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The yacht owners helping to rebuild cyclone-ravaged Fiji

As another tropical cyclone makes Fiji's recovery even more difficult, yachties are working with the Fijian government to get aid where other vessels can't.



MEGAN ANDERSON



Sea Mercy volunteers deliver shelter kits to Fiji's outer islands.

SHELTERBOX

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Wendy and Ian Shields were moored in the mangroves at Port Denarau when cyclone Winston smashed into Fiji on February 20. The category 5 storm hurtled through the Nadi marina just after midnight – after flattening many of the outlying islands during the day.

“The wind was screaming through the rigging,” Wendy tells *The Saturday Paper* from Savusavu on their yacht, *Outsider*.

The most brutal cyclone to make landfall in Fiji battered the island with hurricane-force winds, destroying almost 55,000 homes and killing 44 people.

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The next day, yachties such as Wendy and Ian were asking what they could do to help.

“There were a couple of us on yachts that said, ‘Gee, Fiji must be a mess. I wonder what we can do?’ ”

Word soon spread of a non-profit calling for volunteer yachts to help distribute aid. Based in Port Denarau, floating healthcare provider Sea Mercy had already begun to mobilise a volunteer fleet in co-ordination with the Fijian government’s National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) and emergency relief charities.

Four days later, Wendy and Ian were delivering aid and installing

we can do?' ”

water desalinators on some of Fiji's worst-hit islands.

Yachting has long been a big tourism industry in the South Pacific, with more than 600 cruisers and superyachts visiting Fiji each year. According to the Fijian International Yachting Visitors Survey, 769 yachts brought in \$39.6 million (\$A25 million) in 2014. Because cruisers can reach the more inaccessible of Fiji's 330 islands with their shallow drafts, their spending is valued for being made in non-traditional tourism areas during a longer period of time.

But post-Winston, these yachties are valued for something else: transport.

While navy vessels are adept at moving large amounts of supplies, Vuda Point Marina general manager and chief executive Adam Wade says they tend to deliver it where the most people are.

“The good thing about a yacht is it can take a few tonnes' worth of supplies [and] get to the small remote islands where maybe only one village is – which would be neglected until the end.”

After installing more desalinators on Taveuni and neighbouring Qamea islands, Wendy and Ian are preparing to head south to Makogai to take measurements for the building of a temporary school. Makogai was the first island they visited after the cyclone, which Wendy says was totally levelled by Winston.

“The people hid under the houses ... and they could hear the houses being ripped off from over them. At one stage the floor ... was peeling off and they had to run ... to another house. Nobody was killed, but they were terrified.”

Alf Evans, operations manager for disaster relief agency ShelterBox, says the work of Sea Mercy's volunteers has been absolutely essential to get their tents and shelter kits to the outer islands.

“Not only have they given up their time and their effort and their resources to do that, they're actually giving up their own homes – and that takes a special kind of person.”

Speaking from the NDMO in Suva, Evans says that, for now, torrential rain and flooding has put the organisation's efforts on hold, barely seven weeks after Winston. The bridge to Nadi has closed, incoming teams have diverted to Samoa, and helicopter lifts of aid have been cancelled. Evans is worried the savage weather will cause even more displacement.

“These people are already vulnerable after the hurricane, and the rebuilding is only partially complete in lots of areas.”

Wade, who says Winston was his seventh cyclone in Fiji, says people are still talking about the intensity of it. “Over the years there's been significant damage to the country, but nothing on this scale. This is just unprecedented.”

Just a week before Winston, Fiji became the first country to ratify the Paris climate change agreement

before its formal signing on April 22 in New York. Two more Pacific nations – Palau and the Marshall Islands – followed suit.

Extreme weather, depleted fisheries and rising tides in the Pacific have made governments increasingly vocal on the risks they face in the front line of climate change.

Fiji's submission towards the Paris deal stated: "Despite contributing a mere 0.04 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions to the atmosphere compared to the global average, Fijian communities are experiencing climate change impacts."

Speaking in Port Vila after cyclone Pam devastated Vanuatu in March last year, Oxfam climate change manager Shirley Laban told *The Saturday Paper* that Australia "cannot sit back and watch us continue to face things like that".

"Countries like Australia must take a public step in supporting climate change adaptation programs."

Fijian prime minister Frank Bainimarama has been particularly scathing of what he described in October last year as Australia's insistence on "putting its own immediate economic interests first", urging Malcolm Turnbull to stop building coalmines and embrace renewable energy.

YachtAid Global, which mobilised the superyacht community during cyclone Pam in Vanuatu last year and has partnered with Sea Mercy in Fiji, says climate change will only make the need to swiftly access remote areas and coastlines more important.

"Global warming is certainly a concern, given the low-lying nature of many of the areas we work with," says captain and founder Mark Drewelow. "The Pacific nations have been prone to damaging cyclones throughout recorded history and our biggest concern is filling the gaps where aid may not reach, or not reach quickly."

The idea of yachties wanting to help their Pacific neighbours isn't new: last year Victorian yacht clubs raised \$12,927 towards Oxfam's cyclone Pam emergency response, a fundraiser spearheaded by the Ocean Racing Club of Victoria (ORCV), which has a strong tradition of aid distribution in Vanuatu.

"It's pretty common for yachties to do that sort of thing," says commodore Neville Rose, noting also the efforts of superyacht *Dragonfly*, which was one of the first boats to provide emergency disaster relief in remote areas after cyclone Pam.

"When you sail to some of these places, the people make you feel so phenomenally welcome that you feel obliged to return the favour."

After Winston, tales rolled in from marinas such as Vuda Point and Port Denarau of yachts donating thousands in appeals and donations, alongside local businesses and the marinas themselves.

But with co-ordination between international aid organisations and governments crucial to get supplies where they're needed, a more sophisticated operation during Winston was required to get the most from volunteer vessels.

“In general, cruisers load up with stuff and take it to people they know,” says Sea Mercy co-ordinator and skipper Jonathan Robinson. “To be able to co-ordinate them and make them work in teams we found very effective.”

Working from his yacht in New Zealand, Robinson is preparing another fleet of volunteers to leave for Fiji next month. The fleet plans to assist with aid distribution and long-term disaster recovery after the departure of the Australian and New Zealand navies, with one priority being to spend money on supplies in Fiji.

Because Sea Mercy is self-funded and fully reliant on volunteers, Robinson says for many cruisers their involvement is based on a desire to help a region that has given so much to them in the past.

“We are privileged to be able to go sailing in the Pacific, and we really want to try to give something back.

“My experience of Vanuatu [after cyclone Pam] is they didn't want charity, they didn't want to change the way they lived, but they were really grateful for a leg up to get back on their feet again. And that's what I believe recovery is all about.”

Regardless of the storms and work still to be done, Vuda Point's Adam Wade says the resilience of Fijians is not to be underestimated.

“One guy said to me, ‘House, money – doesn't matter. Life you cannot buy, and that's the most important thing. No one in the village died. We'll rebuild. It's okay. No problem.’ ” ●

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