

Constructing the Torres Strait: Report on Policy, Media and Public Opinion

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Executive Summary

The Torres Strait region holds special significance in the protection of Indigenous Australian culture and land rights, but is also gaining visibility as a site of climate change impacts and adaptation. While the 1992 Australian 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 tides and other inundations linked to climate change.

This report examines how the Torres Strait region is constructed and represented, largely in relation to climate change, in a variety of forums: policy and discussions, popular media and public opinion. While not denying the impacts of climate change in the region, this report aims to interrogate how the Torres Strait is constructed in certain ways, such as being 'particularly' vulnerable to climate processes. This report identifies how the above three realms offer differing representations of the region. Both media and policy representations for instance implicate severe climate change in the identity of the region and as such construct Islanders as 'particularly' vulnerable subjects 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.

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Acronyms Used In This Report

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
MTSRF	Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility
PMSEIC	Prime Minister’s Science, Engineering and Innovation Council
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TSRA	Torres Strait Regional Authority
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

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1. Introduction

This report is one of a series presented by James Cook University on communities living in the Torres Strait. The series is part of a research project conducted under the Australian Government's Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTSRF) program. The research described here fits within the MTSRF objective to 'better understand how the Torres Strait is constructed' – Objective (b) of Project 1.3.1 'Traditional knowledge systems and climate change in Torres Strait'.

Under the MTSRF program, project outputs presented in this report are considered 'public good' research that is end-user and stakeholder driven. Stakeholders in this research project include, (i) the Torres Strait Regional Authority ; (ii) Island Councillors and Island Managers; (iii) Prescribed Body Corporate; and (iv) Elders and locals living in these communities.

The Torres Strait consists of a group of over one hundred islands that spread beyond 48,000 square kilometres (see <http://www.tsra.gov.au>). Situated between the southern coastline of Papua New Guinea and the tip of Cape York on mainland Australia, the region is home to a unique set of histories, traditions, laws and customs. Approximately 7,105 Torres Strait Islanders reside in 19 communities across 16 inhabited islands (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2009). By comparison, it is estimated that there are over 47,000 Torres Strait Islanders living throughout Australia (ABS, 2006).

The focus of this report is an exploration of the ways in which the Torres Strait region has been constructed through various means. It is important to understand the ways in which regions and places are constructed if we take that voice, on issues such as climate change, is linked to exposure and 'particular' representations. The representations of specific places in images, text and everyday talk can largely influence and constitute their identity (Farbotko, 2005). For Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 13), 'identity neither 'grows out' of rooted communities nor is a thing that can be possessed or owned by individual or collective social actors. It is, instead a mobile, often unstable relation of difference'. This study is concerned with the imagery, texts and talk of the Torres Strait region as represented in policy, the media and in the public sphere. There has been little examination in the literature on how islands of the Torres Strait are conceptualised from the 'outside' (with a number of examples from the Pacific as outlined below). As a means of remedying this omission, this research aims to explore the identity of geographically distant islands and island peoples, particularly in relation to climate change, in policy, the news media and through public opinion.

There has been a series of works conducted in a similar fashion in the Pacific Islands region. For instance, Cocklin (1999) and Sacks (1996) argued that the popular imaginations of the Pacific Islands are as unspoilt islands. Similarly, according to Connell (2007; 2003; 1987), Fry (1997) and Smith (1992), another popular imagination of the Pacific Islands region is only of naturally beautiful islands. For others, the region has been culturally constructed as 'peripheral, and its people agreeable and complacent' (McNamara, 2009: 8). The implications of such geopolitical representations of regions, according to Sparke (2003) and Campbell (1992), is that they can assist in identifying and grouping particular places over time and space. However, an alternative imaginary of the Pacific Islands region has been at the international climate change negotiations as 'most vulnerable'. Such a geopolitical characterisation has given these countries considerable leverage in setting ethical benchmarks and raising their profile to demonstrate the severity of the climate change issue (Najam *et al.* 2003; Shibuya, 1996).

This report seeks to join other voices in debates about the politics of representing people and places in particular ways in relation to climate change. This report seeks to build on this body of work described briefly above on the constructions and representations of island nations.

Based on an analysis of discourses from policy, media and public opinion, this report explores representations of the Torres Strait region. This island region holds special significance in the protection of Indigenous Australian culture and land rights, but it is also gaining visibility as a place of severe climate change variability. The 1992 Australian High Court decision to grant Native Title to traditional owners on Mer Island, overturning the century-old legal doctrine of *terra nullius* (popularly known as the Mabo case) and triggering the Native Title Act and a series of land claims, is probably best known internationally as a means to identify the region (see Mabo vs. Queensland, 1992). However, the Torres Strait has more recently gained media visibility in relation to large king tides and other events linked to climate change.

This report examines how the Torres Strait region has been imagined and represented in a variety of forums: international and national policy, popular media and public opinion. This assessment predominately focuses on how the region and its people are constructed through each of these realms in relation to climate change. For instance, at the international level, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has nominated Indigenous populations as one of the two most vulnerable groups, along with small island states, to climate change exposure and impacts. The aim is not to deny the impacts of a changing climate, and much evidence could be assembled to demonstrate how the link between land, sea, environment and Torres Strait Islander culture is being disrupted by recent environmental events. Rather, the aim of this report is to examine how the Torres Strait is constructed, including representations of the region as being 'particularly' vulnerable to climate processes and variability.

2. Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology adopted for this project and in particular the project's objective. This report assesses how the Torres Strait region is represented (and visualised) through government policy, media and public opinion. In doing so, a number of methods were employed, including discourse analysis, content analysis (both manifest and latent) and structured surveys.

Two policy documents were selected for critical scrutiny as part of this report on representations of the Torres Strait region, including an international and national policy document. Content analysis was utilised to assess the print media on the Torres Strait region. The Factiva database¹, which allows searches of news publications on any given topic, was first used to trace news media coverage. Using the search term 'Torres Strait', 22 articles published between 2006 and 2009 were found. While using only one search engine database, Factiva might not be comprehensive, however decisions had to be made about how to contain the scope of the media analysis. Following the collection of these articles, they were then assessed using both latent and manifest content analysis. Latent content analysis assesses the evaluative tenor and key themes within the media articles. On the other hand, manifest content analysis is used to tally the presence of all positive, negative, mixed and neutral terms.

Public opinion of the Torres Strait region was sought through a structured survey. Data was collected at public places in both Cairns and Sydney, such as beaches, parks and town centres. This method was deemed the most appropriate as the approach adopted needed to be question-focused and use a strict ordering of questions, differing from more qualitative and unstructured forms of data collection (Dunn, 2005). The survey was developed in consultation with TSRA. Before the major surveying commenced, the survey instrument was piloted (n = 10) and minor changes were made. The two-page survey probed the public with the following:

- Socio-demographic questions;
- Descriptions of the Torres Strait and how it is viewed;
- Knowledge about the Torres Strait; and
- Opinions on climate change, the Torres Strait region and the environment in general.

