





# **Cyclone Yasi: Experiences of Backpackers in Townsville and Cairns during Cyclone Yasi**

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## **Summary**

### **Evacuation**

- 58% of backpackers evacuated to Townsville or Cairns
- Almost 70% of people who evacuated had been told to

## **Personal impact**

- 71% of backpackers had received assistance from the staff of their shelters or official organisations: especially information and food
- Almost half of the backpackers would have changed their plans if they had known about Yasi
- Almost half of the backpackers didn't expect to come or stop during their trip in the city where they sheltered, especially Townsville where 58% stayed against their will
- Many backpackers were disappointed by the experience of the cyclone, thinking "it wasn't that bad"
- Problems after the cyclone were lack of food for almost 90% of the backpackers (noodle soup and bread seemed to have rescued a lot of people),
- Because of the loss of the telephone signal after the cyclone many people were unable to call their relatives
- An important issue was the loss of job and holiday time
- Many backpackers saw their goods robbed during the cyclone
- Right after the cyclone transport was an issue: rare and expensive for people who wanted to leave Townsville quickly

## **Experience**

- 69% of backpackers hadn't experienced a cyclone before Yasi

## **Travel**

- Bus is the main transport means used by Backpackers
- Plane is used only for really long journeys
- A majority of people travels with other people (friends most of the case) but the number of people travelling alone was significant

## **Demographics**

- The 20-25 year age cohort is the main group, then 26-30 years
- A majority of backpackers are from Europe
- In most of the cases, backpackers had a good knowledge of English
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## **Introduction**

Very heavy rain began in North Queensland before Christmas 2010, culminating in the brief declaration of cyclone Natasha that crossed the coast

## **Methodology**

A focus of research in the centre during the late 1990's and early 2000's was the hazard awareness and preparedness of tourists. A particular emphasis was on independent travellers, of whom backpackers are an identifiable sub group. These tourists and travellers, mostly young, travel independently of organised groups whose leaders have a duty of care and protection for their members. Backpackers come from areas outside cyclone impact zones and may be unaware of local hazards. During 2000 and 2003 students from Europe (Elke Kuehlbrandt in 2000, Wouter Hoogenraad and Ronald van Eden in 2003) joined the Centre for Disaster Studies on placement as part of their degree programs. In 2011 Astrid Vachette is with the centre for the same purpose. Two surveys were carried out in Cairns, of backpackers and backpacker accommodation providers, by Kuehlbrandt in the dry season of 2000, and by Hoogenraad and van Eden in the wet (cyclone) season of 2003.

As Vachette had recently arrived in Australia and was staying in a backpacker hostel in Townsville during the passage of Yasi, we decided to replicate the earlier backpacker studies to explore the experience of young travellers during and after a cyclone. It was also clear from media and anecdotal reports before the cyclone that extensive evacuation was occurring and that it had swept up many backpackers.

Backpackers were interviewed by questionnaire in Townsville and Cairns, during the week immediately following the cyclone. By the end of the week, many had moved on (Townsville in particular was not an ideal holiday location at that time) and it proved difficult to recruit further participants. By that time 55 backpackers had participated in the survey, randomly selected from hostels and cheap hotels in the centre of each city. The small size of the sample makes statistical analyses of limited value, and besides, all of the questions were qualitative in nature. The survey provides useful indicators of the backpacker experience of cyclone Yasi, and many of the results of the two earlier surveys have been incorporated into this report.

The survey instrument is provided in the appendix at the end of this report.

## **Actions Taken by Respondents**

Actions and behaviour are influenced by emotions and feelings.

Table 1. How did you feel as the cyclone reached its peak?

Table 3. What did you do during the night as the storm passed through?

Occupation during the storm by City

Occupation during the storm	City		Total
	Townsville	Cairns	





Table 8. Did you go outside during the evening or night while the strong winds blew?  
Went outside during the strong winds by City

Went outside during the strong winds	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		
yes	13	36%	7	37%	20	36%
no	23	64%	12	63%	35	64%
Total	36	100%	19	100%	55	100%

Between the two cities there is no difference in the behaviour of venturing outside during the storm. It was observed that there were significant

## Arrival and residence

Most backpackers had been in North Queensland for a relatively short period, although Cairns demonstrates a longer residence than Townsville.

Table 11. What date did you first arrive in North Queensland? Date arrived in NQ by City

Date arrived In NQ	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		
less than week	2	6%	2	10.5%	4	7%
1 week to 1 month	16	44%	4	21%	20	37%
1 month to 3 months	12	33%	11	58%	23	42%

## Awareness

Table 13. Were you aware that this area is affected by tropical cyclones?

Aware of cyclones by Gender

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The two studies from the early 2000's showed relatively high levels of cyclone awareness.

