



Impacts and Achievements of the MTSRF

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Showcasing the Australian Government's investment
in the MTSRF for improved sustainability of the
North Queensland region, and Australia

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Abstract

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Assessing the visibility of the Torres Strait: Representations and discourses through policy, media and public opinion

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The Torres Strait region holds special significance for the protection of Indigenous Australian culture and land rights, but is also gaining visibility with respect to climate change impacts and necessary adaptation. While the 1992 High Court decision to grant Native Title to traditional owners on Mer Island is probably best known internationally and nationally, the Torres Strait has more recently gained media and policy visibility in relation to unusually large king tides and other inundation events, which have been linked by the media to climate change. This paper traces the dominant representations of the Torres Strait region through three realms – policy, media coverage and everyday conversation. The paper provides an assessment of the overall visibility and representations of the region within these three realms, particularly in relation to climate change impacts and processes. The aim of the paper is not to deny the role/effects of climate change, and much evidence could be assembled to demonstrate how *Ailan Kastom* (Island Custom) is being disrupted by recent environmental events. Instead, this paper aims to interrogate how the Torres Strait is constructed in certain ways, such as being represented as being ‘particularly’ vulnerable to climate processes. Both policy and media representations for instance implicate severe climate change in the identity of the region and as such construct Islanders as ‘particularly’ vulnerable 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. Vulnerability to climate change is certainly not the dominant construction of the region and its people, as is the case in policy documents and media reports. This paper concludes by raising concerns about the impact of such an emphasis on the ‘particular’ vulnerability of the region in terms of its own capacity to respond to climate change and sustainability more broadly.



Australian Government

Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts



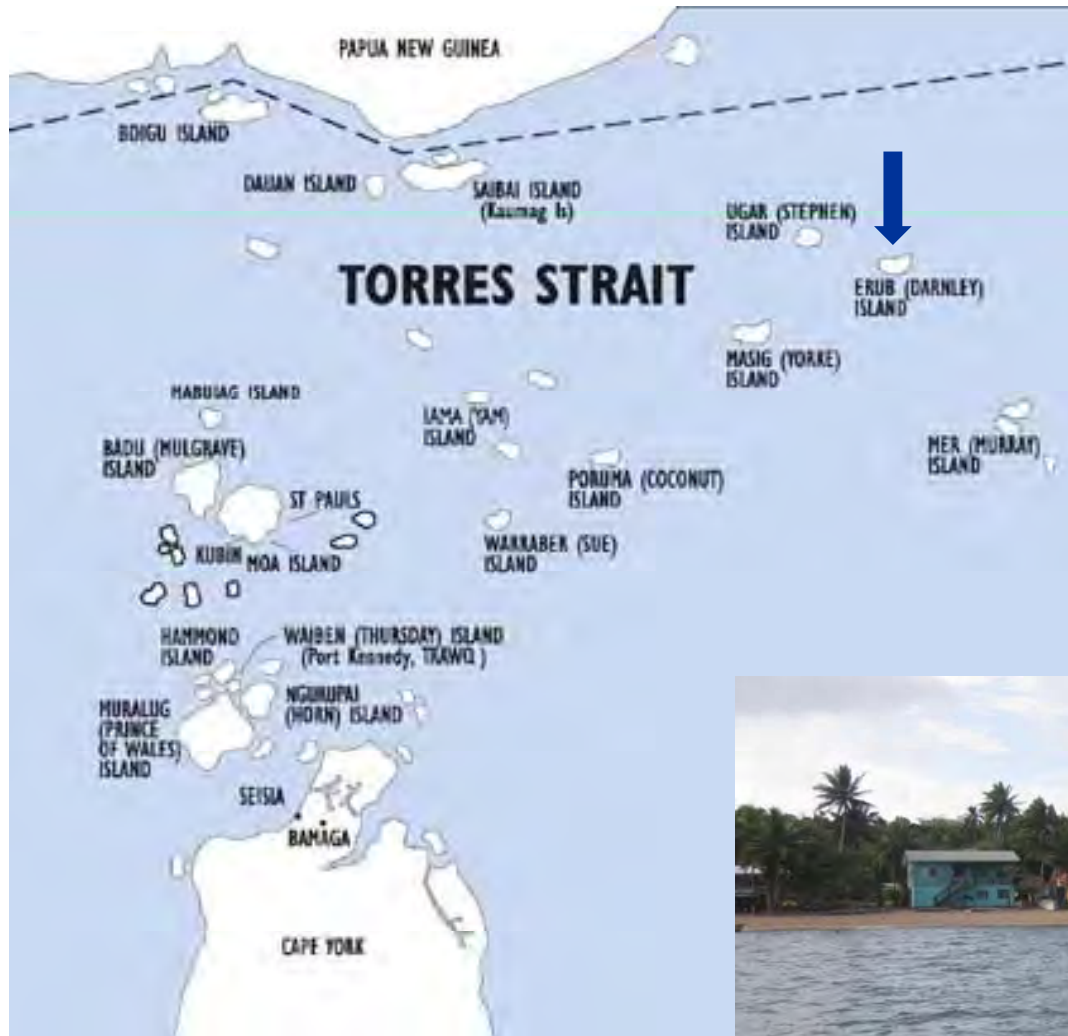
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Assessing the visibility of the Torres Strait: Representations and discourses

