

# Sustainable Use Practices, including Tourism, in/for Small Islands

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## Discussion of a Bimodality

Islands are creatures of trans-territoriality; their history and culture, as well as their political administration, is a perennial dialectic between the woof of home and the warp of away; between openness and closure; between 'routes' and 'roots' (Villamil, 1977; Clifford, 1997; Brinklow et al., 2000).

Thus, an island reveals a particularly stark rendition of the local and the global. It is, at any one time, a discrete piece of geographic or physical terrain, identifiable by its delineated boundary. This is typically represented by the shore and the sea beyond. The finite compactness of the enclosed space tends to reduce the number as well as the internal diversity of both species (of flora and fauna) as well as of products and services (where populated). Its obvious totality is in itself an allure, inviting humans to 'play God': becoming agents of transformation. This is a rare experience of near total control over environmental variables.

Yet, concurrently, an island owes its existence to both inputs towards and outputs beyond itself. In spite of the apparent contradiction-in-terms, what are often referred to as 'externalities' - including exports, imports, migration, remittances, epidemics, tourists, environmental disasters or military interventions - are

simply and powerfully central to island life. Such a condition has been described as "hypothermia" (Baldacchino, 2000), "vulnerability" (Briguglio, 1995) or "volatility" (Easterly & Kraay, 2000).

## Impact Studies

These two conditions represent the global-local, or 'openness-closure', dilemma of small island systems. The composite effects, and ensuing dynamics, of this bimodality assure us that the impact of living things, particularly human beings and their actions, on this planet are nowhere more dramatic, or more tragic, than on island territories. An island, since it is an island, lends itself much more easily to impact, whether the latter is caused by forces within or without. Such an impact becomes all the more glaring, or need not be so significant for it to have a measurable effect, with decreasing physical size of the island.

This proneness to impact is one reason behind the fact that island territories reveal and harbour extreme versions of the living condition. Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace have been pioneers in identifying this uncanny circumstance amongst living things leading to a process of biodiversity often culminating in endemism (Darwin, 1979; Wallace, 1975). In economic terms, small, island based societies like Aruba, Iceland, Bermuda and French Polynesia are counted amongst the

world's richest people (The Economist, 2003a); while those of São Tomé & Príncipe, Vanuatu or the Maldives are recognised amongst the

world's poorest. In political terms, the nature of colonial impact on small islands has ranged from the total extermination of native peoples (for example: Moorehead, 1966) to the cultural incorporation of the locals into the imperialist psyche, to the extent that they shun, rather than actively seek, political independence (Miles, 1985; Winchester, 1985). Where biota are concerned, "island isolation dictates evolutionary problems in heightened form" (Carlquist, 1965:1). In demographic terms, many small islands run the risk of either depopulation or overpopulation (Connell & King, 1999). In geophysical terms, islands can be born (such as Surtsey or Kavachi - see Nunn, 1994) have their entire living biota wiped out (such as Anatahan Island - see NASA, 2003) or totally wiped off the face of the map (such as Krakatoa - see Whittaker, 1999) as a consequence of natural, or human, activity. Life cannot get more extreme than that. No wonder islands are comfortable metaphors for both paradise and prison.

It may come as a surprise, but considerable difficulties may arise in determining whether any such impacts are overall beneficial or deleterious. The contestation over land use by different stakeholders (such as local residents, foreign tourists and [local or foreign] property developers) especially where land is a very scarce commodity has been amply documented in the tourism literature (Bois-



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sevain, 1996). Similar case studies exist in relation to the contestation of land considered (by at least one of the parties) of strategic value (Bartmann, 2002; Espindola, 1987). The conflict escalates not only because of the finite resource basis of the land; but also because any long-term effects or opportunity costs tend to be quite considerable. Indeed, it may be fair to say that, when it comes to smaller islands, speaking of 'sustainable development' is a contradiction-in-terms.

