



## Information Sheet 9: Australian South Sea Islander Demography in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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The New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) supplied nearly 40,000 and Solomon Islands 18,000 (just over one-quarter) of the original Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) population between 1863 and 1904. The New Hebrides dominated early recruiting, then in the 1880s the number from the Solomons expanded, providing over half of the recruits in the final years of the labour trade. Numbers increased rapidly from 1,543 in 1868 to a peak of 11,443 in 1883, and then declined, only to increase again in the 1890s and 1890s. In 1901 there were around 10,000 Australian South Sea Islanders, after which the number declined through attrition until 1906 when the Australian Government planned to begin deportation of as many as possible of those remaining. The deportation ended in 1908 by which time about 2,000 to 2,500 remained.<sup>1</sup> As Patricia Mercer states, for the next sixty years there ASSI were a closed population with no immigration from and little emigration back to their home islands. Three-quarters of them continued to live in Queensland, with about half in North Queensland. The geographic spread established during the nineteenth century remained the same: Mackay was the largest ASSI community in North Queensland, with other substantial populations at Cairns and Port Douglas, the Herbert River (Ingham), Johnstone River (Innisfail), Bowen and in later years the Burdekin (Ayr/Homehill). The only sizeable ASSI population not in a sugarcane-growing district was at Bowen, with small numbers also in Townsville, the Atherton Tablelands, the Gulf of Carpentaria down to Cloncurry and across to the coast through Hughenden and Charters Towers. Some others were amalgamated into Aboriginal communities at Yarrabah, Mapoon, Aurukun and Palm Island. Others lived in Torres Strait and have become part of that indigenous community. The Islanders have always migrated within Queensland and to Northern New South Wales to be near kin. This has led to movement from Central Queensland to Mackay, and into the Bowen and Burdekin areas.<sup>2</sup>

The Table One, expanded in the Appendix to this paper, indicates the geographic spread of the ASSI population in 1891 and 1901. The 1901 ASSI population was 9,537. The most interesting

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<sup>1</sup> Clive Moore and Patricia Mercer, 'The Forgotten Immigrants: Australia's South Sea Islanders, 1906-1993', in Henry Reynolds (ed.), *Race Relations in North Queensland*, Townsville: Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, 1993, pp. 208-242.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Mercer, *White Australia Defied: Pacific Islander Settlement in North Queensland*, Studies in North Queensland History No. 21, Townsville, Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, 1995, pp. 1-2, 100, 106-107.

points arising from the table (and the Appendix) are the enormous geographic spread, not only along the coast but also into pastoral areas, Cape York and Torres Strait and the number of minors along with the adults: 2,127 in 1891 and 1,547 in 1901. The deportation process occurred between 1906 and 1908 there and many of these would have left Australia, however, there most of the Islanders in pastoral and remote maritime areas would have been in Queensland since the 1870s and early 1880s. They were in a pre-1879 special category and were allowed to remain in Australia. Most would have been single men but significant numbers would also have had Aboriginal wives and their families were absorbed into local Indigenous communities.

**Table One: Estimate of Major Pacific Islander Populations in Queensland, 1891 and 1901**

<b>District</b>	<b>1891</b>	<b>1901</b>
<b>Torres Strait</b>	219?	672
<b>Cairns and Mossman</b>	100	500
<b>Johnstone River (Innisfail)</b>	800	530
<b>Herbert River (Ingham)</b>	800	1,233
<b>Burdekin (Ayr &amp; Homehill)</b>	400	500
<b>Bowen &amp; Proserpine</b>	624	298
<b>Mackay</b>	2,277	1,475
<b>Rockhampton</b>	111	150?
<b>Bundaberg</b>	2,000	1,912
<b>Isis</b>	700	500
<b>Maryborough</b>	170?	900
<b>Brisbane &amp; Logan</b>	335	500
<b>Other</b>	266?	367?
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8,602</b>	<b>9,537</b>

(Note: Based on 1891 and 1901 Census statistics, and accumulated personal knowledge. It is difficult to estimate from the Census Districts, which changed shape between the two census years.) There has been no totally adequate count of the number of South Sea Islanders in Australia since 1906. Reaching a satisfactory estimate has always been a significant challenge as the National Census statistics are of limited use. There is inconsistency in the race and ethnicity questions asked, some individuals of ASSI descent choose not to be identified, and others are cloaked under the statistics for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population as their primary identification.)

