



Australian Government

TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY



SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION (RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS)

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

**Inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Communities**

15 June 2009



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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs
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15 June 2009

Re: Response to Questions from the Committee regarding the *Inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities*

Dear Secretary

The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) is happy to provide the Standing Committee on Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs with a supplementary submission in response to the five questions posed by the Committee in the email sent by the Inquiry Secretary on the 15th May 2009, these being:

1. How is the implementation of the Caring for Country/ dugong and turtle management plans proceeding?
2. Have communities indicated to the TSRA their concern that the management plans will restrict their ability to source protein enriched foods?
3. Could you provide more information on progress with the Sustainable Horticultural Practices program and working with hydroponics on the islands?
4. Besides quarantine zones, what are other impediments to the supply of fresh produce between the islands?

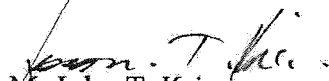
5. Can you offer suggestions about how IBIS could improve its consultations with Torres Strait communities?

The responses to Questions 1 - 4 have been prepared by the TSRA's Land and Sea Management Unit (LSMU), which is responsible for implementation of TSRA's Environmental Management Program.

The response to Question 5 is the product of consultation with various senior staff within TSRA.

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Yours sincerely



Mr John T. Kris

Chairperson

Torres Strait Regional Authority

1. How is the implementation of the *Caring for our Country* / Dugong & Turtle Management Plans proceeding?

The Torres Strait, represented by the TSRA (specifically, its Land and Sea Management Unit, LSMU), was one of five (5) regions across northern Australia to participate in the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) funded Dugong and Marine Turtle Management Project, coordinated through the North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA), which commenced in 2004. The four key activity areas under the project in the Torres Strait included: development of community-based management plans, monitoring programs, negotiation of catch-sharing arrangements, and community education and awareness-raising.

Eight (8) pilot communities in the Torres Strait region were initially supported to take part in the process of moving towards sustainable community-based management approaches under the NHT funded project: Badu, Mabuiag, Boigu, Mer, Erub, Iama, St. Pauls community on Moa, and Horn Islands. Project officers were appointed on all participating islands to assist in facilitating the project's implementation locally.

Plans have now been developed for all eight (8) pilot communities. These community-based plans integrate a range of cultural hunting protocols and traditional knowledge with contemporary fisheries management strategies. Some proposed management arrangements include seasonal closures, gear restrictions, closed areas, effort reduction, limits on take, compulsory sharing and permit systems. The plans also propose ways in which research and development priorities, education and training needs can be addressed; as well as outlining enforcement and compliance processes. These plans have been endorsed by Traditional Owners and have in-principle support from State and Commonwealth governments.

Funds allocated under the *Caring for our Country* program over 2008-09 will enable an additional ten (10) community management plans to be developed by the end of 2009. Further funding under the *Caring for our Country* program is also being sought under the 2009-2010 allocation to the Torres Strait region, including for the implementation of management plans and further monitoring and bilateral engagement activities.

Recently, \$12 million dollars worth of funds over four years were secured under the 'Working on Country' element of the *Caring for our Country* program for the employment of Indigenous rangers on Torres Strait Islands to carry out cultural and natural resource management activities, including the implementation of Dugong and Turtle Management Plans.

TSRA continues to work closely with other government agencies and research organisations to deliver this project, including the Protected Zone Joint Authority (PZJA) partners, namely the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) and Queensland Department of Primary Industries & Fisheries (DPI&F), as well as the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry (DAFF), Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage & the Arts (DEWHA), Queensland Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and James Cook University (JCU).

At the community level, the implementation of the plans varies significantly, depending on cultural issues, capacity constraints and overall community support and engagement in the project, amongst other things. On Boigu Island, for example, the Project Officer has a strong rapport with the community and is able to monitor approximately 75% of all catches. Awareness-raising efforts have also been successful.

In the Kaiwalagal (Inner Island) region, the challenges of managing a larger, and more diverse, population of both Traditional Owners and Islanders from other islands has made it difficult to secure agreement on certain issues. On Mabuiag Island, a ranger unit has been established with funding under the 'Working on Country' initiative, and the rangers are beginning to implement certain components of the plan in relation to catch monitoring, monitoring of turtles and dugongs in foraging areas, seagrass monitoring, as well as school and community-awareness raising.

