

## Smart living on Magnetic Island



Community Engagement Manager, Julie Heath, with the island's Community Action Award at the Smart Lifestyle Centre. Joanne Isaac

As you cruise into Nelly Bay, on Magnetic Island, granite outcrops tower over the harbour and tall, emerald-green hoop pines sway in the breeze. But a different kind of green impressed the judges at the 2008 Australian Sustainable Cities Awards. Thanks to the Magnetic Island Solar Suburb project, the island received the Community Action Award in recognition of their efforts to cut energy use.

Led by Ergon Energy, the project is the largest of several sub-projects being run in Townsville as part of the federally funded *Townsville: Queensland Solar City* project.

Since early 2008, Magnetic Island has undergone an energy revolution. Anyone on the island can register for a free energy assessment of their home or business. Ergon Energy assessors then help residents identify how they can reduce their energy consumption and use a meter to measure how much energy particular appliances expend.

'Some microwaves draw 75 watts just for the clock,' says Community Engagement Manager Julie Heath, 'that can translate to around \$100 a year.' Ergon Energy encourages the whole family to participate

during the assessment to get kids interested in the project.

'Our assessors also change bulbs for compact fluorescents and can fit water-efficient showerheads if residents are agreeable,' Heath continues. Other assessment freebies include a shower timer, draught excluders and a room thermometer.

The project is aiming to upgrade all electricity meters on the island to Smart Meters. Combined with an ecoMeter in-house display unit, the new meters will allow residents to see how much electricity they are using and its cost. So far more than 250 assessments and 450 meter upgrades have been carried out.

The roof is also evaluated during the assessment for suitability to host a photovoltaic array. Ergon Energy owns and maintains



Magnetic Island supports a modern community a short distance from the Queensland mainland. Joanne Isaac

the solar panels, but has no plans to remove them after the seven-year life of the project as long as the hosts agree. 'Electricity generated from the panels goes back into the grid, reducing the greenhouse gas emissions for the whole island,' explains Heath.

Another feature of the project, the Smart Lifestyle Centre, was officially opened



Solar panels power the Smart Lifestyle Centre as well as an increasing number of homes on the island. Joanne Isaac

last year by Federal Minister for Environment and the Arts, Peter Garrett. Visitors can see displays featuring energy-saving devices and solar panels, talk to staff or schedule an energy assessment.

Heath says that Magnetic Island was the perfect location to undertake the project. The most important factor was the high community support. 'More than 40 per cent of households completed our initial energy survey, an amazing response for a mail survey. Our next challenge is to reach the other 60 per cent.'

The island also has clear electricity network boundaries, as energy is supplied by cables from the mainland, allowing Ergon Energy to isolate the island's energy use.

The hard work of the team behind the Magnetic Island Solar Suburb project is already paying dividends. On New Year's Eve 2008, less than a year since the first assessment, peak energy use at 7.30 pm on Magnetic Island dropped nearly 10 per cent compared to the predicted 'business as usual' case.

● Joanne Isaac

**More information:**  
Townsville: *Queensland Solar City*,  
[www.townsvillesolarcity.com.au](http://www.townsvillesolarcity.com.au)