



# DIRE STRAITS

**THE HIGH COST OF LIVING AND PROBLEMS ACCESSING FRESH FOOD ARE AFFECTING HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES. STORY: ANDREW DAWSON AND MATHEW KERWIN**

**Y**oung mother Jaina Morris wants to feed her children healthy food, but she's finding it difficult to afford fresh fruit and vegetables. Some weeks she's lucky if she can even get fresh produce at her local store.

Jaina Morris lives on Masig (Yorke) Island in the Torres Strait. The idyllic setting masks the struggle she and other residents face accessing good quality food at a reasonable price.

Much of her income goes towards groceries, with an average shop costing three to four times the price of similar goods on the mainland.

"I'm buying two shopping bags of fruit and vegies and it costs me \$50 or \$60 and I haven't even bought my full household's food," she says.

"If I did do a full shop it would cost me around \$280, whereas down south [in Cairns] I can get a full trolley and it's only \$70."

Ms Morris says she would like to buy healthy cereal for her family, but can't afford to spend \$25 on just two boxes of it.

During a recent visit to the Torres Strait, a group of federal MPs saw for themselves the high price of food in these remote communities: a kilo block of supermarket brand cheese was priced at \$16 – three times more expensive than in most Australian cities. The visit was part of an investigation by the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee into the operation of remote community stores.



IDYLLIC SETTING: *Masig Island  
in the Torres Strait*

*Photos: Andrew Dawson*

“It’s pretty hard to promote healthy eating when by the time the barge gets here with the fresh food most of it’s spoilt, squished or rotten.”

Stretching from the tip of Cape York to Papua New Guinea, the Torres Strait Islands are spread across 48,000 square kilometres. More than 6,000 people live in the region, with Thursday Island serving as the main administration and business hub. Some of the smaller islands, such as Masig Island and Mer (Murray) Island, have less than 500 people living on them.

Food and supplies are shipped from Cairns once a week via Thursday and Horn Islands, where they are transferred to barges for the onward journey to the other islands. The community stores on these islands are run either by local families, private companies or a Queensland statutory body.

Complaints about the quality and price of the food were raised with the parliamentary committee time and again during their visit. On Thursday Island, MPs were told how



CONCERNED MOTHERS: *Jaina Morris and Nazareth Gamia want healthier food for their children.*

some locals describe their shopping experience as going to “see what is available on the compost heap”.

“I have photographs of salami that has had its date crossed out and then been put on sale,” says Thursday Island resident Samantha Devine. “I have the same with sausages that have had their use-by date crossed out and had a new date written in. I also have a photograph of bread that was incredibly mouldy and was still for sale and on the shelves.”

On Masig Island, mother of three Nazareth Gamia says it is hard to promote healthy eating when “by the time the barge gets here with the fresh food most of it’s spoilt, squished or rotten”.

The journey from Cairns by sea takes several days. It then takes extra days for the food to be distributed to stores around the islands.



RETAIL CHALLENGE: Stores in remote communities can only carry so much stock.

“Our stores are fairly small and to put stock in there that isn’t going to sell, it just doesn’t work.”

According to Rita Kebisu, health project officer at the Badu Island school, the shipping service leaves port with its supply of fresh fruit and vegetables on a Tuesday or Wednesday but the produce doesn’t arrive on Badu Island until the following Monday.

“By the time it gets to the shelf it’s already lost most of its shelf life,” she says. “And if you’re not in first to get it, you miss out and you end up with the frozen vegetables.”

Rob Mitchell, manager of Badu Island’s privately-run Island & Cape store, says staples such as potatoes and onions are available at the store throughout the week. But more perishable items, such as lettuce and other leafy produce, need to be sold within three to four days of their delivery to the island.

He also says freight costs are the main reason islanders pay so much more for their groceries than people on the mainland.

According to the Chair of the Torres Strait Regional Authority Toshie Kris, they have tried to negotiate with the government to get subsidies for food, freight and fuel to make it more affordable for people living throughout the region.

The shipping service to the islands is operated by Sea Swift. It is the only company currently providing a freight



service to the region and does so without any subsidies, according to chief executive Fred White.

Other operators have tried to compete at a discounted rate, but could not sustain the service because their rates did not allow for ongoing vessel maintenance. “Those operators have essentially disappeared out of the market,” he says.

The IBIS chain of stores, run by a Queensland government statutory board, is the dominant retailer in the Torres Strait. According to chief executive Richard Bowler, there are certain realities that need to be recognised in operating a retail business in remote communities.

He says stores on the more populous islands, such as Thursday Island, are able to supply a good range of products. This was seen by MPs when they inspected IBIS’s largest store, where shelves were well-stocked with produce.

But on the smaller islands, some with populations of only 100, there is only so much stock a store can carry. “Our stores are fairly small and to put stock in there that isn’t going to sell, it just doesn’t work,” Mr Bowler says.



The other reality is that the high price of fresh food is driving people towards cheaper and less healthy options.

Almost 40 per cent of Torres Strait Islander households earn less than \$315 gross weekly income. Faced with large weekly food bills, many have opted for less expensive but less healthy alternatives.

Cheaper processed foods and soft drinks are contributing to the poor health of Torres Strait Islanders, says the Mayor of Torres Shire Council, Pedro Stephen. Over time, the lack of affordable fresh fruit and vegetables has made people choose the “cheaper high sugar options over the healthy stuff”.

“It’s about choice, and up here the affordable one is the one with the high sugar content, and the one that is good for your body is too expensive,” he says.

More than 30 per cent of Torres Strait Islanders are battling Type 2 diabetes which can lead to renal and heart failure, vascular disease, eyesight problems and liver damage. Torres Strait Islanders have the highest rate of diabetes in Australia, according to Torres Strait Regional Council representative for Badu Island Wayne Guivarra.

“We’ve got to change our lifestyles and our eating habits to ensure that our people live healthier and live longer,” he says.

Despite the obstacles, some people are trying to shift to healthier eating. On Badu Island, the school tuckshop has introduced more vegetables and is trying to make healthy eating more appealing to children by presenting fresh food in a more interesting way.

IBIS has developed a rating system in its stores. Healthier food options are identified with a star on the label. It has also hired a nutritionist to advise the community about healthier eating options.

Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee Richard Marles (Member for Corio, Vic) says it was important for the committee to visit the Torres Strait to

**HEALTHIER OPTIONS:** *The school tuckshop on Badu Island is trying to make healthier eating more appealing to children.*

fully understand the many challenges facing the islanders and the people running the stores.

“As we’ve been going along we’ve been noting down quite a number of good ideas which have been raised by the community which might help the situation. Clearly governance is a big issue here – there are private stores, there are community-owned stores, and then in IBIS we have a state-run corporate entity. I think that has an impact on the quality of the service that’s provided,” he says.

Local federal MP and committee member Jim Turnour (Member for Leichhardt, Qld) says some Torres Strait Islanders have started to order food from the mainland direct and are having it delivered as part of the once-a-week shipping service.

“People who get their food direct seem to be getting a better quality and a better service than buying from the community store,” he says. But the cost of this can be significant, with the delivery from Cairns costing up to \$53 for one box of groceries.

Masig Island resident Nazareth Gamia just hopes the committee can “do something about reducing prices and getting healthy food”. •

For more information on the inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, visit [www.aph.gov.au/atsia](http://www.aph.gov.au/atsia) or email [atsia.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:atsia.reps@aph.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 4559. To view a video news item on the visit to the Torres Strait by the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee visit: [www.aph.gov.au/ath](http://www.aph.gov.au/ath)