A response rate of 82% was achieved, with a total of 160 surveys collected between October and December 2009 (n = 30 in Sydney; n = 130 in Cairns). Completed surveys were inputted, coded and analysed using the statistical software SPSS v.18.0.

¹ <http://factiva.com/>

3. International and national policy critique

This report is not concerned with the facts and figures of climate change science; rather, it is interested in how different organisations, media outlets and individuals interpret information about climate change processes and impacts. Over the last decade or more, climate change issues and dialogue have permeated into mainstream politics, policy, everyday conversation and media coverage (McNamara and Gibson, 2009). Thus, it is important that we cast critical attention to how climate change is portrayed for mass consumption.

Understanding how people and places are represented in relation to climate change impacts and processes is pertinent. This is of particular relevance as while this environmental issue has escalated to 'crisis' status publically and politically, various discursive categories (such as 'victim', 'adapter', 'vulnerable') have been cast over certain people and places (see McNamara and Gibson, 2009). According to Anderson (2007) and Castree (2002), these categories and labels of public debate or policy do not exist as stable, natural components of reality. Instead, such categories are composed discursively and infuse through policy documents, media coverage and everyday conversation (McGregor, 2004).

In an attempt to unravel the policy discourse surrounding representations of the Torres Strait and its people in relation to climate change, this section examines both an international and national policy document addressing climate change:

- The 'Fourth Assessment Report' of the IPCC (IPCC, 2007); and
- The Australian Government's 'Climate Change in Australia: Regional Impacts and Adaptation: Managing the Risk for Australia' (PMSEIC Independent Working Group, 2007).

The IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report denotes that Indigenous populations and small island states are the two most immediately vulnerable groups to the impacts of climate change and climate processes. As part of the Working Group II, attention is drawn to the Indigenous populations of New Zealand and Australia and their 'particular' vulnerabilities to these processes. In the case of Australia, the report characterises Indigenous communities as having reduced coping abilities and adaptive capacities. This is on the basis of communities' social and economic disadvantage, which is 'affecting these communities' resilience to climate hazards' (IPCC, 2007: Section 11.4.8). As will be explored later in this report, such representations of the Torres Strait differ widely to those held by the public and subsequent everyday conversation.

The Fourth Assessment Report discusses how '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, 2007: Section 11.4.8). Mention is also made to relocation for some Torres Strait Islanders in the report, casting representations of Islanders as 'displaced persons in waiting':

'King tides in 2005 and 2006 in the Torres Strait have highlighted the need to revisit short-term coastal protection and long-term relocation plans for up to 2,000 Australians living on the central coral cays and north-west islands' (IPCC, 2007: Section 11.4.8).

From this quote, the category of 'displaced' or 'relocated' people has been applied in an unproblematic way to particular areas of the Torres Strait. The language used by different institutions to depict climate change and the people affected by it can drive certain agendas and seek to gain particular advantages.

The Australian Government's Regional Impacts and Adaptation Report is a summary of scientific evidence about climate change. The report was prepared by an independent working group for the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) in 2007. The report not only highlights Australia's climate sensitive economy but also recognises the need to increase the planning and adaptive capacities of communities, regions and industries.

The Torres Strait region was identified as one of three communities with a lower adaptive capacity to climate change, along with remote communities, the elderly and the economically disadvantaged. As portrayed in the report:

'Torres Strait islanders and remote indigenous communities have the highest risks and the lowest adaptive capacity of any in our community because of their relative isolation and limited access to support facilities. In some cases the Torres Strait islands are already at risk from inundation' (PMSEIC Independent Working Group, 2007: 28).

It appears that the working group views the Torres Strait region as being at high risk and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In discussing this point, we refer to Furedi (2007a; b) who explored how people are perceived and perceive themselves in relation to discourses of vulnerability. Furedi (2007a: 482) argued that 'disasters are interpreted through a system of meaning provided by culture'. This has in turn resulted in a changing understanding of adversity, with a focus now on vulnerability, compared to more than fifty years ago when the focus centered on resilience (Furedi, 2007a; b). In the case of the Torres Strait, there has been little recognition of community resourcefulness, individual agency, and importantly, how Islanders have adapted to environmental changes in the past, which could assist in the development of culturally-appropriate adaptation strategies in the future.

Within both international and national policy discourse, it seems that vulnerability has replaced resilience as the naturalised focus of attention. This trend is reflected here in the construction by international bodies (IPCC) and the Australian Government (based on the PMSEIC working group) of Torres Strait Islanders as 'particularly' vulnerable 'victims' with low coping capacity; even as 'displaced persons in waiting'. Indeed, alternative visions for the future in relation to climate change, based on active self-identities and communities are ignored (see Hulme, 2008).

The report now turns to an analysis of media news reports to identify how the Torres Strait has been represented and constructed through this means, and examine if the news media reports support this view of a 'particularly' vulnerable future for the region and its people.

4. Media content analysis

This section of the report explores the ways in which news media reports in Australia have represented the Torres Strait region. The Factiva database allowed for the collection of a series of news media articles. As mentioned in Section 2, this database enables searches of news publications on any given topic. In this case, 'Torres Strait' was the search term used to assemble a series of media reports (n = 22) dated between 2006 and 2009.

Once these articles were collected, both latent and manifest content analyses were carried out to explore how each of the articles represented the region. As referred to in Section 2, latent content analysis assesses the evaluative tenor and key themes within media articles, while manifest content analysis is used to tally the presence of all positive and negative terms used.

Table 1 presents a summary of the terminology used to describe the Torres Strait region in these media articles. As many words as necessary were used to summarise the main points in these media texts. By using a large number of words and terminology to describe these texts (manifest content analysis), it was possible to more accurately assess the overall evaluative tenor of these texts. Table 1 also provides a summary of the evaluative tenor of these texts, which is assessed according to four scales: positive, negative, mixed or neutral (see 'Tenor' column). This tenor is in relation to how the media portrays the Torres Strait region in these texts. If, for instance, the tenor of the media reports is predominately positive, it would be describing the place and its people as part of resilient and resourceful communities. The news media reports, in recognising the agency of Islanders, would stipulate the close relationship held by Islanders with their islands and country. This could be in combination with the ways in which Islander people have adapted to environmental changes in the past and how this might bode well for planning for future culturally-appropriate adaptation strategies. By comparison, denoting media reports as negative indicates that the tenor of the content was pessimistic, emotive-based and doomsday driven.

Table 1: Results of the manifest content analysis of news media reports (n = 22) relating to the Torres Strait, 2006-2009.

