

Australian South Sea Islanders



No. 8

ACSJC OCCASIONAL PAPER



A report on the Current Status of South
Sea Islanders in Australia
Prepared by The Evatt Foundation

The Evatt Foundation is a non-profit education and research institution , set up in 1979 as a memorial to Dr Herbert Vere Evatt, one of Australia's most distinguished jurists and politicians.

The Evatt Foundation has established itself as a producer of ideas and a leading intellectual force for policy development and social reform.

Its Constitution lists four broad objectives:

- *the promotion and advancement of education and educational institutions;*
- *assistance to schools, students, universities and colleges;*
- *to promote and assist other educational purposes both in Australia and overseas;*
- *the establishment and support or aiding in the establishment or support of any other association formed for any of the basic objects of the Association.*

In the spirit of Dr Evatt's strong commitment to the promotion of human rights and equality the Evatt Foundation has initiated and developed programmes and projects with Pacific Island and Aboriginal people.

The Foundation's initiative in this area of Pacific Islands people was to provide funding in 1990 for a South Sea Islander to travel through the Queensland coastal areas and meet with Australian South Sea Islanders to obtain up-to-date information on their conditions and concerns.

Information obtained through this initiative has reinforced the perception that the situation of South Sea Islanders needs to be addressed by Federal and State governments.

Acknowledgements:

Graphics courtesy of Rebecca Ruiz

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remaining photos from his book *The Blackbirders*, published by Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1970 are reproduced with the permission of Edward Docker.

The South Sea Islanders now living in Australia are the descendants of South Sea Islanders who were forcibly brought to this country in the 19th Century.

As a black minority group, Australian South Sea Islanders have been and still are, discriminated against because of the colour of their skin. They are discriminated against in regard to employment, housing, health services, training and their children are discriminated against in education.

South Sea Islanders are not eligible for the special benefits available to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders unless they claim to be Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders, which would be a denial of their origins and culture.

Australian South Sea Islanders are seeking to be recognised as a group in their own right.

The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, in presenting this report of the Evatt Foundation, hopes to bring to the attention of the Catholic and wider communities, the plight of the Australian South Sea Islanders, who because of their small numbers could easily be forgotten.

It has been brought to the ACSJC's attention that a copy of the Evatt Foundation's report has been referred to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for examination and possible action.

Bishop W Brennan
Chairman, ACSJC



Introduction

For the purpose of this report South Sea Islanders are defined as the people who are the descendants of South Sea Islanders, referred to in derogatory terms as Kanakas by some Australian historians, who were brought as slave and indentured labour to the canefields of Queensland and northern N.S.W. during the nineteenth century.

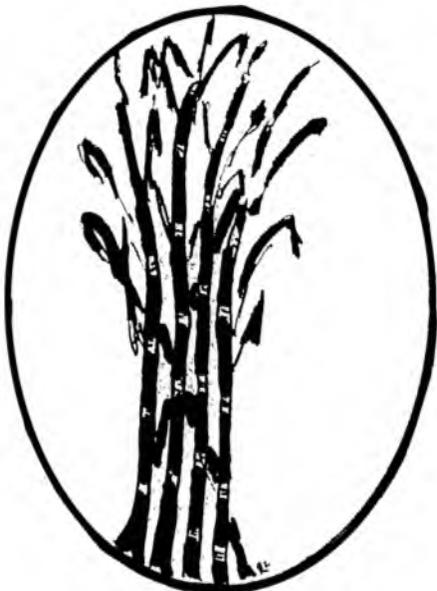
Australian South Sea Islanders are a black minority group, who have been and are discriminated against because of their colour. Because of a fairly high rate of intermarriage with Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders they are often assumed to be of these groups (especially in statistics which determine the level of services made available to them) and are discriminated against in similar ways.

South Sea Islanders' distinguishing feature is that they have no claim for land rights. South Sea Islanders were forced from their lands and brought unwillingly to Australia. Their land cannot be restored to them. They cannot claim land in their new country, neither can they claim the land of their forebears.

Unlike Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, they are not an indigenous people although they suffer discrimination and hardship for similar reasons.

South Sea Islanders are discriminated against in regard to employment, housing, health services, training, and their children are discriminated against in education. They are recorded in disproportionate numbers among the unemployed, the poorly educated and untrained, the impoverished, those in prison and the unhoused. South Sea Islanders are not eligible for the special benefits available to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders unless they claim to be Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders, a denial of their origins and culture.

The South Sea Islanders now living in Australia are the descendants of South Sea Islanders most of whom were brought forcibly to this country in the 19th century. These descendants are now seeking to be recognised as a group in their own right.



Historical Perspectives

The first of the South Sea Islanders were brought to Australia in the 1840s to work as shepherds in the Riverina. Many died from the cold. Those that survived were put to work on the whaling boats on the south coast of New South Wales.

Ben Boyd, strongly backed by London financiers, came to Australia in 1842. He floated the Royal Australian Bank and the Australian Wool Company. He had an involvement in whaling, at that time a lucrative trade, and while aboard a whaling vessel he went to Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides) and Loyalty Islands.

He quickly noticed the fine physique of the people and on his return to Sydney he sent two of his ships to fetch some workers for his sheep station on the Riverina in N.S.W.

Thus began one of the most violent means of procuring labour by force known as blackbirding. The Pacific paradise became a place of terror and fear.