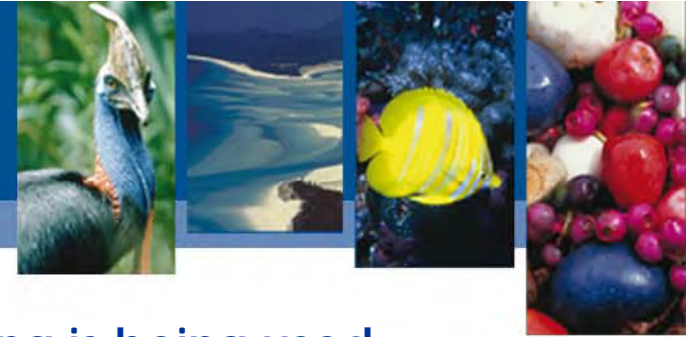
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Local and traditional knowledge recording is being used:

- To better understand extreme events, changes and experiences
- As a teaching tool for students on reading their landscape/understanding indicators (seasonal calendars)
 - To indicate past and present adaptation strategies
- As a way of documenting the voice of Islanders – a way of imagining their island and vision of the future



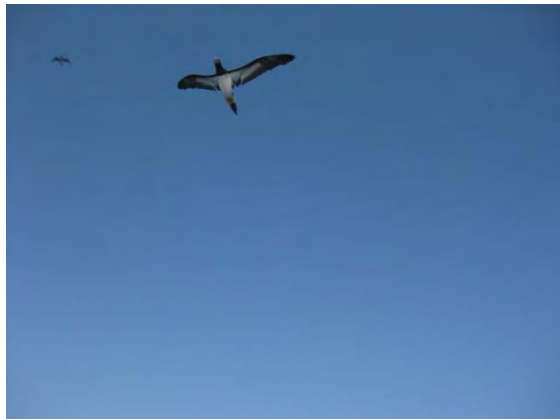
“The richest port in this planet Earth is not the oil field in Kuwait and is not the diamond mines in South Africa. But the most valuable thing is in your local cemetery. That’s where people, way below, know them things but they never written down, a song they never sung, that understanding and that invention what they got, it never got beyond the drawing board” (Elder Keewat).



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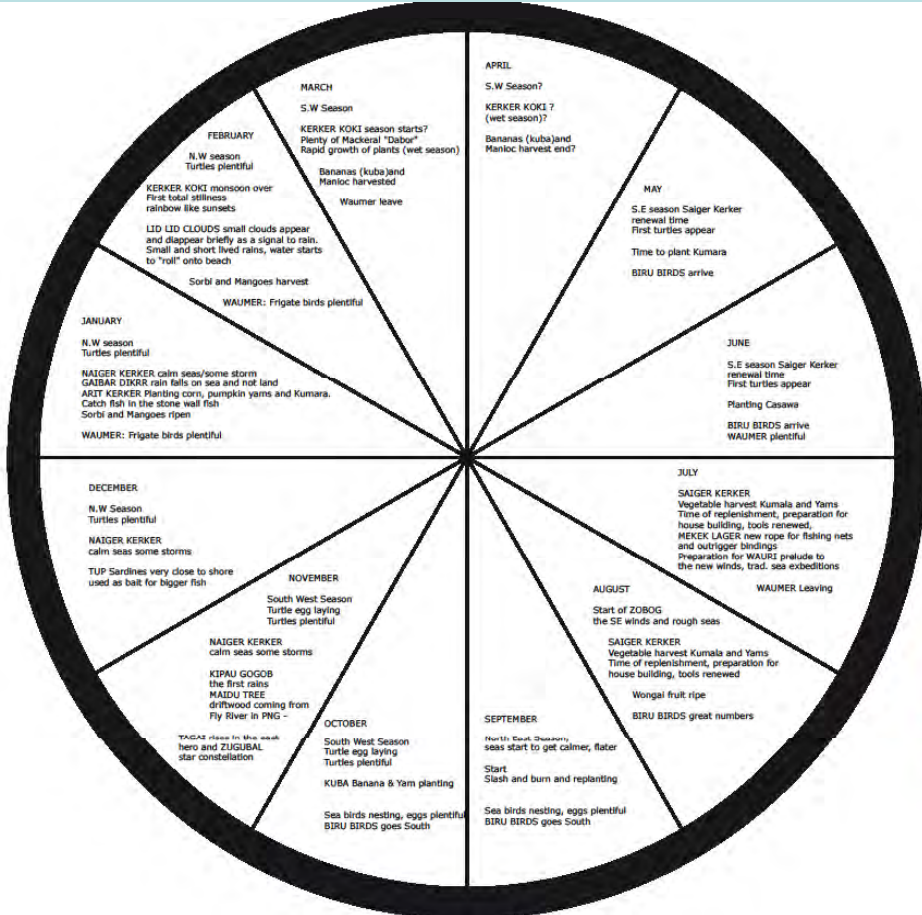
Seasonal calendars