On Iama Island, the Project Officer is in the final stages of completing nesting surveys of Sassie and other neighbouring islands, and has carried out extensive community consultation. On Mer Island, significant progress has been made in terms of monitoring seagrasses, marine debris and ghost nets, and community consultations. The Project Officer has provided significant support to joint-research on nesting and foraging turtles, as well as monitoring sand temperatures as part of a climate change project.

2. Have communities indicated to TSRA their concern that the management plans will restrict their ability to source protein enriched foods?

At various times throughout the community-based planning and consultation process, concerns have been raised on the part of communities about the potential restrictions on the take of turtles and dugongs by community members. However, these concerns have not overridden the significant commitment expressed by all Torres Strait Islander communities to the sustainable, community-based management of the species, and the recognition of the overall benefits these plans have in terms of preservation of

culture, Torres Strait Islander identity, and the protection of dugongs and turtles for the future.

3. Could you provide more information on progress with the Sustainable Horticultural Practices program and working with hydroponics on the islands?

The project takes a multifaceted approach to promoting and implementing long-term horticultural practices within the Torres Strait. It is being achieved through financial, material and technical support for:

1. Pilot community horticulture projects
2. A Horticulture in Schools Initiative, and
3. Formulation of guidelines for the development and management of horticulture within the Torres Strait.

1. Pilot Community Horticulture Projects

Four pilot horticultural projects have been targeted for support through this component of the program. These projects differ in their style and method of implementation, and, as such, they present some of the potential models for achieving sustainable horticulture within the Torres Strait. The 4 pilot areas are:

Horn Island Harmony Garden

This community garden is situated on the grounds of Horn Island School and is a weekend volunteer-based group that meets to tend the garden and harvest the resulting fruit and vegetables. They wish to expand the garden area and improve the associated infrastructure so that they can provide support to the Horn Island School. This will involve teaching the children about gardening, plant propagation and food preparation.

The leaders of the garden are currently seeking quotes for a shed and shade house. They have also revitalised the existing children's garden and are teaching garden activities with the junior classes once a week.

Hammond Island Nursery

The Hammond Nursery is a CDEP based workforce project that has a long history of plant propagation and bush regeneration. They have a small orchard and have previously tried to establish larger orchards and root crop gardens. Unfortunately these efforts have been thwarted by feral animals and fire. This project will provide for infrastructure

upgrades and re-development of the garden areas, ensuring that the risk of damage is minimised and the community can benefit from the production of fresh fruit and vegetables.

One of the shade houses is in the process of having drainage improved, which should be finished by the end of June. In addition, Hammond Island Nursery Team and LSMU are planning the second phase of the project, which will focus on the development of the greater nursery area for traditional mound gardening.

LSMU is also aware that the Torres Strait Island Regional Council (TSIRC) is seeking funding for a hydroponics facility at Hammond Island.

Masig Island Community Garden

The Masig Community wishes to further develop its ability to produce fresh fruit and vegetables. Working from the base of the successful CDEP-supported "Mothers Well Nursery", the community is looking to establish a family allotment orchard and root crop garden. This orchard and garden will be irrigated using recycled water and be tended by community members. "Mothers Well Nursery" will support this garden by producing leaf vegetables and fruit through raised garden beds and an auto-pot system.

The Island Manager and LSMU have been in discussions with the Masig Prescribed Body Corporate to locate a site for the community garden on the island.

St Pauls Community Garden

The St. Pauls Community wishes to re-establish its family allotment garden. This is a similar model to the *Masig Island Community Garden* but differs in that groundwater will be utilised and families will grow leaf and other vegetables within their allotment. TSIRC is also an active participant in the project and will run a small table hydroponics and auto-pot system for supplementary greens and more sensitive plants.

TSIRC and LSMU are currently purchasing equipment to secure water at the site from groundwater reserves. This will involve the laying of roughly 1 km of poly pipe and the establishment of tanks for storage. The water infrastructure should be established by late July 2009.

Hydroponic equipment is currently being sourced and LSMU expect that a small hydroponics system will be established and operating by September 2009.

Mer and Erub Islands

These communities will receive material and technical support through the project, with the aim of ensuring that existing horticulture projects on these islands do not stagnate. These communities are not pilot projects within this project but benefits such as training and orchard plants may be extended to the community.

2. Horticulture in Schools Initiative

In order to ensure long-term sustainable horticultural outcomes in the Torres Strait, LSMU have partnered with Tagai State College (Tagai) to deliver a curriculum based horticulture program. This program will provide children with the ability and knowledge to grow their own healthy food alternatives and is part of a larger personal hygiene and health agenda. It is hoped that through educating the children, we will reach the greater community and slowly build on existing capacity within the community.

