



## *Chapter 5. Mornington Shire*

### *Mayoral Statement*

Mornington Shire comprises a number of islands which are of great cultural and historical significance to their Aboriginal traditional owners.

There are many challenges to face into the future, but maintaining our culture, providing jobs for our people and achieving economic prosperity for our community are key priorities.

We always welcome people who come to live and work on our island to help us achieve our goals. As a remote island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, workers and their families need to bring a positive attitude. They will be rewarded with a great and unique experience.

*Bradley Wilson*  
*Mayor*

## Introduction

Mornington Shire comprises 26 islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria. 14 islands are part of the North Wellesley group of islands, of which Mornington Island is the largest, estimated to be 700 square kilometers in area. The South Wellesley group of islands is dominated by Bentinck Island, and includes Sweers Island. The only township, Gununa, on Mornington Island, is serviced by regular passenger flights from Mt Isa and Cairns, and by barge from Karumba.

The Wellesley Islands and surrounding seas are the traditional lands and waters of the Lardil, Yangkaal, Kaiadilt and Gangalidda peoples who have successfully managed their land and sea resources for millennia. The region remains one of the most pristine in Australia and is renowned nationally and internationally for its indigenous art and culture, as well as its fishing.



*Mornington Shire Area Map*

The land is covered by low scrub with ti-tree and swamp flats providing a habitat for many species of wildlife. There are windswept beaches lined with sea-oak trees, rocky outcrops and mangroves. The surrounding sea is abundant with fish and marine life, such as turtle and dugong. The Lardil, Kaiadilt, Yangkaal and Gangalidda people manage a number of land and sea management projects aimed at maintaining the unique natural environment and supporting future generations to live in harmony with the land.

In the early 1900s, the Uniting Church established a mission on Mornington Island and most Aboriginal people were located within the mission. It is said that the Kaiadilt people “were the last Australian tribe to live a fully traditional coastal hunter-gatherer lifestyle avoiding all contact with Europeans” at the time of their integration into the mission in 1948<sup>12</sup>. In 1978 the Queensland and Federal Governments facilitated the establishment of self-government via a local authority, the Mornington Shire Council.

## Key Facts

**Shire Population:** Mornington Shire had an estimated population of 1,214 people as at 30th June 2012. Projections prepared by the Department of Infrastructure and Planning indicate that by 2016 the expected population of Mornington Shire will be 1,340 people.

**Town:** Gununa population approximately 1,155

**Land Area:** 1,248.4 km<sup>2</sup>

Under a State Government Alcohol Management Plan that currently applies to Mornington Shire, possession of alcohol is prohibited and heavy penalties apply to anyone trying to bring alcohol into the Shire. Alcohol cannot be purchased within the Shire, except with meals at the two tourism resorts (see below).

## Health Services

There is a hospital on Mornington Island which is able to provide primary and emergency health services. Pharmacy and specialist medical officers are provided on a fly-in/ fly-out basis with regular visits from the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Visiting services include Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Paediatrics, Psychiatry, Social Work, Podiatry, Royal Flying Doctor Service (Child Health), Hearing Health, Women’s Health, Oral Health, Physiotherapy, Pharmacy, Palliative Care and Aged Care Assessment, Renal Nurse.

## Education Services

Mornington Island State School incorporates classes from Kindergarten through to Year 10 including Prep and a half-day kindy program.



*World Famous Mornington Island Dancers*

## House and Land Sales

There is currently very little private ownership of houses on Mornington Island. There is also no private rental market operating in the community. Almost all land within Gununa township is owned by the Mornington Shire Council and all enquiries for access to land in the township should be directed both to the Shire Council and to the Gulf Region Aboriginal Corporation. Telephone 07 4745 5132, which represents the native title holders of the island.

Exclusive native title was recognised for all land on Mornington Island outside of Gununa township in 2008. Any person seeking to conduct an activity on native title land is required to comply with the Native Title Act – one of the key ways of doing so is to obtain a registered Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA). Steps for negotiating an ILUA can be found at [www.nntt.gov.au](http://www.nntt.gov.au). As native title rights are generally held by a group, negotiating an ILUA can be more complicated than making an agreement with an individual. Enquiries regarding proposals that impact native title on Mornington Island should be made through the Native Title Representative Body for the area, the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation. Telephone 07 4041 3833.

