

Crisis Management Case Studies



Tropical Cyclone Ului, a Category 3 storm system with winds gusts of up to 200 kilometres, crossed the north Queensland coast at 1:00am, Sunday 21 March 2010. The impact caused widespread but moderate damage across the region and cut power for several days to an estimated 60,000 homes and businesses between Airlie Beach and Townsville.

Meridien Marinas, Abel Point

www.abelpointmarina.com.au/

Meridien's Abel Point Marina at Airlie Beach is a state-of-the-art facility providing a range of services to the boating community in the Whitsunday region. Meridien has owned the property for about three and half years, though it has been in operation since the 1980s. Abel Point is one of three marinas held by the company, the others being the Marina Mirage marina at Port Douglas and Horizon Shores on the Gold Coast. As North Queensland's largest marina, Abel Point accommodates vessels of all sizes up to and including superyachts. In addition to its 500 wet berths, deep water access, high level security and fast-flow fuel depot the property also leases space to 30 tenants including retail and maritime service industries.

The company employs 12 full time and eight part time staff to run its Abel Point operations and has maintained the same staff numbers since Cyclone Ului.

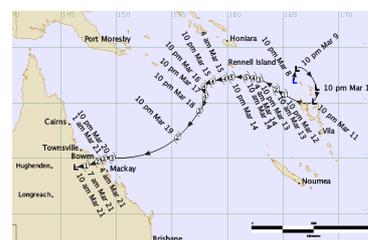
1. Risk Management

Given the size, nature and location of Meridien's considerable holdings, the company has published its own Cyclone Action Plan, clearly identifying the actions required for each phase of a cyclonic event.

2. Cyclone Warnings

Abel Point Marina was well prepared for TC Ului and in addition to its own planning, relied heavily on the regular bulletins issued by various weather agencies.

The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) began to track and broadcast Ului's path on 8 March, when it entered BOM's official tracking zone. Abel Point's General Manager, Richard Barrett and his team monitored these warnings as well as those issued by other weather agencies such as the Regional Harbour Master, Queensland Government Cyclone Warning website and several international and domestic services and implemented the plan accordingly. As the cyclone intensified to a Category 3 system and made its way towards the coast, warnings became more frequent and in the 12 hours prior to impact, status updates were issued on an hourly basis.



3. Preparations

In the first instance, Richard reviewed the company's Cyclone Action Plan and followed the procedures to the letter. From an equipment point of view, all operational gear was checked and secured. Loose items were cleared, stored or tied down and windows were taped. He also continued to monitor weather bulletins and regularly updated tenants with status reports via text messaging.

As the threat increased, Richard's main concern became the safety and welfare of marina tenants. He waited on advice from the Harbour Master as to when the port should close. In the interim, all residents were given notice that the power and water would be switched off prior to the storm's arrival and that they should, as soon as possible, evacuate the marina and seek safe refuge elsewhere until the threat had passed.

At this point, two issues arose. Firstly, the difficulty people faced finding alternative accommodation at the last minute and secondly, the refusal of some tenants to leave. As Richard sought to resolve these problems he was mindful of the risks associated with commercial liability. Any action he took could have had serious ramifications for the company, particularly in regard to the safety of tenants who refused to leave the site and that he could not forcibly remove. Richard took the only possible option - to continue to work cooperatively with the tenants who planned to stay and keep the local authorities (Police) fully informed on the progress of the evacuation and his procedures.

Finally, as the storm approached, Richard's duties were to account for all persons, to check who remained on the premises, log the names of people who had chosen to ride out the storm with their boats and provide a copy of that list to the Police and Marine Safety Queensland. Once this was done, he shut down the water and power mains and made sure the onsite security guards were safe and battened down for the duration.

4. The Impact

Though Ului damaged and in some parts destroyed sections of the marina, Richard believes good planning and the assistance of others were significant to the recovery efforts. While major repairs are still underway, the marina offices opened as soon as the storm abated, albeit offering reduced services due to the lack of power and communications.

In fact, the greatest challenge was the lack of power. Ului had snapped the main ramp off its tracks leaving it attached by only one hinge. The immediate urgency became saving the ramp from being wrenched into the sea with the shifting tides, which would have breached the main fuel lines and power supplies to the pier. Realising the urgency of the situation, one of Richard's contractors, John Warren, came to the rescue. He offered his own generator to Richard to help get operations up and running and then carried out the necessary repairs to secure the ramp. The generator also enabled the marina to maintain operations for the ensuing four days, until mains power was restored.

The acts of good Samaritans like John Warren have stayed with Richard long after the event. He is now fundamentally aware that in a crisis of this magnitude the authorities, service providers and emergency services simply cannot stretch their resources to meet everyone's immediate needs. In many instances it is the community spirit of the locals that comes to the fore to fill that vital role.

5. Lessons Learned

Overall, Richard was satisfied that following the company's Cyclone Action Plan significantly improved Abel Point's ability to manage both pre and post cyclone conditions. From his perspective there were four major lessons learned.

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6. To ensure the marina has access to a generator to assist with any future post-storm recovery operations and repairs and overcome the issues associated with long delays in having essential services reinstated.
 7. A better understanding of the powers and responsibilities associated with evacuation procedures and the tensions between commercial risk and community safety i.e. what to do when people refuse to leave their property or try to leave too late and who is liable for any subsequent injuries or death. For example, if Richard directed people to take shelter at a specified location, the marina could have been liable any outcome from that advice.
 8. To have an adequate level of accommodation available to shelter people who need to evacuate their boats. Community facilities could be deliberately designed to withstand intense storms so that when these events occur they can be used as community shelters.
 9. To take care of the little things prior to the cyclone so they don't become big things, such as:
 - making sure vehicles have a full tanks of fuel and retail/customer supplies are fully stocked
 - arranging to share a generator source to recharge mobile phones, etc.
 - having a reliable heating source - gas burners, full gas tanks, and supplies of tinned food.