Hector Holthouse, Cannibal Cargoes, Rigby Limited, 1969.

South Sea Islanders
distinguishing feature is
that they have no claim
for land rights.

The South Sea Islanders were brought to Australia as indentured labour or as slaves. "Blackbirding" was seen as a means of meeting the need for cheap labour which arose with the cessation of convict transportation from Britain and the cutting off of the world's cotton supply from the southern states of America by the American civil war. One observer, Captain Alf Markham, R.N., said it amounted "to slavery; in many cases to murder".

The Pacific Islands were seen as a prime source of new labour for the newly established cotton plantations on the Logan River, near Brisbane. By the 1860s the sugar industry was established in a small way, and because of the view of the time that whites could not cut cane because they could never stand up to the heat, black labour was sought and "blackbirding", with its outright violence, provided the resource.

Sugar and cotton planters, one of them being Captain Robert Towns, helped develop the indentured labour market.

Captain Towns, a Sydney merchant and shipowner, invested \$6,000 in property to establish Queensland's burgeoning cotton project. (It failed when North America lifted its blockade on southern cotton at the end of the civil war.)

He turned his energy to growing sugar cane, an industry which required black labour since the myth prevailed that whites could not endure the tropical sun.

His ships heavily spotted the Pacific, raiding islands for men and women to work his plantations.

One of Towns' sea captains and recruitment agents, Ross Lewin, later set up his own business in the trade.

On 26 April 1867 Lewin published an advertisement in a Brisbane paper. He begged to inform his friends and the public that he was shortly returning to the islands and would accept orders for Islanders to work on the sugar and cotton plantations. The detailed advertisement ended with a guarantee the "orders may rely on having the best and most serviceable natives to be had among the islands . . . Terms seven pounds each man."



Captain Towns and government officials believed the Islanders were being cared for and they were drafted all over the countryside. Towns' manager, John Black, took workers further north where they built the port of Townsville (named after Captain Towns), today one of the most flourishing cities in Queensland.

From 1863 to 1904 the sugar industry (and the cattle industry to some degree) of Queensland, and to a lesser extent New South Wales, employed Islander labourers from almost all the islands stretching from Papua New Guinea to New Caledonia. These years of the "blackbirding" era produced incalculable distress to island communities, souring relations between Europeans and indigenous people for decades and condemning thousands of victims to disease, slave-like working conditions and race discrimination.

For many some form of coercion was used. Such coercion could be misrepresentation of conditions, payment and length of stay, bribes to local chiefs or families and threats against families and friends. The forced importation of labour is a common story throughout the Pacific of the 19th century, occurring in all the island nations at some time.

"It is because of the ignorance of white people, they can't distinguish Torres Strait Islanders from Aborigines, from South Sea Islanders. It is discrimination against the colour of skin."

Comment from South Sea Islander man at Ayr, Queensland.

South Sea Islanders were prevented from joining trade unions, because trade union officials feared the Islanders would accept poor employment conditions

Not all of the labourers were kidnapped at gun point and forcibly sent into labour. A few returned voluntarily to employers known for their humane conditions. Some of these people survived two or three terms of employment, but they were the exception.

Over 60,000 workers were brought to Queensland between 1863 and 1904 (Moor and Mercer, Meanjin 1978). Some islands were depopulated. There were also numbers of women, mainly from Micronesia and Polynesia, who were thought to be more attractive, but they were not counted. Women from the Ellice, Gilbert and Marshall Islands often fetched \$40 each while a man's price varied from \$7 to \$24. In the 1880s, some 8,200 Islanders were working in Queensland, of whom at least 500 were women.

