



Media Release **No. 662**

For release 10 August 2015

TRADITIONAL LAND BOUNDARIES OF UGAR IDENTIFIED THROUGH INNOVATIVE APPROACH

One of Australia's most remote Islands has successfully concluded a 12-month project identifying the land boundaries of its Traditional Owners, the Ugarem Le.

Stephen Island, traditionally known as Ugar, was formally recognised by the Federal Court in 2004, however the Court determination did not contain all of the details about traditional land ownership.

The Ugarem Le have worked together with contemporary project management techniques and geospatial technologies to map traditional boundaries, a project supported by the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), the Torres Strait Island Regional Council, the National Native Title Tribunal and the Queensland Government.

The TSRA Chairperson, Mr Joseph Elu, said a complex system of traditional laws and customs provide for different parcels on the small volcanic Island to be owned by different families, which is why identifying land boundaries was important.

"The traditional laws and customs involve sophisticated means of land inheritance and various forms of land transactions between families," Mr Elu said.

"However over time uncertainties about the alignment of some traditional boundaries, including markers like rocks and trees which had been moved, has caused some doubt as to where they lay.

"The outcomes have now cleared the way for some important infrastructure projects to be completed, including a helipad upgrade, fuel bowser, desalination plant, community hall and fisheries freezer, which were previously delayed for years because of the boundary confusion."

The boundary resolution project was managed directly by Ugarem Le through their native title corporation, Ugar Kem Le Ged Zeuber Er Kep Le (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation RNTBC.

Logistics of the project included flying nearly 40 Ugarem Le Elders and other family representatives to the Island, many from the mainland.

The corporation's board of traditional owners, led by Chair Seriako Stephen, used project management techniques and comprehensive project planning to ensure its realisation.

Mr Stephen stressed the importance of the outcome to economic development opportunities on the Island.

"We could not have wished for greater success," Mr Stephen said.

“These outcomes strengthen our families and our traditional law and provide our Island paradise with a launch pad for even greater successes in the years to come.”

Mr Stephen paid tribute to a host of contributors, in particular local Councillor Rocky Stephen, TSRA board member Jerry Stephen, and National Native Title Tribunal member James McNamara.

The series of land and infrastructure outcomes coincided with the 105th anniversary of the Island’s historic Church of the Transfiguration.

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