The *Landcare Sustainable Practices Grant* will fund a part time officer (0.5 FTE) to allow development and operation of the initiative within Tagai. In particular it will provide a salary supplement to Tagai tutors to operate across all island primary schools. These tutors are critical to the success of the project as they will be:

- the technical support for teachers providing learning materials and assisting in gardening activities
- the link with the community encouraging participation where appropriate
- a target for any LSMU technical training
- the link to LSMU technical support for each school so that assistance or material can be provided promptly, and
- the garden coordinator ensuring maintenance activities occur in the school breaks and holidays.

The tutors will also be supported by additional funding from LSMUs *Caring for Our Country* core funding. Tagai will provide a coordinator for one year to set up the project and provide ongoing administration support.

Some financial or material support may be needed to establish the school gardens in a timely manner. Where appropriate and possible, LSMU, through the *Landcare Sustainable Practices Grant*, will meet these costs.

Currently Tagai have appointed a coordinator to the project and TSRA will contribute greater funding from their *Caring for Country* core funding. Contracts and Memoranda of Understanding between LSMU and Tagai should be exchanged by the end of June 2009.

3. Horticulture Guidelines for the Torres Strait

A best practice resource entitled the *Horticulture Guidelines for the Torres Strait* will be developed. This will ensure that nursery teams, Councils, communities, schools and anyone interested can access information and training materials on appropriate horticulture development. This document may provide information and training materials on:

- garden design and limiting factors
- garden systems and design
- plant nutrient issues
- plant propagation (raising seedlings, cuttings, marcoting, grafting, etc)
- soil, water and air
- fruit and vegetable species appropriate to the Torres Strait
- pest and disease management
- revegetation techniques, and
- green waste recycling (worms, compost and mulch).

The detail and level of information will be developed on a needs basis as prioritised by training requested from the community. LSMU is going to contract a compiler to assist in sourcing all relevant information and providing it within a structured context. The contract should be signed by mid June 2009.

4. Hydroponics

There has been much consideration given to developing hydroponic systems within the Torres Strait. Successful systems such as at the Badu Island Nursery were developed as a specific project by Badu Island Council and had a full time team of staff assigned to their operation.

There remains a considerable risk associated with developing long-term hydroponics in the Torres Strait. Many leaders within the community see hydroponics as a part of the solution to ensure fresh fruit and vegetable supply for their communities and have pushed for its development on their own islands. Hydroponics needs designated trained staff to regularly tend the plants and maintain watering systems.

St. Pauls is one community where individuals within the community have made a commitment to a hydroponic project and thus LSMU is supporting the development of hydroponics within that community.

4. Besides quarantine zones, what other impediments are there to the supply of fresh produce between the islands?

Quarantine zoning is only an issue for the southward movement of organic material through the designated zones.

Biosecurity Queensland (Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation) has some controls on banana, sugar cane and pig movement, due to the potential to spread disease. These restrictions are often enforced by Quarantine Officers (Australian Quarantine Inspection Service, AQIS) on islands, and this creates some confusion within the community.

The other significant impediment to transport between islands is the cost of freight and reliance on Sea Swift to move viable amounts of produce. Sea Swift's visitation schedule impacts on the freshness and availability of perishable food on the islands. Small freezer boats visiting more than once a week could potentially provide an alternative in many instances.

Despite these transport and movement issues the overriding issues remain:

- insufficient and irregular supply of fresh produce
- insufficient commitment from communities to develop larger sustainable farming systems
- land availability constraints
- lack of consistent and high quality water supply in the outer islands
- significant soil and climatic limitations
- intensive pest and pathogen management, and
- high cost of production.

5. Can you offer suggestions about how IBIS could improve its consultations with Torres Strait communities?

In TSRA's previous submission we mentioned our Healthy Homes Program, one of seven new/revised programs to commence 1 July 2009. This has now been renamed Healthy Communities Program to encompass both health and housing initiatives. While the Program remains in the development phase, it is proposed that one activity be to engage with food suppliers/retailers to explore improved healthy food options. In doing so, TSRA would be acting

in the interest of the community and could possibly facilitate consultations between IBIS and island communities on the subject of healthy food and quality of fresh food. This would be undertaken in partnership with relevant health authorities.

