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Abstract:

Despite the intense debates regarding defining an 'island' and the island traits that yield 'islandness', islands have long been alluring for travellers, including scientific explorers such as Charles Darwin going to the Galapagos Islands, artists such as W.B. Yeats immortalising his Innisfree childhood experiences, and tourists such as east end Londoners holidaying at Canvey Island's seaside at the Thames River's mouth. Concepts and images of islandness from biogeography to literature have become engrained in much European consciousness, frequently pervading contemporary tourist discourse, with island branding frequently being used to market island products and destinations. For instance, Malta and Madeira are advertised to northern Europeans as winter island getaways while Guernsey and Gotland promote their island culture.

Yet not all islands demonstrate or recognise islandness. Fixed links—tunnels, bridges, and causeways—are sometimes suggested as a major factor in losing islandness. Fixed links can increase islands' exposure to tourism along with visitor volume, but that does not necessarily increase tourism income. Depending on distances and the destination's characteristics, day trips can significantly increase while discouraging longer stays partaking in more activities. Fixed links, though, are especially important for Norwegian islands due to the country's policy of building them as part of promoting and supporting residency across the entire country, including regional areas. Irrespective of the impacts of fixed links on tourism, they arguably promote island livelihoods and liveability overall.

This study examines tourism on northern Norwegian islands, Senja and parts of Vesterålen's archipelago, both of which have fixed links to the mainland but which are connected to each other by a ferry as part of a National Tourism Route. Interviews with small- and medium-sized tourist enterprises and examination of tourist literature promoting the destinations yielded little evidence of islandness being a marketing interest. That result matches prior literature on these destinations which discussed tourists' reasons for visits, failing to indicate islandness or island characteristics as being of significant interest for these locations.

Three principal hypotheses for Senja and Vesterålen are (i) islandness has been insufficiently considered or realised for these destinations; (ii) islandness is not relevant for these destinations; and (iii) the research failed to uncover existing islandness interest for these destinations (i.e. absence of evidence is not evidence of absence). Irrespective of the balance amongst these hypotheses in reality, both Senja and Vesterålen have ample possibility to exploit islandness as a marketing or branding ploy. That possibility is unlikely to be pursued and, arguably, it should not be pursued because it would attempt to create an image which is neither relevant nor desirable for these destinations. The suggestions that these islands do not display islandness and that islandness is not relevant to branding or enjoying these locations as tourist destinations is in contrast to many other Nordic island tourist destinations such as Åland, the Faroes, and Iceland—and especially the Norwegian islands of Lofoten which received a fixed link in 2008, potentially altering the tourist images of that destination even where the island branding for tourists is unlikely to change.