
EDITORIAL

Flows and Boundaries: small island discourses and the challenge of sustainability, community and local environments

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ABSTRACT Islands (also islets, isles)—paradoxical spaces: absolute entities surrounded by water but not large enough to be a continent, territories, territorial; relational spaces—archipelagos, (inter)dependent, identifiable; relative spaces—bounded but porous; isolated, connected, colonized, postcolonial; redolent of the performative imaginary; vulnerable to linguistic, cultural, environmental change; robust and able to absorb and modify; placed in regions, (part of) nation states and global life; paradisiacal, utopian and dystopian, tourist meccas, ecological refugia; frames within which interdisciplinary scholarship and dialogue can be constituted and deployed ...

The Context

Accompanied by a commentary and numerous poems by island authors, this Feature Issue advances an exploration of sustainability, community and local environments in Australia's smallest and only island state, Tasmania. Here, sustainability refers to a contingent and contextual form of praxis in which integration, equity, precaution, participation, the maintenance of diversity and continual improvement are foundational principles. It is conceived as crucial to quality of life in communities (be they groups of people in place or aligned by interest) and to the well-being of local environments.

Islands contribute to our knowledge about the world and ourselves, and discourses about islands enhance how we understand the world and the self, place and identity. But islands are not the only entities which enable such reflections, so why are they (perhaps singularly) intriguing in relation to questions of sustainability, community and the tensions between the global and the local? Is it the boundedness of islands, and the flows between islands and other entities, that present both possibilities and challenges for sustainability, community and local environments?

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Like other small islands (Baldacchino & Milne, 2000), Tasmania has diverse natural and social ecologies and jurisdictional arrangements; it also has an entrenched peripheral status relative to the nation. It depends on primary economic activities such as forestry, aquaculture and agriculture, with tourism growing in significance. It is also characterised by social and economic dislocation, measured in terms of unemployment, underemployment, average annual income and retention rates in upper secondary education (ABS, 1991, 1996), although these are improving (ABS, 2001).

However, Tasmania is also the location of embryonic experiments in community and economic development and ecological management. Examples include the state government's 20-year strategic plan—*Tasmania Together*—released in 2001, as well as state–local government partnership agreements and growing interest in regional governance that parallels Local Agenda 21, derived from the United Nations protocol of the same name. As materiality and trope, Tasmania thus affords the opportunity to explore how members of local communities understand, accommodate and resist the imperatives of these international trends in their everyday lives (Anderson *et al.*, 1995). This endeavour is unambiguously important because the social transformations implicit in sustainable development require more than formal institutional change. Rather, such transformations demand (although they may not always be supported by) innovative forms of citizenship in everyday life, reflected in new ways of thinking and speaking that are allied to the notion of sustainability (Barry, 1996; Dryzek, 1997; Harré *et al.*, 1999). Thus, the thread that perhaps best unifies the papers that follow this editorial is a concern to examine and understand how different groups—rock lobster fishers, politicians and policy-makers, and members of rural communities—interpret the disparate demands of sustainability in difficult times.

In preparing this Feature Issue, a number of questions flowing from three particular themes were posed to the authors and they were able to focus their particular research interests accordingly. Those original themes and questions were as follows.

Islands as Local Environments

How are islands constituted as particular local environments? What range of unique natural, social and cultural, linguistic and other characteristics do islands and their peoples possess? How are local island communities managing their particular and diverse social and natural ecologies for sustainability? What links are there between sense of place (islandness) and sense of identity (islander)? Do issues of island indigeneity and island migration have impact on local communities and sustainability?

Island Relations

How do small island communities maintain a sense of identity in relation to other, more dominant, neighbours? Are issues of globalisation particularly acute for the sustainability of small island communities? What implications does the

preservation of the local have for sustainability as a global agenda? Are islands rather archipelagos in the post-industrial era? What effect does this reconceptualisation of the island-as-archipelago have on small island identity and sustainability?

Sustainable Praxis and Island Communities

How are small island communities managing social, economic and environmental challenges, and in what ways are these challenges and management strategies particular to islands? Can the strategies be translated to other communities? How are small island communities coping with demographic and social change? How are they building human and social capital? What effects do these challenges and responses have on sustainability praxis? What are the implications of the globalisation agenda for learning cultures, democratic governance and citizenship in small island communities? Do such island communities 'do' democracy differently and what are the implications of that for sustainability praxis and politics?

The Papers

In responding to elements of the various questions outlined above, Bradshaw and Wood, Falk and Kilpatrick, and Davidson provide insights on very different elements of sustainability in local communities and in regard to different local environments on an island.