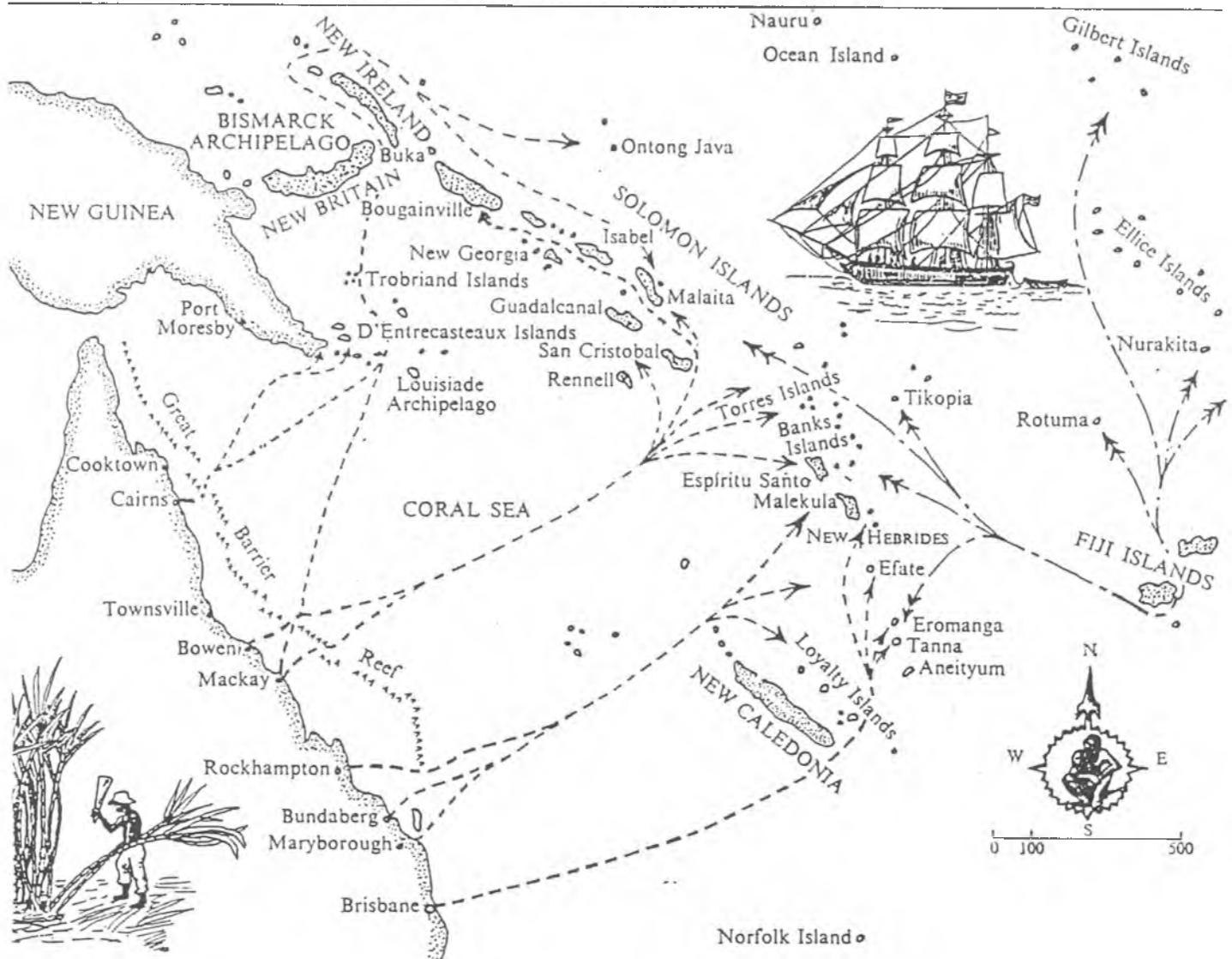


These men and women, through their labour, built the sugar industry and brought modern development to most of the coastal towns of Queensland. The work was hard, supervision was often brutal and there was no trade union protection. Accounts of flogging, shooting, assault and drowning of the Islanders survive, but few cases came before the courts.

The "blackbirding" trade developed such notoriety that concern in Australia and the United Kingdom for the conditions endured by the South Sea Islanders resulted in a lengthy political campaign, led by the British anti-slavery movement, to force the government first to regulate the trade and provide for government inspection and later to abolish it altogether.

The great extent to which the development of the modern sugar industry depended on the labour of South Sea Islanders is not generally understood. Such profitable Australian companies as CSR and Burns Philp made full use of this labour.

THE MAIN RECRUITING ROUTES



Reproduced with the permission of Beverley Docker. From *The Blackbirders* by Edward Docker published by Angus & Robertson. Sydney. 1970.

Legislative Changes

The campaign against forced labour was bolstered by a series of tragedies, from the murder in 1871 of Anglican Bishop Patteson by Islanders, who mistook him for a disguised recruiter, to the mass murder of eighty-five Solomon Islanders attempting to escape from the hold of the ship "Cart". Lurid stories in the newspapers and common knowledge around the sugar towns helped campaigners to bring in government regulation.

The **Queensland Polynesian Labourers Act (1868)** attempted to enforce controls by licensing, but proved useless when faced with the defiance of the traders. A year after the Act was passed, Ross Lewin, a trader notorious for his brutality, imported twice as many labourers as his ship was licensed to carry. The American captain and supercargo were charged with slave trading but were acquitted by the court.

A licensing arrangement requiring all vessels to hold a licence from an Australian Governor followed the **Pacific Islanders Protection Act (1872)**, but this only applied to British citizens and British vessels, and many recruiters were not British.

That Act was amended three times but did not stop the traffic. There followed some improvement in recruiting practices, but abuses continued. Eventually the trade was halted by a total ban imposed by a **Commonwealth Act in December 1901**, largely due to trade union opposition to cheap labour, with the Islanders to be repatriated.

The present descendants, some of them only one generation removed from the original workers, firmly believe their ancestors were kidnapped and this view is supported by much of the 19th century campaign conducted to bring in regulation and finally cessation of the trade.

Repatriation

After the deadline of 31 December 1906 a large number of the Islanders were deported, but those who had married in Australia, had lived in the country for 20 years or had acquired freehold property were allowed to stay. Others hid until the fuss died down, sometimes fearful that deportation was another form of "blackbirding".

Some ship captains took their human cargo well offshore and threw it overboard, thus making the deportation exercise extremely profitable. Masters of ships commissioned to repatriate the Islanders were not at pains to return the Islanders to their home islands and these Islanders found themselves in yet another strange and inhospitable land.

A number had no reason to return.

"The tree that grows over the (Kalamia) mill has a long vine and beans on it. They used the vine as a whip to make the Islanders work harder. The whites used to ride up on a horse and whip them if they were going too slow."

Comment from South Sea Islander man at meeting at Ayr, Queensland, 1990.

"They would have had no family to return to because it would have been broken up by the blackbirding."

Comment from South Sea Islander man at Ayr, Queensland, October 1990.

"There is a certificate that my grandfather had to ask permission from the Protector to marry a full-blooded Aboriginal woman."

70 year old South Sea Islander woman at Weipa, Queensland, October 1990.