### Impact and Sustainability

The 'openness-closure' dilemma identified above contours the sustainability argument in at least two distinct ways. First, it facilitates a resort to management via externalities which reduces the urgency and pressure to devise local solutions to local problems. The world beyond becomes, or actually continues to serve as, both the eponymous recycle bin we now readily use on our personal computers, as well as the potential source for desirable inputs, a modern rendition of the cargo cult (Worsley, 1968). Imaginative statecraft and diplomacy are fervently deployed in the context of international relations (in the case of sovereign island states) or domestic politics (in the case of small islands which are sub-national entities) to achieve solutions to one's problems - small, by anyone else's yardstick other than one's own, after all - which avoid internal resolution.

Second, small islands are truly 'I-lands', where the role of specific individuals is aggrandized. Being a big fish is easier in a small pond, although other 'big fish' may stand stubbornly in the way. This need not happen through active, strategic pursuit but may be a consequence of sheer default; especially so in islands enjoying some degree of administrative autonomy. 'Soft state' dynamics make it so much easier for locals or foreigners to identify discrete individuals who take decisions, and to lobby and influence the substance and/or direction of such decisions to one's advantage (Lowenthal, 1987). Outcome: the potential or disposition for 'building monuments' is nowhere so readily and easily available (Bray & Fergus, 1986). And monument building, by definition, is not typically a sustainable activity.

### Biodiversity and Sustainability

"[T]he incidence of endangered or extinct species is greater on islands than on continents. More endemic species have been created on islands but more have perished there" (Young, 1999: 253).

The 'openness-closure' perspective helps us understand better the dynamics of biological diversity and sustainability on islands. The particular geographical circumstances of each island create a specific eco-system, with its own evolutionary dynamics. In the case of continental islands - land areas that used to be connected to the mainland - evolution works via a long-term process of biota reduction: a progressive loss of species (extinction) which is bound to occur irrespective of the impact of humankind. In the case of oceanic islands - those rising from the sea thanks to coral deposits, volcanic activity or tectonic forces - evolution works via a long-term process of biota addition: a progressive accretion of new species coming in from the outside, starting from nothing (Quammen, 1996).

In both cases, differentiation then occurs as a consequence of relative isolation and biota specialisation. However, also in both cases, reduction and vulnerability of both the number and variety of species is accentuated with the impact of one particular living form - humankind - and its associated evaluation of land not as habitat but as potential for real estate and commodification. Hence, and ironically, the dedication of land to 'development', including tourism development. Hence also, and even more ironically, the construction of nature reserves and parks as 'tourism products'.

### Strategies for Use Practice

How to promote sustainable use practices in such a context? And all the more so when tourism - with all its associated infrastructural and environmental constraints - is fast becoming the common denominator in the development strategy of many small islands?

Once again, it is the 'openness-closure' paradigm which suggests plausible answers.

Let us start from within. Given the towering role of specific individuals within small island communities, much can be achieved by identifying and promoting 'champions' from





amongst the island communities' leadership. The transparency of decision making makes it so much easier to praise and commend those decisions, and the persons behind those decisions, which support sustainability. Active members within civil society, environment lobby groups or green-sensitive political parties can show and extend their support to key individuals, institutions or businesses who adopt or promote more sustainable user practices. The rapid spread of information in a small island community, with or without the use of formal media, ensures quick and cheap publicity.

Let us now continue from without. The impact of trans-territorial and/or trans-national forces can be very significant on small islands. These external agents must not be underestimated as prime movers of change. Take, for example, the presence and role of the diaspora, the sum total of those individuals who have left their home island and settled elsewhere. These emigrants could typically be more numerous, as well as of better financial means, than the locals who opted to stay put. They are the ones most likely to resort to multiple return tourism, and to spend longer nights on 'their' island whenever they visit family and friends. They are usually more post-materialist and environmentally sensitive (Inglehart, 1977), more strident and critical of the state of the local island environment. Their opinions count, and it pays - often literally - for their local cousins to listen.

Thirdly, the amalgam of local and global can nurture a very particular form of island identity. Successful island peoples are often ones who have developed a fairly broad common definition of who they are, in relation to the ever looming external world. The corner stone of economic success is the creation of a society suffused with trust and social cooperation amongst its members (Srebrnik, 2000: 56).

### Island Identity

Islands, especially small islands, come along with some distinct advantages in relation to the construction of identity.

