Dominance of the tiger: The displacement of Aedes aegypti by Aedes albopictus in parts of the Torres Strait, Australia

Mutizwa Odwell Muzari, Joseph Davis, Rodney Bellwood, Bruce Crunkhorn, Ewan Gunn, Ursula Sabatino and Richard Gair

# Abstract

Most of the inhabited islands in the Torres Strait region of Australia have experienced dengue outbreaks transmitted by Aedes aegypti at various times since at least the 1890s. However, another potential dengue vector, Aedes albopictus, the Asian tiger mosquito, was detected for the first time in 2005 and it expanded across most of the Torres Strait within a few years. In 2016, a survey of container-inhabiting mosquitoes was conducted in all island communities and Ae. aegypti was undetectable on most of the islands which the species had previously occupied, and had been replaced by Ae. albopictus. It is suspected that competitive displacement was responsible for the changes in species distribution. Aedes aegypti was only detected on Boigu Island and Thursday Island. Recent dengue outbreaks in the Torres Strait have apparently been driven by both Ae. albopictus and Ae. aegypti. The findings have major implications on management of dengue outbreaks in the region.

Keywords: Aedes albopictus, Aedes aegypti, Torres Strait, surveillance

# Introduction

The Torres Strait in Queensland, Australia, separates the northernmost Australian mainland from the Western Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG) (Figure 1). The region has at least 100 islands of which 17 are inhabited, with a total population of approximately 8,000. Most of the islands have two names (Table 1) which can be used interchangeably.

Fig 1. The Torres Strait region showing the islands where surveys were conducted (bold letters). 

Dengue outbreaks have been recorded in the Torres Strait since the 19th century, including many cases on Thursday Island in 18971 and on Mer and Erub islands in 1912.2 In 1981-82 the islands of Masig, Iama, Badu and Thursday experienced a lengthy outbreak which also affected several cities on the Queensland mainland.3 Other series of outbreaks occurred on various islands in 1996–97 4 and 2003–4.5 Two Torres Strait residents died from the complications of severe dengue haemorrhagic fever in 2004.6 All the dengue outbreaks during that time were attributed to the endemic vector Aedes aegypti.2,3,5,6

In 2005 the Asian tiger mosquito, Ae. albopictus, was detected on Masig Island for the first time and this was followed by the discovery of a widespread infestation of this species on 10 of the 17 inhabited islands in the same year.7 An eradication program was established but its impact was very limited.8 Aedes albopictus spread rapidly across the Torres Strait, with subsequent detections on several more islands including Horn Island and Thursday Island by late 2010.9

Although Ae. albopictus was present in neighbouring Western Province of PNG,10 genetic evidence suggested that the Torres Strait population may have originated from Indonesia, and the species’ genetic structure in the region tended to favour a dispersal pattern driven mostly by human movements.11 Aedes albopictus is capable of transmitting dengue, Zika and Chikungunya12-15 viruses among other viral infections.

As the proliferation of Ae. albopictus populations continued in the Torres Strait, there were suggestions, mostly based on anecdotal evidence, that Ae. aegypti was gradually disappearing from several of the outer islands.16,17 However, there had been no comprehensive vector surveys on most of the outer islands since 2008 when the Ae. albopictus control program shifted focus to the ‘inner islands’ of Horn and Thursday as well as the Cape York Northern Peninsula Area on the mainland.8 Meyer Steiger et al18 briefly conducted adult mosquito trapping in 2013, but only covered four islands. Reliable information on the relative prevalence of Ae. aegypti and Ae. albopictus on the outer islands is essential when responding to disease outbreaks, because response strategies against Ae. aegypti and Ae. albopictus would have to be species-specific due to differences in behavioural ecology.8

To obtain this information, surveys of container-inhabiting mosquitoes were conducted in all Torres Strait island communities in March–May 2016 by the Cairns Tropical Public Health Services with support from Torres Strait Islands Regional Council and Torres & Cape Hospital and Health Services. This paper reports on those surveys and implications of the findings.

During the survey period in March 2016, there were dengue outbreaks simultaneously on Erub Island and Badu Island,8 and later two more outbreaks in 2017 on Boigu and Masig islands. This paper also discusses the vector species incriminated in those outbreaks in relation to the findings from the vector prevalence surveys.

# Methods

## Larval sampling

House to house yard inspections were conducted in all the island communities between March and May 2016 (Table 1) and all accessible potential larval habitats seen in the yard were checked for mosquito larvae. These included buckets, tyres, drums, tins, boats, plastic sheets, pot-plant bases, fallen palm fronds, coconut husks, garden tools and general rubbish items. Samples of 5–10 larvae were collected from each positive receptacle using a pipette or turkey baster and preserved in a vial with ethanol. To save time, larvae that were visually distinguishable as Culex spp., due to their characteristic movement pattern and distinctly long siphon, were not collected. Rainwater tanks were not inspected due to logistical considerations and the general abundance of alternative receptacles available in the wet season. Samples were transported to Cairns for identification.