Settlement of South Sea Islanders after 1906

Federal and State legislation provided bounties for sugar grown by white labour and numerous other regulations hindered South Sea Islanders' employment. Under legislation in the 19th century they had been restricted to field work in tropical agriculture and so were ill equipped to find other areas of employment after 1906.

In 1919 the Queensland Government brought down an industrial award which denied work to the "alien" Islanders on European farms, the only work they had skills for.

South Sea Islanders were prevented from joining trade unions, because trade union officials feared the Islanders would accept poor employment conditions similar to those that had prevailed under the system of indentured labour.

Prevented by trade union bans and the law from working in the sugar industry, (although some South Sea Islanders were able to find some form of employment within the industry) many remaining Islanders became fringe dwellers of the coastal towns of Queensland and northern New South Wales. South Sea Islanders received similar treatment as Aboriginal people and found themselves marginalised, living a separate existence to the town people. Living in grass huts, which they built themselves, on river banks, many survived through subsistence life style. The places of South Sea Islander settlement are marked by the planting of coconut and mango trees.

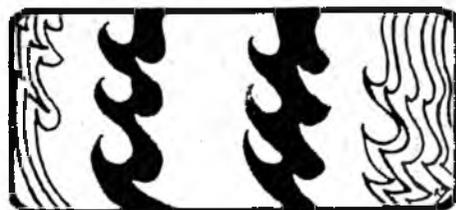
South Sea Islanders were not subject to a statutory system of rigorous supervision and control as were the Queensland Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, but there were difficulties under the law when South Sea Islanders married Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders who were subject to stringent State Acts of protection and control.

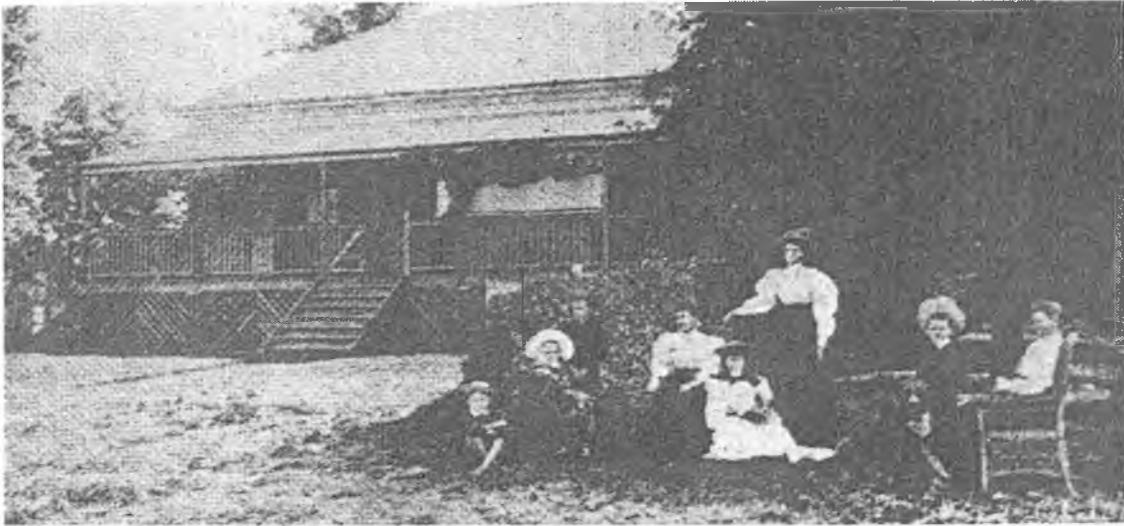
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With the amendment of the State legislation imposing controls on Aboriginal people these social and family difficulties were resolved.

South Sea Islanders have moved and settled in different areas of the country, although the greatest concentration remains along the coastal region of Queensland, particularly around Bundaberg and Mackay. There are also high numbers in the cities of Brisbane and Sydney, with a small number in Melbourne.

The main type of employment open to them was seasonal work, predominantly picking or packing tropical fruits. Some have found employment with municipalities or shires or as factory hands in the sugar mills. Many men work around the Queensland coast on coastal fishing boats and prawn trawlers. With the influx of Torres Strait Islanders into North Queensland since the 1960s there has been fierce competition for employment in this area.





A planter's home in the Bundaberg district.



The overseer with a chipping gang in Queensland.

Recent Developments

In 1977 the Royal Commission on Human Relationships found that:

45. . . . as a black minority group, they [the South Sea Islanders] are discriminated against because they are not eligible for benefits available to Australian Aborigines . . .

46. . . . Evidence to us was that these South Sea Islanders suffer from many of the disadvantages which affect Aborigines. They are regarded by white people as if they were Aborigines . . .

47. In the last **10** years, following the referendum in **1967**, a number of special benefits in fields such as education, health and housing have been introduced for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The South Sea Islanders are not eligible for these benefits unless they claim to be Aborigines, a claim which many feel is a denial of their own origin. We consider that these people suffer unjustified hardship because of this exclusion and that action should be taken to extend to them eligibility for benefits now available to Aborigines.

Although almost fifteen years have passed since the Royal Commission on Human Relationships made its recommendations no effective action has been taken to implement them.

There are also two international human rights agreements recognised by the Australian Government which have a direct bearing on the rights of minority groups:

- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Together with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights they form the International Covenants on Human Rights.

