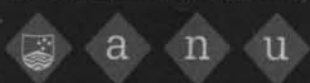


The Australian National University



**C**entre for  
**A**boriginal  
**E**conomic  
**P**olicy  
**R**esearch

Discussion Paper



**Looking beyond the borderline:  
development performance and  
prospects of Saibai Island,  
Torres Strait.**

**R. Davis**

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## **SERIES NOTE**

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- investigate the stimulation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development and issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and unemployment;
- identify and analyse the factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour force; and
- assist in the development of government strategies aimed at raising the level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour market.

The Director of the Centre is responsible to the Vice-Chancellor of the ANU and receives assistance in formulating the Centre's research agenda from an Advisory Committee consisting of five senior academics nominated by the Vice-Chancellor and four representatives nominated by ATSIC, the Department of Employment, Education and Training and the Department of Social Security.

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Professor Jon Altman  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The establishment in July 1994 of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) within the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) has allowed Islander political leaders great latitude in shaping Torres Strait's political and economic destiny. Given that the majority of communities in the Torres Strait region are located on separate islands, the TSRA faces the issue of accommodating quite different community dynamics with overall regional considerations in mind. This paper examines one community in Torres Strait, Saibai Island, comparing demographic economic and labour characteristics over the past 20 years and looking at the sorts of economic choices Saibai Islanders have made recently. The consequences of historical trends and recent choices are explored in relation to regional economic aspirations. In conclusion a prediction of the economic, demographic and labour characteristics of Saibai Island community in 20 years time is offered.

## **Acknowledgments**

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Richard Davis is a doctoral student in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, ANU, and was a visitor at CAEPR for a short period in 1994.

## Foreword

In 1994, the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) made a concerted effort to focus a significant proportion of its research on Torres Strait issues. This decision was influenced by a number of factors. First, a combination of the High Court *Mabo* decision in 1992, the passage of the *Native Title Act 1993* and the formation of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) in 1994, have given Torres Strait a special significance in contemporary indigenous affairs policy in Australia. Second, specialist staff resources were available in 1994 to focus on Torres Strait. Third, CAEPR maintains a commitment to focus a proportion of its research effort on Torres Strait Islander issues.

This paper is the fifth in the series, after CAEPR Discussion Papers No. 71-74, that focuses specifically on the Torres Strait. Richard Davis resided on Saibai Island for 18 months in 1992 and 1993, and then again for a short period in 1994. The primary focus of Richard's research has been on indigenous ritual and sea and land tenure. Before heading off into the field in 1992, I had several discussions with Richard urging him strongly to collect quantitative economic and demographic data at the household level. My argument must have been persuasive, because on his return Richard informed me that he had collected considerable data via a household survey, but that this was largely superfluous to his central research interests. Not to be deterred, I invited Richard to visit CAEPR during 1994, and to return to Saibai for a brief visit with the specific aim of writing up his primary data into a CAEPR Discussion Paper. While Richard's teaching, consultancy and other research commitments have delayed completion of this work, in my view this paper is an invaluable addition to a growing corpus of knowledge about the contemporary economy of the Torres Strait region.

Jon Altman  
Series Editor  
April 1995

Contemporary socioeconomic research in relation to Torres Strait Islanders<sup>1</sup> living in Torres Strait has been based largely on aggregate statistics, which provide a broad characterisation of the region, but give little insight into community-level social and economic dynamics. Furthermore, the analytical tendency has been to amalgamate Islanders with Aboriginal people even though recent research has shown that Islanders living in Torres Strait and elsewhere exhibit a number of important statistical differences from Aboriginal people (Taylor and Gaminiratne 1993; Arthur and Taylor 1994).

Against this background, Islander leaders have called for increased recognition of the uniqueness of the Torres Strait region as a prerequisite for political autonomy (Lui 1994). In this context the newly established Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) has identified regional economic development as an important aspect of these political aspirations (TSRA 1994). Given the large number of distinct communities within Torres Strait, there are some difficulties in establishing regional socioeconomic characteristics. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census derived statistics offer an indication of broad regional trends, but in order to formulate programs and policies in Torres Strait there is a need to establish local context and to conduct community-level research which focuses on the contemporary position of Islanders *in situ* in order to highlight the unique complexities of the region.

Community-level socioeconomic research is not entirely new to Torres Strait. In 1973, at the request of the then Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs (DAIA), a research team undertook a series of socioeconomic studies, one of which was a household structure and income survey of a number of communities in the region. Over a period of eight months the four islands of Badu, Murray, Saibai, and Yorke were surveyed at a household level to identify demographic trends, health and education standards, and aspects of the local economy (Duncan 1974). These community surveys were integrated with other components of the research project and a number of policy options for Torres Strait were proposed for State and Federal government consideration (Fisk 1975). The impetus for the research project was the negotiation between Australia and Papua New Guinea over their international border and the subsequent drawing up of the Torres Strait Treaty (TST).

Since then a number of reports on aspects of regional development have been produced (see Arthur 1990; Lea et al. 1990; Mulrennan and Hanssen 1994). Despite their contribution to policy in Torres Strait one limitation of these works derives from their macrolevel approach to the region. Within Torres Strait there are about 20 separate communities, all of which have different histories, and political, social and economic features. A common approach to identifying community-level features is to utilise ABS census community profiles, which are based on data collected on one night of the year. Reliance on such information is almost wholesale in the absence of

separate community-level case studies. Consequently, there is little with which to compare the census profiles to ascertain their accuracy. Following Altman's suggestion for finer grained case studies of indigenous Australian communities (Altman 1992: 159) this paper presents a microeconomic study of one Torres Strait community, Saibai Island, based on the author's long-term fieldwork conducted in the early 1990s. It is framed over a 20-year period beginning with the work of Duncan in 1973 and concluding with survey material collected on Saibai in 1993.

Such a longitudinal analysis of microeconomic and demographic change has general policy implications in light of the economic objectives of the TSRA. The TSRA's Corporate Plan stresses the importance of development in the region built on a sustainable economic base (TSRA 1994: 9). While mentioning agriculture as one aspect of this emergent regional economy, it is marine resources which are regarded as having the most potential to support a viable industry (Altman et al. 1994). Until the early 1960s Torres Strait supported a thriving marine-based industry which had a history of 100 years.<sup>2</sup> Over this period Islanders were employed as seamen, divers and skippers, extracting *bêche-de-mer*, pearl shell and trochus from the sea. However, it was an industry in which resources were intensively extracted with little regard for the limits of their availability. Boat owners actively encouraged competitive hauls which led to resource exhaustion in the Strait, and it was this economic rationale which underlay Islander participation in the industry (Ganter 1994).

The current economic objectives of the TSRA are to build on this historical base and develop an industry which draws on a wide range of marine resources, and involves Islanders in all levels of operations, from extraction to management and export. How these objectives might be attained and the impact they will have will largely depend on an understanding of current social and economic conditions of individual Islander communities.

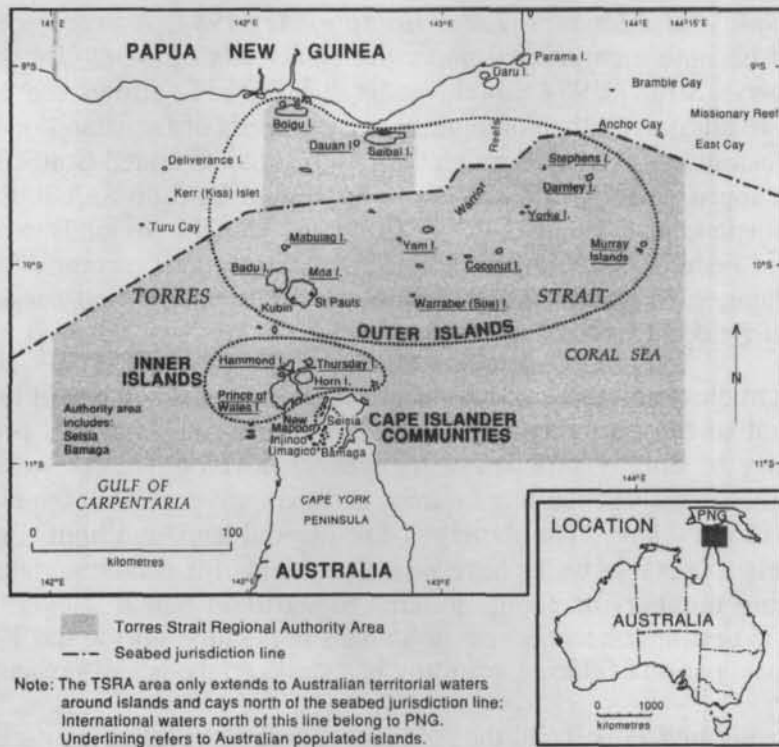
Anthropological fieldwork was conducted on Saibai from March 1992 to August 1993, for a month in November 1993, and two weeks in July 1994. This involved the analysis of a number of different facets of community life and the collection of economic and demographic data through the use of questionnaires. Surveys were conducted at a household level and, wherever possible, were undertaken in the residence of the persons being surveyed.

