

**CARTER  
NEWELL**

**Asia Pacific Carriers' Liability Guide**



**1st edition**



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NB: Due to the extensive nature of this publication and the pace of reforms and judicial consideration there may be an absence of reference to a recent case or some references to legislation and its provisions which are no longer current, yet proclaimed, amended or repealed. This publication attempts to draw out the most significant points in the relevant legislation. Whilst all care has been taken to ensure that the most up to date information has been included, not all cases or aspects of the legislation have been considered. The material contained in this publication is in the nature of general comment only, and neither purports nor is

intended to be advice on any particular matter. No reader should act on the basis of any matter contained in this publication without considering and, if necessary, taking appropriate professional advice upon his or her own particular circumstance.

# Asia Pacific Carriers' Liability Guide

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## PREFACE

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Carriage by air in the South Pacific region can be best summed up as complicated and volatile, but also fundamentally necessary to both the regional and world economy. The very isolation of the many small communities that make air travel so important in this region, also makes efficient, cost effective and competitive carriage problematic. Limited island economies can sometimes find it difficult to fund the significant capital costs of an airline, let alone suitable airports. While there is often high demand for domestic and inter-island services, carriers can be controlled by external forces critical of opening routes to competitive market forces. Many enterprises have struggled and some failed as a result. Confluence between South Pacific nations remains a somewhat overwhelming task to establish common structures for the provision of air services, let alone a joint carrier. Yet in spite of these hurdles, and in spite of all the volatility in corporate, government and market forces, aviation remains a viable and essential industry for the region.

For Australians, the proximity of the South Pacific represents opportunities in business, tourism and in aviation regulation. CASA continues to support the Council of the Pacific Aviation Safety Office by providing technical advice and access to training courses, by attending working groups with specific member nations, and providing, operating and organising targeted programs aimed at enhancing safety standards through better safety inspectors and investigators<sup>1</sup>. Tourism continues to drive much of the international inbound access to the South Pacific, with code-sharing and low cost airlines attractive options. While tourism is a major factor for aviation in this region, it too suffers from seasonal instability in pricing and travel patterns.

The upshot is an aviation market for which domestic and international services are essential, but the volatility and unpredictability present a risky financial equation. This balance of risk not only exists to financial stakeholders (such as Governments and investors), but also manifests as a liability risk with ageing aircraft and a limited emphasis on safety and security in an increasingly litigious and westernised society.

What links the South Pacific nations by their membership to instruments such as the Warsaw and Montreal Conventions, does not necessarily produce like-mindedness for carriage outside those regimes. Indeed, belonging to organisations such as ICAO,<sup>2</sup> the South Pacific Forum, the United Nations or PIASA<sup>3</sup> does not guarantee uniformity in liability and compensation regimes across the region. And therein lies the complexity and legal diversity of the various South Pacific nations analysed in this *Guide*.

This inaugural edition of the Carter Newell *Asia Pacific Carriers' Liability Guide* details the civil aviation liability regime in a number of Asia Pacific nations. The *Guide* outlines the international conventions to which each nation is a member, and examines the key domestic carrier liability legislation and case law for death and injury, baggage and cargo, third party property damage and delay claims. The *Guide* then looks at the civil system of laws adopted and the judicial hierarchy in which they are enforced around the region, the key regulatory bodies empowered to oversee aviation and the impact of local customary laws in each country.

The *Asia Pacific Carriers' Liability Guide* we hope is a valuable tool to all with an interest in this area, with particular value to five key industries:

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<sup>1</sup> Civil Aviation Safety Authority, Annual report, 2009–2010 (2010). The Pacific Aviation Safety Office is an organisation made up of member nations comprising the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Australia and New Zealand.

<sup>2</sup> International Civil Aviation Organization.

<sup>3</sup> Pacific Islands Air Services Agreement.

- Private charter or common commercial carriers operating out of or into the Asia Pacific region, or operating an aircraft for private or general business purposes within this region;
- Various business partners of Asia Pacific carriers and aircraft operators, such as brokers, auditors, accountants and loss adjusters;
- Aerospace and aviation underwriters, reinsurers and claims consultants, particularly those with major risks operating in this region;
- Businesses whose operations rely on the Asia Pacific region – from tourism and adventure operators, resorts, fishing, marine and the mining industry, to aircraft service companies, cargo and transshipment operations; and
- Corporate and private passengers who frequent some of Australia’s closest international neighbours, this *Guide* outlines how differently the Asia Pacific region deals with carriers’ liability.

While some of the nations outlined in this *Guide* may have only one national carrier which may be a signatory to an IATA Inter-carrier Agreement and/or promulgate its own more expansive conditions of carriage for liability, this *Guide* remains focused on the legislative regime for liability compensation for that respective nation. Care must always therefore be taken to ensure any express terms of carriage are considered in conjunction with the liability regimes in place as outlined in this *Guide*.

It is therefore with great pleasure that the Carter Newell aviation team provides the latest addition to the suite of Carter Newell legal guides; the *Asia Pacific Carriers’ Liability Guide*. As always, we encourage the use of the *Guide* where possible, as well as any feedback on its content and useability. We look forward to a strong ongoing partnership with Asia Pacific carriers, their corporate customers, insurers and brokers.

