



Constructing the Torres Strait: Factsheet on policy, media and public opinion study April 2010

Introduction

This factsheet summarises the results of a study on the overall representation and visibility of the Torres Strait region through policy, media coverage and public opinion, particularly in relation to climate change impacts and processes.



Funded by the Australian Government's Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTSRF), researchers from James Cook University analysed Australian and international policy in relation to climate change, as well as a series of media articles on this same topic between 2006 and 2009. Moreover, researchers collected 160 surveys between October and December 2009 in Cairns and Sydney to assess the public opinion component of the study.

The aim of the study was not to deny the role and effects of climate change, given that much evidence could be assembled to demonstrate how *Ailan Kastom* (Island Custom) is being disrupted by recent environmental events in Torres Strait. Rather, the aim was to interrogate how the Torres Strait has been constructed in certain ways, such as being represented as being 'particularly' vulnerable to climate processes.

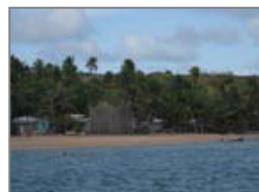
Policy analysis

In an attempt to unravel the policy discourse surrounding representation of the Torres Strait and its people in relation to climate change, the study examined two policy documents:

- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *4th Assessment Report*; and
- The Australian Government's *Climate Change in Australia: Regional Impacts and Adaptation – Managing the risk for Australia*.

The IPCC Report discussed the 'particular' vulnerabilities of the Torres Strait to climate change: 'direct biophysical impacts, such as increases in temperature, rainfall extremes or sea-level rise, are likely to have significant indirect impacts on the social and cultural cohesion of these communities' ([IPCC 4th Assessment Report. Section 11.4.8](#)). The report

argued that the social and economic disadvantage of Torres Strait communities reduces their coping abilities, adaptive capacities and overall resilience to climate hazards. The report refers to the likelihood of relocation, casting representations of Islanders as displaced persons in waiting – a category that has been applied in an unproblematised way.



The Australian Government report provided a summary of scientific evidence about climate change. In the report the Torres Strait region was identified as one of three communities that have a lower adaptive capacity to climate change, viewing the region as high-risk and vulnerable. Little recognition was provided of community resourcefulness, individual agency and, importantly, the ways in which Islanders have adapted to environmental changes in the past, which could assist in the development of culturally-appropriate adaptation strategies.

In both documents, vulnerability replaced resilience as the naturalised focus of attention. Islanders were constructed as 'particularly' vulnerable victims with low coping capacity – even as displaced persons in waiting. Alternative visions for the future in relation to climate change, based on active, even definite self-identities and communities, were silenced. This highlights the fluidity of meanings surrounding categories of climate change ('vulnerable', 'victims', 'inundation and relocation', 'low capacity') and the perils of constructing political arguments based on discourses of victimhood.

Media analysis

Using the Factiva database, the study assembled a series of media reports on the Torres Strait (n = 22) between 2006 and 2009 to explore how the media in Australia has represented the Torres Strait region. Latent and manifest content analyses were utilised to explore how each of the reports represented the Torres Strait region.

The majority of media reports implicated climate change in the identity of the Torres Strait and constructed Islanders as victims. Such an identity and status marginalises other possible alternative discourses of adaptation for Torres Strait Islanders. As a consequence, alternative constructions of

Islander identity that might revolve around resilience, resourcefulness and agency were again silenced (as found with the policy documents).

The media reports, through their use of emotive words such as 'dire', 'relocation', 'crisis' and 'deep alarm', portrayed the impacts of climate change as severe, extreme, but also permanent and far-reaching. Media descriptions of the situation faced by many Islanders conjured up images of Islanders as vulnerable, unfortunate, innocent victims who are being forced to relocate, an only-remaining option as a consequence of climate change impacts. Collectively, these statements contribute to discourses on climate change and the future; they portray it as a destructive and threatening process producing new categories of people and places.



Public opinion survey

Of the 160 surveys conducted:

- 34.6% were male, 65.4% female;
- 60.4% were Australian, 16.4% from the UK and/or Ireland and 10.1% from Europe.
- The average age was 45 years;
- 24.1% were working in the health industry, 17.7% in the retail industry; and
- 32.3% had obtained a degree.

Of those surveyed, 21.7% had visited the Torres Strait (78.3% had not). Of those who had visited, 63.5% visited for work while the remainder visited for recreation (36.5%). For those visitors who had not visited (78.3%), 55.2% indicated that they would consider going on a holiday to the region (44.8% said that they wouldn't plan to holiday there).