### **Local and regional characteristics of Saibai**

Saibai is adjacent to Australia's northernmost border with the Western Province of Papua New Guinea, making it one of the more remote Islander communities in Torres Strait (see Figure 1). It is approximately 20 kilometres long (east-west), and six kilometres wide (north-south). The

Island is formed from alluvial sediments deposited by Papua New Guinea rivers, which have settled onto a limestone base some two to four metres below the surface. Tidal mangroves extending one to two kilometres inland fringe almost the whole island. The bulk of the interior consists of brackish swamps which fish and waterfowl frequent when rising water levels and declining salinity can support them. The interior clay land areas are covered with shrubs and grass, rising one or two metres above the high water line (Barnham and Harris 1985: 249-50). These latter areas are mainly at the western end of the island and support subsistence gardens.

Figure 1. Torres Strait region.



Saibai is one of a number of communities in Torres Strait situated within the Torres Strait Protected Zone (TSPZ) established under the TST, which was ratified in 1985. The TST ensures the continuation of activities defined as traditional, such as trading, non-commercial fishing and cross-border visits by both Islanders and coastal Papua New Guineans for non-commercial reasons. Under the terms of the Treaty, coastal Papua New Guineans are unable to venture outside the TSPZ, and most traded goods are subject to quarantine controls.

The northern edge of the TSPZ coincides with an Australian border with New Guinea, established in 1879 after an 1872 annexation of islands within 60 miles of the Cape York coast, placing Saibai within Queensland's jurisdiction (van der Veur 1966). Thursday Island became the region's

administrative centre and the Government Resident, the Honourable John Douglas, instituted elected councils in 1899. Despite the autonomy given to island communities through elected councils the region has, in its modern period, been characterised by a large State and Federal government administrative presence. Until 1984 the Queensland DAIA which then became the Department of Community Services and subsequently became the Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, administered island communities, providing for the management of physical infrastructure and development.

Saibai Island was a reserve until 1985, when title, in the form of a Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT), was made to the Saibai Island Council under the *Aborigines and Islanders (Land Holding) Act 1984*. A year earlier the Council became incorporated under the *Queensland Community Services Act (Torres Strait) 1984* which, under the DOGIT, allows the elected council to administer the community and the lands of the island on behalf of the customary owners. Through the DOGIT, Saibai Island Council holds in trust approximately 108 square kilometres of land on Saibai, and the adjacent island of Kaumag. Excluded from the DOGIT are lands which the State and Federal government and the Anglican Church currently holds in the village, such as the health centre, the State school and residences, roads, airfield, the Telecom site, and the church.

The slight elevation and coastal placement of the village allows it to avoid the worst of the rising swamps behind and tides in front, and provides proximity to dinghy moorings.<sup>3</sup> However, development is subject to limitations as the surrounding swamps and mangroves restrict the physical growth of the village. The shortage of residential land, and limits imposed by access to potable water have posed problems for accommodating the increasing numbers of people looking to settle on Saibai. Nevertheless, there has been a noticeable rise in Saibai's population during the 1986-91 intercensal period (Table 1), resulting in a strain on the island's resources.

Apart from the Council and the Anglican Church, the other institutions on the Island are the State school and the health centre. Both are managed by white education and health professionals and staffed by Islander community teachers and health workers. This is unlike the Council and the Church which are wholly staffed by Islanders (predominantly Saibai Islanders) as is the Islander Board of Industry and Service (IBIS) grocery store, police, immigration, and quarantine positions. Other services which are part of Saibai's physical infrastructure include the airstrip, Telecom communications tower, cemetery, water supply and refuse dump.

### **Population**

Saibai Island's population during the 1973-93 period has risen substantially resulting in altered demographic characteristics over the 20-year period.

From the mid-1970s to mid-1980s Saibai's population grew then remained steady through the early 1980s. From the mid-1980s on Saibai population has grown significantly as Islanders from the mainland and within the Strait have moved back to the Island and increasing numbers of Papua New Guineans settle on Saibai (Arthur 1990; Arthur 1994: 4; Arthur and Taylor 1994: 3).

One of the most unique developments in population composition has been the emergence of a distinctive Papua New Guinean section. Over the past 20 years increasing numbers of people of Papua New Guinea descent, predominantly from the coastal Papua New Guinea village of Mabudauan, have settled on Saibai and have taken out Australian permanent residence or citizenship. Resident Papua New Guineans, totalling 58 persons, form 24 per cent of Saibai's total population; the rest of the community consider themselves Saibai Islanders and have close associations with each other based on kinship and marriage.

Saibai is not unique in this regard within Torres Strait, as Papua New Guineans are also resident on Boigu, Badu, Yorke, Yam, Darnley and Murray Islands. However, Saibai has a larger proportion of Papua New Guinean residents than other Islander communities owing to its proximity to the Papua New Guinea coast five kilometres away. In 1989, a total of 48 Papua New Guineans were living on Saibai (Arthur 1990: 11), increasing to 58 in 1993. This increase needs to be measured against other Islander communities to establish whether it reflects a longer-term growth trend occurring throughout Torres Strait. Also, it is not clear whether the newer Papua New Guinean residents have moved to Saibai from further south in Australia or from Papua New Guinea.

The 1991 Census data for Saibai indicates an indigenous population figure of 244 (ABS 1993) which corresponds with the author's August 1993 survey figure of 241. These figures show a significant increase on Duncan's population figure of 139 in 1973 (Table 1). Duncan attributes the low population number to 17 men working on boats at the time of the survey and an unidentified number of children attending schools away from the Island (Duncan 1974: 12, 24). Another population estimate from the same period is provided by the DAIA which records Saibai's population totalling 211 in 1972 (Duncan 1974: 11).

Comparison of Duncan's 1973 population figure of 139 with the 1993 population figure of 241 reveals a 73 per cent increase in the number of persons claiming residency on Saibai, while the same comparison using DAIA's estimate yields a 14 per cent population growth figure. For most of the 1970s and into the mid-1980s Saibai's population remained at around 200, but between 1986 and 1993 a jump of 20 per cent occurred. This rise in population can be mainly attributed to a return of those Islanders and their families who had moved off Saibai to southern Islander communities

and the mainland. This is in addition to the gradually increasing numbers of Papua New Guineans who have settled on Saibai since the early 1970s. Arthur's 1990 figure is anomalous in this regard but may reflect the presence of high school children on the island who are normally absent during the school year.

**Table 1. Comparative population figures for Saibai Island Community 1972-93 (year of enumeration).**

|               | Males | Females | Total |
|---------------|-------|---------|-------|
| DAIA (1972)   |       |         | 211   |
| Duncan (1973) | 49    | 90      | 139   |
| ABS (1981)    |       |         | 198   |
| ABS (1986)    |       |         | 200   |
| Arthur (1990) |       |         | 270   |
| ABS (1991)    | 126   | 118     | 244   |
| Davis (1993)  | 127   | 114     | 241   |

Sources: Duncan 1974: 15; Arthur 1990; ABS 1993; Davis field survey, August 1993.

