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THE INTRIGUE OF ISLANDS – WHAT ARE THEY?

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Islands are romantic, inspiring, mysterious, dazzling, tranquil and exquisite. Or so the myths tell us. Even though reality often mirrors this idyllic image, the adjective list describes without defining or even explaining just what an island is.

Defining islands

Attempts at defining islands, or sometimes 'small islands', have considered:

- population size
- the presence of a unique people or culture
- land area or arable land area
- gross national product; and
- environmental influence, for example defining an island to be a land mass which does not create its own climate.

The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that the word 'island' can be as vague as, for example, the last item in the list. The first definition is 'A piece of land completely surrounded by water' noting that the word was 'Formerly used less definitely, including a peninsula, or a place insulated at high water or during floods, or begirt by marshes.'

Today, travel is common by air, land and water, so 'insulation' by water might not imply the same isolation as islands experienced previously. Mountain villages or remote outposts could be as difficult to reach as many small pieces of land surrounded by water. Irrespectively travel along good land transportation networks – roads, railways and bridges – tends to be cheaper than air travel and quicker than water travel. As well, electricity and telephone lines are generally easier to construct and maintain across land or bridges than across open water.

Fixed links

A suggestion might be to define islands, possibly termed 'isolated geographies', as small land masses lacking an adequate land transportation network which connects to a much larger land mass. This approach then becomes stuck in the quagmire of defining 'small', 'adequate' and 'much larger'.

Scoglietto, Italy: island or rock? © Ilan Kelman 2003

A further proviso emerges. The construction of a single fixed link, normally a bridge or tunnel, may create 'pseudo-islands'. The fixed link is not quite an adequate land transportation network, but it is a significant change from no land-based connection. Characteristics may lie in the transition zone between islands and non-islands.

Canvey Island, in the Thames Estuary downstream from London, and Skye, in Scotland, have fixed links to mainland Britain. Canvey Island has two roads into Essex, but they both pass through the same roundabout just before going off-island. The sense of island community and island spirit are strong in both locations, making it difficult (and rather rude) to claim that the fixed link makes them non-islands or pseudo-islands.

Canvey Island's main beach. © Ilan Kelman 2000

In debating the construction of fixed links, fears are often expressed about the expected loss of island characteristics. Working out how much 'islandness' has been lost due to a fixed link is difficult. Islandness could be gained, with the fixed link bringing the island community closer together and emphasising the value of island communities and characteristics.

On Orkney, many islands, such as Burray and South Ronaldsay, are connected to the mainland, Orkney's main island, by causeways with a road. Have the outlying islands changed due to the connection with the island mainland? Has the mainland been affected? Could contrasts be made with Shetland where few islands have land connections to Shetland's mainland?

An answer?

In the end it is perhaps best to answer the question 'What is an island?' with an intuitive concept of a comparatively small land mass, generally without strong land-based connections to a larger land mass. This statement is not a definition but an attempt to pull together some ideas, even though ambiguities will emerge.

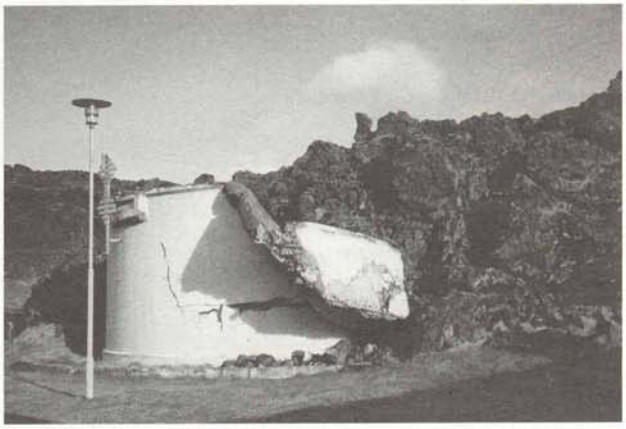
The fairest way of dealing with these ambiguities is to recognise the importance of people, communities, and their heritage, rather than focusing on an external, academic, abstract label. If a location or people feel that they are an island or wish to become involved in the island community for a specific issue, then they should not be excluded. The onus is not on the island community to legalistically and irrefutably define itself or to include and exclude members at their whim.

Instead, the onus is on any physical or human geographical entity to decide to be part of the island community. Islands may then be defined by their physical geography, such as surrounded by water or mountains, but might also be a unique cultural or linguistic group. Galicia could be considered an island as much as Corsica or Jersey. An island, perhaps, refers to the experience of isolation and smallness which may derive from various causes.

Island vulnerability

The importance of such experiences especially transpires for risk and disasters. The physical and psychological isolation of islands tends to give them disproportionately low priority in comparison with their importance. Reasons for neglecting islands include small size, lack of resources and relative inaccessibility, yet these same characteristics make islands 'more unique', more valuable and more vulnerable.

Small size, for example, could result in a minor volcanic eruption threatening the viability of living on an island. In 1973 a volcanic eruption on Vestmannaeyjar, an island off the south coast of Iceland, forced the population to evacuate without knowing whether or not they would be able to return. They were, in fact, able to go back and they continue to thrive as a small island community.



Damage from a 1973 volcanic eruption on Vestmannaeyjar, an island off the south coast of Iceland. © Ilan Kelman 2001

Lack of resources, relative inaccessibility and low interest from mainlanders could conspire to inhibit appropriate responses to a known risk or to a disaster. Longer term vulnerability reduction may also be challenging when islands are frequently vulnerable to emigration of skilled personnel and to the allocation of resources favouring larger, more prominent populations.

The isolation and marginalisation of islands, however, helps to create their beauty and allure. In island vulnerability lies plenty of island intrigue. The characteristics which may cause concern about island sustainability are those characteristics which make the islands worth living on. The challenge is not so much in transforming apparent weaknesses into strengths but in perpetuating those strengths without their becoming weaknesses.

Reference

The inspiration for Island Vulnerability (www.island-vulnerability.org) came from a book by James Lewis, *Development in Disaster-prone Places: Studies of Vulnerability* (Intermediate Technology Publications, London, 1999). ■