Christmas Island is located in the Indian Ocean approximately 2,650 kilometres northwest of Perth, and is 19 kilometres long and 14 kilometres wide. The census of 2006 showed a declining population of about 1,300 people, comprising 60 per cent Chinese, 10–15 per cent European, and 25–30 per cent Malay.

The Territory of Cocos (Keeling) Islands lies approximately 2,950 kilometres northwest of Perth, 3,700 kilometres west of Darwin and 900 kilometres south-west of Christmas Island, and consists of 27 coral islands in two atolls with a total land area of about 14 square kilometres. The population of about 618 people (2001) is largely confined to Home Island, home of the Cocos Malay people, and West Island, where more than one hundred short-term government contract workers, generally from the mainland, live. There are also a few permanent residents. The unique heritage of the present-day population is reflected in Islamic mosques, Buddhist shrines and the idiosyncratic Cocos Malay language. Neither of the island groups has an earlier indigenous population.

While the Indian Ocean territories are a Commonwealth jurisdiction, the Territories Law Reform Act 1992 enabled the application of certain Commonwealth Acts and relevant laws of the state of Western Australia to the territories. Local government legislation based on that of WA was introduced in 1992. For the purpose of enrolling and voting in federal elections, the Cocos (Keeling) and Christmas Islands are electoral districts of the Commonwealth division of Lingard in the Northern Territory.

Christmas Island was named on Christmas Day 1643 by Captain William Mynors of the East India Company; William Dampier and two of his crewmen from the Robinson were the first recorded European arrivals. Naturalist John Murray, on the 1872–76 HMS Challenger expedition to the Dutch East Indies, brought the Island to the attention of the British government, but it was not until 1888
that the Clunies Ross brothers established the first settlement at Flying Fish Cove to provide timber and other supplies to their coconut plantations on Cocos (Keeling) Islands. In 1891 John Murray and George Clunies Ross negotiated a 99-year lease with the British government to extract phosphate, forming the Christmas Island Phosphate Company in 1897. In the absence of local labour, Murray introduced two hundred Chinese labourers, eight European managers and five Sikh policemen the following year.

Phosphate mining continued until the Second World War. Between 1942 and 1945 the island was occupied by the Japanese, who also operated the mines, using forced island labour; many were later sent to Japanese prisoner-of-war camps in Dutch East Indies. From 1946 the New Zealand and Australian governments jointly undertook the mining, and over this period male workers and their families were recruited from Cocos Island, Malaya and Singapore, leading to the establishment of the island’s first permanent population.

After the war, the island was administered from Singapore, but in 1957 it was acquired by the Australian government, a process formalised on 1 October 1958. The head of government is the Australian-appointed Administrator, with management of the island in the hands largely of the Shire Council and the Union of Christmas Island Workers.

A casino and resort, primarily serving the Asian market, were opened on Christmas Island in 1993. For a few years the complex generated huge income and attracted Western Australian workers and contractors, but closed down in 1996 as the result of the Asian economic crisis. Talk of reopening the casino in 2004 was quashed by the Australian government.

The Cocos (Keeling) Islands, discovered by Europeans in 1609, were not inhabited until 1826. Captain John Clunies Ross settled on one island in 1827, and thereafter the Clunies Ross family, ‘Kings of the Cocos’, occupied the islands for more than 150 years. They were declared part of the British Dominions in 1857, and in 1886 were granted in perpetuity to George Clunies Ross, grandson of John. The family established copra (coconut) plantations, using workers brought in from Asia. In 1901 a cable station was established on the islands to provide a telegraph link with Perth, but was destroyed in 1914 by the German SMS Emden, which was wrecked on North Keeling Island in a subsequent battle with the HMAS Sydney.

Responsibility for supervision of the islands passed over the years to the governments of Ceylon (1878), the Straits Settlements (1886), Singapore (1903) and to Ceylon again (1939–45). Occupied by allied troops during the Second World War, the islands became a Territory of Australia in 1935. The Australian government purchased all the Clunies Ross lands in 1978, except the family home and grounds, subsequently purchased in 1993. In 1979 a local council and a workers’ cooperative were set up. The Islanders voted to integrate with Australia in a United Nations supervised Act of Self Determination in 1984 and a commitment was made to respect their religious beliefs, traditions and culture.

In September 2001 the Commonwealth government passed an amendment to the Migration Act 1958, which designated certain Australian island territories, including Cocos (Keeling) and Christmas Islands and the uninhabited Ashmore and Cartier Islands, as ‘excised offshore places’. The effect of this amendment, passed at a time of heightened agitation about ‘illegal arrivals’, was to prevent people who arrived at these places without a visa from subsequently applying for one. An Immigration detention centre was opened that month on Christmas Island.

Both island groups are rich in natural heritage. Cocos (Keeling) Islands are classic examples of coral atolls, whereas Christmas Island is rugged and steep, its 80-kilometre coastline an almost continuous sea cliff. More than 60 per cent of Christmas Island is
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national park, and the annual red crab mass migration to the sea is a unique tourist attraction. Jan Gothard

See also: Indian Ocean region; Marine environment; Refugees; Second World War