News media report	Terminology used and themes	Tenor
Anon. (2009) 'Climate Change: Risks and opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People', State News Service, 30/04/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Impacts (community health, culture, tradition) 2. Urgency 3. Concern 4. Small ecological footprint 5. Indigenous people 6. Need to increase Indigenous involvement 7. UN Declaration on Human Rights for Indigenous people 8. Native title 9. Murray Darling Basin 	Negative
Chau, M. (2009) 'Torres Strait threatened by climate change', Xin Hua News Agency, 07/10/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Threats (king tides, sea levels, storm surges) and threatened 2. Coastal people 3. Concern 4. Effects of climate change 	Negative
Bateman, D. (2009) 'Islands may be swamped: Dire Straits for residents', The Cairns Post, 09/10/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Climate change refugees 2. Trauma 3. Concern 4. Impacts (losses to human heritage and economy, relocation) 5. Reduce greenhouse gas emissions 	Negative
Anon. (2009) 'Garnaut to give Mabo lecture on climate', AAP Bulletins, 07/10/2010	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Threats (king tides, storm surges) 2. Effects on Torres Strait 3. Concern 4. Torres Strait perspective 	Negative /Neutral
Anon. (2009) 'Pacific leaders inspect climate change damage', Asia Pulse, 01/09/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Impacts (water supplies, food management, spread of disease and heat stress for humans and animals) 2. Environmental threats 3. Concern 4. Traditional knowledge and science 5. Strategies and development 6. Risk 7. Repair bill 8. Aid and adaptation 9. Seafaring cultures 	Negative
Michael, P. (2009) 'Water rising in dire straits – Islanders plan to sue climate change culprits', The Courier Mail, 13/05/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Threats (flooding, erosion, king tides, storm surges, sea level) 2. Impacts (islands to be lost, habitat loss, effect on dugongs and migratory birds, graveyards) 3. Islanders homelands 4. To settle in Cairns will cause problems 5. Islanders plan law suit (\$5m) 6. Cites Inuits' law suit against the United States as a comparison 	Negative
Anon. (2009) 'Sea level rise fears for Strait', Townsville Bulletin, 08/10/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Threats (king tides, rising sea levels) 2. Relocation 3. Concern 4. Global mitigation 	Negative /Neutral

News media report	Terminology used and themes	Tenor
Anon. (2009) 'Reports show new way forward for new partnerships between Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples', State News Service, 29/04/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. National human rights act needed 2. Government must act now 3. Need to avoid forcible removal 4. Enable change 5. Native title 6. Monitor progress and partnership 7. Urgency 8. Tactical approach needed 9. Their lands, culture resources 10. Enshrined in legislation 	Negative
Gardiner, S. (2009) 'Climate change to hit Indigenous hard', AAP Bulletins, 04/05/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Impacts (relocation, problems with sewerage, risk of further economic marginalisation as well as perpetual exploitation and dislocation from traditional lands and resources) 2. Native title – not have to continually prove title over their land – needs change 3. Concern 4. Urgency 5. Abuse 6. Cruel irony – smallest footprint but must carry heaviest burden 7. Need a 'seat at the table' 	Negative
Fraser, I. (2009) 'On cusp of change Prof Ross Garnaut says king tides flooding Torres Strait Islands and nearby coastal lowlands of PNG and Indonesian Papua are signs of human induced climate change', The Townsville Bulletin, 10/10/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Brave new world envisaged by Professor Garnaut 2. Change meat eating patterns and greenhouse gas emissions 3. Relocation 4. Solar city ideals 5. Developing nations not addressed in Copenhagen 6. Rhetoric 7. Allow space for economic growth 8. Collective decision on risks to economy and natural/human heritage 	Negative
Anon. (2009) 'Climate case change could pay for Islanders', The Canberra Times, 02/04/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dangerous levels of climate change 2. Rudd Government failing to live up to expectations 3. Threats (sea level, king tides) 4. Impacts (relocation/displacement to mainland, less dugongs/turtles, on sacred sites, on graveyards) 5. Legal action of Islanders (right to carry on traditional customs impaired by climate change) 6. Human Rights commission 7. More actions needed 8. Legal action 9. Global efforts, aim to position Australia as good international citizen 	Negative
Anon. (2009) 'Climate change a threat to coastal developments', ABC News, 26/10/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. New approach – need to change current system as too complex and highly fragmented 2. Legal implications 3. Year of the coast to increase awareness 4. Involving insurance industry 5. Better preparation for marine disasters 	Neutral

News media report	Terminology used and themes	Tenor
Anon. (2009) 'Climate change will marginalise Indigenous people', AAP, 04/05/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Concern 2. Cautious approach 3. Smallest footprint 4. Threats (erosion, high sea storms) 5. Impacts (relocation, destroyed Traditional lands, sewerage) 6. Native title act 7. Change, consultation, consideration 	Neutral
McGrow, K. (2009) 'Special report: They're not waving, they're drowning', Crikey, 05/08/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Devastating changes 2. Impacts (loss of homes, culture identity, 19 unique communities) 3. High level of concern 4. Threats (sea level, drought, large waves flooded gardens, storms, changing flora, no sand, weather patterns, salinity) 5. Feel weak and hopeless 6. Not ready to say goodbye to the islands 	Negative
Anon. (2009) 'Climate a hot topic at Indigenous talks', The Kalgoorlie Miner, 23/04/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Indigenous Peoples Global Summit 2. Share experiences of climate change 3. Participation in all matters that concern Indigenous peoples 4. Concern 5. Representation 6. Careful management 7. Impacts (high temperatures, impact of bush foods, economic and social disadvantages) 	Negative /Neutral
Anon. (2009) 'Island communities face climate threats', The Cairns Post, 18/05/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Threats (high tides, coastal erosion, bleached coral, changing weather patterns) 2. Native Title Act, Australian Human Rights Commission 3. Devastation 4. Upgrading seawalls 5. Concern 6. Uncertain future 	Negative
Anon. (2009) 'Wyatt: Consider culture in climate change response', The Kalgoorlie Miner, 13/05/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Culture and traditional practices 2. Respect for land and culture 3. Mother Earth 4. Anchorage 5. Concern 6. Immediate action 7. Climate crisis 8. Coastal and island communities 9. Deep alarm 	Negative
Bloomfield, B. (2009) 'From Uni to the UN', The Cairns Post, 02/05/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. UN 2. Fair wages 3. Better education on climate change for Torres Strait Islanders 	Neutral /Negative
Bousen, M. (2009) 'Ring of fire disease threat', Torres News, 17/01/2009	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Threats (human and animal plagues, ring of fire hot spot for disease, biosecurity) 2. Most vulnerable 3. Forewarning and forward thinking 	Negative

News media report	Terminology used and themes	Tenor
Franklin, M. (2008) 'PM orders council to identify risks from rising seas', The Australian, 15/02/2008	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Insurance 2. Threats (tidal surges) 3. Impacts (forced to move residents off Saibai Island, economic) 4. Concern 	Negative
Parnell, S. (2008) 'Weather forecast dire for North Queensland', The Australian, 25/06/2008	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Threats (monsoonal rains, cyclones rising sea levels will inundate the region) 2. Impacts (loss of biodiversity) 3. Concern 	Neutral /Negative
Minchin, L. (2006) 'Rising waters may flood her island home', Sydney Morning Herald, 12/08/2006	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remote islands 2. Threats (sea levels, storm surges) 3. Impacts (relocation) 4. Low lying islands 5. Swampy northern island of Saibai 6. Concern 	Negative

From this analysis, the news media articles emerged as a combination of neutral/negative or negative evaluative tenor. In the majority of articles, climate change processes were implicated in the identity of the region and community and used to construct its people as vulnerable 'victims'. Such an identity and status marginalises other possible alternative discourses for Torres Strait Islanders. As a consequence, alternative constructions of Islander identity that might revolve around resilience, resourcefulness and agency are again silenced, as identified in the policy documents.

