

# **A WORLD OF ISLANDS**

*Edited by Godfrey Baldacchino*



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*An Island Studies Reader*

Edited by  
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### **Key Challenge in Sustainable Island Development**

Islanders, more than most other human inhabitants of this 'blue' planet, are likely to recognize both the finite nature of their physical space and the intimate relations that they have with the natural environment. The negative impacts of human activities on the latter have almost immediate consequences on island people. Deforestation, erosion and leaching of soils in the limited land area, the loss of biodiversity, the collapse of fish stock, coral bleaching and the smothering of reefs, the impact of oil spills, contaminated lagoons, radio-active islands in the aftermath of nuclear weapon testing, mining pollutants damaging river and estuarine ecosystems, sea water inundation of fresh water lenses, tidal surges and rising sea levels and dealing with the mounting heaps of solid waste... such events have made islanders living in climatically and geographically diverse regions of the world acutely aware that, if their places of habitation are not cared for properly, their 'living space' will become 'unliveable', and they have nowhere else to go. Balancing the three bottom lines of environmental protection, social (and cultural) well being and economic growth is a global challenge; but, for islanders, it has particular urgency.

Ultimately the environmental health of islands is a measure of the health of the world. Just as all island people cannot simply relocate somewhere else, even if they wanted to, so too, in the case of the 7 billion inhabitants of spaceship earth- without sustainable development- there is nowhere else to go. Islands have become the coalface for the push for sustainable development. Islands act as miner's canaries, serving as advance messengers to global calamities. They are now pointing starkly to how climate change, global warming and rising sea levels are happening. They communicate the need for urgent global action, including the need to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.

Yet, islanders are often regarded as insular, with horizons limited by their geographic conditions. This is only partially true as islanders

have rich traditions of interaction with the outside world that include the movement of people, ideas, products and services. In this age of globalization and the network society, islanders have increasingly seen the tyranny of isolation and distance rapidly whittle away. However, while it could be argued that islanders have been just as or even more world wise than their continental cousins, it is vital for sustainable development of their generally fragile economy, society and ecosystems that they be alert to what is happening in distant places and to build their capacity to meet external challenges.

It is in this regard that the key challenge for islanders is to ensure that their livelihoods in the islands are not destroying the very foundation of island life as this is a very real and almost immediate danger. However, in as much as the threat to islands is emanating from beyond the islands themselves, it is critical that islanders engage with wider, even global networks to share their experiences and organize around sustainable development objectives. This will enable them to push the international community to act to prevent the negative consequences of unsustainable development that endanger in the first instance the islands of the world and eventually the planet as a whole. The good news is that the smallest and most vulnerable island states such as the Maldives and Tuvalu have taken the initiative in this regard, with growing support from islanders the world over.

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