

Water Shortage Hits Australia's Palm Island - Government Says "Not to Worry"

Posted by

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Oread Daily - This is one of those out of the way stories I run across from time to time. I don't have a total handle on what is going on here, but I can tell something sure is.

In Australia, the Queensland government has refused a request from Palm Island council to close the Indigenous community to visitors because of a severe water shortage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy Minister John Mickel says the water shortage is being addressed by a number of government departments. He says an extra plumber will ensure that no water is wasted. Mickel said the Government would supply fresh water at cost price. "I'm advised now that supplies of fresh water will be available at the retail store and that will be available at cost for the islanders," he said.

<http://oreadaily.blogspot.com>

Palm Island's mayor Erykah Kyle had asked the government to close the island to visitors, including the 10 public servants who travel there each day ? and who use the island's water. She said water supplies on the island were unlikely to last much more than a month unless it rained. The Government declined.

The water shortage affecting the small island is so severe that its Aboriginal residents are suffering hygiene problems such as an outbreak of boils, Red Cross workers said. A Red Cross spokesman said the relief agency hoped to supply the island's residents with much-needed drinking water within days. The spokesman said some residents were suffering so badly plans were underway to bring them to the mainland. "Red Cross workers on Palm Island have told us that there has been an outbreak of boils over there ? we haven't got the extent of that," he told ABC radio. "But clearly that relates to issues of hygiene and a lack of water and I understand that they're making arrangements for a number of people to move over to the mainland so it is a very serious situation."

Mayor Kyle says hygiene is not the problem. The quality of the limited water available might be.

The residents of Palm Island want an evacuation plan to be drawn up as the north Queensland island's water crisis worsens. The Government says that, too, isn't necessary.

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A former water department supervisor on Palm Island says residents are angry that they were not told sooner about water shortages. Jacob Baira says staff should have been monitoring the water levels and making regular reports. "My concern is for the people of Palm [Island] at the present moment.?"

"It's unbelievable,? Baria said, ?that you get down to one month's supply of water and then they tell you. It's not good enough." Baira says he is concerned for the welfare of his wife and 11 children.

Baria asked, "Where are we going to go, are we going to start digging wells? We haven't been told that yet," he said. "Whether we're going to be evacuated or how we're going to get our water in the next couple of weeks, this might turn into a real concern then. If it doesn't rain, it's going to drive people to panic."

Mayor Kyle told The Australian if island residents had to be evacuated there would be problems finding temporary accommodation for them. "We have older people here that would be difficult to move," she said. "But it doesn't matter -- young and old, they would be saying, 'We have nowhere to go, we don't have any money'."

Palm Island was the scene of a major uprising following the death in late 2004 of a young aboriginal man in police custody.

Originally used by early European settlers as a leper colony, Palm Island is now home to 4000 Indigenous Australians, making it the largest Aboriginal community in Australia. The Aboriginal settlement on Palm Island was set up in 1918 by the government in Queensland after a cyclone had devastated another state-run institution near the town of Innisfail on the mainland. Over the years, hundreds of Aborigines were sent to live on the island, which is part of a small archipelago. The practice continued until the late 1960s. The Palm Island settlement became an all-purpose repository for Aborigines. It served as a detention camp, an old people's home and a centre for the mentally ill.

The community, deriving from about 42 mainland tribes, has an unemployment rate of 90% and an average life expectancy of 50 years, thirty less than the national average. Many of its residents suffer from substance abuse. Mayor Kyle says it is not unusual on the island to have

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up to 20 people living in a three-bedroom house.

Criminologist Professor Paul Wilson from Australia's Bond University, who has closely studied the island, told the BBC that these problems were caused by the repression of the past. "This history of how white colonizers have treated black people on this island is appalling and we are seeing now the result of that legacy," he said.

Got that right, dude.

In fact, it wasn't until the 1971 that it seemed the outside world took notice that Palm Island really was an Aboriginal reserve run like a jail. Its inmates had committed no crimes but were forbidden to leave. Young people could only marry with the consent of the superintendent. No one could own property. Keith Windschuttle, conservative Australian historian and journalist wrote, "Palm Island breached almost every known principle of human rights and freedom. It was far worse than anything the American Civil Rights Movement had exposed in the USA. It was legalized white racism. It was part of the policy of separatism that underlay the Aboriginal reserves.?"

And now, the enlightened government of Australia is ready to send in a plumber and to sell the locals? some bottled water for their troubles.

Gee, thanks. Sources: National Indigenous Times (Australia) Advertiser (Adelaide), The Australian, Australia Broadcasting Corporation, Wikipedia, BBC, European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights, Bennelong Society

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