



Documenting and sharing the seasonal calendar for Erub Island, Torres Strait

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Introduction

This factsheet summarises the results of a study of the seasons experienced at Erub Island in the eastern group of islands in Torres Strait.

Funded by the Australian Government's Marine & Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTSRF), researchers from James Cook University interviewed island Elders to collect traditional knowledge on seasons, wind patterns, bird migration, plant and sea life, and TAGAI. This information was used to develop a seasonal calendar and mural that are specific to the island, with the mural installed at the local primary school.



This fact sheet explores the process of documenting and synthesising Elders' knowledge of:

- Wet and dry seasons;
- Wind patterns;
- Bird nesting and migration patterns;
- Planting and cropping times, and other plant life;
- Sea life and fishing movements; and
- TAGAI star constellation movements.

Adopting a participatory action research approach, traditional knowledge was collected from four Erub Island Elders in November 2009 and May 2010 and transferred into a calendar that was then reviewed by two cultural advisors on the island.

This project provides an avenue by which knowledge about seasons and land and sea country can be transferred to the younger generation on Erub Island. For Islanders, the connections between land, sea and culture are paramount to identity, livelihoods and sustainability. Thus this project is helping to ensure that knowledge about seasons is both transferred and preserved.

Documenting knowledge

In-depth and unstructured interviews were conducted with Erub Island Elders. To illustrate how the Elders described their seasons, and land and sea country, we have included herewith direct quotes from those interviewed. In this first example, the Elder describes

the role of the frigate bird as an indicator of the start of the monsoon season on Erub Island:

'They [frigate birds] on the monsoon time. Yeah, monsoon, when we see them come low, we know monsoon come close. When they way up in the sky, that's sager time. They always glide and there small one on top. Sager is the south-east. Then they fly way up in the sky, then when north-west time now they come low. We know north-westerly.'

For another Elder, 'lid lid' clouds were also an important indicator of the forthcoming north-west monsoon season:

'You can see the lid lid [small clouds], they sprang out of the horizon, and they disappeared, the lid lid they're linin' up [Elder sings in Miriam Mer] a bit of lightning, you can listen the rumbling from Daudai, New Guinea men land. It's all happening.'

One of the Elders sang a traditional song in Miriam Mer, which provides an account of changes in the landscape that indicate the north-west monsoon:

'Well it [the song] tells you about the beginning of nor-west, you know the things that started to come into play, the clouds, the wind and the thunder, they all usher in the new nor-west. The big tides during the lull, the mango is ripening, the sorbi is ripening, they're all the signs that the nor-west is coming.'

The same Elder further emphasised the importance of astral and marine activities as indicators of seasonal change:

'When they start to get the little rollers on the beach, it's flat calm, and they watch the stars, when the top stars, they twinkle more quickly, when the others more slowly it tells you something. Anyway he read all the signs and said it's gonna blow shortly, and then they start to get the rollers... Biru Biru is the one that flies out. They [booby] are signs or the nor-west.'

Sharing knowledge

The following images illustrate the involvement of the school children at the local primary school in the development of the calendar mural. Each student in

the school painted one of the four major island totems – the tern, booby, frigate bird or parrot fish – or the green turtle, which is a sub-totem for each of the four clans on Erub Island.



Many thanks to the Erub Island Elders who provided their insights and knowledge – it was a privilege to work with you all. Thanks are also extended to Jonathan Sibtain, who helped collect the data, the staff at the local primary school for their support and assistance, and John McNamara and Emma Davidson for developing and installing the mural.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to document and synthesise Erub Island Elders' knowledge of the seasons they experience. This was achieved by adopting a participatory action research approach involving in-depth, unstructured interviews with Elders. The knowledge collected ranged from information about wind directions, wet and dry seasons including the 'doldrum' period, patterns in bird migration and nesting, and plant and cropping cycles. Moreover, knowledge about the islanders' major totems and other plant and animal species that act as seasonal indicators have also been important inclusions in the final seasonal calendar. All of this knowledge was then transcribed, collated and synthesised and presented in the calendar. Another key objective of the study was to provide an avenue for knowledge transfer to the younger generation on Erub Island. The seasonal calendar was well-received by the local primary school, and was the focus of a large-scale mural on the school wall.

This study makes a small contribution towards furthering our understanding of the connections between island environments, livelihoods and culture. Islanders have a long tradition of reading, understanding and listening to landscape changes, reflecting their close relationship with their island, land and sea country. It is hoped that by collating and transferring this knowledge, this study goes some way to ensuring that information about the seasons, landscapes and indicators specific to Erub Island can remain useful and alive.

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

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