

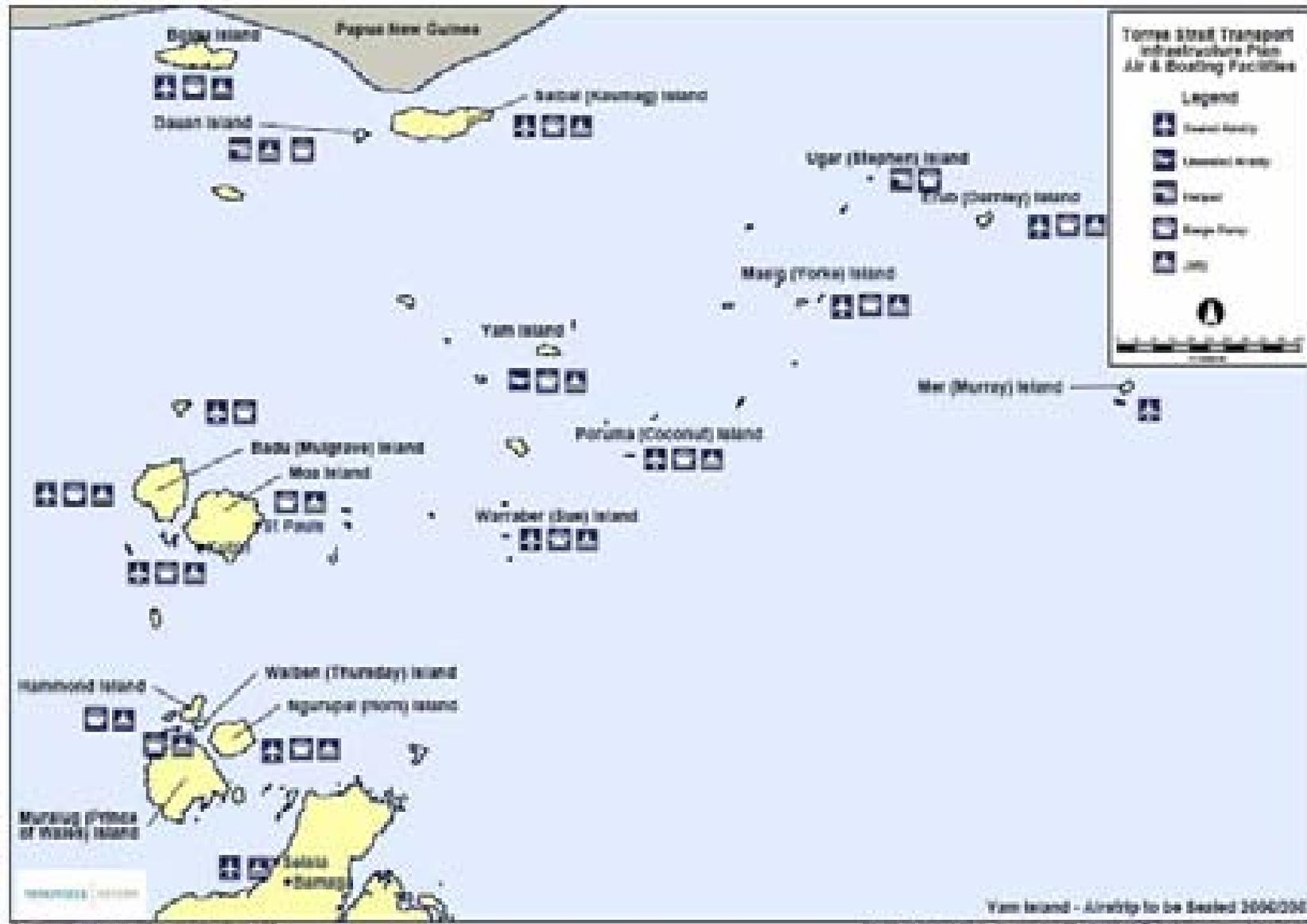
Figure 3.1 Seaswift's Newcastle Bay Freighter



Figure 3.2 Small Boat Pontoon on Thursday Island



Figure 3.3 Existing Air and Boating Facilities



Source for Base Map: MapData Sciences Pty Ltd

In recent years, although freight volumes in the area have increased, a rationalisation of operators has resulted in just one major freight carrier (Seaswift). However, a second carrier (Endeavour) has recently commenced a weekly service from Cairns to Thursday Island. The effects of this second carrier on freight services to the Torres Strait are yet to be established at this stage.

