

## *TSRA Chairman's Column*

June 2013



### **SOCIAL MEDIA THREAT TO TRADITIONAL HUNTING**

The Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people of the Torres Strait are the traditional custodians of what has been recognised as the healthiest dugong population in the world. This has been repeatedly stated by marine mammal experts who to date have given no indication that current hunting levels in the region are unsustainable. The area is also home to the largest sea grass meadow in the world covering 875,000 hectares. That area is included in a 1.3 million hectare Dugong Sanctuary where no hunting is allowed.

The TSRA Board is currently supporting a consultation process to investigate community views about increasing the area the Dugong Sanctuary. The people of the region have also demonstrated a strong commitment to the effective and sustainable management of all marine resources. Turtle and dugong management plans have been operating in 14 Torres Strait communities now for more than seven years and the taking of sea life is strictly monitored. Five Torres Strait communities are also participating in a project to assess an alternative way of euthanizing Green Turtles more humanely.

Individuals need to stop posting images and comments on social media about dugong and turtles because it makes it look as if these animals are not being respected under cultural and traditional practice. This social media behaviour by a number of individuals must stop because it is feeding a growing national and international push to end traditional hunting in Australia.

The Turtle and Dugong Plans now include a direction that prohibits any photos or video to be taken of the butchering of turtles and dugongs, including such recording by community members. The right to traditional hunting is enshrined in Native Title law and has previously been upheld by the High Court of Australia. We must not allow the senseless actions of a small minority who disrespect animals we hold as cultural icons to jeopardise all the progress that has been made towards sustainable sea harvesting for future generations.

## MAINTAINING THE UNIQUE CULTURE OF THE TORRES STRAIT



Caption: TSRA Chairman Joseph Elu at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York

I recently had the privilege of addressing the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York and would like to share some of my thoughts from that occasion with you. I began by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which the meeting held. I also paid my respects to their Elders, past and present, and the Elders from other communities who attended the forum.

My main theme was the critical importance of maintaining and promoting the unique culture of Indigenous peoples, including the Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people. A 2005 National Indigenous languages survey identified the two main Torres Strait traditional languages, Kalau Lagau Ya and Meriam Mir were in critical danger of being lost. It became clear that if the remaining traditional language speakers passed away we would lose the bedrock of our Torres Strait cultural identity.

Australia recognises that for Indigenous cultures to survive, traditional languages along with traditional storytelling, song and dance must be revived and promoted. Without a strong

connection to culture, underpinned by language, globalisation poses a risk to our identity in the Torres Strait. This loss would reduce opportunities to take part in the emerging Indigenous culture and arts economies which are key opportunities for economic development for local communities.

The Australian Indigenous arts industry generates several hundred million dollars in revenue a year. The raw materials required include a strong and deeply rooted connection to culture. Research shows that Government investment in Indigenous arts centres generates a financial return to artists and their communities at a rate of \$52 for every \$1 invested. It also shows that Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal artists reinvest around 40 per cent of revenue generated from art sales back into their community art centres.

The Torres Strait arts industry is in its infancy compared with the Australian mainland Aboriginal success story. If Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal artists in the Torres Strait are to see increases in income from arts activities, further work on cultural maintenance, particularly traditional languages, is needed. This investment is a long term strategy to promote and encourage sustained cultural development and ensure sustainable local economies.

Through the TSRA, the Government is supporting efforts to achieve two simple but broad outcomes for the region's culture, arts and heritage – strong, supported and respected Ailan Kastom (Torres Strait customs and traditions), and an active and sustainable arts and craft industry. A critical focus of this program over the next five years and beyond is also the revival, maintenance, preservation and development of Torres Strait languages.

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples sets out the importance of the retention of cultural identity in all its forms, stating: *'Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.'*

In the spirit of this important statement and the Declaration as a whole, it is essential that national governments prioritise the survival and promotion of critically endangered Indigenous languages.

## World Indigenous Network



Caption: TSRA Senior Rangers Don Whap and Frank Loban working with Arnarvon Protected Area Conservation Officers to prepare a presentation for the WIN conference in Darwin.

The first round of what I hope will be an ongoing exchange has ended with a World Indigenous Network inaugural conference held in Darwin. The WIN has been set up by the Australian government and has so far involved exchanges with conservation managers from New Zealand, Mexico as well as the Solomon Islands.

The exchange started when I accompanied a group of TSRA Rangers on a trip to the Arnarvon Protected Area in the Solomon Islands. The TSRA then hosted a visit by a group of five Environment Officers from the Solomons who spent almost a week in the Torres Strait visiting six communities and a number of other important sites.

These exchanges provided an opportunity to share regional approaches and experiences. The Rangers were able to compare contemporary and traditional knowledge and local practices to better manage the sea and land environment. It also allowed the Rangers to swap notes on progress in the various communities towards supporting sustainable livelihoods. These exchanges will enable land and sea managers to improve their knowledge and skills and consolidate genuine partnerships, essential to the ongoing success of the World Indigenous Network.

The exchange has been a resounding success and we look forward to further consolidating our connections with the people of the Arnarvon Protected Area.

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