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CASE STUDY 4

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS AND OUR TURTLES

by

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BY HORACE B NONA

Mr Nona is a Torres Strait Islander, born on Thursday Island. This paper is written from the perspective of a Torres Strait Islander who has actively participated in the fishing industries of the Torres Strait and who recently obtained employment in the fisheries management of the Strait.

The Torres Strait is made up of a group of 18 inhabited and dozens of uninhabited islands strung out over 32,000 sq/km of reef strewn sea between Cape York Peninsula of Australia and Papua New Guinea. The islands are of four basic geological types;

Volcanic - typically rich soil and lush vegetation.

Coral Atoll - small, flat, infertile soil, sparse vegetation.

Mangrove - flat, muddy and waterlogged.

Contential - large, dry, hilly, dry sclerophyll type woodland.

Because of the generally poor soil and lack of water on the islands, few crops can be grown. Root crops such as taro, yam, sweet potato and cassava are the only crops grown. These crops form a major part of the islanders staple diet. The three volcanic islands are the exception to this rule. Here crops such as corn, bananas, pawpaws, tomatoes etc are easily grown.

Generally speaking there are no land animals suitable as a food source. The exceptions are Saibai and Boigu (Rusa deer) and Badu and Moa islands (feral pigs).

There are 27 communities situated in the Torres Strait, including four communities on Cape York Peninsula. (fig 1). The administrative centre for Torres Strait is Thursday Island with a total population of about 2500 people in three communities. The population of the remaining communities

ranges from 50 to 800 people. The total population, including non islanders, of the Torres Strait and Cape York communities is about 6500 people.

Each community has a dry weather airstrip, one phone (often broken) and also one VHF radio in case of any emergency. Supplies are brought to each community including Thursday Island by cargo vessel once a month. These vessels are all based and supplied in Cairns, some 1000 km to the south.

There is no mains electricity in any community except Thursday Island so each household supplies their own power with 2kva petrol generators.

These are turned off during the day and only used as a lighting plant during the night. This makes the operation of freezers for frozen products, meat, fish etc very difficult.

TRADITIONAL USAGE OF MARINE PRODUCTS

BACKGROUND

Seabased resources are extremely important in the diet of Torres Strait Islanders. We have one of the highest seafood consumption rates in the world (Johannes and McFarlane in press; Poiner and Harris in press).

Our most important resources are dugongs, green turtles and a variety of fin-fish, with the relative importance of each group varying both between island communities and within communities and at different times of the year (Poiner and Harris in press). For example dugong meat is more

important in the western islands where they are more plentiful (Marsh and Saalfeld 1989). Other marine resources that are used includes gastropods (trochus, mud whelk), bivalves (clams, mussels) and crustaceans (crayfish, crabs and prawns).

In addition, sea-based resources are also important in the commercial and artisinal fishing activitivies of the Torres Strait eg. lobster, mother of pearl, mackerel, reef fish and trochus etc (Storrs 1988).

MARINE TURTLES

Six species of turtles are found in the Torres Strait; Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), flatback (*C depressa*), Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), Loggerhead (*Caretta-Caretta*). The leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is rarely seen in the Torres Strait. The Green turtles are the only turtles taken for meat consumption, whereas the eggs of the green, flatback and hawksbill are taken.

Before European settlement and influence we (Torres Strait Islanders) did not have modern equipment such as outboards, dinghies etc. In these days turtles were abundant and very few were taken.

The method used by the early islanders to catch turtles and also dugongs was to build a platform on the reef flat where the animals fed on the

incoming tide. On this platform the hunter would wait till the tide was right and a dugong or turtle came close enough to the platform for him to spear it. Below this platform two other men would wait in a canoe to catch the turtle or dugong when the animal was speared. The spear or harpoon used is known to the Torres Strait Islanders as a whap. This is a long wooden pole with a detachable barb woven into a long rope, (originally made from coconut fibre). The barb is speared into the animal and the pole retrieved. The speared animal is then pulled in after it tires.

Another method that was used to catch only turtles is with a yellow sucker fish. This fish is caught and rigged with rope by the hunter in a special way. When a turtle is seen the fish is thrown at the turtle. The fish would then intercept the turtle attaching itself to it and the hunter would just pull the turtle in.

The knowledge and skill to take turtle and dugong by these methods was known by only a few who were esteemed in the community. With the introduction of modern equipment, hunting methods have changed considerably. It is now a lot easier with the outboard powered dinghies to catch dugong and turtle. Hunters simply chase the dugong or turtle and either spear them or jump over and grab them after the animal has been tired out. These methods do not require any special skills, and no longer have status attached to them.

