

Torres Strait Islands

Overview:

Torres Strait Islands form an archipelago within the Australian state of Queensland, located north of Cape York Peninsula, Australia, stretching across 140 km of the South Pacific Ocean at the narrowest point between Australia and Papua New Guinea. The territory is made up of over 270 islands; it is a complex, shallow region with extensive cays, shoals, sandbanks, coral reefs and inactive volcanic islands scattered through the region.

Territory:

Land Area 2.6%; Tidal Flats Area 6.2%; Open Seas 91.2%. The islands vary in origin and topography: the western islands are hilly and steep vestiges of a mountain range, the central islands are mostly coral cays and the eastern ones are of volcanic origin.

Location:

There are nineteen inhabited islands as well as two communities on the tip of Cape York Peninsula in the Torres Strait region. Some islands north of the seabed jurisdiction line are still part of Australia and have a 3 mile territorial limit. At low tide you can almost walk to Papua New Guinea as it is only about three kilometers from the northernmost island of Saibai. In fact, deer from Papua New Guinea swim across to Saibai each wet season, swimming back to Papua New Guinea as the surface water dries up.

Latitude and Longitude:

Between 9 and 11 degrees South; between 142 and 144 degrees West.

Time Zone:

GMT +10

Total Land Area:

910

EEZ:

35000

Climate:

There is a low incidence rate of cyclones.

Natural Resources:

Torres Strait has a rich heritage of marine resources; the fisheries have been the source of subsistence income for at least 800 years.

ECONOMY:

Total GDP:

Per Capita GDP:

% of GDP per Sector:		
Primary	Secondary	Tertiary

% of Population Employed by Sector		
Primary	Secondary	Tertiary

External Aid/Remittances:

Torres Strait is highly dependent on remittances from the Commonwealth Government of Australia.

Growth:

The economy is not highly developed, there is no significant manufacturing base, mining or agricultural operations, and tourism is not an important source of income. Most aboriginals and Torres Strait islanders are employed by the community development employment program.

Labour Force:	
2002	3,437

Unemployment	
Year:	Unemployment Rate (% of pop.)
1996	23%
2001	20%

Industry:

Labor Force: Estimates of gross household income at \$387 per week in 2002; this is 59% of the income reported by others in the area. Some equivalency factors are used to adjust the information to the fact that Indigenous persons tend to have larger households and less income available per capita. Income levels tend to decline with increased geographic remoteness; in major cities and regional area of Australia, indigenous persons had an income of 70% of the norm; for persons in remote areas this declines to 60%; and in the very remote regions of Torres Strait, it declines to 40% of the norm. This relative income disparity between indigenous and non-indigenous persons increased over the latest five-year reporting period to 2002. Labor force participation by indigenous person is 54%, participation by non-indigenous is much higher at 73%. Labor force participation declines with

remoteness, with a 57% participation rate in the cities, compared with 46% in very remote areas. In 2002 the makeup of the Torres Straits labor force was as follows; Managers 136; Professionals 790; Trades people 284; Service Workers 818; Transportation 222; Laborers 1053; Total Labor Force 3437. When subsistence employment by the Community Development Employment Program is excluded, the unemployment rate in Torres Strait is 47%. There is anecdotal evidence of suppressed unemployment in the Community Development Program. Unemployment rates were highest for those aged 15 to 24, and are generally speaking, double the rates for equivalent Australians.

Niche Industry:

Tourism is considered a niche and growing industry on the island.

Tourism:

There is a very small tourism industry in the area: in 1996 there were 99 guest rooms available for the tourist trade. The beauty of the region is unparalleled, yet the surrounding sea is unsafe for swimming because of crocodiles and sharks. Access is limited, as the nearest airports are in Cairns, 850 kilometers from Thursday Island, and Horn Island, a smaller airport on the top of Cape York.

Imports and Exports:	
Traditional exports evolved since the early 1800's with the arrival of the first non-Indigenous and the export of pearls and beche de mer. There was \$300,000 of exports from Port Kennedy on Thursday Island in 2002.	
Tot. Value of Imports	0.00 (2006)
From Eu:	
Import Partners (EU:)	
Partners Outside EU:	
Import Partners:	Australia and surrounding states.
Tot. Value of Exports	(2006)
To Eu:	
Export Partners:	
Partners Outside EU::	
Export Partners:	Australia and surrounding states
Main Imports:	A variety of manufactured goods.
Main Exports:	Sugar and tropical fruit, and other natural resources

TRANSPORTATION/ACCESS

External:

Number of Airports: 2

The area is served from Cairns Airport and Horn Island Airport in North Queensland. From Horn Island, transportation is by boat into the Torres Straits.