Australian South Sea Islanders have an internationally and Australian Government supported right to preserve their culture, just as they have a right to education, enabling them to "participate effectively in a free society" (International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Article 13). Education in this Convention "shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity".

Governments are required to undertake special programmes if it can be demonstrated that the minority group is not able to "participate effectively" and to maintain its dignity in the face of cultural adversity.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) convention against Discrimination in Education (1962), is also binding on the Commonwealth Government. Article 5 of this convention

states that it is recognised as a right of minorities to "carry on their own educational activities . . ."

The Australian Government has long been a signatory to the above United Nations conventions, but the Evatt Foundation funded survey found that the South Sea Islanders' cultural rights are not being effectively recognised and that their educational and other needs as a minority group are not being met.

To quote from the Submission to the Royal Commission on Human Relations on Behalf of the Australian South Pacific Islanders:

With the removal of restrictions against Federal activity in this field, in 1967, policies again changed. The Australian Government quite properly and quite rightly embarked on a long term programme for restoring the Aboriginal people to civil parity with other Australians, a policy long overdue.

Concern in Australia and the United Kingdom for the conditions endured by the South Sea Islanders resulted in a lengthy political campaign, led by the British anti-slavery movement

This has left the South Sea Islanders in a quandary. Commonwealth benefits available to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, which were introduced after the 1967 changes to the Constitution, are not available to them although they suffer similar discrimination, unless they choose to identify themselves as Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders.

Some South Sea Islanders had become leaders in political campaigns for the 1967 referendum to give the Federal Government the power to legislate for the benefit of the Aboriginal people.

South Sea Islanders received similar treatment as Aboriginal people and found themselves marginalised, living a separate existence to the town people



They worked on committees for the advancement of Aboriginal people, they initiated and organised to establish educational programmes and grants (like ABSTUDY — Aboriginal Study and secondary and overseas education schemes). They were community leaders in organising housing programmes and loans.

Sometimes they and their children were able to participate in these programmes and obtain the benefits they provided because of intermarriage with Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, but since all of these programmes were provided for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, South Sea Islanders have found they can obtain no benefits unless they identify as Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders. Besides this being a denial of their origins, South Sea Islanders have found that some Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders are requesting South Sea Islanders' exclusion on the basis of race, disregarding their part Aboriginality.

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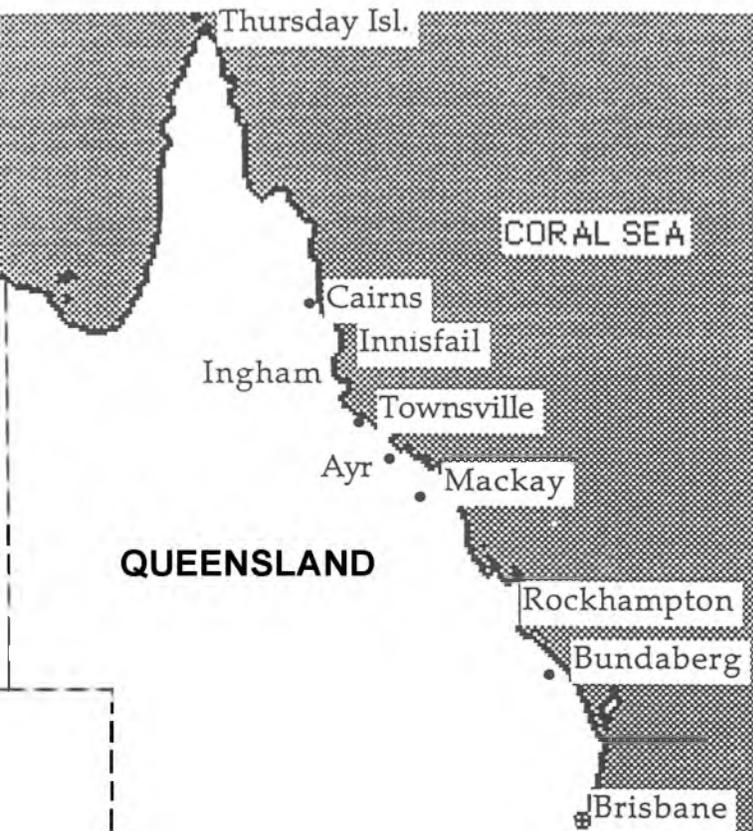
South Sea Islanders are not identified within the **Public Service Act(1922 — Reprinted as at 1 July 1986)** as a category for the purpose of equal opportunity programmes.

The passage of the **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission Act 1989(ATSIC)** only consolidated their exclusion from any representative body and from access to benefits of the same order as those received by Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

Current Situation

At the end of 1990 the Evatt Foundation commissioned a South Sea Islander researcher to travel to the centres with the highest South Sea Islander populations in Queensland to hear the views of these people.

To gauge the current situation of South Sea Islanders and to open dialogue with South Sea Islander communities and their leaders, she met with a great many individuals and also organised a number of public meetings. These were held in *Weipa, Townsville, Cairns, Ayr, Mackay, Rockhampton, Thursday Island, Namboor, Bundaberg, Innisfail, Ingham, Bamaga, Brisbane* and *Cudgen* and attendance averaged fifty to one hundred at each meeting.



Map of Queensland
(areas of South Sea Islander concentration).