Saibai's population increase stands in contrast to Caldwell's predictions in 1975 that the Torres Strait population would decline at a rate of 5 per cent every five years, from 5,146 in 1972 to 3,783 in 2001, with a figure of 4,191 in 1991 (Caldwell et al. 1975: 41). According to the 1991 Census the total population of the Torres Strait region was 7,252 persons, markedly above Caldwell's projected figure. There is no suggestion in Caldwell's projections that migration by Islanders from the mainland back to Torres Strait would take place, or that there would be large internal movements within the region. There is also no consideration of Papua New Guineans settling in Torres Strait in any appreciable numbers. In fact Caldwell adds a cautionary note that Papua New Guineans may be moving through Torres Strait to settle on the mainland and may identify in Census enumeration as Torres Strait Islanders (Caldwell et al. 1975: 43).

#### *Age and sex*

Table 2 compares the age structure of Saibai's 1993 population with Duncan's 1973 figures, Census-derived 1991 national Aboriginal and Islander figures and the total 1991 Australian population. Like the 1973 figure, Saibai's 1993 population is concentrated in the 0-14 years age bracket characterising it as a relatively youthful population. When compared to the general 1993 Australian population Saibai shows a relatively high number of persons in this age bracket. Also, in comparison to 1991 Census Islander figures, the Saibai 1993 population figure reveals a significantly lower working age population. This suggests that like other Islanders in the Strait greater employment and training opportunities on the mainland continues to attract Islanders (Taylor and Arthur 1993).

**Table 2. Broad age group comparisons, Saibai Islanders 1973-93, Islanders and Aborigines on the mainland and other Australians 1991 (year of enumeration).**

|                                | 0-14 years<br>Per cent | Age bracket<br>15-64 years<br>Per cent | 65+ years<br>Per cent |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Saibai Islanders (1973)        | 3.2                    | 53.9                                   | 2.9                   |
| Saibai Islanders (1993)        | 41.1                   | 49.4                                   | 9.5                   |
| Torres Strait Islanders (1991) | 37.0                   | 59.0                                   | 4.0                   |
| Aborigines (1991)              | 40.0                   | 57.0                                   | 3.0                   |
| Other Australians (1991)       | 22.4                   | 66.3                                   | 11.3                  |

Sources: Duncan 1974; Davis field survey, August 1993; Taylor and Gaminiratne 1993; Bamblett 1994.

**Table 3. Comparison of Saibai age-sex ratios, 1973 and 1993.**

| Age bracket | 1973 <sup>a</sup> |                     | 1993 <sup>b</sup> |                     |
|-------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
|             | Males<br>Per cent | Females<br>Per cent | Males<br>Per cent | Females<br>Per cent |
| 0-15 years  | 43                | 56                  | 59                | 41                  |
| 16-45 years | 19                | 81                  | 53                | 47                  |
| 46-65 years | 41                | 59                  | 40                | 60                  |
| 65+ years   | 75                | 25                  | 39                | 61                  |

a. Davis field survey, August 1993.

b. Duncan 1974.

A comparison by age and sex between the 1973 and 1993 figures reveals a number of interesting changes (Table 3). Duncan's 1973 figures show a higher ratio of women to men in the 0-15 years and 16-45 years age brackets. In 1993 these sex ratios were significantly different, in particular for the 16-45 years age group. This shift in age-sex ratios points to a greater retention of men on Saibai, taking into account that 17 men were absent during the survey period. In 1993 no Saibai Islanders worked in the marine industry, the Commonwealth Government Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme employing almost all working-age men on Saibai. The CDEP scheme is a community-focussed labour market program coordinated by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Under the scheme, communities receive a block grant that is roughly equivalent to the welfare entitlements of community members, and additional payments for the purchase of capital equipment (see Altman and Sanders 1991).

**Table 4. Comparison of dependency ratios, 1973-93 (year of enumeration).**

|                                | Overall | Child<br>0-14 years | Aged<br>65+ years |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Saibai Islanders (1973)        | 0.85    | 0.80                | 0.53              |
| Saibai Islanders (1993)        | 1.02    | 0.83                | 0.19              |
| Torres Strait Islanders (1991) | 0.69    | 0.63                | 0.06              |
| Aboriginals (1991)             | 0.74    | 0.70                | 0.04              |
| Other Australians (1991)       | 0.51    | 0.34                | 0.17              |

Sources: Duncan 1974; Davis field survey, August 1993; Taylor and Gaminiratne 1993; Bamblett 1994.

Dependency ratios presented in Table 4 show some significant variations between regional and national averages over time. Table 4 shows that in 1973 for every 100 working-age Saibai Islanders there were 85.3 dependants, of whom 80 were children and 5.3 were aged. By contrast, in 1993, for every 100 working-age Saibai Islanders there were 102 dependants, 82.8 of whom were children and 19.2 aged persons. The difference over 20 years has been in the growth of aged dependants which is highlighted when measured against other census figures. Using these criteria, the economic burden for each Saibai Islander of working age is greater than the total Australian working-age population and substantially higher than their Aboriginal and Islander counterparts.

It should be noted that the population of Saibai, like all other communities in Torres Strait, vacillates between two extremes. The 1991 Census count for Saibai's population is an enumeration which includes those who were actually resident on Census night. The 1993 field survey data provides a second population figure which includes those usually resident on Saibai but absent at the time of the Census. The bulk of this figure includes children who are absent during school term and other people temporarily away at the time of the Census. When these people are taken into account, the population figure increases by 18 per cent from 241 to 294. Like the many men who worked on boats throughout Torres Strait and in jobs further afield up until the 1970s, the school children form a highly mobile portion of Saibai's population for the duration of their school attendance. After finishing high school some do not return to Saibai, preferring to reside in other Islander communities further south in the Strait or on the mainland. Many, however, return to Saibai to take up work on the CDEP scheme.

Apart from the mobility of school children there is a constant flow of Saibai Islanders to and from the Island almost on a daily basis, travelling on airplanes and dinghies to other communities within the Strait. Airplane schedules often change but there are at least three regular flights a week to

Saibai and Horn Island. In the wet season these flights may decrease but during the rest of the year there are often a great deal more flights as chartered aircraft and government department helicopters make visits to Saibai.

Saibai's population forms only a small portion of the overall indigenous and non-indigenous population of the Torres Strait region, which in 1991 totalled 7,252. In contrast, the combined population of communities along the coast of Western Province as enumerated in the 1990 Papua New Guinea National Census was 13,988 persons of which 8,490 persons identified as being residents of the island of Daru (National Statistical Office 1991). This coastal population is also highly mobile; in 1989 there were 4,374 cross-border visits into Torres Strait, 2,405 of which were to Saibai, as Papua New Guineans visited family, bought goods in IBIS stores, sold artefacts and sought employment in the Strait (Arthur 1990: 11). During fieldwork in 1993 a number of Papua New Guinean men passed through Saibai on their way to work in southern Torres Strait crayfishery ventures. To date there has been only limited research in relation to visits by Islanders to Papua New Guinea (Lawrence 1994). Saibai Islanders regularly visit friends across the border and on occasion buy beer at coastal villages and purchase goods at Daru.<sup>4</sup> Further research is needed to clarify how often Islanders visit Papua New Guinea in order to gain a clearer picture about the sorts of interactions and population movements which are occurring.

The most salient feature of Saibai's population over the past 40 years, and the 20 years covered in this paper, is the migration pattern between Saibai and the Australian mainland and high population mobility within Torres Strait and across to Papua New Guinea (Beckett 1987; Arthur 1992). Until the mid-1970s this resulted in a general outflow of population and decline in overall numbers. Subsequently this decline has reversed with a net inflow; Saibai's population has risen to its 1993 figure of 241. In conjunction with an increase in overall population, the constant movement of Saibai Islanders to and from their community, and influx of visitors from Papua New Guinea and other parts of Torres Strait and Australia, gives the Saibai community particularly fluid characteristics in regard to demography.

### **Income**

The Saibai economy is characterised by a reliance on welfare transfers, State and Federal assistance, and subsistence activity.<sup>5</sup> Although cash is important to Saibai Islanders, subsistence produce for use and exchange forms a vital component of the economy. The subsistence economy is acknowledged by Saibai Islanders as a necessary addition to the cash-based economy for both ceremonial and livelihood reasons. Further, subsistence resources have a high social and gastronomic value which makes them

central to the reproduction of social relations on the Island. Before discussing the subsistence economy, the context in which cash enters into the community and the range of incomes earned needs to be considered.