- Months
- Wet & dry seasons
- Winds (koki, sageer, naiger)
- TAGAI star constellation

- Bird migration
- Sea life
- Plant life & crops





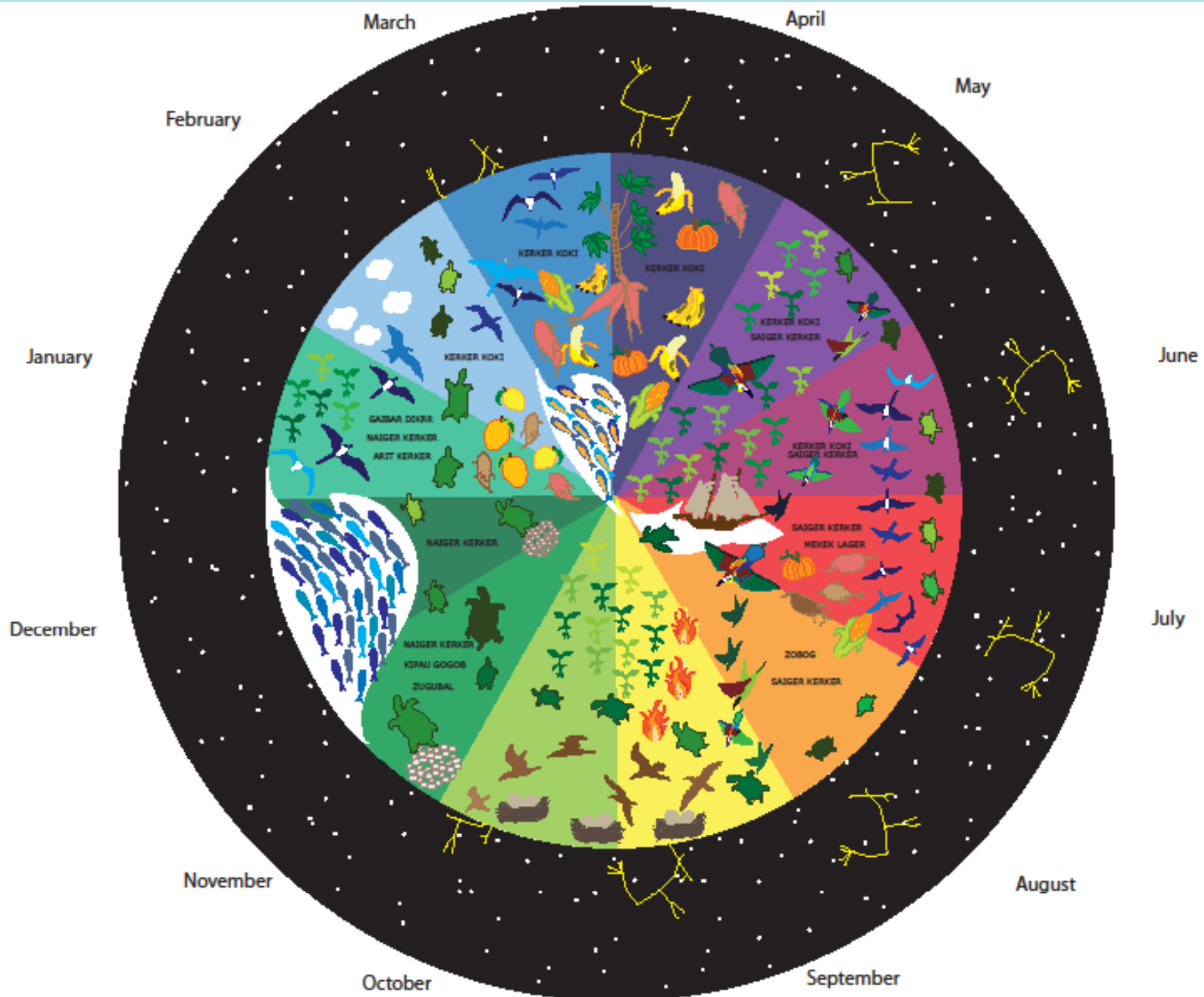
Erub Island seasonal/weather calendar

Various elements illustrated within the calendar. Turtles, birds, sardines etc.

