

Kelman, I. 2005. "Unique Island Livelihoods". Poster at An Overview of Canadian Rural Research, Twillingate, Newfoundland, Canada, 12 October 2005.

Abstract:

Due to their size and isolation--and subsequent marginalisation and resource limitations--small islands frequently face significant development and sustainability challenges. Islands, though, have significant advantages too. Large economic and governance structures, rarely feasible on islands, can produce inflexible systems with poor response time to sudden change. In contrast, kinship-based communities prevalent on many islands can rapidly make and implement decisions based on interpersonal trust. As well, if implemented properly, unique island heritage can be used to generate livelihoods without ruining the heritage.

Despite the challenges, islands therefore often have livelihood opportunities unavailable elsewhere. Past mistakes—for example, Nauru enjoyed phosphate earnings from independence yet planned poorly for a post-phosphate future—should be learned to avoid recurrence. Daily and seasonal difficulties, such as a limited freshwater supply threatened by waste and salinisation, should be tackled as opportunities, such as to develop economic small-scale desalinisation processes.

Some opportunities are being exploited, from vehicles running on coconut oil on Vanuatu to marketing bottled water from St Vincent and the Grenadines. Creativity or circumstances have yielded others, such as Tristan da Cunha's stamps and Tuvalu's .tv top-level internet domain name, although not all such endeavours have been managed appropriately. Some island schemes raise ethical questions, for instance selling university certificates, promoting offshore banking with the potential for money laundering, and accepting overseas aid in exchange for votes in international fora. Contradictions are exposed in establishing eco-tourism on low-lying islands reached mainly by long jet flights.

In proposing, debating, developing, testing, and fully implementing livelihoods which might be unique to small islands, trade-offs, ethical issues, ironies, risks, and opportunities emerge. Determining which unique island livelihoods might promote sustainability and which would be more harmful than helpful requires careful analysis while considering how to integrate such livelihoods with opportunities not unique to small islands.