Welfare transfers mainly take the form of CDEP scheme, pensions and family payments. A small number of jobs as councillors, council staff and government department employees are available, but by and large those who are not participants in the CDEP scheme, the central component of the Commonwealth Government's Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP), are receiving one of a number of Social Security payments. Saibai joined the CDEP scheme in 1985 with 61 participants. Initially, participant numbers declined, largely because women opted out of the scheme and chose other social security allowances as their means of monetary support. This probably reflects the trend for Saibai Islanders to remain on Saibai on completing schooling, as well as the greater number of people returning to Saibai to reside. The CDEP scheme on Saibai does provide a cash base for the community, but local factors have constrained the CDEP scheme from creating a platform for launching local enterprise. Saibai Islanders have, in recent years, chosen to forgo the search for enterprise or have looked to other avenues to provide impetus in this regard.

The fortnightly per capita figure of \$49,788 for wages and welfare translates to an annual income of \$1,294,488. Of this, \$900,380 was in the form of welfare payments and \$386,048 was paid as wages and salaries for government positions held by Saibai Islanders. Virtually no monies were accrued by the residents of Saibai from non-government sources. Some fish and crustacea were sold to a freezer boat by some Islanders and some artefacts were sold to visitors but in total this was insignificant.

**Table 5. Aggregate fortnightly cash income of Saibai Islanders, August 1993.**

| Source                                      | Income (\$) | Per cent |
|---|-------------|----------|
| Social Security income                      |             |          |
| Family allowances                           | 2,731       | 5.5      |
| Pensions (age, sickness, invalid, veterans) | 13,960      | 28.0     |
| Sub-total                                   | 16,691      | 33.5     |
| Employment income                           |             |          |
| Government wages and salaries               | 14,848      | 29.9     |
| CDEP  | 17,939      | 36.0     |
| Other cash income                           |             |          |
| Private store                               | 300         | 0.6      |
| Total                                       | 49,788      | 100.0    |

Source: Davis field survey, August 1993.

Gross income estimates presented in Table 5 indicate that 69.5 per cent of all household income comes from welfare transfers and CDEP scheme payments. Men on Saibai receive around 72 per cent of total government transfers flowing in to Saibai. Converting this to individual fortnightly income, every Islander male on Saibai received \$282.80 while Saibai Islander females received only \$135.10. With regard to government wages and salaries, women receive close to 40 per cent of the total amount earned. Of the overall total received by Saibai Islanders as household income, about 69 per cent goes to men.

The disparity in income between men and women is in large part because of the almost exclusive participation of men in the CDEP scheme. Further, wage payments are based on Jobsearch and Newstart allowances which are scaled according to age, marital status and the number of dependant children a CDEP worker has, issues which have been raised in other contexts (CDEP Working Party 1990; Altman and Sanders 1991). In June 1994, single status CDEP workers aged 16-17 years living at home earned on average \$140.80 per fortnight, gradually increasing to \$560 per fortnight for a participant cohabiting with a partner and children. For many women, the CDEP scheme offers only 'men's work', which is focused on providing basic community physical infrastructure, or activities such as making objects for use in dance performances, to the exclusion of other social or economic objectives. Women are unwilling to take part in this sort of work and are therefore not able to access CDEP scheme payments directly.

**Table 6. CDEP scheme workers and income, August 1992-93.**

| Fortnight ending | Gross (\$) | Number of workers | Supplemented workers <sup>a</sup> |
|------------------|------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 21 August 1992   | 19,584     | 45                | 7                                 |
| 2 October 1992   | 20,826     | 48                | 6                                 |
| 13 November 1992 | 20,469     | 48                | 7                                 |
| 5 February 1993  | 19,971     | 48                | 4                                 |
| 14 May 1993      | 22,506     | 51                | 7                                 |
| 6 August 1993    | 17,939     | 49                | 12                                |

a. Workers, who in addition to other income, are receiving supplements from CDEP scheme, either in the form of low wages, CDEP on-costs or support.

Source: Davis field survey, August 1993.

Administered by the Council, the CDEP scheme provides for a substantial portion of income to the community. CDEP scheme-derived income is the largest income sector of the community, accounting for almost 36 per cent

of total cash income. As Table 6 shows, CDEP scheme wages, on-costs and recurrent monies are being used to supplement, and in some cases substitute for wages of other positions in the community. These include administrative, public works, and positions within the church. The use of CDEP monies to maintain these positions suggests the CDEP scheme is a support structure for other independently financed institutions such as local government, the church and the IBIS store. On Saibai, the use of the CDEP top-up monies in this way suggests that the CDEP scheme is not being used as a skills training or business development program; rather it is structured as an income security program which maintains community physical infrastructure in a remote under-serviced location.

Saibai households have an average income of \$1,082 a fortnight used to support an average of 5.3 persons per household. As indicated in Table 7, there is a great deal of variation in household incomes. A quarter of households received an average of \$800 per fortnight, substantially less than the six households in the highest income bracket which recorded an average of \$1,320 per fortnight. When comparing average individual fortnightly incomes across the income brackets, disparities are made even more apparent. Individuals in the lowest income bracket average \$116 per fortnight whereas individuals in the highest income bracket average \$440 per fortnight.

**Table 7. Total and per capita fortnightly household cash income at Saibai community by income brackets, August 1993.**

| Per capita income bracket (\$) | Number of households | Number of occupants | Individual per capita income (\$) | Household per capita income (\$) | Total household income (\$) |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 0-200                          | 15                   | 103                 | 116                               | 800                              | 12,002                      |
| 201-400                        | 25                   | 120                 | 249                               | 1,194                            | 29,862                      |
| 401-600                        | 6                    | 18                  | 440                               | 1,320                            | 7,924                       |
| Total                          | 46                   | 241                 |                                   |                                  | 49,788                      |
| Average                        |                      |                     | 207                               | 1,082                            |                             |

Source: Davis field survey, August 1993.

In 1993, average fortnightly cash income for each individual was approximately \$207.<sup>6</sup> Over one year this converts to an annual income of \$6,775 for each individual. In contrast Duncan (1974: 53) estimated the average annual per capita income in 1973 as \$519, which is equivalent to \$2,631 in 1993 dollars. This represents a five-fold increase in real per capita income over 20 years from 1973.

When viewed in relation to wider Australian incomes Saibai Islanders' per capita income shows considerable differences. In 1993 annual terms 93 per cent of Saibai Islanders received three-fifths or less (\$6,474) of median-level income for Islanders living in the Strait (\$10,420) and less than half the same level recorded for Australians (\$14,392) (Arthur and Taylor 1994: 13).<sup>7</sup>

When identifying members of households and income on Saibai there are a number of important issues to be aware of, in particular the issue of the appropriateness of identifying households with stable membership (Smith 1994). In terms of household composition on Saibai there are a number of core members who are readily identifiable as being attached to their village properties. Fluid membership between households is an issue when attempting to identify which household an adopted child belongs to. Traditional adoption, referred to as 'Island adoption', is widespread on Saibai and throughout Torres Strait and it is not uncommon for there to be a number of people from different households involved in the care of children. This is particularly so when instead of adoption, families enter into another common social arrangement recognised as fostering. Under both arrangements adopted and fostered children may reside in a number of households as their social identity in regards to families may be subject to negotiation. At some point, usually in a child's teenage years, a strong sense of attachment to a particular family occurs so that the child is recognised by him/herself, and the community, as belonging to that family.

The underlying issue here concerns the interaction of Island adoption, household membership and income on the one hand, and the desire by various institutional authorities to achieve a regulation of sorts regarding Island adoptive practices. For example, to be eligible for family payments under the *Commonwealth Social Security Act 1991*, the natal and adoptive mothers (mothers are usually the recipient because they are identified as the primary caregiver) must come to some sort of arrangement in declaring the adopted status to the relevant authorities in order to claim family payments. This arrangement does not always occur, which affects assessment of household income. More importantly, a potentially difficult relationship with representatives of Queensland and Federal governments and other authorities results. An abiding concern of Islanders regarding adoption is to avoid revealing the natal birth to the child. This ideal is often breached in teenage years when one of two incidents occurs; either the child hears about it, or when dealing with government authorities, written accounts of birth and surnames are required to establish identity. In relation to the latter, what is purposely obscured becomes public, and social identity becomes problematic, requiring validation by regulation. Recognition of Island adoption as a legitimate indigenous social arrangement is a first step for government authorities in dealing with this; the effects and dynamics of State intervention into the regulation of adoptive relationships also needs further consideration.

