BOIGU ISLAND
OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

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This book has been prepared for the people of Boigu Island in the Torres Strait; one of the most remote regions of Australia. Driving the book is a commitment by the authors to help Australia’s First Nation peoples. Its primary goal is to report on the delivery of goods to the Community of Boigu Island, and in so doing share something of our experiences on the Island with the traditional people; a people who often miss out when it comes to their share of the nation’s wealth and resources.

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Introduction

This chapter introduces the book, with an overview of the Project; definitions of “Torres Strait Islanders,” as presented in available literature; the title of the book, and the overall structure of the book.

Overview

Available research indicates that the broader Australian community know little about the Torres Strait and Torres Strait Islander Australians. A case study on the Torres Strait in the Social Justice & Human Rights Issues: A Global Perspective reports “[v]ery few Australians are aware of my people - the Torres Strait Islanders” (HSC Online, no date, no page). In their work on family life for Torres Strait Islanders, Ban, Mam, Elu, Trevallion and Reid (1993) state, “Torres Strait Islanders are Indigenous Australians who have had a low profile in the wider Australian consciousness” (p.16).

This book presents the findings of a project conducted in collaboration with a local community in the Torres Strait Islands. The Islands were annexed to Queensland in the mid to late 1800s. They are mostly part of Queensland, a constituent State of the Commonwealth of Australia. The Islands are administered by the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), which falls under the portfolio responsibilities of the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

The primary aim of the book is to draw attention to the plight of the Community living on Boigu Island. Although it is one of the largest islands in the Torres Strait Boigu Island, it is low-lying with an interior that is sparsely vegetated and mainly swampland. Boigu Island has a population of around 290 people (ABS, 2007). The Community reside on the northern end of the Island, and are one of the most remote people in Australia.

The authors understand that much of the sentiment expressed in the Out of Sight, Out of Mind Book can be applied to other island communities in the Torres Strait, though each has its own unique cultural differences, developed over time. We also understand that the people of Boigu Island are a collective people, who share membership in other island communities in the Torres Strait. That said, the focus of the book remains on Boigu Island, as that was the Community to which we were invited, and the one in which we carried out our small-scale project.
Boigu Island Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Definitions
The term “Indigenous” is generally used when referring to both First Nations’ peoples of Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We understand that the term “Indigenous” is generally used by the Commonwealth Government in line with their charter of program and service provision to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a national level. However, where possible this book does not refer to Torres Strait Islanders as “Indigenous” Australians/people. The reason for this is that while both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up the First Nations of Australia, they are diverse groups and have their own unique and distinctive traditions, histories, cultures, languages, worldviews and experiences.

The Title of the Book
We have chosen the adage - Out of Sight, Out of Mind - as the title of the Book. With this title we aim to capture the broader Australian psyche with regard to the Torres Strait Islands and its population. For instance, when we told people in the Smart State of Queensland that we were travelling to the Torres Strait, many responded by asking, “where’s that?”.

There are far too many Australians that have not heard of the Torres Strait, and much of the Australian literature identifies Torres Strait Islanders as “Aboriginal” people. An example of this can be seen in references made in the media to Koiki (Eddie) Mabo, whose name is synonymous with Native Title rights. Mabo is the Torres Strait Islander who won a case against the Queensland Government in which he and a number of other plaintiffs were legally recognised as the Traditional Owners of their land. Further, the media’s focus has remained on the impact of the dismissal of Terra Nullius (no-man’s land) on the mainland Aboriginal community, while the impact of the decision for Torres Strait Islanders has received scant attention.

In fact, many reports on Torres Strait Islander peoples’ traditions and culture are overshadowed by Aboriginal peoples’ traditions and culture. Further, programs and services that aim to cater to the unique needs of “Indigenous Australians”, typically speak to Aboriginal people, and, albeit inadvertently, subsume the unique and distinctive people of the Torres Strait.

It may interest the reader to note that despite the fact that the Torres Strait Islands were first included in mapmaking endeavours in the late 1700s, after the Spanish Captain Luis Vázquez de Torres sailed through the Strait, the big commercial television stations in Brisbane (and possibly other regions of Australia) do not include visual representation of the Torres Strait Islands in the maps they use to report “the weather”. In 2010, Brisbane viewers (and possibly other viewers from other states and territories in Australia) are not privy to the weather conditions in the Torres Strait, which are significant newsworthy items, particularly in an environment of climate change.

Despite the fact that the Torres Strait Islands are a part of Australia and that Torres Strait Islanders are citizens of Australia, our fellow Australians living in
the Torres Strait remain largely unseen, overlooked and forgotten: out of sight, out of mind.

**The Structure of the Book**

The book is presented in four chapters. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the Book: definitions of "Torres Strait Islanders" as presented in available literature; the title of the book, and the structure of the book. Chapter 2 provides some background information on the Torres Strait, including its geographical location and isolation, people, flag and current administration. Chapter 3 presents an account of Boigu Island; the Community, housing, education and the means by which local residents travel to and from the Island. Chapter 4 concludes the book by putting Boigu Island in mind, with details about the project, sponsorship, and some of the important issues.