Table 1. Mosquito survey dates (2016) and demographic information of each island community in the Torres Strait22

| Community  | Population\* | Number of dwellings\* | Survey dates (2016) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Boigu  | 271 | 68 | 14 – 17 March |
| Dauan  | 191 | 44 | 22 March |
| Saibai  | 465 | 104 | 17 – 22 March |
| Mer / Murray  | 450 | 143 | 16 – 21 March |
| Erub/ Darnley  | 328 | 96 | 21 – 29 March |
| Moa (Kubin community)  | 198 | 73 | 4 – 9 April |
| Moa (St Pauls community)  | 248 | 71 | 2 – 7 April |
| Iama / Yam  | 319 | 80 | 10 – 13 May |
| Badu  | 813 | 223 | 22 March – 1 April |
| Ugar / Stephens  | 85 | 23 | 26 – 27 April |
| Warraber / Sue  | 245 | 62 | 25 – 29 April |
| Poruma / Coconut  | 167 | 59 | 27 – 30 April |
| Keriri / Hammond  | 268 | 78 | 14 – 15 April |
| Mabuiag  | 210 | 50 | 9 – 13 April |
| Masig / Yorke  | 270 | 73 | 18 – 25 April |
| Muralug / Prince of Wales  | 109 | 54 | 13 April |
| Ngurapai / Horn  | 531 | 178 | 11 – 12 April |
| Waiben / Thursday  | 2941 | 880 | 1 – 9 April |

\* 2016 Census data

## Adult sampling

Sampling of adult mosquitoes was conducted with human-bait sweep-net collections8 at selected sites on forest fringes along the edge of the community on Mer (11 sites), Erub (10 sites) and Saibai (11 sites). Selection of sites was targeted at the preferred habitats of adult Ae. albopictus, which are also the normal habitats of Ae. scutellaris. Adult sampling was not conducted on other islands due to time constraints.

## Mosquito identification

Mosquitoes were identified by experienced officers using stereo microscopes. However, due to overlapping morphological features between larvae of Ae. albopictus and Ae. scutellaris,19 larval samples suspected to be either of these species were submitted to Queensland Health Forensic and Scientific Services for identification using PCR methods.20,21 Any such larvae originating from the same container in the field were homogenised together in the laboratory. However, the PCR molecular markers were set to detect the presence of Ae. albopictus only, as this was considered the main species of concern, and therefore any container in which Ae. albopictus was not detected in the test was inferred to be containing Ae. scutellaris only. On the other hand, a mixed larval sample would be classified as Ae. albopictus.

# Results

The survey dates for each island are shown in Table 1, together with estimated size of each community. Results from larval sampling and identification are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of receptacles with larvae of container-inhabiting *Aedes* mosquitoes identified from each island community in the Torres Strait during the surveys in March-May 2016.

| Community | *Ae. aegypti* | *Ae. albopictus* | *Ae. scutellaris*\* | *Ae. notoscriptus* | *Ae. tremulus* |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Boigu  | 26 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| Dauan  | 0 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 0 |
| Saibai  | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| Mer / Murray  | 0 | 146 | 27 | 0 | 0 |
| Erub/ Darnley  | 0 | 62 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Moa (Kubin community)  | 0 | 42 | 0 | 7 | 9 |
| Moa (St Pauls community)  | 0 | 55 | 41 | 16 | 6 |
| Iama / Yam  | 0 | 17 | 6 | 2 | 0 |
| Badu  | 0 | 111 | 18 | 4 | 6 |
| Ugar / Stephens  | 0 | 34 | 4 | 0 | 3 |
| Warraber / Sue  | 0 | 86 | 5 | 0 | 4 |
| Poruma / Coconut  | 1 | 84 | 6 | 0 | 1 |
| Kiriri / Hammond  | 0 | 39 | 7 | 9 | 2 |
| Mabuiag  | 0 | 40 | 5 | 4 | 4 |
| Masig / Yorke  | 0 | 121 | 7 | 2 | 1 |
| Muralug /Prince of Wales  | 0 | 15 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Ngurapai / Horn  | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Waiben / Thursday  | 84 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |

\* Count of containers with Ae. scutellaris excludes any containers which may have had co-infestations with Ae. albopictus

Established populations of Ae. aegypti were only detected on Boigu and Thursday Island.

Aedes albopictus was detected on all the islands except Boigu, Saibai and Thursday Island, while Ae. scutellaris was found on all islands apart from Horn Island.