First, their geographical precision facilitates a (unique) sense of place (Weale, 1992); they have a natural deployment towards the

sea and a maritime destiny that facilitates trade; and they are endowed with an obvious sense of alterity with the rest of the world beyond the horizon. Place, and its shared definition, fosters (though it does not guarantee) a sense of unitarism.

Second, 'place' can be invented and reconstituted - though it can also be lost - with encroaching globalization. After all, most small 'cross-roads' islands have been obliged to operate, or were even historically constructed, as global platforms (Churchill Semple, 1911: 424; Connell & King, 1999: 3-4).

Thus, and thirdly, small islands tend to do a better job, culturally and economically, when they are well-run jurisdictions with open export-gear economies, harbouring an ethnic: a people, a 'moral community' with a shared history and language (Fukuyama, 1996). Island identity can, in this way, replace ethnicity, class or political partisanship as the referent social fabric, still respecting the openness-closure dialectic - and therefore not suggesting defensive mono-culturalism or xenophobia. This facilitates a 'learning organisation' setting (McClelland, 1967), open to diversity, pluralism and the toning down of social class and/or status barriers and tensions. All the more so at a time when powerful forces of localism are being unleashed everywhere (Bartmann, 2000).

Fourthly, the compacted social space, intense webbing and networking of social dynamics, and the manner in which the consequences of decisions are sudden, rapid, total and visible provides easy lessons in



cause-effect relationships. The damage, typically to the natural environment, caused by the wrong decisions is therefore immediate and readily visible to one and all. It becomes a glaring reminder of bad policies, and quickly associated with the instigator(s) of such bad policies.

### Enter Tourism

Tourism provides a sinister twist to this condition. Although the industry permits what appears to be a cheap and easy cashing in on natural resources - sun, sea, sand - unless the fourth 's' of sustainability is also present, then what appeared as a cash cow could soon degenerate into an ecological catastrophe. Tourists invariably bring along added pressure on energy, fuel demands for imported food and raw materials, contribute to solid waste, clogged drainage, roads and telephone lines, and are party to polluted air and beaches. One cannot repeat enough, and the literature confirms this time and time again: the tourism impact is nowhere more sudden, pervasive, transparent - and perhaps even irrevocable - as on islands and their communities, especially smaller islands (Apostolopoulos & Gayle,

2002; Briguglio et al., 1996; Conlin & Baum, 1995; Gossling, 2003; Lockhart & Drakakis-Smith, 1996). UNESCO recognized this island condition as early as 1976. If sustainable development is already a headache; then surely, sustainable tourism in small islands is even more impossible!

### Specific Practices

How, then, to buck the trend? Each and every island is unique; and each has the promise of serving as a geographically total environment. Such a condition resulting naturally from isolation renders most islands ideal for serving as advance posts, laboratories for experiments in novel uses and practices. The island of Iceland is today a key leader in genetic decoding, thanks to its extensively well-documented genealogical heritage (Vesilind, 2000). The island of Mafia, off Zanzibar, is the WHO test site for the elimination of elephantiasis (The Economist, 2003b). The island of Tristan da Cunha may hold the key to the asthma and lung cancer genes (Scott, 2003). Islands are also obvious starting points for designing sustainable ecotourism programmes via biosphere reserves, national parks and other diversity-rich areas (Di Castri & Balaji, 2002).

Turning to sustainable island tourism, Lelaulu (1994) offers four basic suggestions:

a. *Zoning*: Keep tourists concentrated in one place for as long as you can during their visit to a particular island. Waikiki Beach on Oahu, Hawai'i, is one such good example. The tourism policy of the Maldives - a Muslim country - is another. This policy is easier to introduce and implement in the case of archipelagic island territories.

b. *Less but Better & Richer*: Take Fewer Tourists who will stay longer and spend more. Again, small islands enjoy a net advantage here. They do not need millions of tourists to make a difference to their gross national product. And access - by air or by sea - is more easily controlled. A relatively expensive pricing policy, accompanied by quality tourism infrastructure, is typically enough to keep the hordes away. Icelandair and Air Seychelles have done this very effectively. Doumenge (1998: 341) narrates an interesting case, drawn from the Caribbean:

"[On] the small island of St Barthelemy, the airport has a very small airstrip, accessible only to small planes having not more than twenty seats (including that of the pilot); this drastically limits tourist access, and offers an efficient means of control."