### **Pacific Islanders in the National Census, 1911 to 1966**

The National Census data is the only demographic data on ASSI available for most of the twentieth centuries; however it was always regarded as only an approximate source of information on the non-Europeans section of the population. There are statistics on Pacific Islanders in the National Censuses but it is not entirely clear how many of these are descendants of the nineteenth century labour trade immigrants. The National Census until 1966 asked a question on race, but it is still difficult to get accurate information as the designation South Sea Islander or Pacific Islander includes both the original labour trade immigrants and more recent immigrants. Because of the White Australia Policy, between 1901 and the 1960s very few Pacific Islanders were able to enter Australia, although a trickle began to do so for education onwards from the 1950s. Questions on race are difficult to ask and get accurate information from. An example is the 1986 Census which did contain a question on ancestry. Only 133 people in Queensland responded "Kanaka", and the response "South Sea Islander" was not counted.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth beginning with Patricia Mercer's findings on demographic patterns for ASSI during the first half of the twentieth century, to show that they were not average in the wider Australian community, and that the 1976 calculations cited below were based on false premises about the average size of the families.

Islanders, like most minority and many migrant groups, did not share the demographic patterns of the wider community. In Australia this was a period of declining fertility in which the growth rate was only maintained by immigration. Pacific Islanders, in contrast, were a closed population whose survival was dependent on a high rate of natural increase. Amongst the native-born the pre-requisites for such an increase were all present: a very young age at marriage, a narrow gap in age between spouses, conception before or soon after marriage for all but the unfecund, the virtual absence of family planning practices, social pressure to bear and raise large families, a long child-bearing span, and declining mortality and infant mortality rates.<sup>4</sup>

The ASSI who remained after 1907-1908 fell into three categories: old men living alone or in groups; old childless couples; and those relatively few men and women, often younger, married to other Islanders, Aborigines or Asians and with families. By the 1910s and 1920s, the children of these unions were themselves of marriageable age, and faced social pressure to marry back into the ASSI community first, then to Aborigines and last to Europeans. Reflecting the common patterns amongst immigrants, the family size of the original Islanders had been generally small; the families of their children and their children were much larger. By the 1940s and 1950s, families of ten or more were increasingly to be found. For instance, in 1957 novelist Ernestine Hill wrote of meeting Mary Tanna of Halifax (near Ingham), the daughter of Islander immigrants from the New Hebrides. She had married twice and borne seven children who had raised at least fifty-eight children many of whom had begun their own families.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Colin Menzies (The Public Practice Ltd.), *A Profile of Neglect: A Background Paper on the Situation of Australian South Sea Islanders*, 1992, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Mercer, *White Australia Defied*, p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> Moore and Mercer, 'The Forgotten Immigrants', p. 211.

**Table Two: 1911-1947, Pacific Islanders in Australia and Queensland**

Year	Australia			Queensland					
	M	F	Total	M	% of Aust total	F	% of Aust total	Total	% of Aust total
1911	1,803	439	2,242	1,476	81.9	384	87.5	1,860	83.0
1921	1,819	750	2,569	1,482	81.5	616	82.1	2,098	81.7
1933	1,145	747	1,892	954	83.3	628	84.1	1,582	83.6
1947*	1,161	817	1,978	1,007	86.7	676	82.7	1,683	85.1

Source: Patricia Mercer, *White Australia Defied: Pacific Islander Settlement in North Queensland*, Studies in North Queensland History No. 21, Townsville, Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, 1995, p. 150.

\*In 1947 Torres Strait Islanders were counted in with Pacific Islanders. These figures were calculated by subtracting approximate figures given for the number of Torres Strait Islanders from the Australian and Queensland totals.

**Table Three: 1911-1933 South Sea Islanders in North Queensland**

District	1911 Census			1921 Census			1933 Census		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Pt Douglas	40	0	40	26	2	28	12	4	16
Cairns	103	5	108	45	18	63	8	2	10
Atherton Tableland	15	0	15	33	12	45	5	0	5
Johnstone R	*	*	*	45	5	50	11	5	16
Herbert R	71	12	83	65	36	101	31	24	55
Townsville	27	3	30	13	3	16	6	4	10
Burdekin	+	+	+	25	11	36	42	20	62
Charters Towers	6	2	8	11	6	17	3	1	4
Hughenden & West	10	0	10	13	8	21	6	4	10
Bowen	49	5	54	33	14	47	33	22	55
Proserpine	#	#	#	28	22	50	8	4	12
Mackay	208	22	230	234	81	315	169	93	262

TOTAL	529	49	578	571	218	789	334	183	517
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\*Included in Cairns Total

+Included in Townsville Total

#Included in Bowen Total