Adult mosquitoes collected with sweep-nets on Erub Island were identified as 179 Ae. albopictus, 4 Ae. scutellaris, 13 Ae. vigilax and 10 Verrallina sp. On Mer Island the collections had 93 Ae. albopictus, 29 Ae. scutellaris, 12 Ae. vigilax and 20 Verrallina sp. Saibai Island adult samples were 7 Ae. vigilax, 1 Culex annulirostris and 44 Verallina sp.

# Discussion

## Displacement of *Ae. aegypti* by *Ae. albopictus*

The surveys demonstrated that in 2016 Ae. albopictus was widespread and well-established among the Torres Strait islands, reflecting the species’ progressive expansion since early detections in 2005–6. The results also confirmed the apparent disappearance of Ae. aegypti from most of the islands as the species was supposedly displaced by Ae. albopictus.

The widespread occurrence of the dengue vector Ae. aegypti in the Torres Strait was first documented by Taylor in 1912 after several epidemics of dengue were experienced on most of the islands in previous years,2 and Ae. aegypti was reportedly still common on many islands as at 1980.2

In the 1990s, islands which had significant populations of Ae. aegypti include Erub, Masig, Poruma, Iama and Mer, all of which had “prolific breeding of Ae. aegypti” recorded during a dengue outbreak in 1996, with Breteau Indices of 73–219.4 Samples of Ae. aegypti had also been collected on Mer Island in 2000 for vector competence studies23 and again in 2002 during yard inspection surveys.24 In the same year Ae. aegypti was detected in abundance during yard inspections on Erub Island.24 Iama Island was also reported to have “large numbers of Ae. aegypti larvae” in 2003 during a dengue outbreak that resulted in 98 confirmed cases.5 It is therefore interesting to note that by 2016 Ae. aegypti was undetectable on all these islands. The only confirmed disappearance of Ae. aegypti prior to the detection of Ae. albopictus in the Torres Strait was on Masig Island in 2002 where Ae. aegypti had been apparently displaced by Ae. scutellaris.24 In contrast, the same year on Mer Island Ae. aegypti was prevalent in higher densities than Ae. scutellaris.24 However, as at 2016, Ae. albopictus had become the most dominant container-inhabiting Aedes species on Masig and most other outer islands (Table 2).

It is unlikely that vector control interventions were responsible for the decimation of Ae. aegypti populations on any of these islands. Although vector control operations were conducted on the outer islands of the Torres Strait between 2005 and 2008 aiming to eliminate Ae. albopictus, the efforts had very limited impact and were eventually discontinued due to a wide range of logistical challenges including insufficient manpower to conduct adequate vector control.8 The more plausible explanation for the widespread disappearance of Ae. aegypti could be the possible displacement by Ae. albopictus through inter-specific competition.

Similar cases of species displacement have occurred in parts of the United States of America, whereby a precipitous decline of Ae. aegypti population was observed after the arrival of Ae. albopictus.25,26,27 Competition between the two species is said to occur primarily at the larval stage28 where Ae. albopictus shows significantly greater survivorship especially in resource-limited conditions29 and Ae. aegypti gets more severely affected when the larval density of Ae. albopictus increases.30

At the adult stage, the impact of Ae. albopictus on Ae. aegypti populations can occur through mating interference known as satyrization, whereby males of Ae. albopictus mate with females of Ae. aegypti, effectively sterilizing those females through the monogamizing actions of the male accessory gland products.26,28 Therefore, the species displacement pattern noted in the Torres Strait may have been a result of a combination of processes in which Ae. albopictus was the superior competitor.

## Presence of *Ae. aegypti* and *Ae. scutellaris*

During the 2016 survey, established populations of Ae. aegypti were found on only two islands, Thursday Island and Boigu Island, and it was interesting to note that both islands did not have detectable populations of Ae. albopictus at the time of the survey. The presence of Ae. aegypti on Boigu Island had been documented previously.2,18

On Thursday Island, the history of vector surveys and dengue outbreaks shows that the island has had high populations of Ae. aegypti for many years3,31 prior to the detections of Ae. albopictus, and still had notable densities recorded between 2010 and 2017.8 Although Thursday Island was first invaded by Ae. albopictus in 2010–11, the population of this species was progressively suppressed to inconspicuous levels through an intensive and ongoing program targeting the adult resting sites and larval habitats of this species.8 There would therefore have been no opportunity for the competitive displacement process to occur on Thursday Island in favour of Ae. albopictus. Surveys within the ongoing program on Thursday Island included adult mosquito sampling with sweep-nets.8

The intensive suppression program against Ae. albopictus on Thursday Island was also implemented concurrently on Horn Island since 2011, leading to very low levels of this species at the time of the April 2016 survey. Similarly, Ae. aegypti was at undetectable levels on Horn Island during the survey, although some detections have been recorded occasionally during ongoing regular surveys conducted there between 2010 and 2017.8