TURTLE MEAT DISTRIBUTION

When the hunters return from a turtle hunting trip, the turtle or turtles is/are then butchered and shared equally amongst the people of the village. There is no ritual involvement in the catching and butchering of the green turtle. Everybody gets a little piece from the different parts of the green turtle, and there are no special parts of the turtle reserved for any specific person or people.

Turtles are taken all year as they are an important source of protein and can be taken fresh as required (as mentioned earlier there are no facilities to store fresh meat). However most of the turtle taken in the Torres Strait is in the latter months of the year (September to December), because these are the months when the green turtles mate and are always very fat. Also, this is when most of our festive celebrations are held, such as weddings, tombstone unveilings etc. Green turtles taken on these occasions are always used wisely and never wasted, because they can be used in a variety of different dishes suited to fat or lean turtle. At other times in the year lean turtles are not used.

Turtles and dugongs are not taken commercially in the Torres Strait, they can only be caught by the traditional inhabitants and used for their own consumption.

EGG HARVESTING

Of the six turtles found in the Torres Strait only the hawksbill, green and flatback nest here, therefore these are the only eggs eaten by Torres Strait Islanders. The loggerhead is known to migrate down the east coast of Queensland where it nests. The olive ridley is known to nest on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula through to the Northern Territory and the leatherback doesn't nest in Australia.

Turtle eggs are only taken by islanders for their own consumption, Egg collecting is usually the minor part of a fishing trip, whether during crayfishing, line fishing, or a turtle or dugong hunting trip. People rarely go out just to collect turtle eggs and those eggs that are collected are used the same day. Nests are found by following fresh turtle tracks up the beach.

The Torres Strait is a nesting area of world significance for the flatback and hawksbill. There are three islands in the Torres Strait, (Kerr, Deliverance and Crab islands) that have the largest flatback turtle rookeries in the world.

Sporadic nesting of green turtles occurs throughout the Torres Strait, but none of the rookeries are considered to be of major significance. It is thus the harvesting of the hawksbill and flatback eggs that is of greatest concern.

Adding to human pressure, varanid lizards reportedly dig up and consume almost all eggs laid at some minor rookeries in western Torres Strait (Limpus and Parmenter, 1986). There are no other known predators of turtle eggs in the Torres Strait.

LEGAL STATUS

The taking of turtles in the Torres Strait is governed by laws instituted as a result of the Torres Strait Treaty between Australia and Papua New Guinea (ratified Feb 1985). In the Australian part of the Torres Strait the commercial take and use of all turtles and turtle products is totally prohibited by both Commonwealth and Queensland law. In the Papua New Guinea part of the Torres Strait a commercial catch of turtles is allowed provided they....."are consumed by residents of Papua New Guinea and are not exported."

CONSERVATION KNOWLEDGE

Like all other peoples, Torres Strait islanders are very unsure about conserving anything which has been taken for centuries, and is still taken today, with little effort.

Islanders say there is and always will be plenty of turtle in the Torres Strait because to them the numbers of green turtles does not seem to be

decreasing. Islanders believe this, because whenever a turtle (green) is needed it can always be caught with very little effort. Because other species of turtles are not eaten, Islanders do not know what the status of their population are, however, there has never been a shortage of eggs.

The indigenous harvest of green turtle (*C. mydas*) in the Torres Strait by Torres Strait Islanders and the Kiwai people of Papua New Guinea would be of the order of 5200 to 6300 turtles per year (Kwan 1989). To place this harvest in perspective an average of 60 tonnes of tortoise shell is exported worldwide each year (Anon 1989).

Green shell for what?

CONCLUSION

A fact that should not be ignored by conservationists, is that turtles and dugongs are not just of cultural significance, they are our food. This source of food has been used by our fathers and their fathers before them. Turtle and dugong are taken for food as a necessity, because if this food source is taken away from the islanders, there is no other source of fresh meat. The nearest and only butcher shop in the Torres Strait is on Thursday Island, up to 250km away from the other inhabited islands.

As already mentioned, the consumption by Torres Strait Islanders of turtle and turtle eggs in the Torres Strait is relatively low, because there is no commercial industry. The conservation and preservation of turtles on a

6,000 turtles
by 6,500 people
@ 100kg/turtle = 600 tonnes
= 92 kg/person or
over 1/2 lb/day/person

world wide scale requires first, the elimination of all full scale commercial (ie including the export of turtle products) utilisation of this resource along with protection of major rookeries. These measures are of far more significance then concerntrating on preventing a small annual harvest by subsistance fishermen.

If conservation projects are to be successful in the Torres Strait or any where else the first step is to convince the people that there is a problem.

