



Dongyu Islet, home to the permanent venue for Boao Forum for Asia; photo by Li Xiaogang.

Conclusions:

The future of Island Studies and Hainan

JAMES RANDALL

*UNESCO Co-Chair in Island Studies and Sustainability,
University of Prince Edward Island, Canada*

The last several years have seen increased attention paid to island issues and a growth in the number of organizations and individuals researching island topics. Many of these issues directly affect the well-being of islanders, including sea-level rise brought on by climate change, more intense and frequent extreme events such as hurricanes and tsunamis, degradation of marine and terrestrial ecosystems, and fewer opportunities for meaningful employment for our youth. Given that there are at least 600 million islanders throughout the world, we should not underestimate the importance of these issues. However, the economic, social, and environmental changes taking place on islands are also meaningful for mainland populations and places.

THE RELEVANCE OF ISLANDS

One example of this broader role of islands is with respect to the development of creative forms of governance. While in some circumstances, islands have been pawns in a larger chess match carried out by superpowers, they have also shown a political nimbleness in negotiating aid and investment. Some researchers have described the constant state of negotiations with other states and metropole governments as a new form of ‘Islandian’ governance (Korson, 2018; Prinsen & Blaise, 2017; Prinsen, Lafoy, & Migozzi, 2017). This political entrepreneurship has also been extended to the econ-

omy. Despite the failure of some ‘get rich quick’ schemes, including selling citizenship, money laundering, and trading away limited natural resources with little long-term return, many islands have been able to harness their assets to improve the quality of life of their citizens. Referred to as the resourcefulness of jurisdiction, there are numerous examples where island businesses have succeeded, perhaps because of their small size, remote location, and lack of power, rather than in spite of these characteristics (Baldacchino & Bertram, 2009).

Much has been written about the challenges facing islands, and especially low-lying coral atolls, as a result of climate change and sea-level rise. Given the early onset and the severity of climate change consequences, islands may be harbingers of the future facing

other coastal communities. Adaptation and other coping strategies adopted by islands, including integrating traditional knowledge with science, building alliances, and incorporating a transnational mobility, may be transferable to other places (Finucane & Keener, 2015; Kelman & Khan, 2013).

Islands have also been at the forefront as biodiversity hotspots, being home to 20% of the world’s plant and vertebrate species, including many endemic species (Courchamp et al., 2014; Habel et al., 2019). Unfortunately, conservation and preservation efforts on islands rarely receive the same level of attention and funding as is the case at other mainland locations. The tragedy of this situation is that many organisms being lost will no longer be available for use as traditional medicines and future pharmaceuticals (Arrieta, Arnaud-Haond, & Duarte, 2010; Hunt & Vincent, 2006).

One of the challenges that have always faced islanders has been the impact of encounters with newcomers or outsiders. Although these encounters have brought with them opportunities for education and trade, many have also brought genocide, subjugation, and powerlessness. Island societies have often been seen through the filter of

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a rigid social class hierarchy, where the ‘discoverer’ was superior and the islander was mistakenly considered to be ignorant, simple, or savage (Jolly, 2007). Although this marginalization of islanders is changing, it is still apparent in the portrayal of islanders in film and television. If mainland governments and mainland visitors want to develop meaningful relationships with islanders and their governments, they need to be aware of the cultural baggage they may be bringing to their encounters. One of the shared features of small islands is their high degree of social cohesion. This is reflected in strong and dense informal social networks, a high degree of volunteerism and civic participation, and resilience in the face of external threats. The integration of culture and economy, mediated by stable governance, may provide lessons to other jurisdictions seeking to find their way in a globalized world (Baldacchino, 2005; Baldacchino, Greenwood, & Felt, 2009).

THE INSTITUTIONS OF ISLAND STUDIES

The interdisciplinary field of Island Studies has been emerging and growing for the past twenty-five years (Grydehøj, 2017; Randall, 2020; Stratford, 2008). It is represented in the form of supranational and non-profit organizations such as the Alliance of Small Island States as well as academic postgraduate programs at universities, research centres, and institutes. Some of these programs and centres focus on specific regions or issues such as biodiversity, renewable energy, sustainability, and development. Examples include the University of Exeter’s Master of Science in Island Biodiversity and Conservation on Jersey, and the Center for Pacific Island Studies at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa. A smaller number of centres are taking a more broadly based, interdisciplinary approach, with the two most prominent examples being the University of Prince Edward Island’s (Canada) Institute of Island Studies (IIS) and the University of Malta’s Islands and Small States Institute (ISSI), both of which recently celebrated thirty years of existence. Not only do their mandates incorporate education and research, but they also participate in local and global engagement, where the activities at one scale add value at other scales. The number of these comprehensive Island Studies clusters is growing, including at University of the Ryukyus’ Research Institute for Islands and Sustainability (RIIS) in Okinawa, Japan, and the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland. It is hoped that with the continued foresight of the Hainan Foreign Affairs Department and various local partners, Hainan will join this growing list and take a leadership role in Island Studies internationally.

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