## Labour

Island Councillors and administrative staff are employed to maintain the community at a local government level. In the private sector IBIS employ four people to run the local store. Other jobs in areas such as police, immigration, and quarantine are funded by the respective departments and are filled by Islanders. In the public service sector two registered European nurses, and a male European principal-teacher, usually with his partner, are employed to run the health centre and the school. Island health workers and teachers are also employed in these areas. Table 8 outlines the range of employment during 1993-1994 and the source of income for these positions. Many of these positions are continuations of those established and funded by the DAIA (Duncan 1974: 42).

In comparing the differences in employment between 1973 and 1993, it is important to note that apart from government teachers and nurses all employment in 1973 was through the DAIA. In 1993 many of the positions previously supported by the DAIA were funded by a number of government departments. As Table 8 shows there were no permanent part-time positions on Saibai in 1973 whereas in 1993, of the 59 permanent part-time positions filled, 51 were part of the CDEP scheme. Much of the paid work done by Saibai Islanders in 1973 has continued into 1993; only the funding arrangements have changed. Staffing positions for the Council, IBIS store and health and education facilities continues in much the same terms.<sup>8</sup>

Census community profile data indicate that 57 out of 78 employed Saibai Islanders were employed full-time and none were unemployed. Of 70 who stated their industry sector, 60 (86 per cent) are in the private sector. This is in contrast to the 51 workers who identified themselves as drawing a benefit from the CDEP scheme in 1993 (see Table 8). Clearly there are some anomalies between the 1993 field survey data and ABS data which are open to interpretation. The ABS or Saibai Islanders may be interpreting work for the CDEP scheme as reflecting employed status. ABS practice is to classify CDEP scheme work as private sector which resembles a more standard labour force arrangement with set working hours and objectives and regular fortnightly pay packets. Saibai Islanders may also be viewing informal work, such as church-related work, organising feasts, or subsistence labour as being part of overall work practices which are locally identified as employment.

Many of the ambiguities regarding employment status arise out of the arrangements under which the CDEP scheme operates and local indigenous concepts of work and labour. The CDEP scheme operates after Aboriginal and Islander groups voluntarily forgo their individual unemployment benefit entitlements, which along with supplements, are pooled into a grant which is administered by an incorporated community body. Participants

are then 'offered waged employment equivalent to their unemployment allowances' (Bamblett 1994: 6).

**Table 8. Industry sector of waged employment for Saibai Islanders, 1973 and 1993.**

| Industry sector                   | 1973      |           | 1993      |                |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|
|                                   | Full-time | Part-time | Full-time | Part-time      |
| Government                        |           |           |           |                |
| Councillors                       | 3         | -         | 3         | -              |
| Administration                    | -         | -         | 5         | -              |
| Quarantine                        | -         | -         | 1         | 1 <sup>a</sup> |
| Immigration                       | -         | -         | 1         | 1              |
| Police                            | 2         | -         | 3         | 2              |
| Teachers                          | 5         | -         | 4         | -              |
| Nurses                            | -         | -         | 2         | -              |
| Health workers                    | 4         | -         | -         | 4              |
| IBIS                              | 3         | -         | 4         | -              |
| Public works (CDEP)               |           |           |           |                |
| Sea wall maintenance <sup>b</sup> | -         | -         | -         | 12             |
| Carpentry                         | 4         | -         | 9         | -              |
| Arts/crafts                       | -         | -         | -         | 10             |
| Plant maintenance                 | -         | -         | -         | 7              |
| Water supply operator             | 1         | -         | -         | 1              |
| Sanitation worker                 | 1         | -         | -         | 1              |
| Cleaners <sup>b</sup>             | -         | -         | -         | 4              |
| Building repairs <sup>b</sup>     | -         | -         | -         | -              |
| Total                             | 23        | 0         | 23        | 59             |

a. This person also works as a healthworker.

b. Duncan mentions these as temporary work groups in 1973.

Sources: Duncan 1974; Davis field survey, August 1993.

In effect the council acts as an employer and participants as employees where work is performed for wages. On Saibai, CDEP scheme work groups, while having set log-on log-off times, may continue their work beyond their designated hours, particularly where they are involved in an important community event. Large church-related occasions and funeral preparations are two of the most common of these. This may involve arranging the setting and/or preparing, catching and harvesting of food. Thus the hours of paid work may not reflect the actual duration of work carried out, which raises the issue of what constitutes 'work' (Altman and Sanders 1991: 8). On Saibai, CDEP scheme employment has created a secondary labour market with different labour characteristics from other wage earners in the community such as Council employees, health workers and teachers who are able to distinguish the work they perform for wages

from other work they may do, such as voluntary church work, horticulture and harvesting marine resources. Additionally, non-CDEP scheme wage earners are under award conditions, unlike CDEP scheme participants.

Since the inception of the CDEP scheme on Saibai in 1985 the structure of the CDEP program has revolved around a number of core activities. There are a number of continuing jobs identified by Duncan in the early 1970s where Saibai Islanders were employed under DAIA works programs as carpenters, sanitation workers, water operators, and in airfield and sea wall retention. The only noticeable additions to employment under the current CDEP scheme are the formation of an arts and crafts group, office cleaners, and a plant maintenance crew (truck operators). A number of groups are formed to meet local needs as they arise, but by and large the CDEP scheme on Saibai serves as a public works program.

Of the 23 full-time non-CDEP waged positions on Saibai in 1993, 4 were held by Europeans, 12 by Islander men and 7 by Islander women and of the 11 part-time positions available, 10 were held by women. Correspondingly, of the 51 CDEP scheme workers only 5 were women. When the scheme first started on Saibai in 1985 women formed a significant portion of the workers. They were principally organised into a environmental beautification crew whose main duties involved planting and tending shrubs and trees around the village. As women have left the scheme this crew is no longer active. Not surprisingly the women involved in this crew felt that it was unsatisfying and did not lead to much else in the way of interesting work. In this regard the women's concerns about the CDEP scheme differ little from concerns raised by men. This is not to suggest that Saibai Islanders view CDEP negatively. In most of the interviews undertaken the CDEP scheme was viewed as a necessary component of the Saibai Island economy and providing essential underpinning of its physical infrastructure. However, in terms of gaining work, management, administrative, or business skills, the CDEP scheme is felt to be restrictive in what it can provide. The incentive for women to participate in CDEP is minimised because they are able to claim other forms of social security.

During August 1992-August 1993 the CDEP program was organised around a five-day working week with a structured administrative arrangement. The Council organised projects which were administered by a CDEP supervisor, CDEP clerk, and work crew foremen who managed eight work groups. The eight work groups listed in Table 8 reflect ongoing community concerns about maintaining the physical infrastructure which has changed little in 20 years.

In terms of cultural production, one of the most important CDEP work groups is the all male arts/craft group. This group is mainly concerned with preparing materials for the community dance troupe, including dancers and singers, which has a high profile in the region and has travelled throughout

Australia and overseas to perform on numerous occasions. Most of the workers in this CDEP arts/craft group, are also in the dance troupe. An important aspect of this work group is that no additional money is derived from performances or from offering dance implements or dress for sale. The former comes about because in order to generate substantial income the dance troupe would have to locate itself in the major Queensland cities to draw regular paying customers. Whenever the dance troupe has performed away from Torres Strait it has had to secure funding from various government or private bodies to pay for the costs of travel. Given the important role dance plays in Saibai Islander and Torres Strait Islander life in general, the community dance troupe is often regarded as the cultural 'face' of the community in regional, national, and international arenas.

Within Torres Strait, dancing is performed for a number of reasons which are bound up in wider cultural systems involving dance as a medium for, amongst other things, projections of identity and the elaboration of local knowledge in the public sphere. In this context the intricate and stylised dance implements which accompany many movements embody knowledge, which like the dance movements themselves, are often considered property of the choreographers who create them. This knowledge in the form of dance implements is continually recreated in different forms which reflects the importance of innovation in elaborating both new forms of knowledge and new dance implements. To state this dynamic in another way, dance implements fall apart so that they can be recreated. Accordingly, the arts/craft group is one of the most enduring of the CDEP work groups and reflects the importance the community places on dance as a site of cultural reproduction. Dance groups exist outside the CDEP context but are unable to attract funds to travel or make sophisticated dance implements and dress items.