Table 17. Knowledge of cyclone affected areas

	Frequency	Percent
correct	6	4
partially correct	88	56
incorrect	5	3
Don't know	59	37

Source: Kuehlbrandt 2000

Table 18. Knowledge about cyclone-affected areas

	Number	Percent
Correct	72	32.7
Partially correct	57	25.9
Incorrect		

Table 21. Where did you obtain information about cyclones generally, and how to be prepared? Source of general information on cyclones by City

Source of general information on cyclones	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns			
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
School	4	11%	6	32%	10	18%
TV, internet, radio	11	31%	5	26%	16	29%
Word of Mouth	6	17%	3	16%	9	16%
a little bit everywhere	15	42%	5	26%	20	37%
Total	36	100%	19	100%	55	100%

Table 22. Source of information about cyclones

	Frequency	Percent
Word of mouth	31	14.1
TV	23	10.5



There is significant variation between the pre-cyclone 2003 study where the strongest response was to seek information, and the post-Yasi survey where two thirds stated having made no general preparations. It's interesting that in 2003 30% indicated an intention to evacuate, which became a reality for many of those interviewed after Yasi. 20% of the respondents in this study had received some kind of training on how to protect themselves, other people and property from cyclones, but a large majority had not been prepared for this kind of event and didn't really know what to do. However, without knowing it they showed the right reaction to prepare themselves for the cyclone -- looking for a shelter, buying food and seeking information.

Table 25. What to do in case of a cyclone

	Frequency	Percent
Seek information	91	41.4
Evacuate	65	29.5
Shelter	39	17.7
Stay	18	8.2
Don't know	5	2.3
Call emergency services	2	.9
Total	220	100.0



## Demographics

Table 28. Age by City

Age	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		
less than 20	1	3%	2	11%	3	5%
between 20 and 25	13	36%	10	53%	23	42%
between 26 and 30	13	36%	5	26%	18	33%
between 30 and 40	5	14%	1	5%	6	11%
more than 40	4	11%	1	5%	5	9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 31. What is your first language? Language by City

Language	City		Total	
	Townsville	Cairns	Number	%
	Number	Number		
Czech	2	0	2	4%
Danish	3	0	3	5.5%
Dutch	3	0	3	5.5%
English	7	4	11	20%
Estonian	1	0	1	2%
French	4	3	7	13%
German	3	2	5	9%
Hungarian	0	1	1	2%
Italian	4	0	4	7%
Japanese	0	2	2	4%
Korean	4	0	4	7%
Lebanese	0	1	1	2%
Malagasy	1	0	1	2%
Portuguese	0	1	1	2%
Slovenian	0	1	1	2%
Spanish	3	4	7	13%
Swedish	1	0	1	2%
Total	36	19	55	100%

In most of the cases, backpackers have a good knowledge of English. Those who reported a low knowledge of English had been working on the banana farms before the cyclone.

Table 34. General level of competency of written and spoken English: 2000

	Frequency	Percent
Good	126	80
Fair	23	15
Poor	9	6
Total	158	



## **Evacuation**

Backpackers are an important component of the North Queensland economy. While they

Table 39. Were you told to evacuate or did you make your own decision to evacuate?  
Evacuation Decision by City

Evacuation Decision	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns			
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
own decision	9	25%	1	5%	10	18%
told to evacuate	12	33%	10	53%	22	40%
didn't evacuate	15	42%	8	42%	23	42%
Total	36	100%	19	100%	55	100%

The proportions evacuated to Townsville and Cairns were the same. Almost 70% of people who evacuated had been told to do so, especially those who were interviewed in Cairns. A relatively small number took the decision themselves.