It is easy for western societies to consider the residents of what are termed "underdeveloped" or "third world" countries to be ignorant and unconcerned about conservation. The reaction of western societies to the availability of fossil fuels and timber are excellent examples of other people in "developed" countries ignoring warnings about shortages of supply.

Because of the cultural and dietary significance of turtles to Torres Strait Islanders we want to see them preserved for our descendants. For us to play a part in the world wide protection of this species we need to understand the extent of the problem. This can best be achieved by a low key approach to the education of our people, particularly through our primary schools. The Australian Fisheries Services has implemented such a program to cover dugong fishing in the Torres Strait. This program was conducted by a Torres Strait Islander (Mr Dana Ober) and copies of the material produced have been sent throughout Eastern Australia, Madagascar, California, Brazil, Papua New Guinea and SPREP.

Education will have two affects,

- (1) Traditional peoples including Torres Strait Islanders will become more aware of what's happening around us.
- (2) Because of our greater knowledge we will be in a better position to put pressure on those countries that are over exploiting a resource that belongs to us all.

There are of course many different ways to achieve the various levels of conservation but whatever methods are developed it is critical that the traditional users of the resource be consulted, because in the end, we have the strongest motive for making it successful.

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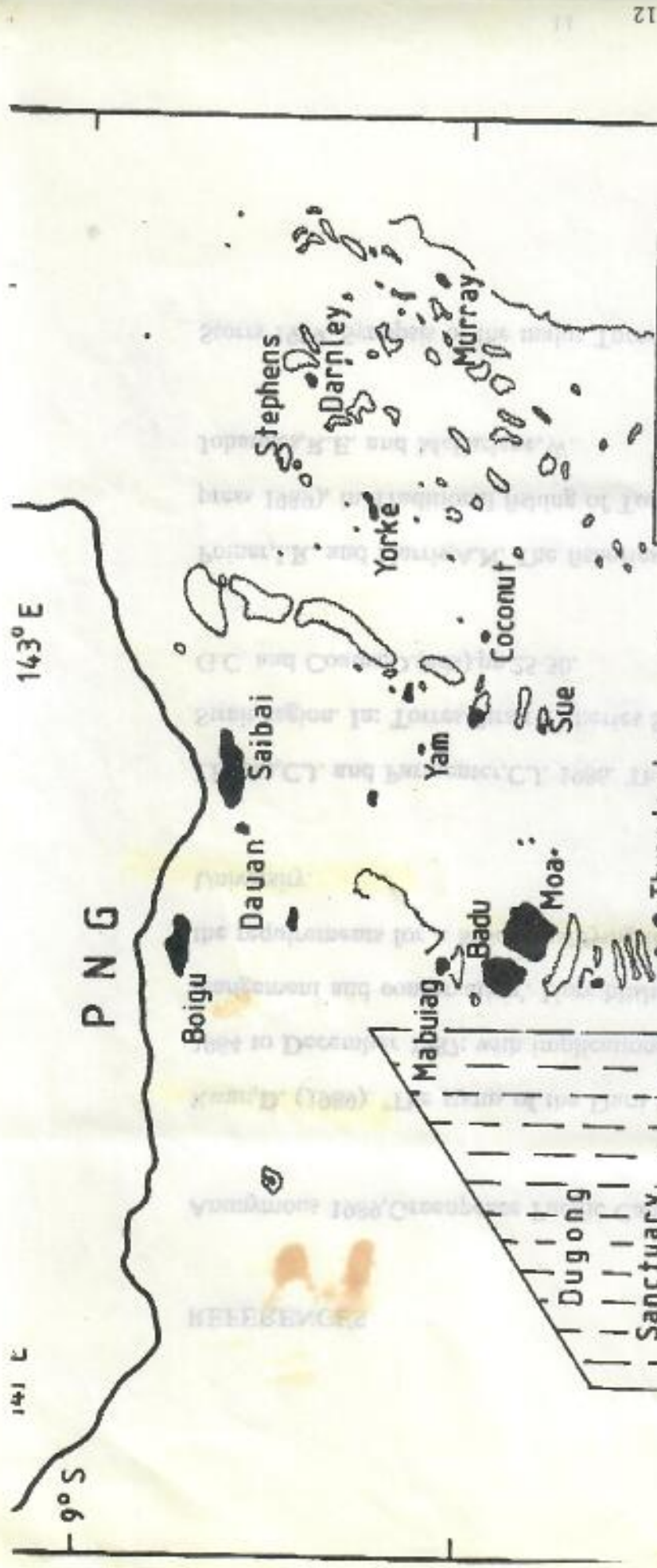


Figure 1: Torres Strait, Australia