General

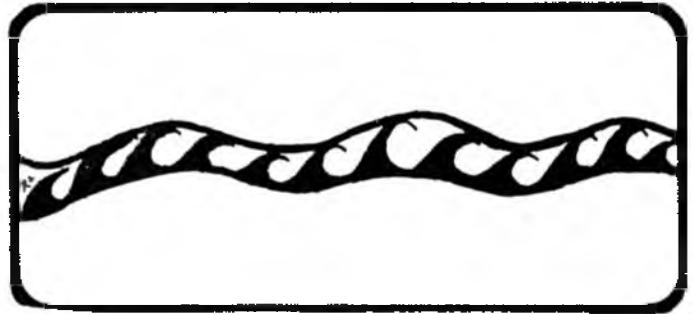
The issues dealt with in this report are the issues raised by the South Sea Islanders themselves and many of the views expressed are those of the South Sea Islanders. They did not want to be identified by name. South Sea Islanders suffer the same discrimination as Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, the same difficulties in obtaining employment, and the associated low income levels which exclude them from housing loans and education.

"South Sea Islanders are being discriminated against, not only by the white people but the black people too and the government."

Comment by South Sea Islander man at meeting at Ayr, Queensland, October, 1990.

"I'd like to see them recognised because they were the people that the sugar cane came from, so I'd like to see them recognised and be accepted into the whole of this area."

Comment of South Sea Islander woman from South Weipa, Queensland, October 1990.



"I can't identify as an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander because I'm not, I'm neither. I am a South Sea Islander and I'll stay that way,"

Comment of South Sea Islander man at meeting at Ayr, October, 1990.

"I'd rather say yes I am a South Sea Islander, but can I have the same things as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders because I'm being treated the same. I'm not treated as a white person."

Comment of South Sea Islander woman from Ayr, Queensland, October 1990.

There is an urgent need for the South Sea Islanders to be granted the special benefits — with the exclusion of land rights — to which the Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders are entitled, but they do not wish to identify as Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders in order to obtain the benefits.

"It is only because of the South Sea Islanders that it (ABSTUDY) got started. My grandmother happened to be one of those people. So all her hard work is gone away to everybody else and not the South Sea Island people who they fought for."

Comment from woman at meeting at Mackay, Queensland, October 1990.

Issues

1. Population

The population of South Sea Islanders throughout some areas of Queensland and interstate is estimated "as follows:

Mackay	3 400
Ayr	900
Rockhampton/Yepoon	1 500
Bundaberg	5 000
Nambour	500
Innisfail	500
Proserpine	100
Townsville	100
Cairns	600
Ingham	500
Tweed River	500
Brisbane	600
Sydney/Canberra	600
Mt Isa/Charters Towers	300
Melbourne	100
South Australia	100
TOTAL	15 700

(* 1990 estimation)

In addition there are South Sea Islanders in Thursday Island, Cape York Peninsula and other towns and states. These are estimates only, but indicate that the South Sea Island population is higher than recent census figures indicate.

They would not be able to maintain their households, educate their children or find employment without the assistance of these benefits.

The census for Aboriginal people includes many people of South Sea Islander descent.

Current funding and staffing levels for handling Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander matters in government departments is based on the last census, yet that count included many people of South Sea Island descent, who are not identified as a separate ethnic group.

South Sea Islanders lack representation on any representative body recognised by Federal and State governments.



2. Australian South Sea Islanders United Council

South Sea Islanders lack representation on any representative body recognised by Federal and State governments.

Recognising the necessity to have representation to monitor their needs, so that governments can be made aware of their situation and to put forward their views, South Sea Islanders in Queensland determined to have a national organisation with local branches, known as the Australian South Sea Islanders United Council (previously formed in 1974). An Interim Committee has been elected.

With an elected Council the Australian South Sea Islander United Council will be the appropriate body from which to draw representatives to such bodies as ATSIC.

This organisation should have the support of the Federal Government.



3. Housing

South Sea Islanders need special consideration in regard to housing. Again they suffer discrimination because they are a black minority. They have difficulty in gaining access to housing, but more importantly difficulty of access to reasonable housing loans. They cannot compete on the open housing market for purchasing of a dwelling because their income is invariably too low. They are priced out of the market. They are also excluded from consideration for special housing loans for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders and from grants to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders housing associations unless they identify as Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders.

As with employment, the funding and staffing relating to housing is based on the last census of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. This count unofficially includes South Sea Islanders. Departmental staffing and funding for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders has been based on the inclusion of significant numbers of South Sea Islanders, especially in Mackay, Bundaberg, Ayr and Rockhampton.

"Mondura (a South Sea Islander) is trying to get a house. She applied with the Aboriginal and Islanders Co-op here in Mackay . . . she received a letter in the mail saying she was unable to get a house because she was a South Sea Islander. She went to the Aboriginal and Islander Affairs Office. They told her she could not get a house because she was a South Sea Islander."

Comment from South Sea Islander Woman at meeting at Mackay, Queensland, October 1990.

"There are no houses now in Mackay for the South Sea Islander, especially the young ones coming up."

Comment from woman at meeting at Mackay, October 1990.

"There is just not enough housing. You have to identify as an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander, then you get a house."

Comment from woman at meeting at Mackay, October, 1990.

The Australian population is an ageing population and the South Sea Islanders are not exempt from this demographic trend. While it has been the practice for the South Sea Islanders to care for their aged, societal pressures of financial hardship, unemployment and lack of housing have made this an impossibility for many families. This has resulted in the breakdown of the solid customary home.