The use of emotive words such as 'relocation', 'dire', 'crisis', 'hopeless', 'urgency' and 'deep alarm' not only portrays the impacts of climate change as severe or extreme, but also permanent and far-reaching. These descriptions of the situation faced by many Islanders conjure up images of Islanders being 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 a particular climate discourse and future: that climate change is a destructive and threatening process to the people of the Torres Strait, reinforcing the construction of Islanders as vulnerable.

5. Public opinion survey results

This section summarises the results of the public opinion survey, which set out to ascertain public opinion and everyday conversations on climate change, and the key public representations of the Torres Strait region.

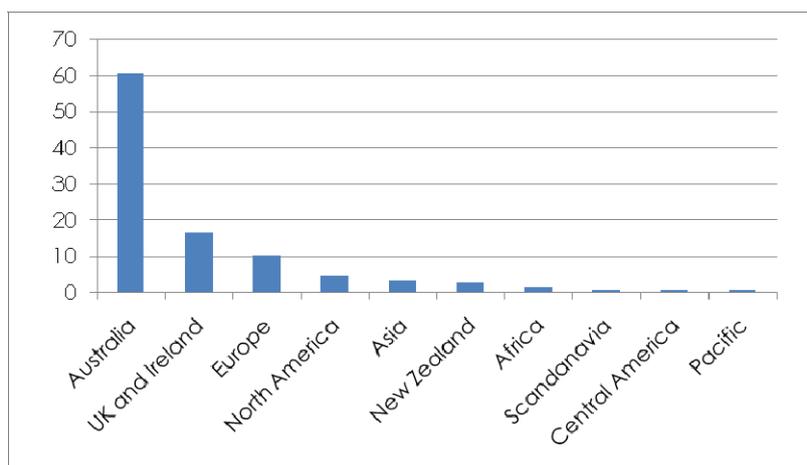
5.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of survey respondents

Gender and origin

Respondents were asked to indicate their gender and country of origin. If respondents indicated Australia as their origin, they were then asked to provide their postcode. From the sample (n = 160), 34.6% of respondents were male, and 65.4% were female.

Figure 1 provides a summary of respondents' country of origin. The vast majority of respondents were Australian (60.4%), followed by those from the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland (16.4%), and Europe (10.1%).

Figure 1: Origin of survey respondents as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).

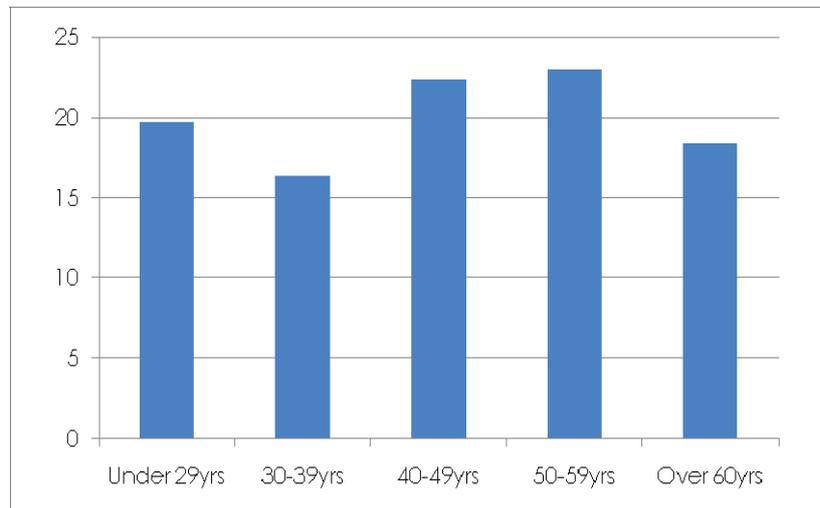


Of those respondents whose origin was Australia, the overwhelming majority were from Queensland (81.2%), followed by those from New South Wales (8.9%), Victoria (5.9%), South Australia (3.0%) and the Northern Territory (1.0%).

Age

Respondents were asked to indicate the year in which they were born. The mean year that respondents were born was 1965, making 45 years the average age of respondents. The earliest year that a respondent was born was 1929 while the most recent was 1994. Figure 2 provides a summary of the age groupings of respondents from less than 29 to over 60 years, and highlights the even spread of respondents across these decade-based groupings.

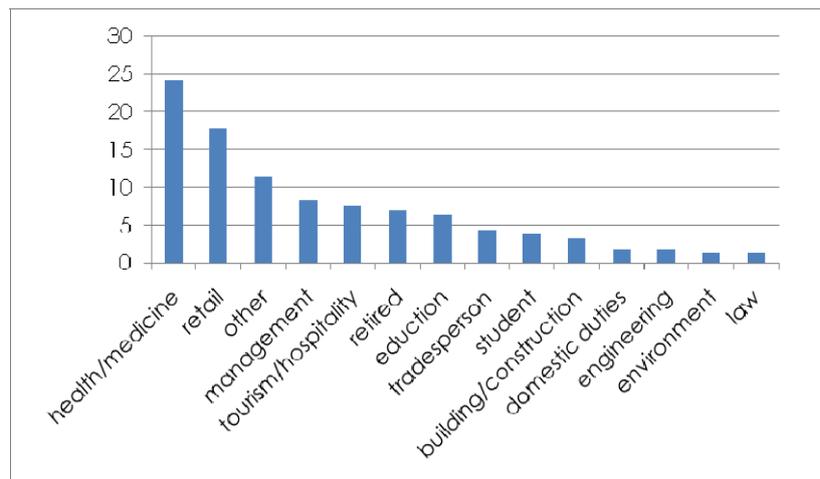
Figure 2: Ages of survey respondents as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).



Occupation

Respondents were asked to select their field of work based on a list of 15 possible occupation titles. One open-ended response, 'other' was provided for respondents to select if there were no titles that best described their occupation. Figure 3 illustrates the summary of respondents' occupations.

Figure 3: Occupations of survey respondents as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).