## Services

The island offers a relaxed and quiet lifestyle with modern facilities and a full range of communication services. Public utilities are well developed in Gununa with reticulated power, water, sewerage and storm water drainage. Services available at Gununa include:

- Australia Post
- EFTPOS facilities
- Ambulance
- Library
- Police Station
- PCYC
- Places of worship.

There are two privately owned tourist resorts within the Shire - Birri Paradise on Mornington Island and Sweers Island resort on Sweers Island. These cater mainly for fly-in/ fly-out fishing groups, but many Gununa residents use the restaurant at Birri. Both resorts have a limited alcohol license. There are plans to establish a motel and restaurant on the foreshore within Gununa itself.

## Sport and Recreation

There is a range of sporting facilities at Gununa including an indoor sports centre. Residents also enjoy fishing, boating, camping and beach-walks. Permission to camp and access parts of the island under native title should be sought from the relevant traditional owner group. The traditional owners of Mornington Shire are internationally renowned for their artwork and culture. The Mornington Island Dancers have performed extensively nationally and overseas, and works by Mornington artists such as Sally Gabori fetch high prices. The Mornington Island Gulf Festival is run most years for residents, reinforcing Mornington's position as 'The Cultural Heart of the Gulf'.



*Berry* - There are so many opportunities to have a good lifestyle. You have to find your role in the community and commit to it. If you can do that and if you've got that drive and motivation it is very, very rewarding, no matter what work you do. The island itself has a rugged beauty and there are many places you can go to the bush or the beach. If you enjoy fishing and boating it's the perfect spot to be.

*Mei* - I really liked coming to Mornington Island because of the really different cultures. With different jobs, sometimes you will be able to just come and experience the island for a couple of months, maybe if you're a nurse or something like that. But if you really want to make yourself be counted and make a difference then you need to stay longer and become part of the community rather than a passer-by.

*Dr Berry & Mei Zondag, Gununa, Mornington Island, 2013*

## Climate

Many people think Northern Australia is uniformly hot and humid, but this is not always the case. Mornington Shire residents enjoy warm days, cool winter nights and dry winters. Maximum temperatures are higher than on Queensland's east coast, but not as high as areas such as Mt Isa, which is hotter throughout the summer months.

The Shire enjoys cool winter nights, with mean minimum temperatures in July cooler than in Cairns. Humidity is also generally lower than in Cairns, especially in winter. As with most of Northern Australia, rains begin to fall in November/December, mainly through afternoon and evening storms, before the monsoon brings the bulk of the regions rain from January through to April. Average rainfall, however, is much less than on the east coast in Cairns and rain periods tend to be shorter in duration.

Our Shire also experiences one of the world's most interesting climatic phenomena - the Morning Glory. Although more pronounced on the mainland, the Morning Glory is a rolling cloud which stretches up to 1000 km long and is usually 900 metres deep. Rolling onto land in the morning, it looks and behaves much like an ocean wave.

## Contact

Mornington Shire Council

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School Principal Mona Anau and students

Heading a K10 school in an Indigenous island community in the Gulf of Carpentaria has its challenges, but for Mona Anau, it's the ideal teaching job. "I love being here," she told Education Today. "The children are wonderful, the parents are lovely and my teachers are young and innovative".

Jamie Skinner is one of Anau's 'young and innovative' teachers. She and her partner, Tom Watson, joined the staff at the start of this year. "Mornington Island was our first preference," Skinner told Education Today. "You don't often get an opportunity to work in such a remote location." Like all first year teachers, there are "good days and bad days" in class. But the good days far outweigh the less good experiences, she says.