As an avenue for commercial activity, producing dance products may be a viable option. Given the social context of the creation of dance materials it is not clear whether their sale would diminish their value for community members. This extends to any commercial production of objects which derive their initial meaning for Saibai Islanders from a local context. However, the production of artefacts, whether for Saibai Islanders or the commercial market, does not necessarily correspond to a dichotomy of indigenous value between traditional and commercial products. As Morphy (1991: 245-74) shows for the Yolngu of Arnhem Land, commercial production of paintings bearing significant Aboriginal motifs does not imply loss of meaning for the painters or the community. Similarly, it is conceivable that the production of artefacts on Saibai for the commercial market, whether they are related to dance or not, could be produced in a meaningful context not circumscribed by commercial necessity.

### *Floating business initiatives in the community*

During the August 1992-August 1993 period the works program remained consistent, although some changes were made to working arrangements. CDEP employees were working 24 hours a week spread over four or five days in 1992, but the Council changed this in late 1992 to a 24-hour working week spread over three days with the expectation that workers would mainly give attention to commercial fishing as well as subsistence activities. For about six months during 1992-93 a freezer boat was continuously moored at the village jetty. The owners of this boat had arranged with the Council that any Islander from Saibai who wanted to sell marine produce to the boat could do so. The shift to the three-day working week was arranged to accommodate the expected influx of fish and crustacea caught and sold to the boat by CDEP scheme workers with less restrictions on their work schedules. The expected appeal of the boat was not forthcoming, which in part was due to the small volume of fish caught and sold by Islanders. On the whole, the opportunity to supplement CDEP scheme-derived income with money earned from the sale of fish was not taken up by Saibai Islanders.

Maintenance of social relations via the exchange of marine produce is crucial to community life. When offered the opportunity to fish for cash on a part-time basis Saibai Islanders were not anxious to take up this option. A few families collaborated to sell to the freezer boat but these amounted to only two dinghies being used regularly for such cash ventures. All families involved in this had substantial gardens and drew on family connections to crew the dinghies and check nets. Drawing on kin ties allowed these families to work for the CDEP scheme, maintain gardens, and fish for the freezer boat. Other households sold surplus fish to the freezer boat intermittently as they caught more than they needed, but primarily marine produce was consumed or passed on to others.

In another attempt to stimulate interest in enterprise development the Council floated an initiative in 1994 whereby Saibai Islanders were given the opportunity to establish registered businesses. Eight licenses were offered to the community, all of which were taken up. Six of these potential licensees identified the business they were to establish, furniture and clothing importation, fast food outlet, general merchandise, hardware, boat building and one fishing operation, while the other two were unidentified as to what they hoped to establish. The Council then looked for support from ATSIC on Thursday Island in the form of advice but to date little has eventuated.

The failure of the fisheries venture to attract Islander fishers and the lack of success in business establishment has some important lessons for understanding the factors that are likely to influence increased involvement of Islanders in a fisheries-based regional economy. The TSRA's 1994-95 Corporate Plan views the development of Torres Strait marine resources as

the most important aspect of an emerging regional economy (TSRA 1994: 9). Although the plan recognises that sea resources are important to Islanders it is essential that the role such resources play in community life are clearly understood. At present, Saibai Islanders regard subsistence produce (both marine and garden) and its exchange as more important than intensive commercial marine harvesting.

In addition, Saibai Islanders have had little historical experience in enterprise. In the 20 years following World War II many Saibai Islander men based on the island worked in the marine industry. However, there were no Saibai-based boats after the mid-1950s as a number of failures led to a lack of support by the government who maintained the Saibai boats. This led to Saibai men working for Badu and Yorke Island skippers as crew and divers (Beckett 1987: 69). As the industry contracted many Saibai Islanders emigrated to other parts of Torres Strait and further south on the mainland looking for work (Beckett 1964: 306).

Over the years a work-force has emerged in Torres Strait in which a high proportion of people have completed secondary schooling, but few go on to gain tertiary degrees, diplomas or vocational qualifications (Taylor and Gaminiratne 1993: 25; Arthur 1994). Unlike the 1991 Census which records three women on Saibai with Bachelor degrees (ABS 1993), in 1993 no Saibai resident held a tertiary degree and only three men had trade qualifications. Some men had basic mechanic and building skills and a few men and women had administrative skills but no Saibai Islander resident on Saibai in 1993 had extensive experience in enterprise.

#### *Cash, goods, commodities and local context*

The tables on income do not present the degree to which money and other goods circulate within the community, at family and community funded feasts, and more directly, between kin. Some family groups pool a significant proportion of their money each fortnight, which goes to financing expensive items or events such as funerals, so that cash may gravitate into the hands of a few. Kinship and affine relations also form a network in which produce and cash is distributed throughout the community. Alternatively cash, in the form of goods, is passed on to people who may have limited access to culturally important foodstuffs, such as garden produce, turtle and dugong meat. This is especially relevant in regards to elderly people who are unable to maintain gardens or go hunting or fishing in dinghies. The local church also receives substantial donations, although not in the form of tithes. These donations often occur at public feasts where the display of cash is intimately tied to concerns about status and largesse. Resident Papua New Guineans also regularly remit parts of their welfare benefits to kin living on the New Guinea coastline across from Saibai village as part of an elaborate and ongoing system of exchange in which cash is one element in a flow of material goods.<sup>8</sup> Saibai Islanders, to a lesser extent, also participate in this cross-

border exchange. As these examples suggest, the use of cash is located within wider systems of meaning and sociality and is used not only for the purchase of goods for personal consumption.

Currently, CDEP scheme-derived income and welfare transfers provide the necessary wherewithal to pay for goods and other living expenses. In addition subsistence derived foods are an integral part of the daily diet of most households. Out of 46 households, 15 tend substantial gardens situated away from the village and many more have small gardens situated around their houses. Gardens tend to hold a number of crops, and sometimes more than one household is involved in the garden as close kin tend to garden together or in adjacent gardens. Both men and women are involved in gardening. About 19 of the households fish at least once a week, either from the village front or from dinghies. Men, women and children participate in fishing from dinghies, but often women and children will fish from the village front. Fourteen households use dinghies regularly, and most of the owners hunt dugong and turtle on a regular basis. The availability of dugong and turtle depends on the seasons and tides, but turtle is present most of the year. The fact that less than half the households fish and hunt from dinghies can be attributed to a number of factors. The produce from fishing or marine hunting is often distributed throughout the community so that a large number of people benefit from a catch. For example, the meat of an average sized dugong will be distributed between up to a dozen people. From this initial distribution a secondary dispersal of meat often occurs so that in effect the primary distributor 'carries' subsequent recipients of the meat. This flow of marine produce is reciprocated by the exchange of other material goods, such as store bought goods and money, as well as less tangible items, such as knowledge (held by elderly people) and care. Also, while dinghies are privately owned, closely related people who do not own dinghies are often part of the crew of a fishing expedition or a hunt and are expected to contribute to an outing. This reduces the need for additional dinghies on the island and cuts down on maintenance costs as Saibai's distance from the repair shops on Thursday Island makes restoration and replacement a costly exercise.

Gardening, fishing and sea hunting constitute the major subsistence activities for Saibai Islanders and they form the basis for an elaborate system of ongoing exchanges based on ties of kinship where social credit is generated and social debts are met. Primarily this takes place within the community but it also links in with wider Torres Strait systems of exchange. The major part of this exchange occurs on a day-to-day basis as people share subsistence and store goods with kin around the community as well as during regular public feasts which involve the whole community. While bought items are readily exchanged they do not carry the same prestige value as traditional items. Traditional subsistence practices have undergone change under colonisation, as has the whole

Saibai economy, however the economic importance of exchange of traditional foodstuffs is still a significant part of Saibai Islanders' self-perception and extends from within the community out to Papua New Guineans and other Islanders in Torres Strait and on the Australian mainland. An example of this occurred in 1993 when there was an abundance of dugong in the waters around Saibai. Dugongs were caught so that every freezer on Saibai was full to capacity with dugong meat. Reflecting the prestige dugong meat holds in Islander communities, no Islander bought meat from the IBIS store and eventually what was held in the store was discarded. In this social context the logic of exchange and the prestige primacy of traditional foodstuffs operate as a brake on commerce. As Saibai Islanders readily state, Saibai Island waters hold limited resources. Low impact techniques of marine resource extraction, such as handline fishing (no Saibai Islander fishes with a rod) and hand-flung wooden spear hunting, are congruent with maintaining consumption of marine produce at a level which does not exceed what is needed.

