

They came from 80 different islands including Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Fiji, the Gilbert Islands, New Ireland and Papua New Guinea.

South Sea Islanders arriving by ship in Bundaberg, Queensland. Photo: State Library of Queensland



Deportation

Deportations began in 1906 and continued until 1908. More than 7500 South Sea Islanders were returned to their home country, although some had arrived in Australia at a young age and had no memory of their home country. About 2500 Pacific Islanders remained in Australia.

Recognition

In 2000 the Queensland Government recognised Australian South Sea Islanders as a distinct ethnic and cultural Australian group. The Queensland Government also acknowledged that the community had experienced discrimination and injustice throughout their history in Australia.



Australian South Sea Islanders travelled from across the state to be part of the Queensland Government Recognition Ceremony, Queensland Parliament, 7 September 2000. EH7871

“We honour the South Sea Islander elders, who through their hardship and struggle, paved the way for Australian South Sea Islanders today and for future generations.”

Present Day

Despite the hardship and discrimination faced by the community, Australian South Sea Islanders have contributed significantly to the social, cultural and economic development of Queensland. Australian South Sea Islanders provided labour to help build local economies and key industries.

They have continued to contribute to farming and grazing, the maritime industry, pearling, mining, railways, domestic services and childcare and the defence force. Today's Australian South Sea Islanders are a distinct cultural group with a unique history and position in Australian society.



Australian South Sea Islander Flag



Meaning of the flag design for Australian South Sea Islanders

The black column next to the flag, the most important part of any flag - is for the people standing strong in community and surviving despite the hardships and injustices of the past.

The horizontal black band stands for our continuing in the future.

The bright blue recalls our origins from the South Pacific, the sea and the sky.

The green is for the land and especially islander peoples' contribution to agriculture (including sugar cane) and to the development of our home, Australia. It also stands for our hope for the future and for our children.

The deep gold stands for the sunshine and the sand of our original island homes and that of our homeland now, Australia.

The Southern Cross reminds us of our home in the South Pacific, and as it is the badge that Australians associate with, it emphasises that we are also Australians.

To find out more about Australian South Sea Islanders including their long history in Queensland, visit our website:



Who are Australian South Sea Islanders?

Australian South Sea Islanders are the Australian-born direct descendants of people who were brought to Australia between 1863 and 1904 to work as indentured labourers in the primary industries.





Members of the South Sea Island Mission in the Nambour district, Queensland, 1906. Photo: State Library of Queensland.

Australian South Sea Islanders have little in common with more recent groups of migrants (including from Pacific Island nations), having been settled in Australia since the 19th century.

Australian South Sea Islanders are not Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islander people, although some identify as having Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage through family relationships.

Shipping Routes 1863-1902

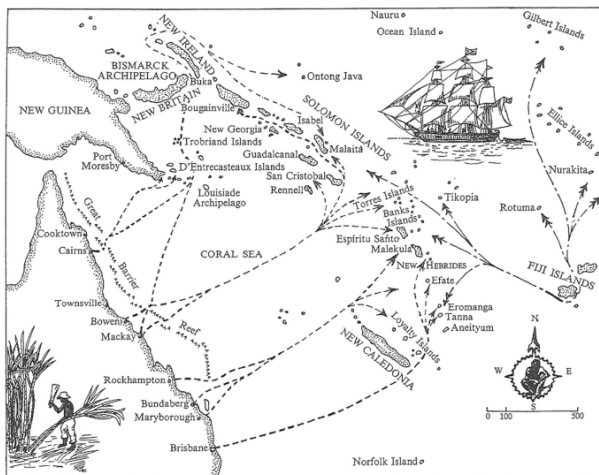


Photo: "The Blackbirders" by Edward Docker.

Most of the original labourers were recruited from the Solomon Islands and New Hebrides, now known as Vanuatu, though others were taken from the Loyalty Islands, Samoa, Kiribati and Tuvalu. The majority were kidnapped, 'blackbirded' or deceived into coming. The map shows the shipping routes used in the South Pacific at that time. While some ancestors of Australian South Sea Islanders may have left their homelands by choice, they were often subjected to the same discrimination and harsh treatment as those who were deceived or taken by force.

South Sea Islanders, recruited for the Queensland canefields, being carried in boats to the Para. Photo: State Library of Queensland.



Why were South Sea Islanders brought to Australia?

At first labour in the Australian colonies was cheap and widely available because of the large numbers of convicts. This changed between 1840 and 1868 when convict transportation stopped and led to a shortage of workers.

South Sea Island labourer in the sugarcane fields at Bingera, about 1898. Photo: William Henry Mosby. John Oxley Library 2252



Sugar production needed a large workforce, so Queensland plantation owners suggested using 'coloured' labour. This meant using workers from the South Sea Islands instead of white Australians or Europeans. South Sea Islanders could be employed cheaply, and some people believed that white Australians were not suited to hard work in Queensland's tropical climate.

South Sea Islander women working on a sugarcane plantation at Hambledon, Queensland, about 1891. Photo: John Oxley Library 172501



Australian South Sea Islander history in Queensland



Group of Australian South Sea Islander women labourers on a sugarcane plantation near Cairns, Queensland, about 1895. Photo: John Oxley Library 63220

How were they treated?

There were few laws to protect the labourers, known then as 'Kanakas', from exploitation. Many were kidnapped from their home islands and others were told lies about what to expect in Australia. Once in Queensland, South Sea Islanders were forced to work for little or no pay. The Queensland Government introduced legislation in the 1860's and 1880's to limit this exploitation, but many people ignored these laws and the forced 'Blackbirding' of Islanders continued.

In the 1880's the White Australia movement was growing, and people argued that South Sea Islanders were taking jobs from white workers. In 1891 the Queensland Government banned the recruitment of South Sea Island workers, but the ban was lifted during the 1890's economic depression because the sugar industry was struggling.

In 1901 the Pacific Island Labourers Act was passed by Australia's new federal government. It was part of Australia's White Australia policy. The law prohibited South Sea Islanders from entering Australia after 1904, and meant that South Sea Islanders in Australia could be deported.

What was blackbirding?

'Blackbirding', or slave trafficking, involved the kidnapping or questionable recruitment of South Sea Islanders for their labour.

Since the 1840's South Sea Islanders had been recruited to work in labour-intensive industries around the Pacific. Recruiters were generally white men, who worked on contract from plantation owners or recruited with the expectation of selling on the South Sea Islander's labour.

The first group of 67 South Sea Island workers were brought to Brisbane in 1863 to work on a cotton plantation but that industry soon became unviable. Between 1863 and 1904 more than 62,000 men, women and children were brought from the South Sea Islands to work in Queensland.

