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# Islands, culture, landscape and seascape

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**Abstract** Land and water, landscape and seascape, nature and culture, communication and isolation, island and islanders are inseparable dualities. In this introductory paper of the new journal on Marine and Island Cultures, the relationship between these dualities is discussed and a few key concepts such as insularity, isolation, island laboratories and biocultural diversity are mentioned.

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### Introduction

#### Islands

An *island* is ‘a piece of land surrounded by water’ (Oxford English Dictionary). Yet *continents* are also surrounded by water, but due to their large extension they are not considered islands. The largest island in the world is Greenland, but Australia, more than three times the size of Greenland, is the smallest continent of our planet.

As Rackham (2012) has pointed out in his article of this issue, the ‘island’ definition is not straightforward, as there are islands surrounded by peatlands, islands merging into a peninsula, islands appearing and disappearing due to tides. We refer to his paper for the definition of different types of islands, such as oceanic, offshore and land-bridge. Archipelagos, atolls, keys and lagoons are added below.

An *archipelago* is a group of islands closely scattered in a body of water, usually a sea or ocean, but it can also be a lake

or river. An *atoll* is generally ring-shaped and formed by a coral reef, island, or several islets which surround a body of water. The word *key* refers to a small, low island of ancient coral reef. A *lagoon* presents a shallow body of water that may have an opening to a larger body of water, but is also protected from it by a sandbar or coral reef.

#### Insularity vs isolation

The concept of insularity has been widely discussed in literature (Fosberg, 1963; Evans, 1977; Cherry, 1981; Terrell, 1986; Patton, 1996; Pungetti, 1996, 1999; Vogiatzakis et al., 2008) and in the case of marine environment it mainly depends on the size of island and its distance from the mainland or other islands. *Insularity*, generally, refers to a physical condition of a place surrounded by water, mountains or desert.

Conversely, *isolation* is understood as a complete separation from other places or people. Seas for example are sometimes an insuperable obstacle to plants, animals and people. Isolation can refer to a distant, inaccessible place, as well as to a person or a community living a way of life without, or very limited, contact with other groups, or suffering from contagious disease, quarantine or detention.

Insularity leads to isolation of biotic and human populations. Isolation varies not only according to insularity, but also according to geographical and ecological circumstances, e.g. a

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high mountain range or rich forest, to climatic conditions, and to the level of technological development. Isolation of populations, as discussed later, depends also on communications, transport and technology.

Insularity and isolation have effects on biodiversity. Island biogeography has shown that geological processes, colonisation and geographical isolation have influenced biodiversity (MacArthur and Wilson, 1967). The size of island and its distance from the mainland can influence biodiversity too.

Isolation, moreover, reduces the relationship of islands with the mainland, and with it the interchange of species and of dispersal events. Hence islands provide examples where evolution has produced patterns of endemic forms. However some islands, if sufficiently old and isolated to have generated endemic forms, but close enough to continents, have been able to sustain dynamic interaction with diverse continental land-masses. This is the case of the West Indies and island chains in the Indian Ocean (e.g. Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles and Mascarenes).

Insularity, furthermore, conditions the perception and lifestyle of island people: the greater the distance the island is from the mainland, the closer the community, as in the case of Sardinia in the Mediterranean, pointed out in past research (King, 1975; Pungetti, 1995; Patton, 1996). Nevertheless the distance of an island from the mainland is not enough to suggest that its community has been totally isolated; it is not a simple matter of distance, but other factors count. Certainly some island societies are more inward-looking than others, a matter which varies with time and is not closely related to distance. For centuries Japan was inward-looking; completely inward-looking islands are few. For thousands of years a few islanders in the world, i.e. Tasmanians and aborigines of remote islands, were unaware that there was anyone else in the world.

The physical condition of isolation can indeed be extended to a place, or a person, who is detached, and standing alone from the rest of its environment, whether geographical or social. Likewise, the term insularity is used to indicate a characteristic of, or pertaining to, islanders. This dichotomy demonstrates clearly the duplex and indivisible relation between the natural and cultural aspect of islands. In this paper both aspects are discussed.

## Culture

Noticeably, islands have developed isolated living communities, whether plant, animal or human, separated from, and differing to varying degrees from, mainland communities of the same kind.

From a cultural point of view, means of physical communications, such as transport, were crucial for the past interaction of island and continental populations, which largely depended on distance, climate and technology. Nowadays developed technologies such as airplanes, and means of virtual communication, such as internet, have reduced most distances.

Contacts are indeed influential in determining the degree and the nature of cultural factors (Evans, 1973). This is especially true in islands, which have been less affected by cultural and ethnic change, hostile invasion, mass immigration or political interference, and at the same time have been more exposed, if not open, to cultural stimuli from a wider variety of sources.

From a natural point of view, several islands have developed a strict relationship between the other islands of their biogeographic region, as well as with the mainland or the continent. As pointed out before (Hong and Pungetti, 2012), islands and seas carry a particular duality between communication and isolation. The island is seen by travellers as the destination of a journey, and the sea the means to reach it.

In the past, memorable sea voyages were depicted by writers, artists, travellers, explorers and geographers, and today in the notes of journalists, scientists and tourists. The islanders too have changed, and their insularity has contributed to forging particular cultures, creating unique societies, which in turn have preserved their traditional and ecological systems more than those on the continent. This cultural and natural duality is discussed below.

## Landscape and seascape

*Landscape* is the visible interaction of abiotic, biotic and human processes developing on the earth surface over time. The interaction of these processes on the coast, sea and adjacent waters constitutes the *seascape*. Coasts outline the link between landscape and seascape.

The concept of seascape, initially meaning a picture or view to the sea, or a view of an expanse of sea (Oxford English Dictionary), has been broadened to mean the coastal landscape and adjoining areas of open water, including views from land to sea, from sea to land and along the coastline (Hill et al., 2001). As it can describe the effect on landscape at the confluence of sea and land, seascape becomes an area of inter-visibility between land and sea, with three defined components: sea, coastline and land (DTI, 2005).

Recently, seascape research has included the historic and archaeological character areas of the sea encompassing also what lies beneath the sea surface (Tapper and Johns, 2008). Specifically, Historic Seascape Characterisation (HSC) maps a cultural understanding of coastal and marine landscapes, extending principles of Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) completed across most of England's land area.

## Linking islands, culture, landscape and seascape

A few studies have attempted to describe in the past the relationship between island, culture, landscape and seascape. Among these is *Mediterranean Island Landscapes*, which describes the interaction between nature and culture with Mediterranean islands as case studies (Vogiatzakis et al., 2008).

Such research has been developed further at European level by several academics engaged in the study above, with the ESLAND Project funded by the Culture Programme of the European Commission (Pungetti, 2013). The focus of ESLAND, however, is on culture, considering island landscapes as part of European heritage, including the unique identity and values they have for European people. The main goal is to increase consideration of cultural heritage in European island landscapes of different sizes.

Islands clearly highlight the richness of global landscape diversity and are ideal for the application of natural and cultural approaches in landscape research. The project however excludes European culture as expressed in colonial islands, for example New Zealand and Tasmania.

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