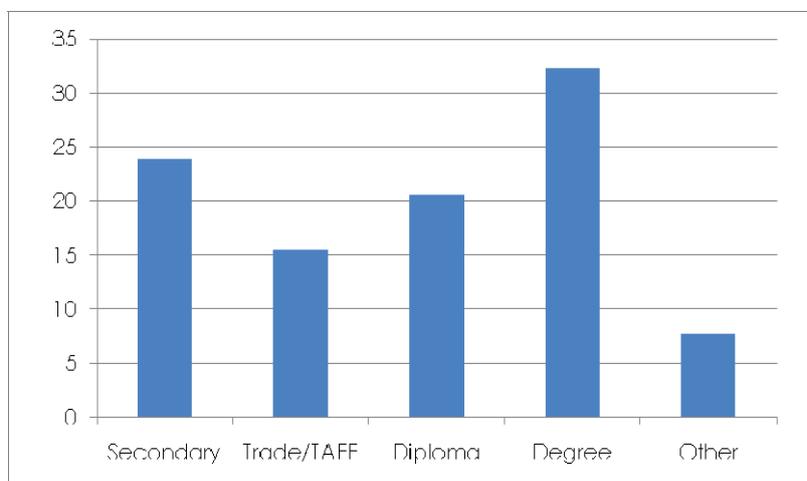


From the 15 options given, only one was not chosen by respondents ('science'). 'Health/medicine' was the most popular field chosen (24.1%), followed by 'retail' (17.7%) and 'other' (11.4%). Some examples that were included in 'other' included 'administration', 'artist', 'pilot', 'research' and 'archaeology'.

Education

The survey requested that respondents indicate their highest level of formal education received. Results are demonstrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Level of education reached by survey respondents as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).



While the highest number of respondents had obtained a university degree (32.3%), there was a relatively even spread across all levels of formal education obtainment.

The above socio-demographic characteristics of respondents offer some insight into the sample of survey respondents. These characteristics, along with whether or not respondents have visited the Torres Strait region, will be used to compare and contrast the responses of certain groups to survey questions relating to descriptions of, and attitudes and knowledge concerning the Torres Strait region.

Survey respondents who have visited the Torres Strait region

Respondents were asked if they had ever been to the Torres Strait. Of those surveyed, 21.7% had visited the Torres Strait. Of those who had visited, 63.5% visited for work, while the remaining group had visited for holidays (36.5%). For those respondents who had not visited the Torres Strait (78.3%), 55.2% indicated they would consider going on a holiday to the region (44.8% of these respondents said that they would not plan to go there on holidays).

5.2 Describing the Torres Strait

A series of thirty words or descriptors that could be used to depict the Torres Strait were used in the survey. Respondents were asked to indicate how accurate these words were in describing how they considered or perceived the region to be, based on a Likert scale that ranged from 'not accurate' (equal to 1) to 'extremely accurate' (equal to 5).

In order of survey presentation, the thirty possible descriptors of the Torres Strait were:

- 'Remote/isolated'
- 'Outback'
- 'Separate (from mainland Australia)'
- 'Off the mainstream radar'
- 'Island paradise'
- 'Tourism destination'
- 'Melanesian'
- 'Unique culture'
- 'Vibrant culture'
- 'Strong culture'
- 'Successful land claims'
- 'Distinct Indigenous community'
- 'Indigenous Australians'
- 'Experiences extreme weather'
- 'Vulnerable to climate change'
- 'Exceptional biodiversity'
- 'Fishing communities'
- 'Good environmental managers'
- 'Valuable traditional knowledge'
- 'Musical'
- 'Athletic'
- 'Poor social services'
- 'Poor health'
- 'Poor education'
- 'High poverty'
- 'Neglected by Government'
- 'Place of tropical diseases'
- 'Biosecurity threat'
- 'Dangerous' and
- 'People have a close relationship with their environment'.

Table 2 summarises the mean values given to each of these descriptors, and also includes the individual percentage values for each of the five scales.

Table 2: Survey respondents' ratings of descriptions of the Torres Strait based on their opinions or perceptions (n = 160).

Descriptions of the Torres Strait in order of highest mean value	Mean value	Rating (%)				
		1 'Not accurate'	2 'A little accurate'	3 'Moderately accurate'	4 'Very accurate'	5 'Extremely accurate'
1. Fishing communities	4.21	1.3	3.1	11.9	40.3	43.4
2. Distinct Indigenous community	4.09	1.3	3.2	20.6	34.8	40.0
3. Valuable traditional knowledge	4.02	1.3	7.6	17.8	34.4	38.9
4. People have close relationship with their environment	3.94	2.5	5.7	22.0	35.2	34.6
5. Strong culture	3.87	3.2	6.5	21.4	37.7	31.2
6. Unique culture	3.83	3.8	5.1	24.8	36.3	29.9
7. Indigenous Australians	3.80	10.6	6.6	14.6	28.5	39.7
8. Separate (from mainland Australia)	3.80	10.2	8.9	10.8	30.6	39.5
9. Vulnerable to climate change	3.78	3.2	12.2	19.2	34.6	30.8
10. Musical	3.69	5.1	7.7	28.2	31.4	27.6
11. Remote/isolated	3.62	3.8	10.3	26.9	37.8	21.2
12. Vibrant culture	3.57	4.5	9.6	31.8	33.1	21.0
13. Experiences extreme weather	3.40	8.4	19.5	19.5	28.6	24.0
14. Exceptional biodiversity	3.33	5.8	18.2	33.1	22.7	20.1
15. 'Off the mainstream radar'	3.20	16.0	10.3	29.5	26.3	17.9
16. Poor social services	3.19	7.1	16.9	39.6	22.1	14.3
17. Athletic	3.13	9.6	19.7	30.6	28.0	12.1
18. Island paradise	3.10	12.1	14.6	38.2	21.0	14.0
19. Poor health	3.08	6.4	19.7	45.2	16.6	12.1
20. Poor education	3.07	5.8	20.6	45.8	16.1	11.6
21. Successful land claims	3.06	8.6	21.9	36.4	21.2	11.9
22. Place of tropical diseases	2.99	9.7	25.8	33.5	18.1	12.9
23. High poverty	2.95	12.3	19.5	38.3	20.8	9.1
24. Neglected by Government	2.87	14.8	22.6	31.0	23.9	7.7
25. Biosecurity threat	2.78	22.9	22.9	22.2	17.0	15.0
26. Good environmental managers	2.69	14.3	24.7	44.8	10.4	5.8
27. Melanesian	2.52	38.1	10.8	23.7	15.8	11.5
28. Tourism destination	2.50	20.8	32.1	30.8	8.8	7.5
29. Dangerous	1.87	45.8	29.7	18.1	4.5	1.9
30. Outback	1.64	64.9	16.2	9.7	7.8	1.3

Of particular interest are the top ten descriptions ranked by respondents. Eight of these in particular describe the Torres Strait region's internal attributes such as fishing, a distinct Indigenous community, valuable traditional knowledge, Islanders' close relationship with the environment, music and culture. The remaining two descriptions (from this top ten) refer to external ways of imagining the region – impacts from externally-induced climate change and geographical separation from mainland Australia.