Compared with Australians in general Saibai Islanders seem relatively poor. However, economic wellbeing on Saibai is not exclusively dependent on cash inflow. Saibai Islanders draw on cash but also on well established systems of subsistence production and exchange which underwrites cash income. The combination of welfare, subsistence practices and close proximity to kin on Saibai has resulted in an 'Island' mode of living wherein Saibai Islanders maintain an equilibrium between cash, subsistence and relationships. On Saibai, as occurs in other parts of Melanesia, the combination of the domestic economy, kinship, exchange, cash and commodities are intertwined to produce complex social relations in which economic wellbeing is located (see Carrier and Carrier 1994).

The difficulties the freezer boat venture encountered on Saibai highlights the importance that social networks within and between communities would play in any attempt to establish a regional fisheries industry. The links between communities within Torres Strait is very complex; by marriage, through kin, along mythical routes, via friendships established in the war and in the old fisheries industry to name a few. As Maegawa (1994) has shown recently on Badu, there are at least two crayfishing operations which draw in various ways on some of these relationships.

### **Council and administration**

Under the *Queensland Community Services (Torres Strait) Act 1984* Saibai Island Council is empowered to act as a local government. Of the three councillors who are elected every three years, the chairperson represents Saibai on the Island Coordinating Council (ICC) and the TSRA. This allows Islanders a three-yearly review of the performance of the Council, although the politics of election are subject to complex social and political

forces which follow the rise and fall of powerful families and their political influence.

Prior to the 1984 legislation Saibai's elected representatives were funded by the DAIA (Duncan 1974: 42). At that time the DAIA exercised considerable control over the community; any applications for jobs made by councillors were subject to the review of the manager of the DAIA situated on Thursday Island and funding for all political, administrative and service jobs was provided by that Department. Under the *Queensland Community Services (Torres Strait) Act 1984* Saibai Island Council gained considerably more autonomy in administering government funds but arguably less equal status than other Queensland local governments (Sanders 1994: 4).

As a local government Saibai Island Council collects rents and rates, maintains community physical infrastructure, and receives local government, State government, and ATSIC grants. These grants are organised into three accounts; State government grants go into the State Government Financial Aid Fund, local government grants go into the General Fund, and ATSIC grants go into the Trust Fund. As well, the General Fund includes any public monies the Council receives through rents, rates, and electricity. A fourth account, the Enterprise Fund, holds any monies generated by Council enterprises such as the guest-house, office flat, wet canteen, community hall and equipment hire.

In 1993, the ATSIC grant was divided into CDEP wages, operational costs, recurrent monies, capital and on-costs. Money designated as operational went towards salaries, stationery and minor administrative charges. The recurrent monies went towards wages, worker's compensation, accounting and audit fees, repair and maintenance of buildings and building materials. The capital portion of the grant went towards plant maintenance. On-costs went towards supplementing wages and various expenditure items.

The State government grant's largest component was a housing grant which comprised 94 per cent of the total and a main roads grant. The remainder was spent on councillor allowances, wages to police, sanitation, airfield, and water supply workers, and various other expenses. The General Fund held the local government grant.

As Table 9 shows, during the 1993-94 year Saibai Island Council received a total of \$1,964,279 to pay wages, salaries and to manage the community. Apart from the small earnings generated by the sale of fish and the occasional artefact to visiting bureaucrats and contract workers, and the money brought in by guest accommodation, the grants received by the Council and social security payments to individuals account for virtually all of the income flowing into the community. This amount is virtually equalled by the costs of running the community, which total \$1,947,437.

The discrepancy between income and expenditure is attributed to moneys which have been carried over from the previous year. If not for money raised by the Enterprise and General Fund, expenditure for maintaining the community would have needed to decrease to balance with State and Federal government funding.

**Table 9. Saibai Island Council budget statements, 1993-94.**

| Council accounts                | Allocation/income<br>(\$) | Expenditure<br>(\$) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Trust Fund                      | 694,961                   | 695,230             |
| Financial Aid Fund <sup>a</sup> | 713,955                   | 837,779             |
| General Fund <sup>b</sup>       |                           | 309,743             |
| Local Government Grant          | 135,677                   |                     |
| Sub-total                       | 1,544,593                 |                     |
| General Fund                    |                           |                     |
| Other <sup>c</sup>              | 203,597                   |                     |
| Enterprise Fund <sup>d</sup>    | 216,089                   | 104,685             |
| Sub-total                       | 419,686                   |                     |
| Total                           | 1,964,279                 | 1,947,437           |

- a. This account had an opening balance of \$110,186.  
 b. This account had an opening balance of \$166,663.  
 c. Includes bank interest and the takings of rents, rates, and electricity.  
 d. This account had an opening balance of \$65,068.

Source: Saibai Island Council.

The balanced income and expenditure figures in Table 9 conceal the fact that the council was often unable to pay for maintenance costs in 1993. The high cost of importing spare parts and skilled workers for broken-down plant machinery often meant that the machinery was left that way for long periods. Houses and watertanks were also difficult to maintain because of the lack of finances to maintain ongoing repair costs. In the dry period of April-November of 1993 this led to water shortages for a number of households so that they had to draw on water held by other households, leading to critical levels of potable water.

The allocation of \$1,964,279 combined with the estimated \$900,380 arriving annually into the community via welfare yields a total annual income for the year 1993-94 to the Saibai Island community of \$2,864,659. Duncan's parallel figure stands at \$109,450 for the 1973 year, which in 1993 real terms was \$591,030 (Duncan 1974: 54). This figure corresponds to the provision of \$11,886 for each resident of Saibai from a combination of local, state and federal governments in 1993. In the 20 years from 1973 government funds to the island have increased by almost 80 per cent

reflecting not only an increased level of funding but an almost total underwriting of the cash economy by various levels of government.

### Reflections and future prospects

Duncan's work in 1973 was part of an overall research agenda set against the backdrop of looming border negotiations between Australia and Papua New Guinea. Some concern was expressed at the time that the boundary may be set at the 10th parallel of south latitude resulting in a handing over of a number of Islander communities to Papua New Guinea (Fisk and Tait 1974: 23). In a volume devoted to considering this complex issue, Fisk and Tait state:

It is our conclusion, therefore, that although the Australian people as a whole will probably derive no significant benefit from the retention of (sic) islands ... in the Torres Strait. To hand over the home islands of these people to a foreign power against their will would be a shocking travesty of such duty (1974: 24).

In taking this stance the authors took into consideration the fact that Islanders had expressed a strong desire to remain part of the Australian state and were unwilling to relinquish the status and living conditions they had acquired as inhabitants of Australia (ibid 1974: 5). Under the terms of the Torres Strait Treaty Saibai is situated north of the seabed resources line, but still retains Australian territorial status. During discussions in the early 1970s about the placement of the border the possibility was aired that Saibai, Dauan and Boigu might be handed over to Papua New Guinea as part of their territory. Saibai Islanders have not forgotten this and feel that there is a constant threat of their excision from Australia and incorporation in the Papua New Guinea state. As in the early 1970s contemporary Saibai Islanders are very reluctant to forgo their economic entitlements as citizens of Australia and enter into the economic hardships experienced by south-coast Papuan New Guineans.

Even as Saibai Islanders have no desire to relinquish their economic entitlements, there is a significant shift from the 1970s rhetoric of Torres Strait as an economic burden to Australian government to the Torres Strait as having the potential to be economically self-sufficient and exporting to other regions. Torres Strait seabeds hold the key to this regional economic strategy. In 1974 Holder (1974: 32-35) identified the control of seabed resources as potentially the most contentious aspect of border negotiations. More recently, the review of a ten-year moratorium on seabed mining in the TSPZ, which expires in 1995, has caused great consternation amongst Papua New Guinea and Islander political leaders. The possible lifting of the moratorium to allow exploration to take place has led the chairperson of the ICC and TSRA to express deep concerns over the possible threats of access to marine resources ('Islanders make a stand on mining', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 November 1994: 36).

