

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.

Tourism Whitsundays

www.tourismwhitsundays.com.au/

Tourism Whitsunday (TW) is the Regional Tourism Organisation for the Whitsundays, incorporating an area that consists of 74 Islands located in the heart of the Great Barrier Reef and the Queensland mainland from Bowen in the north, to Laguna Quays in the south, inland to Proserpine and to the coast at Airlie Beach.

A membership-based organisation, TW has been operating for more than 25 years and employs 11 full time and two part time staff. It is the peak tourism industry body for the region and its primary objectives are to facilitate partnerships, promote sustainable tourism development and market the Whitsundays' destination across Australia and around the world. In addition to its head quarters at Airlie Beach, the organisation also operates a Visitor Information Centre at Proserpine.

1. Risk Management

Tourism Whitsundays has a comprehensive Natural Disaster Risk Management Plan.

2. Cyclone Warnings

CEO Peter O'Reilly received notice of Ului's potential threat several days before the cyclone hit.

In monitoring the BOM updates, he could see there was a considerable chance the region would be affected by Ului but to what degree was the question.

Like many Whitsunday residents, Peter also kept up-to-date through media bulletins and regular contact with the local area's Disaster Management Team.



3. Preparations

With enough time to prepare, Peter's first priority was to touch base with tourism operators in the region, check on how they were going with their preparations and to offer what assistance he could. From an operational perspective, Peter worked with staff to secure both the office premises and Visitor Information Centre. The organisation's computer server was fully backed up to avoid loss of or damage to records. Prior the storm making landfall, all equipment was turned off.



On the domestic front, Peter took the usual precautions of taping the windows of the family home, stocking up on batteries, food supplies and water, and clearing up around the yard.

4. The Impact

Ului caused some minor structural damage to the Visitor Information Centre. However, the overwhelming impact of the cyclone was the subsequent three days without power or telephone land lines. With limited access to these utilities and no backup generator, the organisation like many of its member businesses was unable to function in the normal manner.

Further frustration was caused due to the lack of clear communication from the power companies as to when the power and phones would be reconnected. While the ABC radio broadcast all available information the situation was exacerbated by the fact that the energy company only advised that everything possible was being done to restore services but gave no estimated timeframes. This was of little help to local residents and tourism operators who did not have a generator at their disposal and were trying to deal with guests who felt they'd been virtually left stranded.

For those operators with a generator, the recovery time was much faster and many were running limited operations immediately following the storm. Notwithstanding this, in the aftermath Greyhound Bus Line received advice to stop running its service to the Whitsundays because the region was unable to provide for any tourists.

5. Lessons Learned

The commitment of the energy companies and emergency services towards the recovery effort was never in doubt. In Peter's view, the issue was a reticence to communicate predicted reconnection times for fear that those times may not be met. Had local families been told that they would be without power for three days many would have travelled away for a few days break.

1. On a professional level, Peter will be better prepared in the event of any future cyclones and hire a generator as a precautionary measure. Though, he acknowledges even this solution may have its limitations. He will also redirect office land lines to the appropriate mobile phone.
2. He will also strongly advise operators to have an alternative power source at the ready and redirected land lines as part of his pre-event communications with industry.
3. Given a new appreciation for the vulnerability of the landlines and power supplies, Peter would seriously consider evacuating his family, particularly if the cyclone threat were any greater than a Category 3 storm system.