significantly less than the overall costs of remedial interventions aimed at protecting Australia's primary and plant produce industries.

Furthermore, if these benefits could be clearly measured, this would create a strong case for Commonwealth Government recognition of the initiative as one having *special status*. This could allow the Commonwealth Government, or key agencies, with the leverage to negotiate discounted, or subsidised, telecommunications linkage cost with the relevant telecommunications carrier or Internet Service Provider given the initiative's role in protecting Australian peoples, primary industries and the Australian nation and its economy.

For example, in 1995 the State Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service initially estimated it would cost \$64 million to control and eradicate the Papaya Fruit Fly infestation that devastated Qld's multi-million dollar banana industry in North Qld. The final cost for this quarantine control and eradication strategy was \$62 million. The overall annual cost of *Island Watch* would be significantly less than this figure.

Summary

The *Island Watch* proposal has the capability to significantly enhance the operational effectiveness of, and range and type of services, intra-agency co-ordination, information sharing and organisational operations of most, if not all, of the 27 Commonwealth and State bodies operating in the Torres Strait region.

The introduction of cost-effective and sustainable digital telecommunications linkages to the 16 inhabited Torres Strait islands proposed under the *Island Watch* model would provide significant benefits to the key island-based administrative organisations and the island communities.

The *Island Watch* proposal presents an achievable, economical and sustainable solution to enhance existing, and introduce new, State and Commonwealth Government services. It offers the chance to enhance, and introduce, a new range of Government, commercial and community education, employment and training programs, at the same time providing all Torres Strait Islands' inhabitants with a standard of telecommunications access equal to most parts of Australia.

Furthermore, it also creates a stronger sense of ownership and partnership between key Coastwatch agencies and Torres Strait communities. This can only be of benefit for all parties and could result in increased success in all Coastwatch activities in the region.

The initiative can deliver clear benefits in the areas of defence force activities, policing, customs, health, education, employment, fisheries management, quarantine procedures, training, primary livestock and plant industries protection.

The proposal also offers greater training, employment and revenue generation for community-directed sustainable local industry development and stronger cultural and linguistic communications and increased Islander cultural industry production, promotion and sales through the BRACS-*Islander Watch* initiative.

A timely opportunity for further consultations between Coastwatch stakeholders and the Island Watch initiative has been presented after the Networking the Nation Secretariat advised the Island Co-ordinating Council that it was granted \$100,000 to further research and develop the initial \$3.3 million Island Watch RTIF application. The consultant, or consultants, will have the opportunity to liaise with key Coastwatch stakeholders as part of an overall strategy to build the business case in support of the Island Watch proposal.

A further Island Watch submission will be lodged in the next funding rounds of September 2000, or March or September 2001. The commissioning of the consultant will allow all key agencies involved in the Coastwatch initiative to further discuss and identify potential benefits to key commonwealth and state agencies that could flow from the Island Watch initiative.

Bibliography

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Yours,

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ⁱ TSIMA was formed in 1985, with assistance from the ABC and the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Media Association. It is based on Thursday Island and is the only Indigenous media association servicing the Torres Strait Islands. Thursday Island, the administrative centre for the fourteen inhabited islands, is multicultural with Malay, Japanese and Chinese residents, but the majority of people are Torres Strait Islanders.

The association was awarded a community radio licence late in 1997 but for many years, it has been broadcasting via ABC (4TI) from Weipa in the south, to the Torres Strait Islands and into Papua New Guinea. TSIMA's broadcast area includes three Aboriginal communities and two Torres Strait Islander communities in northern Australia.

ⁱⁱ The Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme initiative arose from the Commonwealth Government new policy proposal in 1987-1988 to provide 82 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with access to receive, monitor and retransmit satellite-delivered commercial, public (ABC and SBS) radio and television signals and community radio signals. Also, to encourage language and cultural preservation, maintenance and promotion each BRACS station can be used by its respective community to produce their own radio and television programs for transmission within its licence area. The BRACS stations are located in remote and regional areas in WA, SA, NT, Qld and the Torres Strait and there are now around 103 BRACS stations.

The BRACS stations broadcast either satellite-delivered television (the ABC and SBS and QSTV) or radio (ABC, SBS, the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Media Association's community-licensed radio service, 4K1G, and TSIMA broadcasts for 15 hours per week on the ABC regional radio station on Thursday Island, 4TI.

ⁱⁱⁱ Personal interview with the General Manager, Mr Ken Priestly, Animal Plant Health, State Department of Primary Industries 10 June 1998. The quarantine costs were originally estimated to cost \$64 million.

^{iv} The projected revenue return of \$2 million per year was calculated by dividing this figure by 27 (the existing number of Commonwealth and State agencies that operate in this region) which gave an average cost for each agency of \$77,488 for lease and usage of the *BRACS-Island Watch* infrastructure.