Number of Main Ports: 5

There is one main port of export and import at Port Kennedy on Thursday Island; there was \$300,000 of exports from the port in 2002. There are other ports in Cairns Port, Weipa, and Innisfail in Queensland.

Internal:

Air

Road:

Sea:

Personal transportation in small powered watercraft is common, replacing the more traditional canoe.

Other Forms of Transportation:

Only 32 % of Torres Strait Islanders have access to a vehicle; the main source of transportation is by boat around and between the islands and the mainland. There are also motorbikes, quad bikes, and cars.

Economic Zones:

Energy Policy:

Year	Total Energy Production (Mwh)	Type			Total Energy Consumption (Mwh)	Sector				
		Thermic (Mwh)	Geothermic (Mwh)	Other (Mwh)		Domestic (Mwh)	Commercial (Mwh)	Public Service (Mwh)	Industry (Mwh)	Public Lighting (Mwh)

Official Currency:
Australian dollar

Banking and Insurance:

Number of Banks and Credit Unions: 1
Number of Agricultural Credit Unions:
Number of Insurance Companies:

The National Australia Bank is the only bank on the ground to provide financial services for Torres Strait Islanders.

Financial Services:

Torres Strait is a remote area that generally has land pressures and disputes, limited access to finance (which is further affected by the land tenure system), limited core skills and lack of professional services. When combined, these limitations have a serious effect on economic development opportunities for individuals, groups and communities in the region. For many business ventures in the Torres Strait, a key consideration to their survival is the size of the local market, access to financial and professional support in establishing their enterprise, and overcoming the types of difficulties that the region's geography presents. At a more fundamental level, the small population of island communities and low per capita income represent major obstacles for any attempts to develop a local economy.

Communications/E-Commerce:

Access to the internet is becoming available, 12% of Torres Strait Islanders have access. Television is also commonly available.

Public Ownership:

The Torres Strait Regional Authority owns a large portion of the local housing stock. The High Court, in a majority decision of 6 Judges with 1 dissenting, found on 3 June 1992: Murray Island, Mer, in Torres Strait: The Meriam people are entitled to possess, occupy, use and enjoy the Murray Islands (with the exception of certain areas that had been leased.) The State of Queensland has the power to extinguish the Meriam people's title, as long as it exercises that power validly and in a manner consistent with Commonwealth laws.

Land Use:

Torres Strait Islander people now hold and deal in substantial areas of land, and in the main these lands are held through some form of communal title. Various administrative mechanisms exist under the statutes that established bodies to manage the lands and be accountable to the community of owners. However, the recognition by common law of native title rights has highlighted the difficulties of these arrangements. Indigenous communities own land under customary law as self-regulating communities with distinct rights, but cannot under current Australian statutes organize their political structures in relation to this land. However, there are substantial difficulties even in identifying the "community" who might self-organize political structures in relation to land ownership. In Torres Straits, the issue of public land ownership is governed by the Land Act (Aboriginal and Islander Land Grants) Amendment Act 1982, the Local Government (Aboriginal Lands) Act 1978, the Aboriginal Land Act 1991, and the Torres Strait Islander Land Act 1991. The evolution of native title law centers on where native title exists and what is the nature of the native title; this depends on the law and tradition of the Indigenous peoples, and varies considerably from place to place. Native title arises out of the laws and customs of Indigenous peoples in Australia; native title arises out of the laws and customs of Indigenous peoples in Australia; Native title is recognized by the common law of Australia and can also be recognized by the statutory law following procedures established under Commonwealth and State legislation; native title can be extinguished by lawful acts of governments or through the Indigenous people ceasing to acknowledge their customary law; and native title is particularly important in environmental management because of substantial areas of land and waters affected by co-existence of native title rights or full native title ownership. Traditional land use and ownership throughout the island community had evolved based on intermarriage, raiding, and reciprocal exchange of food and other resources. Each community claimed a distinctive exclusive access territory that in some cases included shorelines, offshore reefs, and intervening waters. Torres Strait is now inhabited under a land tenure system which causes pressures and disputes, the system is highly regulated and cumbersome, forms of tenure include Deed of Grant in Trust and inalienable freehold grants under the Land Act. Torres Strait is now the home of native title, with ownership resting with the regional government; slowly, cases of historic residence are being granted title to lands. In some areas of the islands, as many as 85% of residents rent the home they live in. The right ownership of land by Torres Strait Islanders according to their traditional customs was recognized in the landmark Australia High Court decision *Mabo v State of Queensland* in 1992. This decision recognized for the first time native title rights and interests in common law. Since 1993 mechanisms have been set up to resolve native title claims, certification of claims and Indigenous Land Use Agreements, and dispute resolution as set out in the Native Title Act of 1993. There have been 14 determinations of native title over Saibai, Moa, Mabuiag, Poruma, Warraber, Masig, Damuth, Dauan, Waier and Dauar. There have been 5 determinations of title by the Kaurareg people over Ngurupai (Horn Island), Murulag (Prince of Wales Island), Zuan (Entrance Island), Tarilag (Packe Island), Yeta (Port Lihou Island), Damaralag Islet, and Mipa (Turtle Island).

