

# DISASTER PREPAREDNESS IN THE CAIRNS TOURISM INDUSTRY

Rachel E. Reese  
November 2004

Centre for Disaster Studies  
James Cook University  
Townsville, Queensland, Australia

## INTRODUCTION

### ***Disasters***

A growing discussion in the emergency management literature has centred on increasing the capacity of communities to plan for and respond to disasters in order to speed the recovery process. A disaster is defined as any event, either natural or human-induced, that overwhelms a community's normal processes for meeting basic needs. Because communities differ in resources and preparedness, a minor event in one community could easily be a disaster in another. Disaster management includes three phases: Readiness, Response, and Recovery.

*Readiness* means planning and preparing for potential disaster events. This includes educating people, instituting appropriate building standards, and setting up processes for dealing with disasters.

*Response* means taking action when a disaster strikes. This includes protecting lives and property, communicating with emergency managers, and educating people about emerging threats.

*Recovery* means returning the community as much as possible to a pre-disaster condition. This includes treating injuries, clearing debris, and rebuilding infrastructure.

### ***Tourism and Disasters***

Communities which are economically dependent on tourism face particular challenges in preparing for, responding to and recovering from disasters. Some key challenges with visitors include –

- Fluctuating numbers in the area, usually with no clear process for rapidly determining the visitor population
- Less knowledgeable about local hazards
- May not understand the local language
- Lack access to personal transport
- Lack stocks of basic supplies, such as food, water, and torches
- Limited access to social support networks, such as family or friends

Economically, a disaster can financially cripple a community in the short-term; however, in a tourism-based economy the effects are likely to last far into the future. If an area is deemed unsafe or if tourism services are significantly affected due to a disaster, visitors will seek another location. For example, the tourism industry in Bali crashed following the nightclub bombings of October 2002, with the average annual income dropping by 43% and international arrivals dropping by



- Upscale accommodation – 4 or 5 star hotels
- Strata holiday units – strata-titled units rented for holidays
- Caravan parks – facilities for recreational vehicles
- Tour operators – dive shops, boat trips, attractions, etc.

Businesses were also assigned to one of six locations (see Figure 2):

- CBD – roughly bounded by Bunda St., Florence St., Abbott St., and Spence St.
- Esplanade – the Esplanade from Spence St. to Minnie St.
- North Esplanade – the Esplanade from Minnie St. to Lilly St.
- Pier – roughly bounded by Spence St., Sheridan St., and Trinity Inlet
- Sheridan St. – roughly bounded by Smith St., Digger St., Grove St., and McLeod St.
- Outer Fringe – southwest of Bunda St.

### ***Cyclone plan components***

Since all plans featured cyclones, I analysed which of “The Three R’s” – Readiness, Response, Recovery – were included in Cairns cyclone plans. In addition, I analysed plans for evidence of attention to media liaison and business functions. Media liaison has gained importance with the rising power of the media to rapidly report on breaking events. Lack of control over information and the media during a disaster can cause serious issues for the tourism industry. Business function refers to processes aimed at protecting the company’s ability to function during a disaster. This includes steps such as downloading computer data, safely storing files, implementing alternate communication systems, and preparing a back-up office site. Attenti

## ***Response rates***

Of these visits, twenty-two (22) agreed to discuss the issue of disaster preparedness. Reasons for non-response included --

- No manager available (8)
- Too busy (7)
- Require compensation (2)
- Not interested (2)
- Need permission from Brisbane office (1).

As shown in Figure 5, the response rate was highest for businesses located in Sheridan Street (80% response) and lowest for businesses located in the Esplanade (20% response). Ten attempts were made in each area.

By business type, Figure 6 shows that strata holiday units had the highest response rate (80%) and caravan parks the lowest response rate (0%). However, only two caravan parks were visited, compared to five strata holiday units. Only caravan parks and hostels were more likely to decline than to respond.

## ***Existence of disaster plans***

Only four businesses (16%) reported that they had no disaster plans or processes: one tour operator, one hostel, one strata holiday unit, and one budget accommodation. Three were located in the CBD and one in Sheridan Street. Reasons given included

- We tell guests to listen to the radio and follow instructions (2)
- The idea of a disaster doesn't make sense for this business (1)
- This is a new business and we haven't thought that far ahead yet (1)

Eleven businesses (44%) had informal plans or processes, meaning that they could quickly and easily list off the things they would do in the event of a disaster. These plans were not written down. Ten businesses (40%) had formal, written disaster plans.