This is an interesting finding: the public's dominant view of the Torres Strait appears to be of a strong and unique culture, based around fishing and Islanders' close relationships with their environment. It is not based on the dominant, popular media-generated image of the region as 'victims' of an inhospitable, changing and threatening climate. Respondents considered the description of the region as being 'vulnerable to climate change' as the ninth most popular, with 3.2% of respondents considering it to be 'not accurate', 12.2% of respondents considering it 'a little accurate', and 19.2% of respondents considering it 'moderately accurate'. Moreover, the description of the Torres Strait as a place that 'experiences extreme weather' was the thirteenth most popular according to respondents, from thirty different descriptions.

Table 3 provides a comparison of the top ten descriptions of the Torres Strait based on the overall sample according to respondents' age, origin and whether or not respondents had visited the region or not.

Table 3: The top ten descriptors of the Torres Strait according to survey respondents' age and origin, and whether they had visited the region previously (as mean values).

Descriptions of the Torres Strait in order of highest mean value	Mean value	Age group					Origin		Previous visit to the Torres Strait	
		<29 yrs	30-39 yrs	40-49 yrs	50-59 yrs	>60 yrs	Domestic	Int'l	Have been	Haven't been
1. Fishing communities	4.21	4.03	4.21	4.44	4.11	4.29	4.31	4.08	4.21	4.23
2. Distinct Indigenous community	4.09	3.90	4.52	4.19	4.06	4.18	4.20	3.93	3.97	4.16
3. Valuable traditional knowledge	4.02	4.00	4.17	4.12	4.11	3.86	4.00	4.07	3.94	4.09
4. People have close relationship with their environment	3.94	4.23	4.04	3.91	3.71	3.89	4.03	3.81	3.79	4.01
5. Strong culture	3.87	4.00	4.13	3.85	3.56	3.93	3.91	3.82	3.85	3.89
6. Unique culture	3.83	3.86	4.17	3.56	3.80	3.93	3.94	3.68	3.94	3.80
7. Indigenous Australians	3.80	3.68	4.00	3.94	3.88	3.62	4.07	3.42	4.03	3.74
8. Separate (from mainland Australia)	3.80	3.61	3.88	3.56	3.91	4.19	3.84	3.75	3.64	3.91
9. Vulnerable to climate change	3.78	3.76	4.25	3.94	3.89	3.30	3.85	3.67	3.70	3.82
10. Musical	3.69	3.36	3.67	3.65	4.17	3.59	3.79	3.53	3.82	3.67

Grouping respondents according to different variables (age, origin and visitation to the region), assists us to ascertain which groups might be identifying the Torres Strait in particular ways. The younger generation identifies the region as having a distinct Indigenous community, a strong and unique culture and a close relationship to the environment. They are also the group who, by far, recognised the region as being 'particularly' vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This may be an overall reflection of Generation 'X' and 'Y' being more aware of environmental problems and issues. By comparison, describing the Torres Strait as separate (from mainland Australia) was more prevalent among older generation respondents.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to think about the Torres Strait and describe the region in their own words. Of the 160 surveyed, 114 respondents provided descriptions. None of these descriptions included any mention of climate change, climate variability or processes, vulnerability or 'victims'. Instead, the main themes revolved around the culture and people of the Torres Strait, as the following quotes epitomise:

- 'Tropical islands, indigenous, cultural';
- 'Island community, basic infrastructure, strong culture';
- 'Warm and friendly people';
- 'Cultural and diverse and individual in its tradition structure';
- 'Isolated, culturally rich, poor, indigenous, home of Mabo and the beginning of native title recognition'; and
- 'Beautiful island(s) paradise, welcoming people – out of mainstream so still able to practice their culture'.

Other key themes that emerged from the descriptions involved references to the natural beauty of the region and its remoteness:

- 'Beautiful environment and sea';
- 'Beautiful and a paradise, very laid back and nature at its best'; and
- 'Remote, island paradise troubled by economic and health issues'.

This final quote above also illustrates that for some respondents, identifying the many challenges facing the region, such as economic, health and education issues, was an important factor in describing the region. However, as referred to earlier, no respondents, in describing how they visualised the region, mentioned climate change vulnerability or extreme weather events.

5.3 Knowledge about the Torres Strait

Respondents were asked five questions that explored their knowledge of the Torres Strait region. These ranged from population size to the administrative centre to the total number of islands in the region. These survey questions were used to identify the base level of knowledge about the Torres Strait.

The following figures present the results of these questions. Figure 5 summarises responses to a survey question about the Australian jurisdiction of the Torres Strait. The majority of respondents correctly indicated that Queensland was the Australian jurisdiction for the Torres Strait Islands (83.2%).

Figure 5: The jurisdiction of the Torres Strait according to survey respondents, as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).

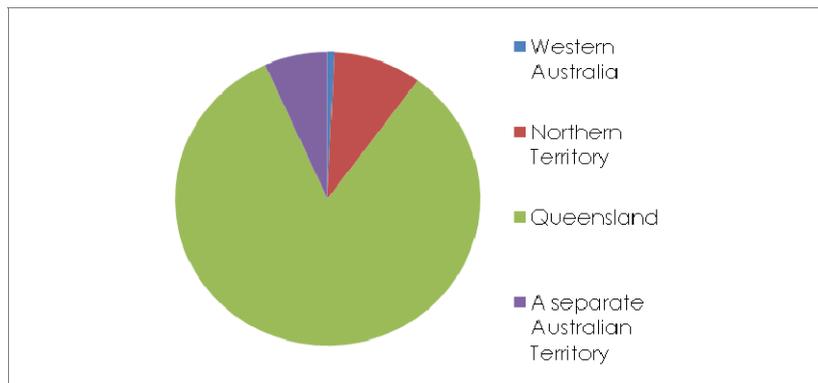
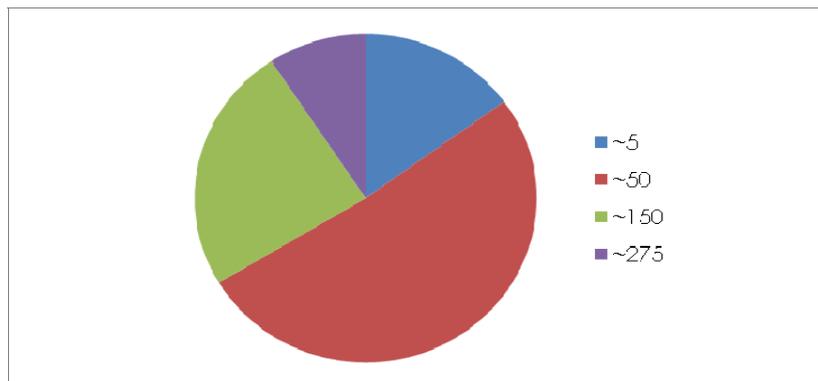


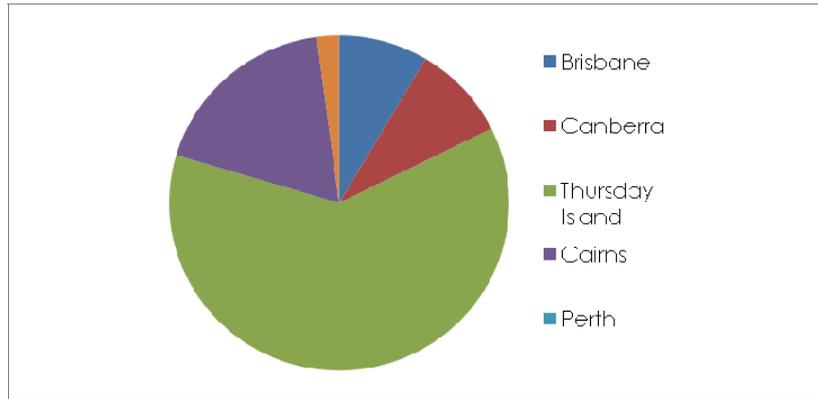
Figure 6 indicates respondents' knowledge of how many islands are located in the Torres Strait in total (both inhabited and uninhabited islands). Only a small number of respondents were able to correctly approximate the number of islands located in the Torres Strait (~275; 9.3%), with the large majority of respondents approximating there to be around 50 islands in the region (51.4%).

