

GUEST OPINION: Islandness: A COVID-19 superpower?

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A farm near Brackley organized bales of hay into this display as a show of gratitude for front-line workers during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nathan Rochford • Guardian file - Contributed

Marlene Chapman

Guest opinion

Researchers have been busily documenting and assessing responses to COVID-19 around the world in hopes of strengthening policies and communities for the future. Some keys to success are emerging — some of which will be obvious for those of us lucky enough to live in P.E.I. Dr. Jim Randall, UNESCO chair in island studies and sustainability at UPEI, is one of the leads in the international research collaboration COVID-19 Island Insights Series, which outlines responses specifically on islands around the world. He was recently quoted as saying, “When islands have the autonomy to craft their own responses, when they have the capacity to limit access, and when their residents are conscientious, they have been more successful in preventing the spread of the virus.”

As a student of island studies I recognize some of those features as islandness — characterized as being surrounded by water, connectedness, tight-knit communities, ingenuity and limited resources. While on the whole these are neither inherently good nor bad, when evaluated in the context of a pandemic, one might argue they begin to swing more to the inherently good column.

Let’s take boundedness: being surrounded by water. For those who love the ocean and the sense of “being away from it all,” this is viewed as an asset, but perhaps never so much as during a global pandemic, when the ability to physically shut out the rest of the world is a matter of closing a handful of entry points. And autonomy, well, that is a matter of both governance and attitude. Having authority over health care has been a major key in successfully managing COVID for P.E.I., as well as for other islands around the world. Beyond that, gumption and good sense, the drive for island-made solutions and unapologetically forging our own path, is a combination which has coloured our cultural history. It also appears to have fuelled our pandemic decision-makers, the people working to support them, local business-owners, artists and community leaders of all kinds. Because of them we are not only successfully managing a crisis, we are having a pretty OK time living through it too.

Then there is the commonly held notion that a scarcity of resources on small islands is a vulnerability. On this point, I find myself agreeing with Dr. Ilan Kelman, a researcher on disasters, health and islands, in his chapter in the soon-to-be-published Global Islands Report 2021. There he argues that a scarcity of resources in health care, leaving small islands ill-equipped to respond to major outbreaks, pushed places like P.E.I. to move early and hard with restrictions. In other words, scarcity was leveraged to build resilience.

On March 15, Oxford University published their assessment of the various provincial and territorial responses to COVID across Canada. P.E.I., along with the Atlantic Canada bubble, stands out for its success. One of their primary findings was in the differences in leadership across the nation. In some provinces, public health officials were the face and voice of reason through the crisis, while, in others, this role was given to political leaders. In the case of provincial chief public health officers, they point out that in British Columbia and P.E.I. “both led their province’s largely successful pandemic responses and have been commended for gaining public trust due to their personable and straight-forward communication style.” I like to think that in P.E.I. we would be hard-pressed to find anyone who would argue that Dr. Heather Morrison’s leadership hasn’t been stellar. Quite the opposite: she has become cherished by many. How did she achieve such regard? By being the best of us. By being an engaged member of her tight-knit community. By caring deeply about the individuals in her community.

And we responded in kind. We tuned in and did what was recommended by leaders who have continued to earn our trust and respect. And it has worked well for us. As Randall speculates, there is something about the dynamic of the community — cohesion versus competition, caring versus questioning — that is playing a role in the success of pandemic responses. While snitch lines and nosy neighbours may be aspects of our islandness that we laugh — or even snarl — at from time to time, today I am seeing it as a feather in our collective cap; a collective consciousness that trumps individual freedoms in times of crisis.

Connectedness is a classic characteristic of islandness. But, it means more than being connected to each other, it’s also about how connected we are to other places: hello, Atlantic bubble. The notion of a Maritime Union dates back even before Confederation and while it’s not a formal union, this pandemic has certainly raised the possibilities of how we work together. Both inside the bubble and outside, people are seeing how highly we function as a unit, how united and integrated we can be. This is not only showing up in the research, it is evident in the spike in numbers of people moving to the region during a global crisis.

It seems to me that islandness has definitely played a role in our good fortune. I hope that our new normal hangs onto these parts of us — our caring, our connectedness, our gumption and ingenuity: our superpower.

Marlene Chapman, who lives in Murray Harbour, is a graduate student in the master of arts in island studies program at UPEI and interim co-ordinator of the Institute of Island Studies at UPEI. The reports mentioned above can be found at islandstudies.com.

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