Another new program for TSRA is titled Governance and Leadership, which will include a project focused on achieving integrated service delivery within the Torres Strait Region. It is envisaged that an agreement will be signed by Australian, Queensland and Local government to work together in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area to achieve integrated service delivery and to commit to performance monitoring. Mechanisms to achieve this will likely be an Integrated Service Delivery Steering Committee which will meet regularly, and working groups dealing with particular areas, including health. Some such working groups already exist, though they may require reform, others will need to be formed, to deliver on the agreement.

TSRA sees its Healthy Communities Program Manager being part of any health working group (there is already a Torres Strait Health Partnership Agreement between Commonwealth and Queensland governments and a Health Partnership Forum has been held irregularly)¹ which could seek to actively engage with IBIS and other retailers.

It is not clear to the TSRA, but given what it knows of IBIS' mandate and Constitution, we wonder if the Queensland government could determine that IBIS report back and take strategic direction from the Integrated Service Delivery Steering Committee or its health working group (the Health Partnership Forum or other), or at least participate in the health working group/Partnership. This may be a vehicle for IBIS to be more responsive to the needs and interests of the Torres Strait communities. It could provide a mechanism to facilitate and improve consultation and communication flows between IBIS and communities.

TSRA must emphasise that the above scenarios are only fledgling ideas at this point in time, and if they were to be progressed, may take some time.

Having a representative from each of the three regional Councils on the IBIS Board may be a positive move.

Having a rigorous customer feedback and complaints system at IBIS is necessary. As Member for Leichhardt Jim Turnour MP noted during the hearings on Thursday Island (p.36 of the transcript), customers can be deterred from complaining if they are told to ring the Chief Executive Officer.

¹ Participants include representatives from TSRA, Queensland Department of Health, Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, Queensland Ambulance Service, the three regional Councils, and the Health Community Council - a community organisation in the Torres Shire set up to monitor Queensland government health service delivery.

If not already in place, customer complaints, comments and suggestions and the response from IBIS staff and management should be reported to the IBIS Board.

More rigorous training for all IBIS front line staff (and managers) in customer service delivery, and customer liaison/community relations appears necessary.

TSRA wonders whether the location of the CEO and senior IBIS management in Cairns - versus on-location in the Torres Strait (on Thursday Island) - is impacting negatively on relations with the island communities, as well as the quality of service and produce. Communication, consultation, responsiveness and understanding of concerns and complaint resolution may be improved with IBIS head office being relocated to the Torres Strait.

TSRA also wishes to pick up on Jim Turnour's idea about island community reference groups (p.37 of the Thursday Island transcript). A Community Health Management Committee (CHMC) has been established on each island by the Torres Strait Health Partnership. The role of the CHMC is to provide information on health issues as well as develop healthy lifestyle initiatives in consultation with the local Health clinic and community.

Such Committees could provide the mechanism for greater IBIS and community communication. They may require encouragement and support to become more active and effective.

Additional comments

TSRA would like to recommend to the Committee that it consider all submissions to the Inquiry regarding the Torres Strait from the perspective of health - that is, the core issue is the poor health outcomes of Torres Strait Islanders and the incidence of obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases.

Future access to healthy foods options in the Torres Strait needs to be aligned with the *Torres and Northern Peninsula Area Regional Investment Strategy 2007* and *Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area Regional Health Plan* (being finalised, to be endorsed by the Torres Strait Health Partnership). Both documents are geared to address obesity, chronic disease and diabetes, and access to fresh and healthy food options through IBIS.

Access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables is only one part of the strategy to address chronic disease. IBIS plays an important role, however it is only one element and cannot be seen as the 'easy' answer to addressing obesity, chronic disease and diabetes within our society. The implementation of the *Regional Investment Strategy* and *Health Plan* require a whole-of-government,

industry and whole-of-community approach that includes IBIS, the other fruit and vegetable retail stores and transport / freight providers, while also encompassing job and labour market reform across the Torres Strait and community based initiatives.

There are three key strategies required:

- (1) Implement a whole-of-government, industry and whole-of-community approach to address obesity, chronic disease and diabetes through strategic prioritisation of achieving provision of affordable fresh and healthy food options at community level, and a change in dietary and smoking habits
- (2) Develop and implement long-term (5 - 10 years) purchasing subsidies for fruit and vegetable wholesalers in Cairns and southern markets for Torres Strait retailers, and freight subsidies to transport companies to deliver the products to remote island and Northern Peninsula Area stores, and
- (3) Implement major long-term reform in the job and labour market across the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area communities in order to move the region away from a welfare- based economy and increase individual and family incomes.