Agriculture/Forestry:

There is little agriculture practiced in the area as it is a marine based economy. Products like coconuts are harvested, but no agricultural products are exported at all.

Marine Activity:

Fishing:

Fisheries resources are shared with the traditional inhabitants of coastal communities of Papua New Guinea and Cape York, Queensland, Australia. Fishing is the dominant industry in the Torres Strait area; the major source of income for island communities is from fishing lobster, mackerel and pearls; turtles and dugong are the major source of subsistence food. Marine resources in the 150 kilometers of ocean are managed jointly with the Queensland Territory and the Australian Government in conjunction with the government of Papua New Guinea by the Torres Strait Protected Zone Authority. The Marine Strategy of 1998 is the governing framework which shares the resource between residents of the islands and communities on Cape York in Australia and along the southern coast of Papua New Guinea. The existing framework was put in place with the desired intention of bringing ownership and management of the fisheries into the hands of traditional residents. The Torres Strait Regional Authority brought a case before the Australian Federal Court on the Torres Strait Regional Sea Claim in 2003; this case is expected to be dealt with by 2007.

Marine Life:

Torres Strait is listed as a complex shallow region with extensive shoals, banks and reefs, resident dugong and turtle populations and extensive seagrass beds. This area is a mixing zone between the Coral Sea and Indonesia, sediment and nutrients flow into the area from Papua New Guinea rivers. There are extremely strong ocean currents in the area and a complex tidal regime. The surroundings seas, offshore sandbanks and reefs of these coral, continental and mangrove islands have not only provided the inhabitants with an abundance of sea foods, but also set significant social and cultural parameters for them. This is further reflected in their predominantly marine clan totems: crocodile, eel, dugong, hammerhead shark, stingray, turtle, frigate bird and dog. Exploitation of the sea's resources involves both sexes, all ages, a wide variety of techniques, spans 24 hours in the day, and extends throughout all seasons.

Critical Issues:

Border security.

JURISDICTIONAL RESOURCES

Capital:

Thursday Island is the administrative center of Torres Straits. Canberra is the capital of Australia.

Political System:

Australia is a democratic, federal state which recognizes the British Monarch as sovereign. Torres Strait now has a democratic system of governance; following a general strike in 1936, the islanders were allowed to vote for their own Island Councils. Twenty elected Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal

people living in the Torres Strait represent the area on the Island Coordinating Council. Seventeen of these people hold office by virtue of being an Island Council Chairperson from one of the inhabited islands in the region. One representative is designated from the Tamwoy community, one person represents the Port Kennedy community, and one representative is from Horn Island and Prince of Wales Island. The Chairperson, Deputy, and Alternate Deputy are elected by the members of the TSRA. The chairperson is Mr. Terry Waia. The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) receives its authority from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989 passed by the Australian Government. The administration was established in 1994 and has developed joint management plans with the Commonwealth Government of Australia, the Queensland Territory, the Island Coordinating Council, Torres Shire Councils, and the Island Councils on the future of the region. The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) is responsible for joint administration of health care, housing and infrastructure, small business development, marine resources, education, arts, language, sports, and native title. In some issues TSRA has an advisory capacity, and in some issues it has the lead role. TSRA has 6 portfolios of responsibilities, Womens Issues, Small Business and Economic Development, Arts and Culture, Housing, Environment and Health, and Education. The Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula (TSNP) Legal Service is funded by the TSRA to provide culturally appropriate indigenous legal aid service. Torres Strait Islander people clearly now hold and deal in substantial areas of land, and in the main these lands are held through some form of communal title. Various administrative mechanisms exist under the statutes that established bodies to manage the lands and be accountable to the community of owners. However, the recognition by common law of native title rights has highlighted the difficulties of these arrangements. Indigenous communities own land under customary law as self-regulating communities with distinct rights, but cannot under current Australian statutes organize their political structures in relation to this land. However, there are substantial difficulties even in identifying the "community" who might self-organize political structures in relation to land ownership.

