

Coastal management

Principle:

The coastal zone provides significant resources for residents, visitors and industry. Competing interests need to be appropriately managed if these resources are to be maintained.

The Tiwi Islands coastline has historically been a major focus of activity and contact, from Macassan traders to European explorers, Japanese pearl-ers, traders, and Missionaries. Most of the significant sites identified in Tiwi history are located on the coast, as are residential, hunting and ceremonial campsites.

This continues today, with the importance of mangrove and estuarine areas for food, and the preference for saltwater over freshwater fish. The three main communities of Nguui, Pirlangimpi and Milikapiti are all coastal communities, and Wurankuwu has direct coastal access through a number of nearby watercourses. Similarly, the majority of other outstations and permanent campsites are either on the coast or within easy distance.

The importance of the coastal zone, its access and resources, is evidenced through decades of Land Council business addressing and discussing coastal issues, and investigations into sea closures as early as 1980. Tiwi leaders have long had to deal with competing interests between landowners, recreational and commercial fishing, industry fishing and farming interests, tourism, government, researchers and public lobby groups.

In 1995 the Tiwi Coastal Waters Consultative Committee was formed to progress dialogue between Tiwi interests and the NT Government. The Committee meets regularly, and now includes permanent representation from the Amateur Fishing Association of the NT (AFANT) and Marine Harvest, who operate the aquaculture facility off Bathurst Island.

The Committee has dealt with many issues over the years, including net debris, marine legal enforcement, jurisdictional interests, illegal immigrants and their vessels, river closure lines, recreational permits and agreements, and commercial aquaculture planning. The Tiwi Land Council also provides representation on forums such as the NT Marine and Coastal Management

Policy Sub-committee, the Aquatic Resource User Group Forum, and the Seas Working Group, made up of representatives from each of the coastal Land Councils in the NT.

High fish stocks and close proximity to the mainland has made the region a favourite destination for recreational fishing, and the Islands have featured in a number of popular fishing magazines. Visitation to the area is increasing, especially as keen fishermen access larger vessels with greater ranges. The north coast of Melville Island especially has become a more viable option for those looking for a rewarding trip, and Port Hurd and the west coast of Bathurst Island have become regular destinations.

Trips are usually over two or three days, and are also becoming more popular with Fishing Tour Operators (FTO's), who often operate mother ships with tendered dinghies. AFANT expects these trends to increase. Under current legislation, FTO's are classed as recreational fishers, and as such are permitted to access and fish any waterway. As long as individuals do not enter the land without a permit, they can remain and fish any area for any length of time.

In an effort to manage uncontrolled access to the Islands associated with recreational fishing, an agreement was made between the Tiwi Land Council and the NT Government in 1998. The agreement, administered by AFANT, identified six sites on the islands that were available for camping after obtaining a permit. According to AFANT estimates, permits are issued for an average five to six boats on selected dry season weekends, with up to 15 boat parties obtaining permits for club organised events. Anecdotal evidence suggests that non-compliance is an issue, with reports of people camping without permits (Harrison, 2003).

Bathurst and Melville Islands have a combined coastline of nearly 800km, and the vast majority is inaccessible by road. The population of the Islands is concentrated on the southeast coast of Bathurst Island and the northwest coast of Melville Island, and so sea access to other areas of the coast by local residents is also restricted to larger vessels and long voyages. The remoteness of the Tiwi coastline and its importance to local people creates significant issues to do with uncontrolled access to both the land and

coastal resources. Of major concern to Tiwi leaders is the trend towards increased effort by recreational fishers and FTO's, and the impact this may have on coastal resources, including the inadvertent transport of pest species. The impact of commercial fishing on the region is also poorly understood, and confidentiality of data makes it difficult for Tiwi stakeholders to access information on the use of the resource.

Port Hurd is an important area for industry and Tiwi economic interests, as it contains the Marine Harvest barramundi sea cage facility. It may also become a base for a commercial Tiwi fishing tour operation in the future. Recreational fishers and FTO's regularly visit this area, with one instance of visitors fishing into a sea cage late at night despite the area being aquaculture lease. Port Hurd was also the landing for an illegal foreign fishing boat, the crew of which mistook the area for the Australian mainland. A closure line currently exists across Port Hurd, however it is inland from the Marine Harvest facility.

In response to ongoing coastal issues, the Tiwi Land Council approached the NT Government in 2000 with a proposal for a Tiwi Marine Ranger programme, with the first Ranger commencing duties in 2001. The main function of the Ranger position is to provide a visible presence within the broader fishing community, and to monitor and record fishing activity. Other duties include the provision of a liaison and advisory service to tour operators and local residents. The programme has been so successful that it formed the model for other Marine Ranger Programmes elsewhere in the Top End.

The Marine Ranger is based at Pirlangimpi on Melville Island, from where he carries out patrols of north and west Bathurst Island, the Apsley Strait and the southern coast of Melville Island. He also patrols selected areas of northern Melville Island by vehicle. Given the size of the area, the patrols are often widely spaced, with some areas not patrolled at all. This severely reduces the effectiveness of the programme. Currently the Marine Ranger works alone, and seeks volunteer assistance for longer voyages. A two-person team would provide a safer service, and allow for ongoing training.

Subsequent approaches to the NT Government and recurrent funding from the Tiwi Land

Council has won support for an additional Marine Ranger which will allow an expansion of the areas patrolled, and more regular patrolling of key areas. The additional Ranger will be based at Milikapiti, effectively doubling the exposure and providing a far more efficient service.

Outcome:

Sustainable and equitable management of the Tiwi Islands coastlines.

Objective:

6. Assess and manage current impacts on the coastal zone, and develop and implement processes to manage future impacts.

Recommended Actions:

- 6.1 Record important marine and coastal hunting areas as protected from significant disturbance on the Tiwi GIS.
- 6.2 Continue representation on government and other marine and coastal bodies.
- 6.3 Through the Tiwi Coastal Waters Consultative Committee and Aquatic Resource User Group Forum, lobby for FTO's to be recognised as commercial operators.
- 6.4 Develop and implement a programme to carry out permit checks for recreational camping twice yearly. Locations and times to be determined on advice from AFANT.
- 6.5 Through AFANT, initiate log book projects for recreational fishers.
- 6.6 Through the Tiwi Coastal Waters Consultative Committee, initiate and manage research on the impacts of both the commercial and recreational fishing industry in the region.
- 6.7 Relocate the Port Hurd closure line to the mouth of Port Hurd.
- 6.8 Erect 'No Trespassing' signs around the Marine Harvest aquaculture lease.
- 6.9 Expand the Tiwi Marine Ranger Programme to two vessels and four ranger staff.
- 6.10 Provide ongoing training opportunities for Marine Rangers.