Small boats play a vital part in everyday life for the residents of the OTSI communities, providing a flexible means to travel between communities and the main centre, to harvest marine resources and maintain cross border contacts. The dinghy is often referred to as the “car of the Torres Strait” and mooring facilities are the equivalent of car parking stations. Thursday Island in particular is the destination of significant volumes of dinghy traffic from both inner and outer islands as it is a regionally important employment generator and acts as the service centre, shopping centre and a social centre for the Torres Strait.

The existing small boat pontoon at Thursday Island is the only facility that caters for mooring of dinghies at either Thursday or Horn Island. The pontoon is heavily used and at most times it is overcrowded as there is insufficient space against the pontoon and boats are tied to each other two or three deep. Dinghies do moor at the Horn Island jetty but it is not designed for this as it is a commercial facility. It is apparent from investigations carried out during this study that dinghies are the preferred mode of transport for many Torres Strait residents and they will continue to be used into the foreseeable future.

The level of commercial and recreational vessel operations in the Torres Strait region is increasing due to the growing population, the growth in tourism, the number of cruise ships now visiting the region and the increasing number of recreational yachts sailing around Australia and the world. There are no mooring facilities at either Horn Island or Thursday Island that cater for the aforementioned types of maritime vessels or their tenders. The Torres Shire Council and TSRA raised the issue of having suitable mooring facilities for small dinghies through to large yachts as well as suitable drop off / pick up facilities for tenders from the cruise ships. The lack of these facilities makes dinghy travel to Thursday Island difficult and deters recreational yachts and cruise ships from spending time in the Torres Strait due to difficulties in landing on the island.

Dinghies are normally open and less than 6 metres in length, and require good weather and competent boating practices for safe use. Fuel costs are relatively high and given the distances involved, this form of travel is considered expensive for most residents, even though it may be cheaper than other means of travel.

Most other communities have a dedicated barge ramp and associated finger pier, but much of the OTSI marine infrastructure is now over ten years old, with the facilities having been constructed in the early 1990s. Although some maintenance has occurred, most of the community infrastructure now needs substantial repairs or replacement, especially with respect to piles and navigational aids.

Over the past few years, several commercial marine operators have ceased services, mainly due to a lack of demand for services, although lack of business management skills may also have been a factor in the demise of the smaller operators. This has led to a decrease in competition, and a reduction in services to some centres.

Figure 3.4 Many marine facilities have suffered significant wear and tear



Figure 3.5 Small boat travel is a vital component of the Regions transport system



Figure 3.6 Almost all OTSI communities have a combined barge ramp and finger pier adjacent to a dredged channel



Weather extremes are a significant concern for most marine users, hampering safe access by barge operators to communities and threatening the safety of small boat and ferry operators. Tides and strong currents also affect safe navigation, and may restrict services at specific times of the day or month to some communities. Given the lack of alternative low cost transport for many community residents, these restrictions can potentially affect their quality of life.

The main impacts on marine freight transport are the weather, the inability to use larger vessels to offset rising commercial overheads, and the relatively high cost of shipping from southern ports. Port charges are over six times more expensive than those at the Port of Cairns, and consequently increase the cost of goods for all Torres Strait residents. Freight issues are discussed in more detail in **Section 3.4**.

Another major issue facing future marine transport and passenger travel seems to be the relatively high cost of maintaining a network of serviceable marine facilities on every community, especially where no commercial return can be expected. The channels to some islands require dredging, and many require repair or replacement of piles and navigational aids. An audit of facilities in late 2004 identified priority repair work, and discussion with barge companies has identified those communities most in need of dredging. In general, most islanders are unaware of the constraints and costs associated with maintaining essential freight services, and whereas other transport areas (such as air services) have received significant funds over the past decade, most marine facilities have had little attention, and now require substantial refurbishment, especially given the vital role they play in sustaining life in the region.

Existing ferry routes from Seisia and the island communities are identified in **Figure 3.8**. This figure also shows the council operated ferry services to Ugar and Dauan (which do not have a fixed wing air service).

The major traditional shipping routes are shown in **Figure 3.9**.