Political Parties:

Torres Strait Islander Working Party

Important Legislation:

Torres Strait Treaty 1979: The Torres Strait Treaty is a border agreement between Australia and Papua New Guinea setting out the territorial limits of each nation throughout the region. It governs the seabed jurisdiction line, the fisheries jurisdiction line, and The Torres Strait Protected Zone. The Protected Zone acknowledges the traditional movement of Torres Strait Islanders and coastal peoples of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea and allows free movement of indigenous people from both countries in pursuit of their traditional way of life. The main purpose of the Torres Strait Treaty is to acknowledge and protect the traditional way of life and livelihood of the traditional inhabitants. Inhabitants are permitted activities in the area in accordance to local tradition including gardening, hunting, and fishing, barter and market trade. The Torres Strait Regional Authority brought a case before the Australian Federal Court on the Torres Strait Regional Sea Claim in 2003; this case is expected to be dealt with by 2007. **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989:** The Native Title Act of 1993 was passed as a result of a High Court decision in 1992 granting the Meriam people title to the Murray Islands, (Mer).

Principal Taxes:

Associated Power:

Commonwealth of Australia

Citizenship:

Australian. Jurisdictional authority in the region has developed under the auspices of the Australian Government. The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) receives its authority from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989 passed by the Australian Government. The administration has developed joint management plans with the Commonwealth Government of Australia, the Queensland Territory, the Island Coordinating Council, Torres Shire Councils, and Island Councils.

Paradiplomacy:

Commonwealth Government of Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs maintains a Torres Strait Treaty Liaison Office on Thursday Island, and there is a Papua New Guinea Treaty Liaison Office on Daru Island.

HUMAN RESOURCES

Indigenous persons were first counted in the Australian census in 1971, since that time there has been an increasing number of persons identifying themselves as Torres Strait Islanders, greater than the birth rate alone would account for. The Australian Bureau of Statistics states that comparisons between two censuses must be made with caution as the increase may be the result of a growing propensity of people to identify as indigenous and greater efforts to record the indigenous status in the census. Indigenous people were first recorded in the 1970 census, between 1991 and 1996 there was a 33% increase in the number of indigenous persons, and between 1996 and 2001 there was a 16% increase. The Commonwealth of Australia has for many years used a three part definition of Aboriginality: An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person: of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives. This definition has been accepted by the High Court, and is generally accepted by the Indigenous community, although specific legislation such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989 have a simpler approach, defining "Aboriginal" as "a person who is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia".

Island	Area (km sq.)	Population	% of Total Population
Torres Strait Islands	4,800	6,700	%

The population is spread out in many small island communities. Population 1999; 2004; Boigu 285 ; 295; Badu 698 ; 786; Dauan 123 ; 120; Erub 291 ; 320; Hammond 210 ;208; lama 272; 363; Kubin 202 ; 208; Mabuag 222 ; 240; Mer 449 ; 462 ; Murray Island Porima 123 ; 175; Saibia 344 ; 368; Seisa 146 ; 144; St. Pauls 236 ; 239; Torres 3235 ; 3810; Ugar 60 ; 57; Waraber 226 ; 239; Yorke 317 ; 336. On the mainland of Queensland, in northern Australia, the town of Port Kennedy serves as the administrative center of the area. The mainland population of Port Kennedy in 2001 was 1631, and TRAWQ population was 1049. TRAWQ represents the residents of the suburbs of Tamway, Rose Hill, Aplin, Waiben and Quarantine on Thursday Island. Just over three square km in area and 39 km off the top of Cape York, Thursday Island is the most well-known of the Torres Strait Islands.

Population:	
Year	Resident Population

Age of Population:	0-14	15-24	25-49	50-64	65 and up

Migration:

There are a large number of people who migrate throughout the territory; local custom might allow citizens of Papua New Guinea to cross borders into Australia within the limits of the Torres Strait Treaty area, but not allow them any long term ability to stay there. Currently there is a steady out migration of islanders from the area which is estimated to be on average, 50 persons per year. Smuggling is also prevalent throughout the Torres



Straits, with fauna, flora, guns and drugs moving in and out of Australia. Organizations such as Australian Customs and the Defense Forces are present in the area.