Of the businesses who responded, Figure 7 shows that increasing accommodation cost roughly equates to increasing attention to disaster readiness. Most hostels and budget accommodations had informal plans or processes, while most upscale accommodations had formal plans. Strata holiday units were a mixed bag – the most likely accommodation to have no plan at all, but more likely than hostels and budget accommodations to have a formal plan. Tour operators fared similarly, with 23% having no plans but 50% having formal plans.

Considering location, Figure 8 demonstrates that businesses in the CBD were most likely to have no plan (43%), the Esplanade most likely to have an informal plan (100%), and the Pier and Outer Fringe most likely to have a formal plan (100% each). However, the small number of respondents in the Esplanade (2) and the Outer Fringe (1) skew these percentages greatly. For example, in absolute numbers, the North Esplanade reported more formal plans (2) than the Outer Fringe (1). In general, location was less important than business type in determining the existence of plans.

### ***Types of plans***

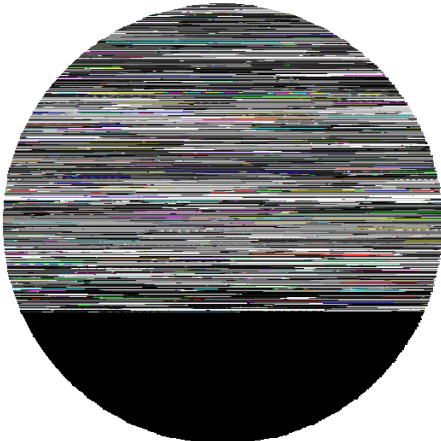
Disasters can take a variety of forms, and disaster plans should contain not only general procedures but also specific processes for dealing with the most likely situations. Our study did not specifically review fire evacuation plans, since all businesses are required by law to have these processes in place. We considered cyclones, floods, and explosions/acts of terror as the greatest risks for the Cairns tourism industry. Of the twenty-one (21) businesses that had disaster plans, all included cyclones. None (0) included floods, except mentioned briefly connected to cyclones. Nine (9) included explosions or acts of terror (see Figure 9). In total, we found only three (3) Cairns businesses that had formal, written plans for dealing with an explosion or act of terror. This is somewhat surprising given Cairns' prior experience with a deadly LPG explosion in 1987 and the recent increase in terrorism against tourists in the Asia-Pacific region.



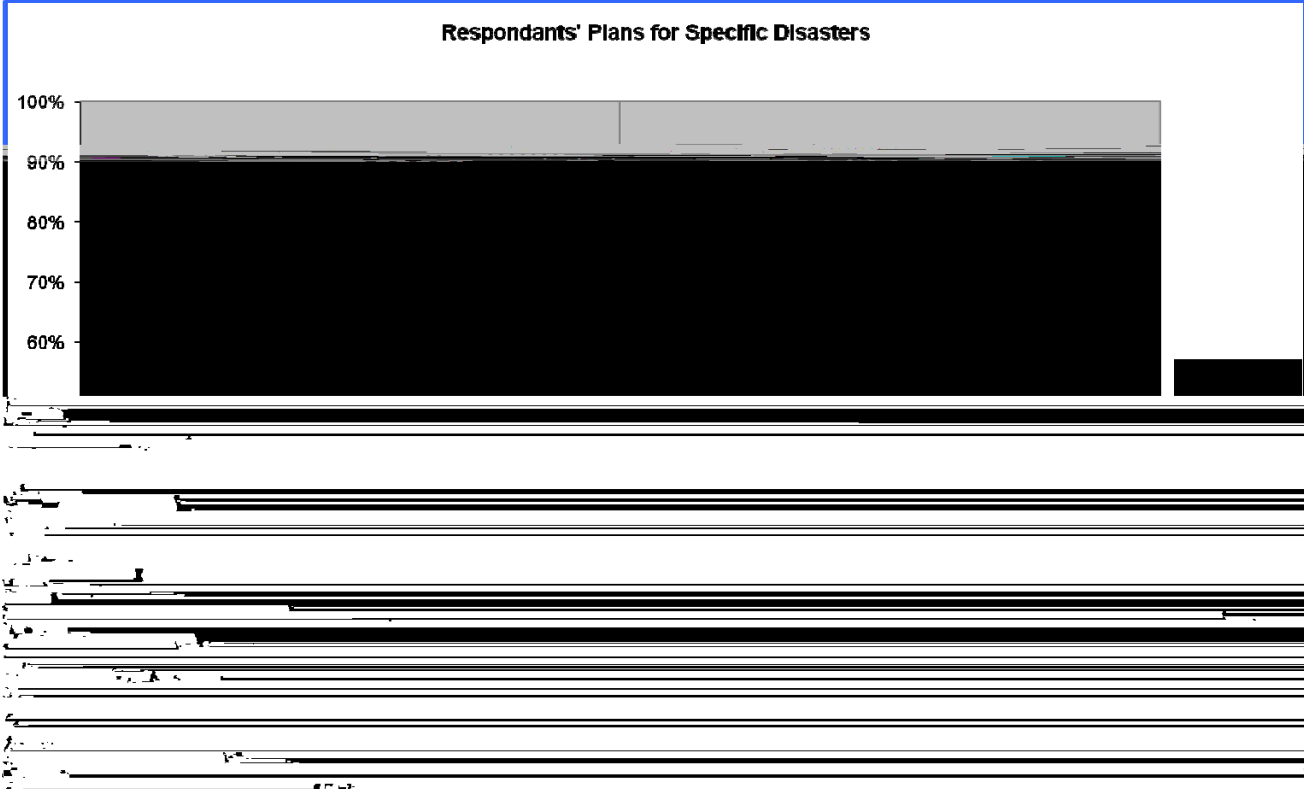
Another issue was that four (4) businesses reported formal plans but did not provide us with copies. We were therefore unable to assess the components included in the plan. Where possible, we counted these plans as existing if our discussion indicated this.