Using a colour wheel, appropriate colours are selected for each element or event/season in a way sympathetic to the gradiating colour.

There is also a possibility of illustrating constant elements, such as the sky/sea showing the range of behaviours.









Adaptation strategies

Local initiatives such as re-vegetation, gardening, seawalls, windbreaks, stone fish-traps, education/learning from older generation



“This sand bar hasn’t had much problem, because of them grasses... the wind blow the sand and it's stayed. They’ll only grow if the vegetation is there, they won't grow in nothing” (Elder Gutchen).

“People used to live right around this community, but, on the gardening, they have their own plot of land, like something’s been handed down from the ancestors. And also the clan maybe have one huge garden between themselves, just for them... But people used to share whatever, whatever that area there” (Elder Lui).



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“Just bamboo and with coconut leaves and that, all just, you know, put it to stop the wind as wind breaks”
(Aunty Maryanne).

“The Islanders always do with natural windbreak where the logs get buried upright and that will help slow down the erosion” (Elder Gutchen).



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“Well at Christmas we get king tide then but this one was, the start that tide. The first one come and take all the coconut from out the front went. The second one come, we had to build a sea wall now with all the bags, sand bags... Yeah, he didn't put much tyres, but this time now, he put them tyre on the pallet; after that big tide” (Aunty Norah).





Policy analysis

IPCC 4th Assessment Report

- Social and economic disadvantage of TS communities reduces their coping abilities, adaptive capacities and overall resilience
- Refers to likelihood of relocation – representing Islanders as displaced persons in waiting

AG Climate Change in Australia: Regional Impacts and Adaptation – Managing the risk for Australia

- Identifies TS region as 1 of 3 communities with lower adaptive capacity, high risk and vulnerable

Overall – vulnerability replaced resilience, TS constructed as ‘particularly’ vulnerable victims with low coping capacity and displacement – discourse of victimhood





Media

- Reports from 2006-2009 (n=22) using latent/manifest content analysis
- All reports implicated cc in identity of TS and people constructed as victims – marginalising alternative discourses
- Use of emotive words – dire, relocation, crisis, deep alarm – portraying the impacts of cc as severe, extreme, permanent, far-reaching
- Image of people as vulnerable, unfortunate, innocent victims who are being forced to relocate, as only-remaining option
- Overall – contribute to a discourse on cc and the future – portrayed as a destructive and threatening process producing new categories of people and places



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Public opinion

Fishing communities - 4.21

Distinct Indigenous community - 4.09

Valuable traditional knowledge - 4.02

People have close relationship with their environment - 3.94

Strong culture - 3.87

Unique culture - 3.83

Indigenous Australians - 3.80

Separate (from mainland Aust) - 3.80

Vulnerable to climate change - 3.78

Musical - 3.69

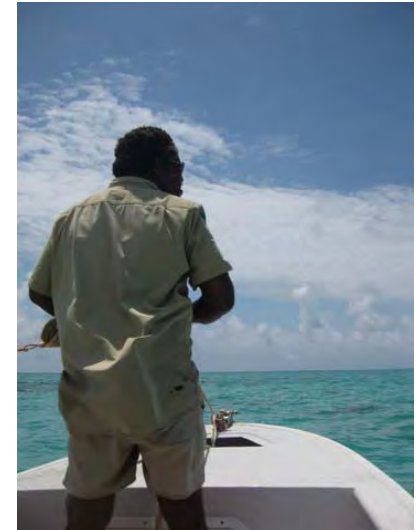
Remote/isolated - 3.62

Vibrant culture - 3.57

Experiences extreme weather - 3.40

Exceptional biodiversity - 3.33

'Off the mainstream radar' - 3.20



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Public opinion

- 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



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Concern for...

- 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 int'l 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



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Conclusion

- *LTK* indicates concern (of impacts and changes) and agency (active and creative management of the environment) and pushes for resources to adapt (locally and culturally-appropriate).
- *Policy* and *media* representations implicate severe and threatening cc in the identity of the TS and construct people as ‘particularly’ vulnerable victims with low adaptive capacity.
- *Public* opinion presents alternative constructions of the region, based around culture, people and community. Victimhood and vulnerability to cc was not the dominant construction of the region and its people.
- Doomsday and victimhood discourses emphasis a ‘particular’ vulnerability and may reduce resilience of the TS in the future.





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 (MTRSF), 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 Kaatom* (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



For further information about this study please contact Karen McNamara at JCU:
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The above factsheet is available for download from the MTRSF website:
<http://www.rrrc.org.au/publications>

Thankyou