Another example is drawn from the island called Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, USA:

"High prices keep Martha's Vineyard exclusive, although other tourists can come to observe the celebrities on day trips, their numbers



being controlled by a ferry boat licensing system. About 100,000 people are on the island [of whom 10,000 residents] at any one time in the summer” (Royle, 2001: 196).

*c. Do not compete on sun, sand and sea:* When islands compete as any other sun, sand and sea destination, they lose out on their distinctive characteristics. They become effectively placeless, just another ‘paradise’ destination on the tourist brochure. One should exploit and showcase the charm, history and culture which makes every island unique. This diversity management strategy -geared towards ‘ecotourism’ - will tend to attract less but ‘better’ tourists, with a ‘host-guest’ encounter more likely to be synergetic than standardising (Baldacchino, 1997). Moreover, this recipe provides hope for the development of a viable tourism product in ‘cold water’ islands.

*d. Involve the local community.* Mass tourism is hard put to offer its clients a taste of local culture. Very often this amounts to “staged authenticity” (McCannell, 1973): cultural programmes often invented specifically to serve and amuse the tourist, and with no resonance whatsoever with the local population. Like the eponymous tourist souvenirs which have been manufactured elsewhere, and which therefore must be imported. Rather, one should involve local artists, local farmers and local service providers, improving the lot of the locals, while assuring a better host-guest interaction. Locals are also meant to include what is alas too frequently a silent or invisible majority: women. This strategy nurtures all round ownership of tourism, and an appreciation that its benefits are widely and indigenously shared, rather than siphoned off to the few and foreign. The latter leads easily to resentment, recoil or outright hostility (Pearce, 1987). What kind of sustainable island tourism is that which warns its tourists not to depart from the relative security of the hotel precinct? Again, it is islands, bearing high rates of tourism penetration, which have served as sites for the development of the aptly-named ‘irritation index’ (Doxey, 1976; Mathieson & Wall, 1992: 137-8; McElroy & De Albuquerque, 1994: 14).

## Conclusion

It is ironic that it has been the tourism industry which has obliged many small island territories to start recognising that their natural environment is a key resource which cannot be allowed to deteriorate. Both guests and hosts can participate in the campaign to economise on waste generation, choose sustainable products, keep the place clean, re-use or recycle specific products and finally to dispose of inevitable waste in the proper way. The campaign should be a way of life; islanders should take pride in being custodians of their environment, even if they do it for the sake of foreigners!

For all of history, and for as long as a trace of it remains on the face of the earth, our generation is likely to be remembered as the one that has made the most spectacular technological progress and yet caused the most harm to the planet. With their status as platforms of extreme renditions of the human condition, islands bear the most dramatic trace of such a state of affairs. They also act as the proverbial miner’s canary, providing early warning signals of environmental problems which require urgent attention and which are not typically restricted to islands (Baldacchino & Milne, 2000: 241). Small may be beautiful; but it is also vulnerable (Cropper, 1994).

## Postscript: A Case for ‘Island Studies’

It would be a pity to end on a depressing note. It has already been argued that one characteristic of (especially small) islands is the manner in which the cause-effect relationship is typically quicker, deeper and visibly so. Such a phenomenon is in itself an invitation to consider the richness of the cause-effect relationship which is sadly often fragmented into separate disciplines and specialisms. The close inter-relationship between an island’s geography, ecology, demography and economics - to mention a few key issues - and the proneness of islands to all kinds of ‘externalities’ are, in themselves, a lesson in the importance of inter- and pluri-disciplinary strategies. Which is why ‘island studies’ - also known as ‘nissology’ (McCall, 1994) - today beckons as a field of study, research and inquiry per se. Islands need to be studied and evaluated on their own terms, preferably in comparison to other islands, and respectful of their ‘openness - closure’ alterity. For example, it remains bitterly ironic that, with close to 10% of the world’s population - over 550 million people - living on islands, INSULA remains the only international journal dedicated to island studies. Indeed, there is no other way except the holistic way to properly and humbly understand, and then hopefully adopt, sustainable development practices.



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