Matt Bradshaw and Les Wood employ the case of the Tasmanian rock lobster fishery to examine issues of sustainability and how local differences are both hidden *and* intensified via the state-wide management of the fishery; this is particularly the case since the advent in 1998 of a total allowable commercial catch or TACC for the rock lobster (*Jasus edwardsii*). The authors use in their analysis of these local differences the notion of a *boundary object*—a frame into and out of which various things flow, a frame which bounds various things and marks them as exterior or interior. The boundary object also serves to explain how the management of the Tasmanian rock lobster fishery is contested in terms of ideas about its sustainability and the sustainability [or rather the *viability*] of the industry and communities whose members depend on that industry. The authors thus view Tasmania as a boundary object in which the art of government disguises and serves to nullify various internal heterogeneous elements—ecological, social, political, economic, spatial or technical—in the rock lobster fishery. They also argue that such effacements are strategic because to acknowledge differences inside the fishery would be to introduce into a uniform management system numerous—largely social and economic—difficulties at various scales from local to national. Notwithstanding this realisation, Bradshaw and Wood argue the need to redefine the frame that is a uniform system of management of the rock lobster fishery in Tasmania in order to accommodate internal zones and ensure the better [more sustainable as distinct from merely viable] management

of that fishery. Their position is informed by an evaluation of the TACC as neglectful of “historical and geographical specificities [resulting in the intensification of] existing sub-regional differences”. Their paper explores the details of such differences and gestures to problems in institutional capacities to advance the sustainability of the fishery.

As a form of praxis, sustainability assumes high levels of civic and ecological literacies in the advancement of the principles noted earlier. In turn, such literacies—the capacity to move beyond the narrow defence of individual rights (which are nonetheless crucial to well-being) to foster *collective responsibilities* and the ability to understand the notion of *limits* and apply it to daily living—demand high levels of social capital. In this vein, Sue Kilpatrick and Ian Falk focus on learning as a key skill for Tasmania’s rural communities as their members build (or rebuild) social capital (generalised trust, reciprocity, networks and associations). They review how Tasmanians are managing change through learning and the development of social capital. For Kilpatrick and Falk, learning (crucial to civic and ecological literacy skills and the management of vulnerable island places) “assists people to receive, decode and understand information, and hence make better decisions”. Referring to empirical evidence from interviews with rural Tasmanians about their learning strategies and approaches to agriculture, community and change, they describe a model of social capital building and uptake that permits a focus on different scales of community and engagement. In doing so, they propose that “the social capital resources that increase the capacity of a community are simultaneously built and draw upon learning interactions between individuals”. These interactions can be termed bonding and bridging ties. Most importantly in the context of an islands focus, the authors also distinguish communities-of-common-purpose from geographical communities, suggesting that bridging and bonding ties are more *readily* delineated on islands than elsewhere. The *island* is situated as a powerful tool of analysis that highlights special challenges in Tasmania in forging bridging ties—developing networks external to the island—that might then aid learning about agricultural practices, adjustment to rural change and the demands of sustainability.

Julie Davidson examines various barriers to and prospects for sustainability with specific reference to community, participation, citizenship and ecological literacy in the Huon Valley of southern Tasmania. She views dependency as a singular impediment to sustainability and as a hallmark of peripheral [island] communities. Conversely, active citizenship—acting from intrinsic motivations rather than rational egoism—is introduced by Davidson to challenge the appropriateness of narrow self-interest that is implicit in dependent communities. For her, active citizenship provides mechanisms by which “norms of trust and reciprocity and knowledge of local settings” can unsettle the grip of ‘the expert’ over decision-making in community life. Focusing on the Huon Valley local government area, Davidson examines the ways in which historical and contemporary circumstances—remoteness from centres of bureaucratic and political power, the activities of one or two very powerful figures in industry and government, and reliance on a small number of resource extractive industries—have rendered the Valley’s peoples largely dependent on forces external to their place and their identity. In particular, Davidson pinpoints how laudable efforts

among members of the Valley community to enhance citizen participation and empowerment have sometimes failed to account for individual capacities and human capital. These trends underscore the existence of significant opportunities to build civic and ecological capacities, although “in some localities, there are major impediments to responsible citizenship engendered by generations of dependence”. These challenges notwithstanding, Davidson gestures to the importance of novel forms of governance and new associations that “have considerable potential for improved strategic decision-making”, which may also address on-going issues of dependence. Referring to the Huon Healthy Rivers Project, she suggests that multilateral partnerships among tiers of government, non-government organisations, industry and community have resulted in “a better appreciation of the needs of the various parties” as well as a focus on self-sufficiency and co-operation as disparate groups of people with traditionally conflicting roles have come together to manage riparian systems in ways that build individual capacities, foster social capital and protect ecological values. It is Davidson’s contention that such examples of sustainability praxis enhance active citizenship and serve to challenge the negative effects of dependency.

The Poetry

This island collection includes not only the three papers summarised above, but a selection of island poetry ably contextualised by Peter Hay, a Reader in Environmental Studies at the University of Tasmania. Sourced from various islands—and not exclusively those of the far reaches of the Antipodes—these poems provide a lyrical depth and reflective space for readers interested in issues of local environments, local communities and sustainability, particularly as they articulate with the material conditions and metaphorical powers of *island*.

I commend this Feature Issue to readers of *Local Environment*.

References

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