**CARTER NEWELL**

## APPLICATION OF CUSTOMARY LAW

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*‘The fact that customary law is not part of the formal system of law does not mean that its importance will diminish in a practical sense. The enduring strength of customary law supports the view that formal recognition is not required to give it force. Customary law still operates, as it has always done, on a separate plane, at a village level. This is recognised and enforced independently and without the need for statutory endorsement.’<sup>4</sup>*

Many of our readers will be well aware of the impact Asia Pacific customary laws have on the resolution of a property damage or personal injury carriers’ claim. But what is Customary Law, why is it relevant and how do we address this issue in this *Guide*?

To begin with, there is no universal definition of customary law. Confusion arises between a ‘custom’, compared to ‘customary law’; the former might refer to a person’s behaviour within a group, whereas the latter relates more to the rules governing that behaviour. Drawing a line between the two is difficult. Both are relevant to a carrier’s potential liability.

There is the related problem of deciding whether such rules qualify as law and whether they can be enforced within a formal system of law. Some countries do not deal with this. In the Cook Islands for example, where the definition of customary law dates back to the *Cook Islands Act 1915* (CK), custom is ‘*the ancient customs and usages of the Natives of Cook Islands*’.<sup>5</sup> Often relevant definitions introduced at independence are more palatable. The Constitution of Papua New Guinea for instance defines a custom to include ‘*the customs and usages of the indigenous inhabitants of the country existing in relation to which the matter arises, regardless of whether or not the custom or usage has existed from time immemorial*’. This elevates the status of custom and makes it clear that it will continue to develop and form part of the legal system. In countries where new customary rules may be recognised as law, a related question is how widespread they must be to warrant recognition as customary law? This question is particularly pertinent to this region where customs differ from island to island, and village to village.

Some guidance was given by Chief Magistrate Lunabeck in *Waiwo v Waiwo and Banga*.<sup>6</sup> In that case, the petitioner sued for divorce on the grounds of adultery, under the *Marriage Act 1986* (VU). In accepting that adultery was a serious matter in custom (with customary law dictating the measure of punitive damages), the Magistrate referred to the words in the Preamble to the Constitution, which underlined that it was ‘*founded on traditional Melanesian values . . .*’. Chief Magistrate Lunabeck held that, when considering customary law, ‘*a Court should not be bound to observe strict legal procedures or apply technical rules of evidence, but shall admit and consider such relevant evidence as is available (including hearsay evidence and expressions of opinion) and the Court shall otherwise inform itself as it sees fit*’. This is a difficult and quite liberal approach that common law would struggle with. Indeed, this approach has since been rejected on appeal on the following basis:

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<sup>4</sup> G. Powles, ‘*The Status of Customary Law in Western Samoa*’ Masters Thesis, VUW, (1973), Part VI; Jennifer Corrin, ‘*The Status Of Customary Law In Fiji Islands After The Constitutional Amendment Act 1997*’ (2000) 4 *Journal of South Pacific Law*.

<sup>5</sup> Section 2, whilst not defined in the Constitution, *Interpretation Act* (VU), Cap 132, provides that ‘Custom’ means the customs and traditional practices of the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu. The word ‘traditional’ could be interpreted as carrying with it a requirement that the custom is longstanding.

<sup>6</sup> Unreported, Magistrates Court, Vanuatu, cc324/95. The decision was reversed on appeal in *Banga v Waiwo*, unreported, Supreme Court, Vanuatu, AC1/96.

*'It is essential to remember that Judges and magistrates are not custom chiefs and are not experts in custom of any area let alone of the whole of Vanuatu. Nor is there any such thing as THE custom of Vanuatu. Although it is conceivable that there might not be a need for strict rules regarding the obtaining of evidence of a particular custom if and when the need arises to establish a particular custom, evidence must, nevertheless be obtained and a clear custom must be established.'*

The corollary of the very nature of customary law is that it gives rise to fundamental questions of law and fact. Those nations (like Australia) whose constitutional systems approximate a Westminster concept of government and judicial law, would invariably seek to understand customary law by taking formal law and legal systems as a benchmark. But such concepts of proving facts by evidence and the rule of law may do little to underpin a customary law cause of action.

Ultimately, what makes customary law most perplexing and challenging, is that much of it is unwritten. For the purposes of this *Guide* therefore, it is impossible to provide, as a general explanation of laws, every nuance of a nation's injury, land and property customary laws. What we therefore seek to highlight in this *Guide* is whether the potential exists for customary laws to affect a carrier's liability by examining whether a plural legal system exists and how Judges in turn have resolved relevant liability cases. Certain Asia Pacific nations have sought to expressly exclude the import of custom and customary law by Constitutional amendment. While this does not necessarily mean the 'customs' of those nations will be extraneous to a carrier's liability, it does at least inform generally the minimal impact customary law will have in any given matter. By contrast, many of the Asia Pacific nations still formally seek to recognise and enforce customary law, even sometimes if only by recognising broad concepts rather than prescriptive rules. It is in these nations where our and our local agent's knowledge and experience of customary law throughout the region, is paramount to understanding carriers' liability.

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