

Australian South Sea Islanders are the proud descendants of the original South Sea Islanders who were brought here between 1863 and 1904 to work the cotton and sugar plantations, pastoral and beche-de-mer industries, in the late half of the 19th Century.

This trade in Islander labour had notorious beginnings. One of the most controversial aspects of the labour trade was the kidnapping of Islanders from their island homelands, referred to as “blackbirding”.

The exploitation of the young Islanders and the way in which they were 'recruited' into becoming labourers, is still debated and the question remains; were they forced, coerced, deceived or persuaded to leave their island homes at a young age and travel by ship to Queensland? The answer is yes, all of those methods were used.

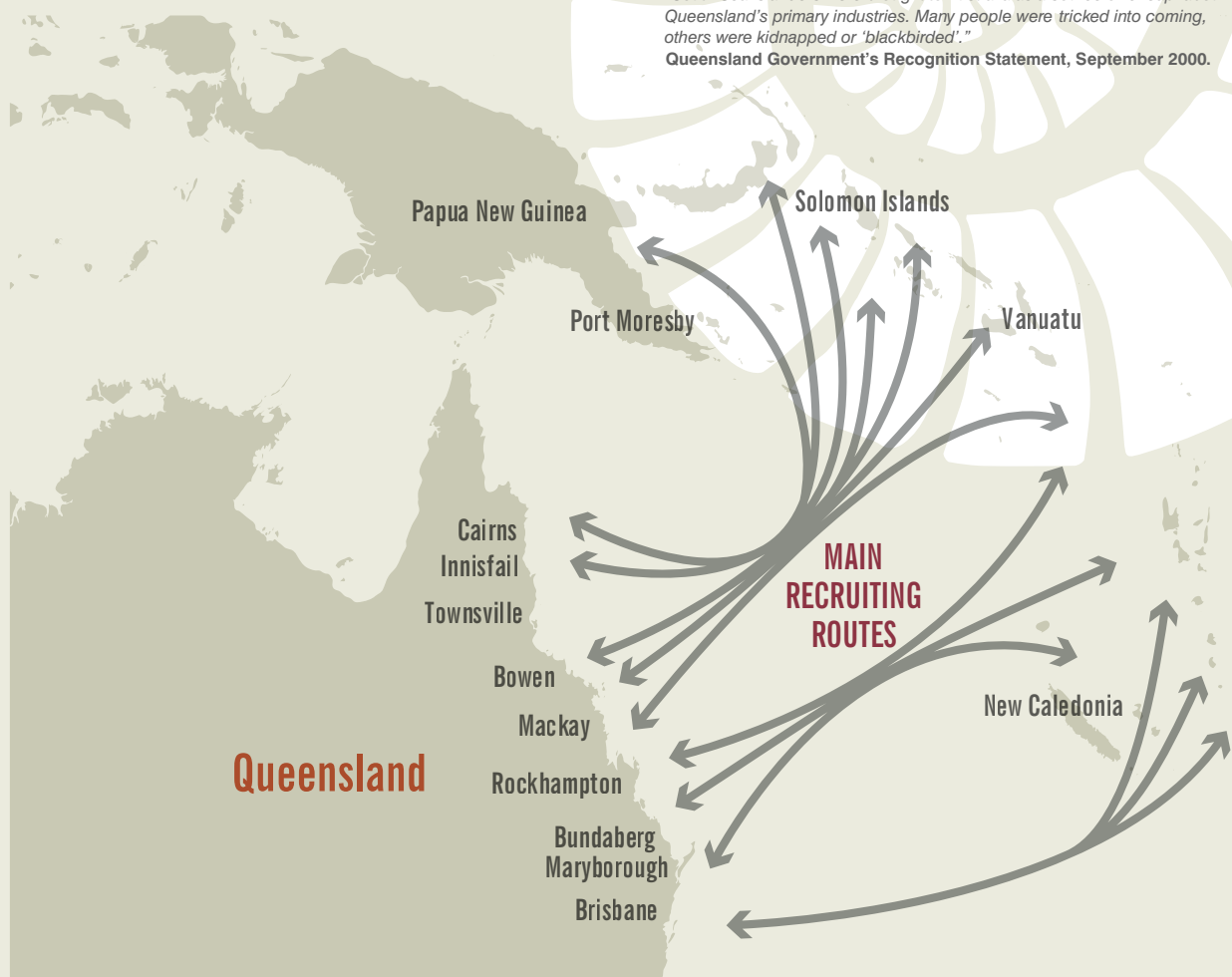
During this time, some 62,000 South Sea Islanders were brought to Australia to work in the Australian sugar industry. They predominately came from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands but they also came from New Caledonia, Fiji, Gilbert Islands, New Ireland, and Milne Bay Provinces of Papua New Guinea.

South Sea Islanders were referred to as Kanakas a term often considered derogatory by members of today's Islander communities.

Today, the descendants are known as Australian South Sea Islanders.

Main recruiting routes

"South Sea Islanders were brought to Australia as a source of cheap labour for Queensland's primary industries. Many people were tricked into coming, others were kidnapped or 'blackbirded'."
Queensland Government's Recognition Statement, September 2000.



The Queensland sugar industry was built on the backs of South Sea Islander labour. Men, women and children had to work long hours in harsh conditions akin to slavery. While white labourers received £30 each year, Islanders were paid in weekly rations and £6 per year, paid at the end of three year contracts.

Hard labour and poor living conditions meant that the Islanders were vulnerable to foreign diseases. This combined with a culturally and nutritionally inadequate diet, consisting of beef or mutton, potatoes, bread, tea and sugar, meant the Islander health was severely compromised.



South sea Islander labourers gathered together on a plantation in Halifax, Queensland.
Source: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.
Neg: 18057

Islanders had to work while sick and because there was little or no real health care, many died in the paddocks or at the farms where they worked. The result of this was a very high death rate for South Sea Islanders compared to that of Europeans.

Authorities believed that the specified Islander diet was suitable.

“A South Sea Islander diet was well balanced, under Government Regulations; each man received daily 1lb. beef or mutton, 1lb of bread or flour, 5 ozs sugar, 2lbs vegetables and 8 ozs maize meal or 4 ozs of rice...they were also allowed to grow their own gardens.

Sweet potatoes and bananas were the mainstay of the crops grown...If a man was ill, he was looked after in the Plantation hospital... Weekly they received 1 oz tobacco, 2 ozs salt and 4 cakes of soap. Yearly they were supplied with 3 shirts, 4 pairs of trousers, a pair of blankets, a hat, shoes, pipes, matches and knives.

In return the South Sea Islander worked a 10 hour day, starting early morning and finishing late afternoon.” Robertson, 1991, page 10.



Group of Australian South Sea Islander women labourers on a sugar cane plantation near Cairns, Queensland, ca. 1895.
Source: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.
Neg: 63220

Eventually, in the 1880s, hospitals were set up for South Sea Islanders in various parts of Queensland including Maryborough, Ingham and Mackay. Some general hospitals had 'Kanaka' wards set up.



South Sea Islander labourer in the sugar cane fields at Bingera, Queensland, ca. 1898.
Source: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.
Neg: 2252