The non-detection of Ae. aegypti on Saibai Island was not surprising, given that the species had not been detected there in the various entomological surveys conducted in recent decades.7,18,32,33 The island comprises largely of swampland and gets almost completely inundated with brackish water for lengthy periods during the spring tides and wet season. This possibly rules out ground-level and subterranean receptacles as potential breeding sites for Ae. aegypti as containers are contaminated by salt water that could kill or inhibit Ae. aegypti production . Similarly, Ae. albopictus had never been found on Saibai in any surveys after the initial invasion of other Torres Strait islands.7,8 However, it is interesting that low populations of Ae. scutellaris, which is considered to exploit similar habitats as Ae. albopictus, appeared to have been thriving on the island for some time.18,34 This may be due to Ae. scutellaris having a wider tolerance to salinity and water quality than Ae. aegypti 24 and possibly Ae. albopictus .

The surveys in 2016 showed that Ae. scutellaris was as widespread as Ae. albopictus across the Torres Strait (Table 2), albeit at lower densities. Despite the possible underestimation of Ae. scutellaris larval densities due to the molecular identification process, results of adult sampling on Erub and Mer islands confirmed that Ae. albopictus was by far the more dominant species. The two species are often found coexisting in larval habitats and as adults in their sylvatic habitats. Aedes scutellaris is endemic to the Torres Strait region, and it also occurs in northern parts of mainland Australia.2,35

Aedes scutellaris was linked to dengue transmission at a locality in PNG in 194636 and, based on laboratory infection studies, Ae. scutellaris from the Torres Strait has been described as “a moderate vector” of dengue.16 The species was suspected to have been responsible for at least one dengue case on Masig Island in 2004 (based on non-detection of other potential vectors on Masig at the time)16 during a widespread outbreak that affected several islands in the Torres Strait.5 However, retrospective molecular analysis of preserved mosquito specimens later suggested that Ae. albopictus may also have been present on Masig Island in 2004.9 Consequently, not much is known about the importance of Ae. scutellaris in outbreaks of mosquito-borne diseases in Australia.35

The distribution pattern of Aedes species observed on the outer islands in this larval survey (Table 2) was comparable to the findings of Meyer Steiger et al18 from adult mosquito surveys conducted on four islands with carbon dioxide-baited Passive Box Traps in January-April 2013. They found Ae. aegypti on Boigu Island but did not detect the species on Saibai, Badu and Moa. They also found Ae. albopictus on Badu and Moa but did not find it on Boigu and Saibai. Furthermore, Ae. scutellaris was detected on all four islands surveyed in 2013 just as it was detected in 2016. This suggests that the species distribution pattern observed in 2016 had probably persisted that way for several years prior.

## Dengue outbreaks in the Torres Strait in 2016-2017

The Torres Strait region experienced a series of dengue outbreaks in 2016–2017 after absence of local transmission for at least a decade. There were 18 confirmed cases on Erub Island (Feb–March 2016), one case on Badu Island (March 2016), six cases on Boigu Island (Dec 2016 – Jan 2017) and one case on Masig Island (March 2017).

Based on the vector species present (Table 2), the outbreaks on Erub, Badu and Masig islands were attributed to Ae. albopictus, whereas Ae. aegypti was incriminated for the outbreak on Boigu Island. Furthermore, intervention strategies targeting Ae. albopictus (i.e. residual spraying of fringing vegetation) resulted in immediate cessation of transmission on Erub, Badu and Masig islands.8 On the other hand, interior residual spraying targeting Ae. aegypti on Boigu Island was equally successful in preventing further cases.

Based on the findings, it is now clear that any vector management efforts for prevention or control of dengue, Zika or Chikungunya in the Torres Strait should be targeting Ae albopictus with an emphasis on outdoor residual spraying, except on Boigu and Thursday Island where significant population of Ae. aegypti exist. However, periodic monitoring of the vector species prevalence is required since the situation may change over time.

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# Author details

Dr Mutizwa Odwell Muzari, Senior Medical Entomologist1

Mr Joe Davis, Manager Medical Entomology1

Mr Rodney Bellwood, Senior Vector Control Officer1

Mr Bruce Crunkhorn, Senior Vector Control Officer1

Mr Ewan Gunn, Manager Environmental Health2

Ms Ursula Sabatino, Manager Environmental Health and Vector Control3

Dr Richard Gair, Director, Public Health Medical Officer1

1. Tropical Public Health Services Cairns, Queensland
2. Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Queensland
3. Torres and Cape Hospital and Health Services, Queensland

## Corresponding author

Mutizwa Odwell Muzari

Tropical Public Health Services,

Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service

P.O. Box 1103, Cairns, Qld 4870. Telephone +617 42265555

Email: Odwell.Muzari@health.qld.gov.au

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