There is a need for homes for the aged South Sea Islanders, staffed by trained South Sea Islanders to care for their aged population.

"What's needed here is an old peoples home, I mean for the coloured people, and staffed by coloured people. When coloured people go into these homes they are alienated. They're taken from their homes and they are in with a lot of strangers and more or less they fret themselves to death."

Comment from woman at meeting at Mackay, October, 1990.

Evatt Foundation funded survey found that the South Sea Islanders' cultural rights are not being effectively recognised

4. Health

Medicare has made it possible for South Sea Islanders to obtain medical services, but they are in need of financial assistance with dental care — and all that that implies for general health and well-being — and this presents a major problem.

Unless a South Sea Islander lives within a reasonable travelling distance of a free dental service she/he has little choice but to attempt to ignore the need for dental care. Dead and rotting teeth, besides perhaps causing pain and septic infection, can lead to problems of digestion and arthritis.

"Those that cannot afford the dental service (in Townsville) just don't go. And they don't get their teeth repaired and therefore it effects their health."

Comment from South Sea Islander from Ayr, Queensland, 1990.

"I don't think we'll be able to go there (to the Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Service) after ATSIC comes in."

Comment from South Sea Islander at meeting at Ayr, Queensland, October, 1990.

The great extent to which the development of the modern sugar industry depended on the labour of South Sea Islanders is not generally understood.

5. Employment

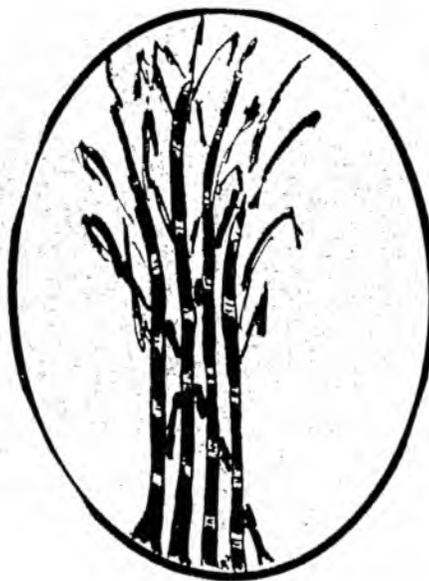
South Sea Islanders, partly because of their black skin, find their fields of employment are limited, even when the employment market is buoyant. It appears their unemployment rate in Queensland is higher than that of any other group.

With adequate educational qualifications the women can undertake training in the fields of education and nursing, but many of the men find their openings are limited to labouring and manual jobs. Few of these are permanent.

Because they are not cited as an identified group in the **Public Service Act (1922 Reprinted as at 1 July, 1986)** they do not receive any consideration as a group suffering discrimination when applying for public service positions.

For special employment programmes to be effective it is important that South Sea Islanders be trained and employed in Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) and other government offices.

Since the formation of ATSIC the South Sea Islanders are no longer able to apply for positions that are identified by employers (governments and private industry) for the employment of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, although they had previously been able to work in these jobs.



In Mackay, where unemployment runs at approximately 4.5%, it appears that the unemployment rate for South Sea Islanders who register is about 8.5%, but this unemployment group is classified as Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islanders, a general term that obscures the fact that 90% of these unemployed blacks are South Sea Islanders. Statistics on unemployment determine staffing levels in CES offices, yet South Sea Islanders are included with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait unemployed. In a centre like Mackay where there are approximately 90% South Sea Islanders to 10% Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders (figures are 1990 estimates made by researcher).

This leads to a distortion of the situation, with the South Sea Islanders being excluded from eligibility to any of the special Aboriginal Employment Programs.

Employment prospects are grim, mainly because the majority of South Sea Islanders can only do unskilled work and there is a lack of training or of retraining in new skills appropriate to the current labour market.

There are complaints that employers and overseers hassle young South Sea Island employees, who lack the self-confidence and self-assurance to be able to stop or minimise this type of discrimination. Their response is usually to leave the place of employment, even when it means a cessation of training.



"My lad was the first South Sea Islander to go through and matriculate in Mackay as a fitter and turner. His boss did his best to get him out. He didn't want to give him that certificate."

Comment from South Sea Islander man at meeting at Mackay, Queensland, October 1990.

"I have a son who was an apprentice carpenter. He was doing good for a while until the foreman swore at him. He tried to put up with it but he couldn't."

Comment from South Sea Islander man at meeting at Mackay, Queensland, October 1990.

"Most are ordinary labourers, doing seasonal work."

Comment from South Sea Island man at meeting at Ayr, Queensland, October, 1990.

"There is much unemployment here in Mackay, most of it comes from being untrained."

Comment from woman at meeting at Mackay, Queensland, October 1990.

"They have no centre to learn new skills to get them back into the workforce."

Comment from South Sea Islander woman at meeting at Mackay, Queensland, October 1990.

"We want a course that gets in and gives them something so they can go and earn their bread and butter and raise their families."

Comment from woman at meeting at Mackay, Queensland. October 1990.

6. Education

South Sea Islanders are in urgent need of financial help to be able to send their children to secondary schools in 1991 and thereafter.

Since the establishment of ATSIC they have been told they cannot apply for ABSTUDY.

South Sea Islanders have been identifying as Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in order to obtain ABSTUDY grants and be able to afford to send their children to school. Very few are going on to tertiary education, because of the problem of identifying as Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders. At the tertiary stage of the educational progress students are examined more closely in order to substantiate any claims of particular identity.