Figure 6: The number of islands in the Torres Strait according to survey respondents, as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).



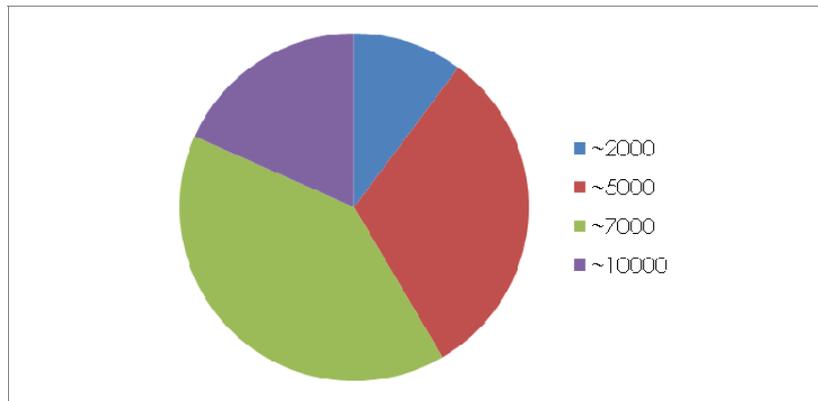
Respondents were also asked where the administrative centre of the Torres Strait is located, the results for which are summarised in Figure 7. The majority of respondents (62.0%) selected the correct answer – Thursday Island.

Figure 7: The administrative centre of the Torres Strait according to survey respondents, as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).



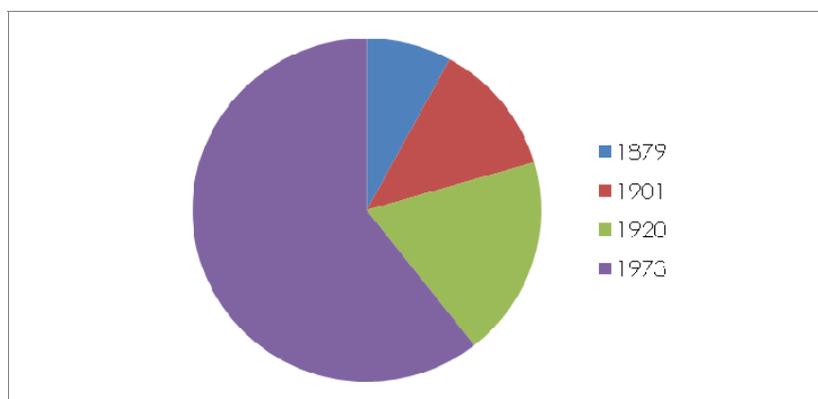
Based on four possible options, respondents were asked to indicate the estimated population size of Torres Strait, the results of which are provided in Figure 8. The number of people living in the Torres Strait region is approximately 7,000. Less than half of all respondents selected this option (39.9%), while 31.2% of respondents selected approximately 5,000 people.

Figure 8: The population size of the Torres Strait according to survey respondents, as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).



In the final knowledge-based survey question, respondents were asked to indicate the year in which the Torres Strait legally became part of the State of Queensland (Figure 9). Only 7.9% of respondents correctly identified 1879 as the correct answer. The vast majority of respondents incorrectly nominated the year as 1973 (60.6%).

Figure 9: The year in which the Torres Strait legally became part of the State of Queensland according to survey respondents, as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).



5.4 Attitudes towards climate change

This section explores the attitudes of survey respondents to climate change. Respondents were asked to think about climate change and indicate their concern for a series of places and issues on a Likert scale of 'not concerned' (equal to 1) to 'extremely concerned' (equal to 5). These were listed in the survey in the following order:

- Loss of the Great Barrier Reef;
- Loss of the Murray Darling Basin;
- Loss of islands in the Torres Strait region;
- Loss of islands in the Pacific region;
- Decreasing quality of life;
- Reduced biodiversity in Australia;
- Diminishing fresh water supplies;
- Increase in extreme weather events;
- Lack of Australian Government action; and
- Lack of an international agreement.

Table 4 summaries the mean values of respondents' concerns for these places and issues, and also the individual percentage values for each of the five scales.

Table 4: Respondents' concerns for a series of places and climate change impacts.

Climate change concern or impact in order of highest mean value	Mean value	Percentage of overall sample (n = 160)				
		1 'Not concerned'	2 'A little concerned'	3 'Moderately concerned'	4 'Very concerned'	5 'Extremely concerned'
1. Diminishing fresh water supplies	4.27	4.7	4.1	10.8	20.3	60.1
2. Loss of the Great Barrier Reef	4.22	6.1	3.4	10.9	21.8	57.8
3. Reduced biodiversity in Aust	4.05	4.1	6.1	16.3	27.9	45.6
4. Decreasing quality of life	4.05	5.4	5.4	16.2	25.0	48.0
5. Increase in extreme weather events	4.04	6.1	6.1	15.5	22.3	50.0
6. Lack of an international agreement	3.99	8.2	6.8	12.3	23.3	49.3
7. Loss of islands in the Pacific	3.99	5.5	6.2	16.4	28.1	43.8
8. Loss of the Murray Darling Basin	3.95	6.2	6.2	20.0	21.4	46.2
9. Lack of Australian Government action	3.86	7.5	8.9	16.4	24.0	43.2
10. Loss of islands in the Torres Strait	3.86	7.5	6.8	20.4	23.1	42.2

Based on the ten concerns outlined in Table 4 and in relation to the impacts of climate change, respondents indicated that diminishing water supplies and 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 = 3.89), they were of least concern when compared with other places, losses or issues. Again, this reiterates the fact that the image of the Torres Strait for these respondents was not one of extreme vulnerability. While there might be recognition of the impacts of climate change in the region, a discourse of ‘victimhood’ is not the dominant one. This shakes presumptions, and both media and policy constructions of the Torres Strait as being ‘particularly’ vulnerable to climate change processes and impacts.

