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Not waving but drowning at our back door



Ali Tamwoy, 3, of Masig Island, in the Torres Strait, swims during high tide.
Photo: Andrew Meares

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BABY Sedoi Passi was alone in her parents' bedroom just before midnight when the waves broke through a wall and began flooding the room.

"The tide had been rolling in all afternoon, bigger than usual, like surfing waves. But we kept thinking, 'It's going to stop,'" recalls her father, Sunny Passi.

"But it just kept coming up ... So we were all running around like crazy, moving stuff, and with everything happening, my partner and I didn't realise our little girl was still inside."

When they went back in, "we found Sedoi sitting in her cot, covered from head to toe in sand, poor girl. She didn't cry the whole time, it was like she was in shock or something."

For Mr Passi and others living on Australia's northern frontier, climate change is no longer an abstract threat. They believe it is happening now.

Over the past two years, half the populated islands of the Torres Strait have experienced unprecedented flooding from surging king tides. The islanders cannot prove that climate change is to blame for the tidal flooding or for shifts in the weather, but their elders are baffled.

Although the flooding of the islands has gone largely unnoticed on Australia's mainland, from next year it is set to become a globally reported issue.

According to the draft of the fourth Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, written by the world's top climate scientists and seen by *The Age* before its official release next year, the king tides have exposed a need for better coastal protection and long-term planning to potentially relocate half the 4000 people living on the islands.

The draft report also warns that those islanders may not be alone in seeking refuge on the Australian mainland.

"About 60,000 to 90,000 people from the Pacific islands may be exposed to flooding from sea-level rise each year by the 2050s," it says.

"This would place pressure internally on these countries and on surrounding nations (such as New Zealand and Australia) to help sustain communities or to consider emergency immigrants. Displacement of Torres Strait islanders to mainland Australia is also likely to occur within this time frame."

CSIRO scientist Donna Green is working with indigenous communities in remote northern Australia on adapting to climate change. She says the Torres Strait is one of the most vulnerable regions in the country.

"While we don't have historical records of sea levels in the Torres Strait, we do know that climate change is causing sea levels to rise in this region and is increasing the intensity of extreme weather and tidal events," she says. "So it is likely that climate change is playing a part in these recent inundations."

Flying over the strait in a light plane, a teardrop-shaped island appears below, its dark green interior of palm trees fringed with pale sand in the opal-coloured sea. There are more than 100 of these remote islands between Cape York Peninsula and Papua New Guinea, but only 14 are inhabited.

For mainland Australians, this coral teardrop, known as Masig or Yorke island, is the most recognisable feature of the Torres Strait after its starring role in the recent SBS television series *Remote Area Nurse*. Masig is among six low-lying islands in the central and north-western Torres Strait that have been hardest hit by repeated flooding over the past two years.

On Masig, the waves have surged 50 metres past the beach to lap at the steps of the 113-year-old St John the Evangelist Church. "When I went out that night with my family, geez, my eyes nearly popped out," says Father Ned Mosby, who appeared on *RAN*.

"My kids asked me, 'Dad, what's happening?' I told them, 'I don't know' ... But that night I told them, 'Hey, this is our home, but the day will come when you have to move.'"

It is a message Father Mosby and fellow priest Father Edward Nai reluctantly preach to their congregation. "I get upset talking about it, but I'm a realist," says Father Nai. "That's why I'd like John Howard to start talking to indigenous people on mainland Australia now about places where you might be able to settle islander communities."

He would "also ask the Prime Minister to do everything he can to slow down the process of global warming because, otherwise, God only knows how much longer we will be here".

Although the waves did not damage the church, its roof needs replacing at a cost of \$101,000. "Do we try to raise that money to replace the roof here, or do we start thinking about having to rebuild the church somewhere else?" he asks.

Some islanders have a nickname for mainlanders, particularly politicians, who fly through the strait, make a lot of noise about local concerns, then fly off without doing anything to help. They call them seagulls.

But after years of frustrated lobbying by the Torres Strait Regional Authority and the Island Co-ordinating Council, finally there are signs that politicians are listening. Late last year, the Federal Government granted \$300,000 towards a major study of the six islands at greatest risk: Poruma, Iama, Masig and Warraber in the central Strait, and the swampy north-western islands of Saibai and Boigu. As well as preparing long-overdue emergency evacuation plans, the islands have also lodged an application for \$4.4 million from the federal and Queensland governments to patch up sea walls, raise houses on stilts and protect vital infrastructure such as water.

Regional authority chairman John Toshie Kris says relocation has been discussed "as a last resort", but believes it can be avoided with government help. "At the moment, you cannot move these people, because they are connected by blood and bone to their traditional homes," he says.

On the far-eastern volcanic island of Mer — also known as Murray Island — five Meriam men led by Eddie Mabo fought an epic High Court case over native land rights, which overturned the legal myth that Australia belonged to no one before the British arrived.

But today it is the sea, not the law, that is taking their land.

Over two nights in July last year, Mer was struck by strong winds and king tides that prompted more than half a dozen families to move inland.

It came as no surprise to council chairman Ron Day, who has for years been warning that "no one can stop the sea from rising".

But like other Torres Strait islanders, the Meriam people have deep ties to the sea and land, celebrated in a slow, tender song about living "within thy opal waters ... blessed with all good things".

The song was written a century ago by Scotsman John Stewart Bruce, whose family were the first Europeans to live on Mer. They loved it so much they were buried there. Last July, their overgrown graves were flooded.

It was that flood, and the fright of finding his daughter Sedoi covered in sand, that convinced Mr Passi to pack up his beachfront home and move to the hills.

Although Mr Passi says it will be hard for his children to give up their backyard beach and falling asleep to the sound of lapping waves, he is trying to be optimistic about their move.

"We're going to have solar panels on the roof, a wind generator, our own vegie garden, a compost toilet and all that stuff," he says.

"I'm just going to start by doing my little bit, and see where we go from there."

'Please help us, we're sinking'

"NATIVES quit vanishing Torres islands," shouts the headline above a photo of sombre-faced women and children in a newspaper published more than half a century ago.

"This Saibai Island group ... are being dispossessed by the encroaching sea," the story reads.

On most of the low-lying islands of the Torres Strait, even elders with long memories say that the recent flooding from king tides is the worst they have seen. But on Saibai, mostly a metre above sea level, the flooding has been this bad once before, in 1948, when hundreds were forced to resettle on the mainland. Today, the 379 people on Saibai fear flooding is increasing. Even with a long sea wall, the streets have been repeatedly washed out, most recently in February.

A wooden placard hammered into a palm tree sums up the locals' fears: "Urgent. To the leaders of this community, please HELP ME, I'M SINKING ... To the community, please PRAY FOR ME."

But council chairman Jensen Warusam insists it is not too late to save the island. He wants funds to repair the crumbling sea wall.

"We do have to think hard now, because some areas (that were flooded) this year were untouched by water before," he says. "But we will lose our identity as Saibai people if we scatter. If we separate, there will be no more Saibai."

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