

South Sea Islanders were restricted to working in the sugar industry by legislation that stated they had to work within a 30 mile limit from the coastline.

Harsh working conditions

Regardless of how they were recruited the exploitation of Islanders was widespread. A few Islanders worked under formal contracts established by the *Queensland Master and Servants Act 1861*. All were controlled by draconian legislation.

Islanders were made to sign three year work contracts. Many could not read and a signature was a fingerprint. While white labourers earned £30 each year, Islanders were paid in weekly rations, with their wage of only £6 per year paid at the end of the contract.

The Queensland sugar industry was literally built on the backs of South Sea Islanders. Men, women and children had to work long hours and in harsh conditions akin to slavery. They were required to clear heavy rainforest and scrub, and to plant, maintain and harvest the cane.

Social conditions

Despite the controls over their lives, Islanders maintained their cultural connections even while working as indentured labourers. South Sea Islanders usually lived in some kind of barracks style housing on the sugar cane farms. Some preferred to live in traditional grass hut style accommodation, with separate sleeping arrangements for women and men. The village layout was similar to those in the islands, families together and single men's quarters separated away from the families.

South Sea Islanders were vulnerable to disease and poor health care in Australia. In their new home of Queensland, South Sea Islander men, women and children were exposed to people who carried diseases that the Islanders would have had little or no prior contact with in their home islands. As a consequence Islanders caught European diseases. Combined with a culturally and nutritionally inadequate diet of beef or mutton, potatoes, bread, tea and sugar, this was a recipe for an Islander health disaster. The Islanders had to work while sick and because there was little or inadequate health care, many died in the paddocks or at the farms. The result was a very high death rate for South Sea Islanders compared to that of Europeans.

Australian South Sea Islanders were segregated from mainstream society and excluded from services. Eventually, in the 1880s hospitals were set up for South Sea Islanders in Maryborough, Ingham and Mackay. Some hospitals created separate 'Kanaka' wards.

An end to labour trade

The trade in Pacific Labour drew criticism from many sectors. But it was the White Australia Policy and the desire to protect jobs for white Australians that finally ended the Labour trade. In 1901 the Labour Trade formally ceased and the Australian government took steps to deport South Sea Islanders to their home islands. This was impossible and undesirable for many, and resulted in more hardships and discrimination for those who had made Queensland home.

Keywords: [indentured labour](#), [slavery](#), [South Sea Islanders](#), [sugar](#)

Date created: 22 October 2010

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ISSN 1838-708X