Crude Birth Rate:	
2001	2.2%

Life Expectancy:

Life expectancy at birth for indigenous female islanders is 64.8 years, and for males is 59.4 years for statistics recorded in 2003. Statistics for Torres Strait Islanders would indicate that life expectancy is almost 20 years less than that of all Australians. The life expectancy of Australia as a whole is now 80 years (2005). Non-indigenous persons have a much higher life expectancy; females can expect to live to 83, and males to 78 years. The calculation of life expectancy in the region has long-standing issues attached to the identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island persons on death certificates, preventing definitive statements being made; only 58% were believed to be recorded correctly.

Crude Death Rate:	
1982	10.3%
2002	6.8%

Ethnicity:

Torres Strait Islanders are Melanesian people, ethnically related to other Melanesians of the South-west Pacific. Culturally and linguistically, the indigenous inhabitants of the Torres Strait are divided into seven broad groups. The Miriam speaking people reside on the high islands on the eastern side of the Strait, while the speakers of Kala Lagaw Ya dwell in the predominantly low-lying central and western islands. These two groups are known collectively as Torres Strait Islanders. On the Papua New Guinea side are the Kiwai speakers who inhabit the coastal areas along the northern shore of the Strait, and the Gizra, Bie, Gidra, and Agob peoples who mostly occupy the savanna backing the beach ridges and coastal swamps. The matrix of social relations among the islands has a sense of reciprocity and sharing that is tied to the common marine resource.

Class Division:

Class divisions between groups of islander are based on historical relationships with the marine realm. Customary rights of access to marine areas and resources occur within a localized cultural framework. Groups of individuals claim rights based on the premise that their ancestors were the original inhabitants of the area, and they reaffirm this relationship through myths and songs. The collection of meanings that clans and communities attach to the landscape defines the relationship between various social groups and their identity. In a survey of indigenous person in 1994, 60% of respondents identified with a clan or tribal group, this has not changed and in 2002 a similar proportion of the population stated their affiliation was still strong.

Languages:

English, Oceanic Pidgin or Creole (Torres Kreole), Australian Indigenous. There are two traditional languages, Kalaw Lagaw Ya and Meriam Mer. Since the arrival of English, Torres Strait Islanders have fused the two indigenous languages and English into what is called Creole. Creole is the dominant language for health care delivery. 80% of Indigenous persons in Australia speak English at home and many persons are bilingual. The pattern is geographic in that 55% of those living in remote areas speak an Indigenous language, a higher proportion in the north and center of Australia, and one would surmise, the Torres Strait. In fact 52% of Torres Strait Islanders speak Oceanic Pidgin or Creole in 2001, persons 45 years and older are more likely to speak an indigenous language than younger persons.

Religion:

Religion: Australia 2001; Torres Strait Islanders 2001; Catholic 26%; 23%; Anglican 20.5%; 23%; Other Christian 20.5% ; 23%; Buddhist 1.9%;; Muslim 1.5%;; Other 1.2%;; Traditional Aboriginal Religion ; 5%; No religious beliefs ; 15%; No answer ; 11%;

Literacy:

The literacy rate is at a lower level than the general population of Australia due to English being a second language. 12% of Torres Strait Islanders have used the internet.

Education System:

Only 7% of islanders have post secondary education. The number of persons who have achieved a higher level of education has improved significantly in the last 10 year reporting period, now 3.8 percent of indigenous persons hold a bachelor degree or higher. The number of persons reporting receiving post secondary education is increasing significantly, from only 12% in 1994 having improved to 26% in 2002

Total Pre-schools:()	
Total Primary Schools	
First Level:	
Second Level:	
Third Level:	
Total Secondary Schools:	
Total Professional Schools	
Universities:	

Number of Schools per Island:										
	Pre-school		Elementary			High-school		Prof.	University	
	Pub	Priv	1	2	3	Pub	Priv		Pub	Priv

Students Enrolled:

Year:	Pre-School	Elementary	High-school	Prof.	University
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Teachers							
Year	Pre-School	Elementary			High-School	Prof.	University
		1	2	3			

The government has created a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP). Its major goal is to involve the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in educational decision-making. Two bench marks in achieving this goal are: The establishment of effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of pre-school, primary and secondary education services for their children. An the increased number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed as educational administrators, teachers, curriculum advisers, teachers assistants, home-school liaison officers and other education workers, including community people engaged in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history and con-temporary society, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

Medical Services:

Torres Strait Islanders do not access health care resources at the same rate as most Australians, local traditions dictate that health concerns are first dealt with by "Kastom medicins". The government of Australia has set up many programs to try to address this issue as this is the result of access to facilities as well as cultural background. Spending on Torres Strait Islanders is approximately 70% of the spending for other Australians; health care services are delivered mainly by OATSIH, the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health. Funding at a rate of about \$300 per person to provide Medical Services and providing 43% of total health care service delivery in the region. Medical services are provided at Thursday Island Primary Health Care Centre and at two hospitals. Bamaga Hospital (14 beds) on Cape York, and Thursday Island Hospital (36 beds). Low birth weights seem to be wide spread; approximately twice as many low birth weights occurred in indigenous populations as opposed to non-indigenous persons in the period 1998-2000. Significant numbers of indigenous children demonstrate failure to thrive. Infant mortality appears to be continuing concern, with neither an improvement nor decline showing up, the generally poor state of health of mothers is seen to be a limiting factor in efforts to improve infant mortality rates. The infant mortality rate as expressed by the number of deaths in the first year is 14.8 per 1000, as compared to 4.8 for the rest of Australia (2003). Major health concerns in the area are caused by diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, mental illness, cancer, pneumonia and influenza. Modern health care service is not helping to reduce high mortality rates. Inhabitants of Torres Strait Islands have the highest prevalence of diabetes in Australia, about 26% of the adult population. There are many preventable complications that arise from this fact. The availability and low cost of frozen foods, combined with the distance from market and high cost of fruits and vegetables, is having a health impact on residents who are predisposed to better health outcomes with the traditional low fat diet.

HISTORY AND CULTURE

History:

Australian Aboriginal society has the longest continuous cultural history in the world, 40 000 BP is the most commonly accepted date for Australian occupation. The archaeological material suggests great diversity in the culture and density of human occupation in both space and time. Traditionally the link between the land, sea, and Ailan Kastom (Island Custom) was enduring and fundamental to the way of life in the Torres Strait. Ailan Kastom played a major role in social, political, and economic structures throughout the 800 years of indigenous history. Ailan Kastom was an effective community based system of environmental management and control for long term survival of the species, culture, identity, and sea life. This range of cultural features including customs, traditions, observances and beliefs formed the basis of social organization in the area. Special occasions are celebrated with dancing and feasting, tombstone openings, and dugong and turtle hunting. The culture is intrinsically linked with the sea, and fisheries exclusion zones were established by gentleman=s agreement. Prior to European contact, the inhabitants of the region were organized in small communities which were politically and socially autonomous, alliances were forged primarily on intermarriage and reciprocal exchanges of food and other resources. There was an extensive maritime trading network. The hunting of dugong and sea turtles attained considerable social and spiritual as well as economic significance, this spiritual connection to the sea was even carried inland where marine products were used in agricultural ceremonies and healing rituals. This affiliation with the sea is rooted in shared notions about the origins of distant ancestors and is maintained to this day in oral histories, songs, dances, and name places. First contact with Europeans was the discovery of the islands by Luis Vaez de Torres, a Spanish navigator who charted a passage between Australia and Papua New Guinea. In 1871, the London Missionary Society arrived on Darnley Island and in 1873 two teachers from the society were killed, violent frontier conflict continued into this century in tropical Australia. Land wars were fought with many different Aboriginal nations as each new frontier opened. The society stayed in the region until 1915 when they handed off to The Church of England. Since Torres Straits became part of Queensland in 1881, policies adopted by governments continued, and continue, to disrupt the ongoing management by Indigenous peoples of their land and sea country. Current efforts are aimed at returning cultural and ceremonial artifacts for safe keeping and establishing a cultural center on Thursday Island With \$1 million in funding from the Queensland Heritage Trails Network, the Gab Titui Cultural Centre on Thursday Island is a place for visitors to discover the rich culture of Torres Strait Islander people. Opened in 2004, a major focus of the Gab Titui Cultural Centre is to celebrate Torres Strait culture within the local community and to present and promote the region's unique heritage to Australian and international visitors.

Referenda:

Recent Significant Events:

1992 First indigenous land title recognized in Australian law. 2002 Federal Court of Australia provides land title to traditional title holders on eight uninhabited islands in the Torres Strait Territory.

Music, Dance, Handicraft and Patrimony:

The level of participation in cultural events is very high in the region. In 2002, 7 out of every 10 indigenous persons aged 15 and over attended a cultural event. Sports are very popular in the Torres Strait, particularly rugby, basketball, netball, volleyball, and touch football. Inter island competitions are common. Gardening was very important on some islands and closely related to prestige.

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