Until such time as teachers develop a greater sensitivity to discriminatory attitudes in themselves and others, black students will have difficulty in staying on at school even if financial problems are discounted.

The likely exclusion from education will have profound social, as well as educational and employment, consequences. Without some form of government assistance similar to the special education programmes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, such as ABSTUDY, secondary and overseas grants, the South Sea Island children will be forced to leave school while still too young to be employed (if there was work available) and also too young for unemployment benefits. They will be left with an aimless existence wandering the streets and likely to become involved in crime.

"The only way we could afford to send our kids to secondary school was to identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders."

Comment from South Sea Islander woman at meeting at Ayr, Queensland, 1990.

"We are not going to be able to send our kids to secondary school without the assistance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education grant."

Comment from South Sea Islander woman at meeting at Mackay, Queensland, October, 1990.

"What will happen to our children? We don't have Aboriginality and we will not be entitled to the ABSTUDY grant."

Comment from South Sea Islander woman at meeting at Mackay, Queensland, 1990.

"Many of the youth coming out of school have good marks, but somehow or other there'll be one teacher that will sort of bug you and in the end you'll get up and walk out."

Comment from South Sea Islander woman at meeting at Mackay, Queensland, October 1990.

"Many of the children, they can't hear properly, they can't get the words out and they have difficulty in the pronunciation. They need special tutors."

Comment from South Sea Islander woman at meeting in Mackay, Queensland, October, 1990.





7. Legal Services

"We need to have an alternative to the present correctional service, for our own people and run by South Sea Islanders."

Comment from South Sea Islander man at meeting at Ayr, Queensland, 1990

"We could hire professional black people to do the job (of correctional officers)."

Comment from South Sea Islander man at meeting in Ayr, Queensland, 1990.

"It is an alternative to black deaths."

Comment from South Sea Islander at meeting in Ayr, Queensland, 1990.

South Sea Islanders claim that a considerable percentage of the black prison population in Mackay and other Queensland towns are their people. They outnumber Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

As with the elderly, the South Sea Islanders consider it preferable to have their own people employed and running correction centres and legal centres.

South Sea Islanders are seeking the establishment of Appropriate Dispute Resolution (A.D.R.), Mediation Centres and Rehabilitation Training farms. They should be located in North Queensland towns such as Mackay and Townsville. These establishments should be staffed and administered by professionally trained South Sea Islanders mediators and dispute resolvers.

South Sea Islanders consider it preferable to have their own professional people administer the centres. They also consider that such mediations and rehabilitation services will reduce the number of black deaths in custody.

Federal funding is required for appropriate training of South Sea Islanders and to support the establishment and running of these institutions.

The census for
Aboriginal people
includes many people of
South Sea Islander
descent.

Conclusion

Unlike the Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, the Australian South Sea Islanders are a lost race with little trace of their culture and languages.

South Sea Islanders suffer discrimination like the Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

Account must be taken of all that this implies in regard to discrimination in the community and the workplace; particularly in employment, education and training, housing, health and dispute resolution.

South Sea Islanders have for a long time retained pride in their identity, but have recognised that for all intents and purposes they were treated as Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders. They sometimes identified themselves as such on the census because there appeared to be no other appropriate category. They identified themselves as such for benefits because they knew that their people had been instrumental in obtaining those benefits. They knew also that they would not be able to maintain their households, educate their children or find employment without the assistance of these benefits.

South Sea Islanders are not identified as a special minority group and do not have appropriate representation to put forward their particular views and needs.

They must be included in all Federal and State legislation, statutes and regulations that identify disadvantaged minority groups. They must be a clearly identified group for equal opportunity, for special assistance schemes and programmes and receipt of benefits of the same order received by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

There is a need for immediate action so that the Federal Government can implement remedial programmes along the lines of the recommendation of the Royal Commission into Human Relationships and to comply with the International Covenants on Human Rights.



Recommendations

1. That consideration be given to the introduction of federal legislation for South Sea Islanders, recognising their history, their contribution to the Australian Society and their special needs.
2. That South Sea Islanders be eligible to benefits similar to those provided to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in relation to Housing, Education and Training, Health and Legal Services, and economic development (but not land rights benefits).
3. That the responsibility for the co-ordination of all policies and programmes relating to South Sea Islanders be with the Prime Minister's Department through one of its already existing units such as the Office of Multicultural Affairs.
4. That there be a specific reference to South Sea Islanders on future census forms.
5. That recognition be given to a national organisation representing the South Sea Islanders, such as the Australian South Sea Islanders United Council and that the Federal Government make available adequate funding for the effective operation of such a body which would provide a channel of communication between governments and the South Sea Islander communities.
6. That the government provide core funding to the order of \$100,000 to enable the Evatt Foundation to commission a proper population survey in known areas of concentration of South Sea Islanders to bring statistical information up to date and to establish the extent of poverty, unemployment, lack of education and skills training, health, housing and other special needs within the South Sea Islander communities.
7. That there be urgent remedial programmes aimed at redressing discrimination suffered by South Sea Islanders because of their ethnic origin and in particular that South Sea Islanders be included as an identified category in the Commonwealth Public Service Equal Opportunity Program.
8. That government provide adequate funding to train South Sea Islanders in skills for staffing resource centres including health, legal, mediation and conflict resolution.

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