Businesses that host visitors for brief periods, such as restaurants and shops, were not given priority in our study. This was a simply matter of resources, as we did not have sufficient time or personnel to cover all tourism businesses. Certainly this is justified in the case of a cyclone, which arrives with adequate warning to usher most visitors back to their place of accommodation. However, rapid-onset disasters are as likely to strike visitors sitting in a café as those asleep in a hotel. Global experience demonstrates that restaurants, nightclubs, and attractions are particularly susceptible to acts of terror. Our study gives no indication of levels of readiness among these types of tourism businesses.

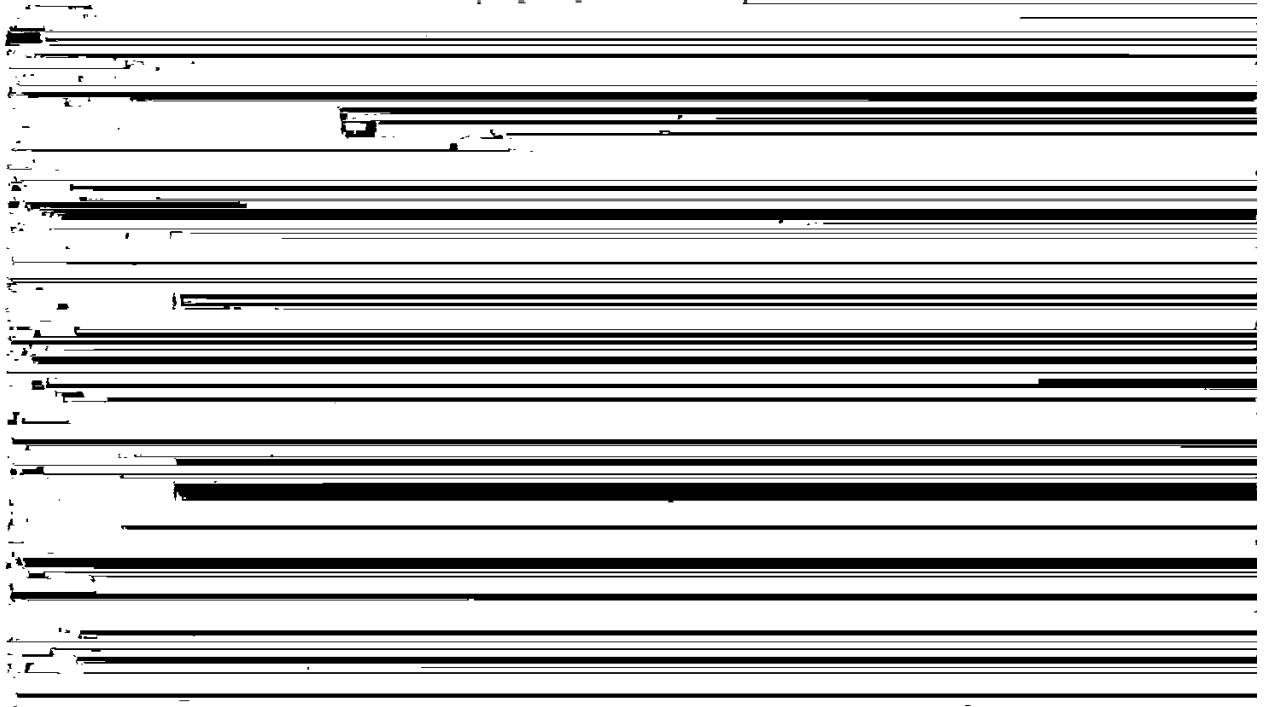
**All respondents: Existence of Plans**







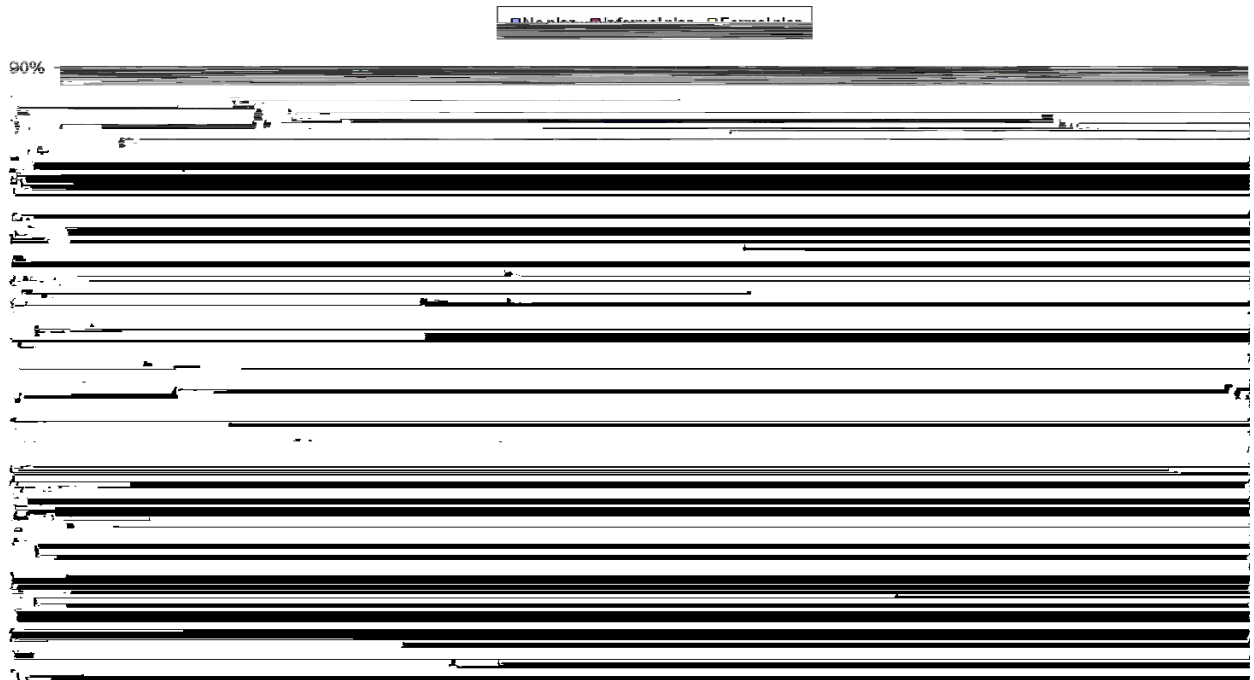
### Adequacy of Cyclone Plan Components



### Existence of Plan by Location



### Type of Plan by Business Type



### Comments about disaster preparedness collected during site visits to tourism businesses:

"Load of rubbish"

"The media sensationalises"

"We haven't thought that far yet"

"We take common sense actions"

"We deal with it in our own way"

"We have no plan"

"We just tell guests to listen to the radio"

"We prefer to think positively, not negatively"

"We just follow instructions in the media"