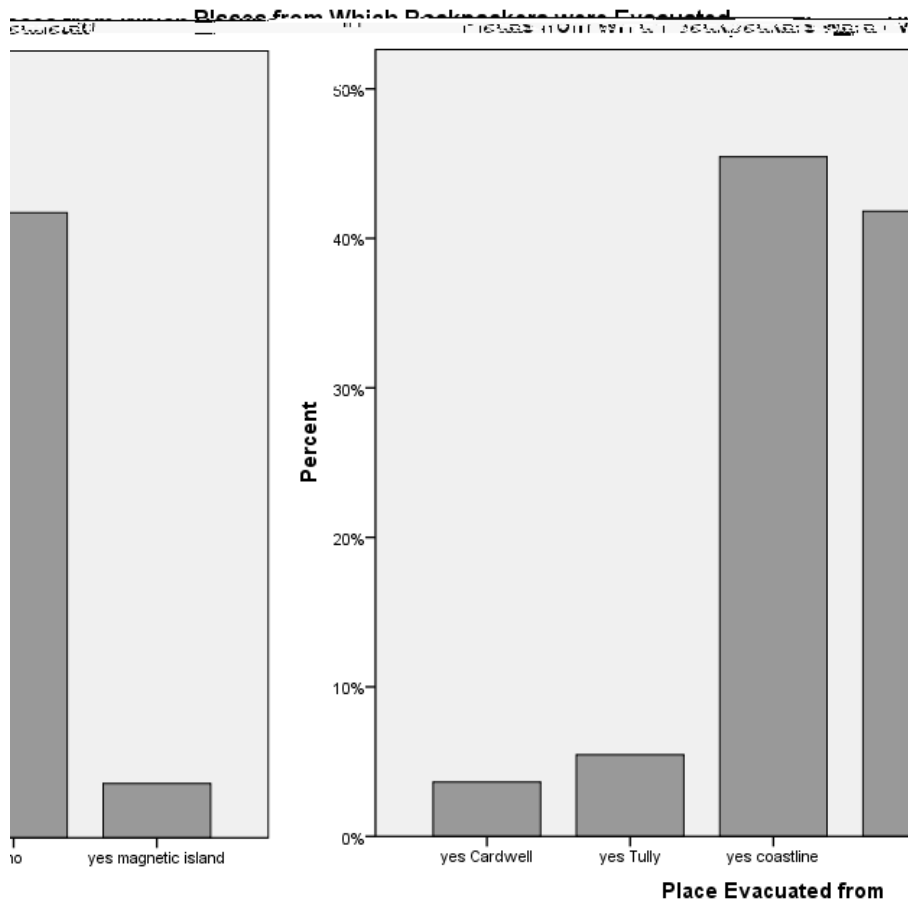


Table 40. As the cyclone approached were you staying at a place where you had to evacuate?  
 If yes where? Origin Location of Evacuees by City

Places Evacuated from	City		Total
	Townsville	Cairns	

## Cyclone Experience

Table 41. Was it the first cyclone you have experienced? First personally experienced Cyclone by City

First Cyclone	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		
yes	26	72%	12	63%	38	69%
no	10	28%	7	37%	17	31%
Total	36	100%	19	100%	55	100%

For most people this was their first experience of a cyclone: 69% of the backpackers hadn't experienced a cyclone before Yasi. In the 2003 survey 69% of backpackers had never travelled in cyclone prone areas of Australia before.

Table 42. Lived in a cyclone prone area: 2003

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	13	5.9
No	207	94.1
Total	220	100.0

Source: Hoogenraad and van Eden 2003

Table 43. Travelled in a cyclone prone area: 2003

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	67	30.5
No	151	68.6
Don't know	2	.9
Total	220	100.0

Source: Hoogenraad and van Eden 2003

The 2003 survey showed that most backpackers had come to North Queensland without any direct cyclone experience. Most previous experienc 015(1.92)-0.300048(2)-0.300048(0)500]TJ ET Q q 355



## Impact

Impact records the damage that occurred to the place of shelter of the backpackers.

Table 45. Was there any damage at the place where you were staying?

Damage in the shelter by City

Damage in the shelter	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		
yes	21	58%	16	84%	37	67%
no	15	42%	3	16%	18	33%
Total	36	100%	19	100%	55	100%

The main damage was to trees with small amounts of flooding. People from the same shelter did not necessarily have the same answer on how much or what damage had occurred. Tables 45 and 46 record whether there was damage and the type of damage reported. Most places sustained some level of damage although it was generally minor.

Table 46. Was there any damage at the place where you were staying? What sort of damage? Kind of damage by City

Kind of damage	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		
trees	4	11%	4	21%	8	14%
trees, little flood	13	36%	1	5%	14	25.5%
trees, major flood	0	0%	1	5%	1	2%
roof, trees, flood	4	11%	10	53%	14	25.5%
no damage	15	42%	3	16%	18	33%
Total	36	100%	19	100%	55	100%

Table 47. During the evening and night of Wednesday into Thursday where did you shelter? Place of Shelter by Kind of damage at Shelter

Shelter during the storm	Kind of damage					Total	
	trees	trees, little flooding	trees, major flooding	roof, trees, flooding	no damage	Number	%
in a safe room of my hostel	2	10	0	7	5	24	43.6%
Commonwealth shelter	0	0	0	0	5	5	9.1%
Parking shelter on Flinders street	2	2	0	0	2	6	10.9%
Primary School	4	1	0	3	0	8	14.5%
Stockland shelter	0	0	0	0	2	2	3.6%
with friends	0	0	0	1	2	3	5.5%
with strangers	0	0	1	3	0	4	7.3%
Holiday Inn	0	0	0	0	2	2	3.6%
Civic guest house	0	1	0	0	0	1	1.8%
Total	8	14	1	14	18	55	
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%

Table 47 indicates the places where backpackers stayed during the night of Yasi and the sort of damage that occurred to each place. Many evacuation shelters opened up during Wednesday and people went to them regardless of whether or not they needed to. Centres were specifically intended for those who were told to evacuate, but many nervous citizens and tourists went to them for shelter. Consequently some were overcrowded and stressful.