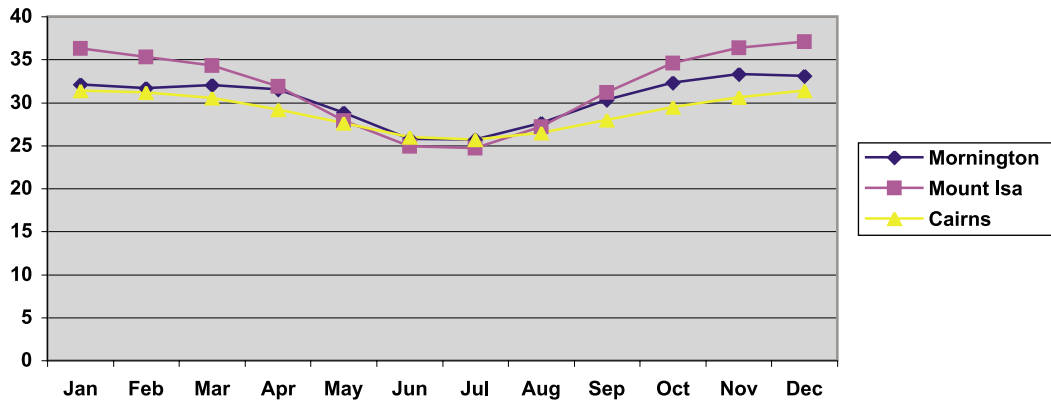
Interaction between teachers and children is both close and a lot more physical than it would be in a suburban Australian school. "The children are fantastic, very loving and very inquisitive. Coming from Brisbane 'touchy-feely' was something to get used to. Someone is always playing with my long blonde hair." Out of school, Skinner and Watson find plenty to do. There's the island to explore on bikes, fishing trips in their Tinny and get-togethers with other teachers and friends.

Sally Evelyn, another of Mona Anau's valued young teachers, is heading into her third year of teaching at Mornington Island.

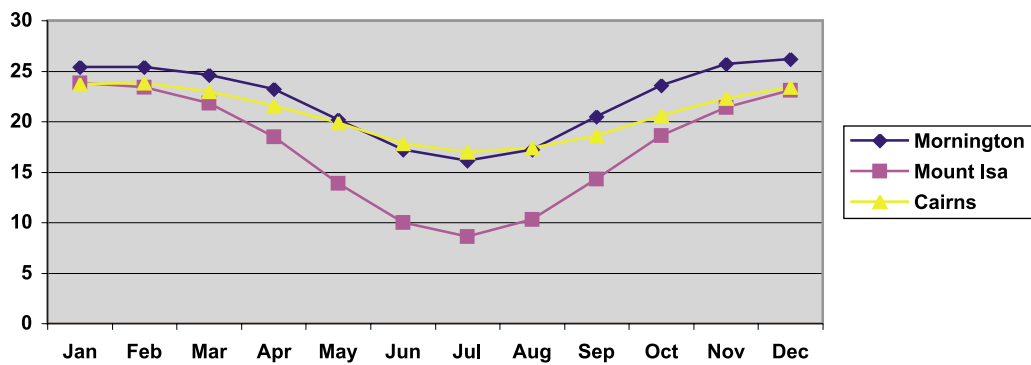
"It is so important that we have enthusiastic teachers that really want to be here and that are active in forming relationships with the community. It has made my work as a teacher much richer for the relationships," she says.

*Excerpts reprinted with kind permission from Minnis Communications publication "Education Today", 2009.*

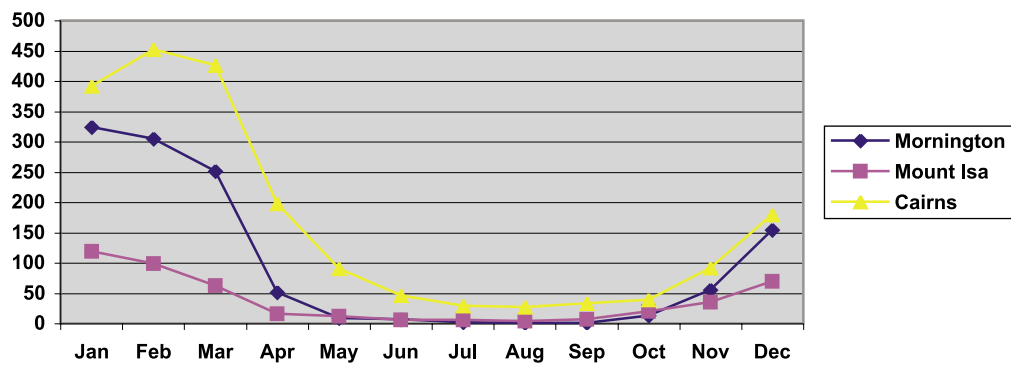
**Mornington Island Mean Maximum Temperature**



**Mornington Island Mean Minimum Temperature**



**Mornington Island Mean Rainfall**



**Mornington Island Mean 3pm Relative Humidity**

