

**United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Tenth Session - New York
16-27 May 2011**

**Agenda Item 3(b) Climate Change implications for Torres Strait
Island communities and impacts on species of global
significance**

**INTERVENTION DELIVERED BY MR TOSHIE KRIS, CHAIRPERSON, TORRES
STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY**

Thankyou Chair

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land where we are gathered today.

This morning/afternoon, I would like to speak about the impacts of climate change on the Torres Strait region and specifically, the threats to our communities, culture and the environment.

Around 8 500 people live in our 20 Island communities, situated between the northern tip of Australia and Papua New Guinea.

The Torres Strait Regional Authority, T-S-R-A, was set up by the Commonwealth Government in 1994 in response to local demands for greater autonomy. The TSRA supports all of our Island communities.

The Torres Strait is recognised as being at the front line of climate change impacts due to the number of low lying islands that are being inundated by rising sea levels.

This daunting fact has been recognised in several key reports including the *Climate Change 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report*; specifically for Torres Strait, the report states:

As a consequence of king tides in 2005 and 2006, there was a "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

As I have shared with the Forum for the past two years, every year our low lying communities are inundated by sea water during king tides and large storm events and the situation is getting worse each year.

At least six of our Islands urgently require the construction of sea walls and coastal erosion control measures to protect communities and critical infrastructure from the encroaching seas.

Think for a moment about what it would be like if your community was regularly flooded with salt water. While we are a sea faring people, we are deeply unsettled when the ocean washes through our homes and gardens, undermining our roads and destroying the graves of our ancestors.

How do you feed your family when traditional crops have been inundated by sea water and the local supermarket shelves are depleted? How do you manage diseases and health risks when waste treatment facilities are regularly shut down? How do you progress economic development when roads are closed or impassable? How do you provide clean, safe drinking water to a community when their water storage reservoirs and water tables are salt impregnated?

These are the grim realities of climate change; this is happening now. These Island communities have nowhere to retreat; they can't just move away from the coast; engineering options are essential.

So far there has been significant collaboration between all levels of government and key stakeholders in terms of research into the profound problems caused by climate change.

This collaboration has enabled us to form a solid base of research including information on coastal erosion and

inundation, modelling for local climate change and the development of flood modelling and sustainable land use plans.

We welcome this assistance which has enabled us to take a proactive approach to the challenges that we face.

One key response so far has been the development of *Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy 2010 - 2013*, which outlines the key issues and more importantly, lists the actions required to address climate change threats to infrastructure, ecosystems, culture and people and communities.

Funding is urgently required to reduce erosion and flooding impacts on the six most vulnerable communities. Affected infrastructure includes schools, health clinics, police stations, water supplies, homes and stores. Financial input will go a long way to protect the communities and the significant infrastructure investments already in place on these islands.

The only other alternative is relocation from traditional Indigenous lands.

What we need now is a commitment to action.

I would like to point out that for our region, climate change is not just impacting our people and our lands, it will also affect our marine ecosystems that underpin the life, livelihoods and unique culture of Torres Strait Islanders.

Specifically, TSRA is concerned about the impacts of climate change on turtles and dugongs.

Torres Strait is home to foraging green turtles. This is part of the largest nesting population in the world; these creatures are of enormous cultural significance to Torres Strait Islanders and are also a food source for Traditional Inhabitants.

The Torres Strait is also home to some of the world's largest seagrass meadows, critical for the long term survival of the highly significant turtle and dugong populations.

Scientific evidence indicates that climate change could affect these vulnerable species. Turtle nesting grounds are being lost due to coastal erosion and hatching success is being compromised.

Climate change may also be affecting dugong habitat with impacts on seagrass, their main food source.

Already, the TSRA has initiated community-based Dugong and Turtle Management Plans. A seagrass monitoring program is being facilitated by 21 Indigenous Rangers and five Turtle and Dugong officers.

Our previous addresses to this forum in 2009 and 2010 have sounded the alarm bells on climate change in the Torres Strait.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples promotes full and effective participation in all matters including the right to remain distinct and to pursue economic and social development.

Today I am calling on this forum to support our calls to action in the spirit of the Declaration.

Today I call for this forum to note Climate Change Strategy 2010 - 2013 developed by the TSRA in partnership with our communities and stakeholders and for recognition of the financial, technical, scientific and human resources needed to implement our Climate Change action plan.

I also call for immediate and comprehensive action and funding to address the ongoing impacts of flooding and erosion on our Islands.

In 2008, a report by Australian Human Rights stated:

“If strong action is not taken to address these (climate change) threats, there is the potential for effects in the Torres Strait to create a human rights crisis.”

We do not want to contemplate such a human rights crisis, but if swift and effective action is not taken over the next few years that is exactly what will occur.

The Torres Strait may well be the first area in Australia to commence evacuations of inhabited lands; not as a precaution but as a direct result of climate change. Clearly, significant sections of a unique Indigenous culture now face the possibility of irreparable damage.

I thank you today for the opportunity to share this important information about the impact of climate change on the people of the Torres Strait. And I would like to give a commitment to share our strategies and learnings with the international community in the struggle to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Thank you or as we would say in our mother tongues, Koeyma Ezzo, Aw Ezzoaw.