Table 48.  
Impacts of cyclone Steve on the accommodation facility: 2000

	Number	Percent
no impact, no damage	11	52
no tourists - bad business	6	29
damage to building	5	24
debris	5	24
power loss	4	19
flooding/water damage	3	14
adverse media	2	10
public transport	2	10
no impact on business, people stayed longer	1	5
Total respondents	21	

Source: Kuehlbrandt 2000

Note: multiple answers were recorded for each respondent

Table 49.  
Possible impacts of cyclones on the accommodation facilities according to backpackers owners

	Frequency	Percent
Power failure	12	57
Severe winds	10	48
Damage from flying debris	8	38
Flooding	7	33
Storm surge	5	24
All	4	19
None	1	5
Other	1	5
Total respondents	21	

Source: Kuehlbrandt 2000

Note: multiple answers were recorded for each respondent

The 2000 summer season was in the latter half of 2000 during the dry season, but cyclone impact than that of Yasi in backpacker establishments

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The expectation of cyclone damage varied considerably between the two curves

## Personal Impact

Table 53. Would you have come to North Queensland if you had known this would happen?  
Decision to come to NQ if Yasi had been predicted by City

Visit to NQ if Yasi predicted	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		
yes	17	47%	13	68%	30	55%
no	19	53%	6	32%	25	45%
Total	36	100%	19	100%	55	100%

Almost half of the backpackers would have changed their trip plans if they had known about Yasi beforehand. The 2003 survey showed that there was no real influence on preparedness

Table 57. How do you feel about the whole cyclone experience?

Feeling about the whole cyclone experience by City

Feeling about the whole experience	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		
scary experience	9	25%	4	21%	13	24%
disappointed	13	36%	8	42%	21	38%



Table 61. What other problems did you face after the cyclone had passed?

Other problems after Yasi by City

Other problems after Yasi	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		

## Travel Patterns of Backpackers

Table 62. How you have assisted each other? Help to other people by City

Help to other people	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns		Number	%
	Number	%	Number	%		



It is incumbent upon us as communities and arms of government to take responsibility for the





Table 74. Where do you plan to travel to next? Travel Plans by City

Travel Plans	City				Total	
	Townsville		Cairns			
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Brisbane	6	17%	0	0%	6	11%
Bundaberg	3	8%	0	0%	3	5%
Cairns	6	17%	0	0%	6	11%
Canberra	0	0%	1	5%	1	2%
Cardwell	2	6%	0	0%	2	4%
Darwin	1	3%	1	5%	2	4%
don't know	9	24%	9	47%	18	32%
Gold Coast	2	6%	0	0%	2	4%
Ingham	1	3%	0	0%	1	2%
Mackay	1	3%	0	0%	1	2%
Melbourne	1	3%	1	5%	2	4%
Newcastle	1	3%	0	0%	1	2%
Perth	0	0%	3	16%	3	6%
Rockhampton	1	3%	0	0%	1	2%
Sydney	0	0%	3	16%	3	5%
Tasmania	1	3%	0	0%	1	2%
Western Australia	1	3%	0	0%	1	2%
Townsville	0	0%	1	5%	1	2%
Total	36	100%	19	100%	55	100%

The largest group in Table 74, which records the next stage of travel plans, comprised 32% who said they don't know.

## **Information and warnings**

The final tables deal with information and warnings.



## References

Hoogenraad, Wouter and van Eden, Ronald. 2003.





- 25 If yes, what sort of damage?
- 26 Did the place you were staying at lose power? If yes how long for?
- 27 Did the place at which you were staying lose water? If yes how long for?
- 28 After the cyclone had passed did you have any problems getting food to eat?  
How did you feed yourself?
- 29 What other problems did you face after the cyclone had passed?
- 30 Did you receive any assistance from a) staff where you were staying b) other tourists c) official or voluntary organisations
- 31 What sort of assistance did you get and who from?
- 32 How do you feel about the whole cyclone experience?
- 33 Would you have come to North Queensland if you had known this would happen?
- 34 Where do you plan to travel to next?
- 35 Have you ever experienced a cyclone or hurricane before?
- 36 If yes, where was it?
- 37 Have you been travelling in Australia alone, or with friends or other visitors?
- 38 If yes, please tell me how you have assisted each other?
- 39 Where are you from?
- 40 What is your first language?
- 41 How good is your understanding of written and spoken English?
- 42 How old are you?
- 43 How long are you staying in Australia?
- 44 How long are you staying in North Queensland?
- 45 Gender
- 46 Do you have any other comments?