Table 5 compares respondents’ concerns for these places and issues, according to their age groupings, origin (domestic/international), and whether or not they have been to the Torres Strait.

Table 5: Respondents’ concerns for a series of places and impacts, according to their age and origin, and whether they had visited the Torres Strait previously (as mean values).

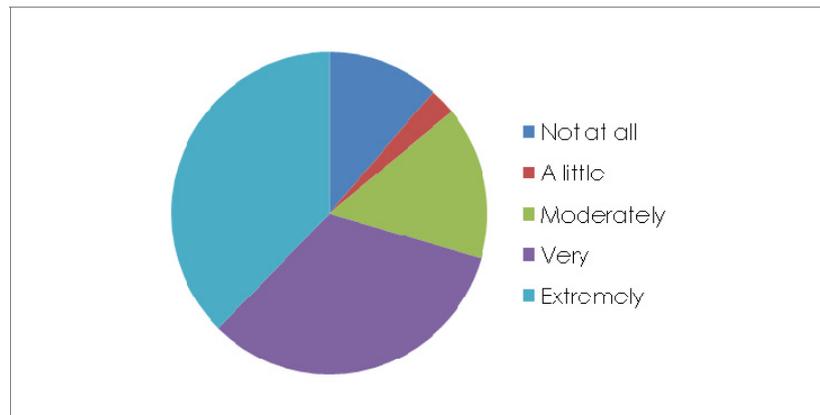
Climate change concern or impact in order of highest mean value	Mean value	Age group					Origin		Previous visit to the Torres Strait	
		<29 yrs	30-39 yrs	40-49 yrs	50-59 yrs	>60 yrs	Domestic	Int'l	Have been	Haven't been
1. Diminishing fresh water supplies	4.27	4.58	4.37	4.12	4.32	4.04	4.40	4.07	3.90	4.37
2. Loss of the Great Barrier Reef	4.22	4.62	4.54	4.12	4.24	3.54	4.20	4.24	3.71	4.35
3. Reduced biodiversity in Aust	4.05	4.38	4.17	4.03	4.32	3.33	4.10	3.97	3.71	4.14
4. Decreasing quality of life	4.05	4.46	4.25	3.88	4.21	3.46	4.03	4.07	3.65	4.15
5. Increase in extreme weather events	4.04	4.00	4.25	4.18	4.15	3.54	4.09	3.97	3.77	4.11
6. Lack of an international agreement	3.99	4.35	4.25	3.94	3.94	3.26	3.92	4.09	3.28	4.16
7. Loss of islands in the Pacific	3.99	4.19	3.96	3.94	4.29	3.42	4.01	3.95	3.77	4.04
8. Loss of the Murray Darling Basin	3.95	4.08	3.67	3.72	4.32	3.75	4.18	3.60	3.87	3.97
9. Lack of Australian Government action	3.86	3.96	4.21	3.79	3.71	3.61	3.90	3.81	3.24	4.02
10. Loss of islands in the Torres Strait	3.86	4.08	4.04	3.79	4.09	3.12	3.88	3.83	3.61	3.92

Again, by grouping respondents according to different variables (age, origin and visitation to the region), we can better identify which groups find particular places and issues of most concern as a result of climate change. As with the descriptions of the region (see Table 3), younger generation respondents were the most concerned with a number of the places and impacts. These included fresh water supplies, loss of the Great Barrier Reef and biodiversity, decreased quality of life, lack of Government action and lack of an international agreement.

On the other hand, older generation respondents were the most concerned group of the entire sample about the loss of the Murray Darling Basin and loss of islands in the Pacific and the Torres Strait region.

Respondents were also asked if they were at all concerned about the impacts of climate change. The large majority of respondents answered 'yes' to this (88.5%). Respondents were then asked to indicate how concerned they were, based on a Likert scale of 'not at all' (equal to 1) to 'extremely' (equal to 5), the results of which are summarised in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Concerns about climate change according to survey respondents, as a percentage of the overall sample (n = 160).



The reason for documenting this is to illustrate that the large majority of respondents were 'very concerned' or 'extremely concerned' about the impacts of climate change. This translates into having concerns for impacts in a variety of places and on a number of issues. While respondents considered the loss of the Torres Strait islands as a concern, respondents were only 'moderately concerned', and yet by comparison were 'very concerned' or 'extremely concerned' about climate change overall.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to assess how islands of the Torres Strait have been conceptualised from the 'outside', particularly in relation to climate change. This report has presented divergent representations of the Torres Strait region, which have stemmed from a critique of three main sources – international and national policy, media and public opinion. A number of methods were employed to undertake this research, including discourse analysis, content analysis and structured surveys. The aim of this study was not to deny the impacts of climate change throughout the region, but instead to interrogate constructions of the Torres Strait as being 'particularly' vulnerable to these processes.

In the policy arena, the climate change imperatives centered on a 'particular' vulnerability. This involved the representation of Torres Strait communities as having a low adaptive capacity to climate change impacts and processes, which may even result in relocation. In this instance, a climate change category of Torres Strait Islanders as 'victims' and even 'displaced persons in waiting' was applied in a straightforward manner. Little attention was given to alternative visions for the future based around community resourcefulness, individual agency and, importantly, how Islanders have adapted to environmental changes in the past to assist in the development of culturally-appropriate adaptation strategies.

In a similar discursive fashion, news media reports have portrayed the Torres Strait as a 'victim' region that is 'particularly' vulnerable to climate change impacts, variability and processes such as sea level rise. Moreover, these news texts emphasised the immorality of the international community at large for contributing to climate change – the impacts of which are being faced by communities in the Torres Strait. With little reference to community resilience and agency in these news reports, the 'particular' vulnerability of the Torres Strait becomes bound with images of helplessness.

This construction, particularly in relation to the future of the Torres Strait, has the potential to silence other representations that demonstrate a potentially significant capacity for resilience. While this wasn't the explicit image stemming from the public opinion survey, there was however much more of a focus given to the people, culture, community and tradition. Based on the survey, the region was not viewed as 'particularly' vulnerable to climate change processes. Instead, the dominant images of the Torres Strait considered by the public were of a vibrant and unique culture, conjuring up images of a place able to fashion energetic communities and adapt to environmental change.

The findings of this report raise some interesting concerns. The main concern is the potential impact of emphasising the 'particular' vulnerability of the region in terms of its own capacity to respond to climate change impacts and imperatives. The reason for such concern is that this study has demonstrated that doomsday (and associated 'victimhood') discourses emphasise a 'particular' vulnerability based around long-term sea level rise and relocation instead of a focus on mitigation, adaptation and resilience. In this way, vulnerability discourses, as identified to be present in policy and media documents, may reduce the resilience of Torres Strait communities to draw on their own resources and capabilities to adapt to environmental changes. This report has identified and engaged with these divergent constructions of the region, and highlights that these can influence the resilience of Torres Strait communities simply by emphasising their 'particular' vulnerability. Importantly then, this report emphasises the need for a more balanced perspective in the vulnerability-resilience continuum across all scales.

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