In the survey, a series of thirty descriptive words were used to describe the Torres Strait. Respondents were asked to indicate how accurate these words were in describing the region, on a scale of 1 'Not accurate' to 5 'Extremely accurate'. Table 1 summarises the mean values of each of these descriptions.

From Table 1, the eight most popular descriptions were of the Torres Strait region's internal attributes (culture, fishing, Indigenous community, Traditional Knowledge, links to land and sea country, music and culture, and geographical separation from the mainland). While respondents did consider the region as vulnerable to climate change and a place that

experiences extreme weather, these were the ninth and thirteenth most popular descriptions respectively. Overall then, the public opinion representations did not reflect the dominant media and policy-generated image of the region and people as victims of an external and inhospitable nature, and changing and threatening climate.

Table 1: Respondents' ratings of given descriptions of the Torres Strait region, in order of mean value.

Description	Mean value (Scale 1 to 5)
Fishing communities	4.21
Distinct Indigenous community	4.09
Valuable Traditional Knowledge	4.02
People have a close relationship with their environment	3.94
Strong culture	3.87
Unique culture	3.83
Indigenous Australians	3.80
Separate (from mainland Australia)	3.80
Vulnerable to climate change	3.78
Musical	3.69
Remote/isolated	3.62
Vibrant culture	3.57
Experiences extreme weather	3.40
Exceptional biodiversity	3.33
'Off the mainstream radar'	3.20
Poor social services	3.19
Athletic	3.13
Island paradise	3.10
Poor health	3.08
Poor education	3.07
Successful land claims	3.06
Place of tropical diseases	2.99
High poverty	2.95
Neglected by Government	2.87
Biosecurity threat	2.78
Good environmental managers	2.69
Melanesian	2.52
Tourism destination	2.50
Dangerous	1.87
Outback	1.64

In an open-ended question, 114 survey respondents described the Torres Strait region in their own words. None of these descriptions included any mention of climate change, climate processes, vulnerability or victims. The main themes revolved around the culture and people of the Torres Strait, the natural beauty of the region and its remoteness, and the challenges facing the region, such as economic, health and education issues.

Respondents were asked to consider the issue of climate change and indicate their concern for a series of places and issues on a scale of 1 'Not concerned' to 5 'Very concerned'. Table 2 summarises the mean values of concern for these ten places/issues.

Table 2: Respondents' concern for a series of places and issues with respect to climate change, in order of mean value.

Concern for...	Mean value (Scale 1 to 5)
Diminishing fresh water supplies	4.27
Loss of the Great Barrier Reef	4.22
Reduced biodiversity in Australia	4.05
Decreasing quality of life	4.05
Increase in extreme weather events	4.04
Lack of an international agreement	3.99
Loss of islands in the Pacific	3.99
Loss of the Murray Darling Basin	3.95
Lack of Australian Government action	3.86
Loss of islands in the Torres Strait	3.86

From Table 2, the issue of diminishing water supplies and the loss of the Great Barrier Reef were of paramount concern. While loss of islands in the Torres Strait region was still of concern for respondents (mean rating = 3.86), this was of least concern when compared with the other places and issues.

Conclusion

Both policy and media representations implicate severe and threatening climate change in the identity of the Torres Strait and as such construct Islanders as 'particularly' vulnerable to climate change with low adaptive capacity. On the other hand, the results from the public opinion survey present alternative constructions of the region, based around culture, people and community. The survey showed that victimhood and vulnerability to climate change was not the dominant construction of the region and its people, as was the case in the policy documents and media reports analysed for this study.



This study has raised the question, What impact might the emphasis on the 'particular' vulnerability of the region be in terms of its own capacity to respond to climate change and sustainability more broadly? This MTSRF study attempted to highlight the fact that 'doomsday' (and associated victimhood) discourses emphasise a 'particular' vulnerability based around long-term sea level rise and relocation, rather than a broad sweep of mitigation and adaptation measures.

Vulnerability discourses – present in policy and media outlets – may reduce the resilience of the Torres Strait in facing climate change impacts, and sustainability imperatives generally. This study was one step in furthering our understanding of this by identifying the different constructions of the region through three realms (government policy, media coverage and public opinion) and highlighting that some of these discourses have the ability to marginalise the capacity and resilience of the Torres Strait by emphasising a 'particular' vulnerability.



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This factsheet is available for download from the MTSRF website: <http://www.rrrc.org.au/publications>

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http://www.rrrc.org.au/mtsr/theme_1/project_1_3_1.html

McNamara, K. (2010) *Constructing the Torres Strait: Factsheet on policy, media and public opinion survey*. Report to the Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTSRF), Cairns (3pp.).

The MTSRF is administered in North Queensland by the Reef & Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC).