

13th Session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
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Madam Chair and Expert Mechanism, Thank you for giving me the floor, I am honoured to contribute to the Thirteenth Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in my capacity as delegate of the United Nations Association of Australia- Qld Division.

My name is Sasha Purcell and I am a Torres Strait Islander from the Torres Strait (Zenadth Kes). I belong to the Whaleboat family. The Torres Strait Islanders are the [Indigenous](#) inhabitants of the [Torres Strait Islands](#) which is part of [Queensland](#), Australia. This is an extremely isolated community and more than 200 Islands make up the Torres Strait comprising island peoples living in the north of Queensland at the Papua New Guinea border. A special UN Treaty is in place for those peoples on those 15 inhabited islands, and administered locally.

I speak here today on the topic of the impact of COVID-19 on the Torres Strait Island community. The role of traditional practice has always existed in the Torres Strait but the time and space given due to COVID-19s impact has reinvigorated traditional ecological knowledges and the Torres Strait community has come together as one to unite against the negative impact of this virus. It has allowed the Leaders and community of the Torres Strait to look back to traditional ways of living on land and sea including fishing and gardening. This has been a time of unity, where we see families supporting each other in a time of crisis, emotionally and financially.

COVID-19 has made a lot of people in the Torres Strait rethink their lives and the livelihoods of ancient Islanders. There has been a shift in thinking from what they felt they didn't have, to realising that they have them so much. They have traditional skills and knowledge to survive and thrive during COVID-19 in an isolated Island community. It caused the challenge of COVID-19 to inflect a wave of remembrance and thanks to our forebearers and ancestors who have long lived amongst the seasonal changes of Island life.

As a result of the slowdown of activity due to COVID-19 there has been a lot of time for cultural practice and family kinship. Many traditional initiation practices have been undertaken during this time as the world allowed it, due to COVID-19.

It also made community realise there are benefits and advantages of being isolated. COVID-19 has not been able to negatively impact the health of the community as much as it has in other populations due to the remote nature of the Islands.

Given the isolated community; current island life, in many ways, has reverted to a strong traditional way of life and although community reverted back to tradition, it is a new space due to the impact of climate change. Community leaders and members are having to adapt to the timing of harvesting and planting and fishing as the ecosystem is not what it was 50 years ago due to the impact of climate change. The Torres Strait Islands have founded their livelihoods on a seasonal calendar which is based on the winds that surround the Torres Strait Islands. This calendar use to be able to predict when to garden, when to harvest and when to fish. This is no longer the case due to climate change. However, the impact COVID-19 has had on the Islanders time has allowed many people in the community to analyse and evaluate what those changes are due to climate change and are now reenvisioning a similar calendar of how to live off the land and off the seas.

Torres Strait Islanders are strong, resilient and nurturing pioneers. This has always been the truth. This is what they are and what they represent. They have proven their ingenuity, adaptability and the power of coming together as one.

Chairperson I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to the breadth that the Torres Strait Islander people have shown in alleviating the negative effects of COVID-19 in their community.

Au Esoau.