Apart from the effects that mining may have on subsistence fishing these concerns also encompass possible impediments to commercial fisheries and their role in forming the basis of a sustainable regional economy. The economic development rhetoric of the TSRA's Corporate Plan is to a large extent countermanded by the example of Saibai Islanders, who maintain an economic strategy which balances traditional subsistence practices with government transfers to retain a desired standard of living. Access to marine resources for Saibai Islanders in the current economic climate means maintaining current levels of consumption. As kin networks are extant throughout the Torres Strait, the obligatory relationships which exist at a community and regional level often involve the exchange of foodstuffs such as dugong and turtle meat, cultivated produce and, to a lesser extent, store bought goods. The demands of household level small-business competes with the demands of the maintenance of kin relationships through the exchange of traditional foodstuffs and hence the time needed to ensure resource availability.

One option is to 'encourage' mainstream labour force participation by cutting off CDEP scheme entitlements. As these are received in lieu of Jobsearch and Newstart allowances this would contravene Saibai Islanders rights as citizens to welfare. Further, forcing Saibai Islanders into a mainstream labour market would achieve a dual dependence. The TSRA's Corporate Plan is unspecific about how many jobs will be made available in an indigenous commercial fishery, or how it envisages moving people off the CDEP scheme into the commercial fisheries labour market. In 1973 there were only 17 men who were employed in the marine industry. In 1993 the CDEP scheme employed 51 men and women and presumably the TSRA is hoping to provide full employment for all of them in the mainstream labour market. As Ganter (1994) points out there are real limits to the intensity with which marine resources can be viably extracted, which corresponds to constraints on employment possibilities. If Saibai Islanders fail to secure employment what surety is there then that they would receive welfare? In addition to the difficulties of securing employment in a regional mainstream labour market, the Saibai community will still be dependent on government finance to maintain the community.

These concerns also have a larger regional resonance and trajectory into the future. It is probable that a flourishing fisheries industry will attract many mainland Islanders and Papua New Guineans to the Strait in search of employment. The Torres Strait already attracts mainland Papua New Guineans from throughout Western Province to the coastal villages of Sigabadaru and Mabudauan near Saibai, and Ber and Buji near Boigu for the purpose of visiting relatives, sale of fish and artefacts to Islanders and others who visit the outer Western Islands, as well as seeking employment in the Torres Strait fisheries. As has been suggested, Papua New Guineans will look to compete for access to employment in any commercial fisheries in the region (Arthur 1992: 30).

The problems which beset the moored freezer boat on Saibai in 1993 show that there is a real need to identify the types of skills required to establish commercially oriented enterprises. Saibai Islanders have been prepared to pay for private training in diving, freezer maintenance and boat managing skills from non-government operators, even though they are aware of the great costs involved. In relation to this, one Saibai man expressed the following:

We get money from the government but it is not much. We know there is fish and crays out there, we can do it, make some money for ourselves. My children are educated and can do the books and we can do the diving.

The lack of effective support to earlier business attempts on Saibai in the previous five years suggests that this man's aspirations will receive little support. To date the CDEP scheme has contributed little to facilitating local economic growth at a household level. The various small business proposals on Saibai, which are all at the household level, have come about despite the lack of a coordinated strategy towards identifying real economic opportunities in the context of local social and economic conditions. They also reveal that Saibai Islanders have a desire to develop enterprises but are restricted by lack of support, training and locational disadvantage. Saibai Islanders are also competing against IBIS which, simply because of economies of scale, makes it difficult for small-business people to establish enterprise. Designing training programs at a regional and small business level at the recently established TAFE on Thursday Island would go some way towards addressing these needs as well as establishing commercial structures which make enterprise attractive.

Economic opportunities for Saibai Islanders would seem to be limited to a few choices. Movement away from the CDEP scheme into the mainstream labour market will always be hampered by the number of jobs available. Continuing the mobility of previous years, Saibai Islanders have the option of migrating to the mainland in search of work. Alternatively, by staying on the island they may be able to supplement cash income with increased subsistence practices and stay at a low cash income level. In addition, some families could export arts, crafts and marine produce, such as fish and crustacea generated at a household level, to earn private income.

#### *Saibai in the year 2013?*

Assuming that Saibai will still be Australian territory in the year 2013, there will probably continue to be high population mobility, as a portion of Saibai's population seek employment elsewhere in Australia, returning intermittently to resume the 'Island' mode of living or retire. In effect the mainland will continue to exert an economic 'pull' on Saibai Islanders, while Islanders on the mainland are continually attracted to return to Saibai's lifestyle. Small business will always be ultra-sensitive to demand and suffer locational disadvantage and seasonal difficulties making the long-term establishment of local enterprise problematic. It is possible that

in 2013 Saibai Islanders will have secured commercial licenses and boats to operate in the fisheries, and if so a considerable portion of the crew will probably come from Saibai. However, Saibai Islanders will still be reliant on government transfers to maintain community infrastructure and welfare payments for the bulk of their personal income. Traditional subsistence practices have declined since colonisation but have never been wholly supplanted by a cash economy. With this history it is likely that subsistence produce will continue to play an important part in maintaining social relationships. Given the previous 20 years of Papua New Guinean settlement in the Strait, it is also likely that they will continue to seek residence on Saibai and may form considerably more of Saibai's population than in 1993. In terms of the gender composition of the workforce it is likely that there will be an increase of Saibai Islanders filling professional positions on the island, but unless incentives are offered for women to participate in business and the mainstream labour force which may be established by a marine industry it is likely they will continue to receive welfare benefits.

#### Notes

1. Throughout this paper the term 'Islanders' refers to Torres Strait Islanders. This paper is primarily concerned with economic, demographic and labour issues on Saibai Island and only deals with traditional rights in land and sea in a summary fashion.
2. This should in no way be taken to suggest that Islanders were full participants in all aspects of the marine industry over the years. As Mullins (1988) and Ganter (1994: 94) have shown, Islanders were initially excluded from the emerging marine industry of the 1860s and were initially employed when their local knowledge and cheap labour was required, and after World War II when the Department of Native Affairs sought to increase Islander involvement. From this time on Islanders struggled to have greater control over the industry (Beckett 1987).
3. During the December to March wet season the village becomes surrounded by water from the swamps and the sea, both of which are connected to the shallow water table which rises during high tides. In the late 1940s this resulted in the flooding of the village, and the eventual movement of a significant section of the population to Cape York where they founded two communities, Bamaga and Seisia.
4. Under Articles 11 and 16(a) of the TST these activities would be regarded as a breach of the Treaty as they are not strictly traditional, being commercial activities. While it needs to be acknowledged that there are problems with Papua New Guineans commercially fishing in the TSPZ (Babbage 1990: 36), commercial transactions between Islanders and Papua New Guineans need to be viewed in their social and cultural context and not just as transgressions of the Treaty. Cross-border commercial activity between Saibai residents and Papua New Guineans not only meets strictly economic needs but displays, in material terms, the reproduction of social relations.
5. On the basis of fieldwork conducted in 1993 the subsistence economy includes activities which are carried out at least on a weekly basis, depending on the

season. These include maintaining gardens which contain cassava, yams, sweet potato and bananas, both in the vicinity of the house and the more extensive gardens situated away from the village; fishing, turtle and dugong hunting, and deer hunting. From time to time people collect molluscs from the mangroves, and shoot wild fowl, but these are not regular activities.

6. At the time of fieldwork in 1993, the only other Europeans permanently resident on Saibai apart from myself and my partner were two teachers and two nurses. The relative employment status of the Europeans was reflected in their cash income which averaged about \$1,900 per fortnight, or nine times the average figure for Saibai Islanders.
7. The 1993 figures are based on 1991 data presented in Arthur and Taylor (1994: 14) converted into 1993 dollar terms by a standard CPI factor of 1.028 for the calendar year period 1991-1993.
8. It is difficult to establish how much money passes between Saibai and New Guinea, as it occurs informally as between kin, or involves buying small quantities of goods such as beer, audio cassettes, mats and other decorative items.

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