



Island landscapes: Some preliminary questions

Oliver Rackham

Cambridge Centre for Landscape and People and Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge, UK

Received 9 September 2012; accepted 4 November 2012

Available online 27 December 2012

KEYWORDS

Island landscapes;
European culture;
Cultural landscapes;
Island environments, plants,
animals, and history;
Island special features

Abstract The ESLAND Project (<http://www.eslandproject.eu>) seeks to investigate 'European culture as expressed in island landscapes'. All the world's islands, except perhaps those of the high Arctic and high Antarctic, are cultural landscapes: the product of interactions between the environment, plants and animals, and human cultures. Any cultural landscape, whether of an island or otherwise, accumulates the results of such interactions, which typically go back at least for centuries and often involve more than one culture. For example, in the eastern half of the island of Tasmania, English settlers tried, with varying success, to replicate the hedges and fields of their distant homeland, to the extent of importing hawthorn and elm trees as well as wheat and sheep. This expression of European culture, dating from the early to mid nineteenth century, is superimposed on a pre-existing savanna of scattered giant eucalyptus trees, another cultural landscape resulting from thousands of years of land management by Tasmanian Aborigines.

© 2012 Institution for Marine and Island Cultures, Mokpo National University. Production and hosting by Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Introduction

European culture involves not only people's intentional actions but their inadvertent or incidental actions and their inactions and defaults, which tend to be especially significant on islands. Many an oceanic island has had its ecology and landscape irrevocably altered by rats escaping from a passing ship, or by goats left behind to feed future shipwrecked sailors. The landscape of Tasmania has been profoundly altered by the suppression of the fires that were part of its ecology: fear of fire

is one of the characteristic differences between English and Aboriginal culture. Another European characteristic is a passion for mixing up all the world's trees and flowers, often with a very different result from what the originators intended: thus the Chinese tree-of-heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), introduced to Crete in the nineteenth century as an ornamental (by Sir Arthur Evans, the archaeologist?), has spread uncontrollably outside gardens and is now one of the island's commonest trees.

Island cultural landscapes thus depend not just on the most recent human culture but often on a succession of previous cultures, superimposed on the landscape before human contact; they may depend on the properties of the island's original plants and animals, and ultimately on the making of the island itself. This applies especially to distant oceanic islands, most of which had no experience of land mammals nor adaptation to them, and where human contact typically had catastrophic results. For example Easter Island (Rapa Nui), far out in the Pacific, lost all its palm-trees, either because Polynesian settlers

E-mail address: or10001@cam.ac.uk

Peer review under responsibility of Mokpo National University.



Production and hosting by Elsevier

cut them all down or because European rats, introduced by visitors in 1722, ate all the seeds. Lack of resistance either to stone axes or to rats doomed the palms; which it was is controversial (Hunt and Lipo, 2011) and may never be settled, because every last palm is gone and no experiment is possible. Islands that had native mammals, such as Sardinia or Crete, have a less violent history of human contact: their plant life was already adapted to browsing and less easily destroyed. Sheep and goats took the place of native browsers and grazers, and many components of the present cultural landscape are inherited from the pre-human ecology.

What is an island?

An island should be a tract of land surrounded by water, but in English and many other languages this definition is not straightforward. There are islands surrounded by peatlands, such as the Isle of Ely in England and many in Ireland. Islands merge into peninsulas. In S England, St. Michael's Mount is isolated at high tide but joined by a causeway at low tide; the Isle of Portland is connected to the mainland by a shingle-spit and a bridge, but has that characteristic island feature a high-security prison. The Isle of Thanet in SE England is cut off by an insignificant (though formerly tidal) stream. The Isle of Purbeck in S England is a peninsula connected by a high ridge that never had a water barrier. The Île de France, the countryside around Paris, makes no attempt to be surrounded by water. Many inland places are called *Ynys* 'island' in Welsh or *Nisi* in Greek: the modern observer finds it difficult to detect anything insular about them.

Writers often claim to be able to count the number of islands in, for example, Greece or the Isles of Scilly, but these numbers are usually arbitrary because of problems of definition. Islands are fractals: the number of islands on a map increases without limit as the scale of the map gets bigger. Tides create further problems of definition: does an island count if it is joined to another island at extreme low tide?

How old is the island? What type of island is it?

The study of island landscapes begins by investigating the origin of the island and asking how long it has been an island. An island that is a fragment of an ancient continent, like New Caledonia, will be very different from islands of ancient or recent volcanic origin.

Oceanic islands are those distant enough to have no close connexion with a continent, for example Iceland and the Canary Islands. They tend to be of volcanic origin, and usually have no native land mammals except bats. Typically they have been isolated for tens of millions of years.

Offshore islands are those close to continents but separated by sea deep enough for them to remain islands during ice ages when sea-level is lower, for example Crete and Cyprus. Typically they have been isolated for millions of years. The limiting depth is usually about 120 m, but may be more or less than this because of local emergence or subsidence.

Land-bridge islands are separated by shallow seas that become land during ice ages: thus Britain was joined by land to Europe during the last glaciation, but Ireland may not have been joined to Britain. Such islands have been isolated for at most 10,000 years.

Island environments and wildlife

Climates

Islands tend to be drier than the mainland (unless they have mountains high enough to attract rainfall). Their oceanic climate makes them more windy, more foggy, cooler in summer and warmer in winter, less frosty.

Animals

Animals play a large part in determining vegetation and therefore landscape. Oceanic and offshore islands tend to have, or have had, different wild animals from the mainland. Human contact, even briefly from passing ships, tends to introduce the universal mammals that accompany humanity (rat, goat, pig, cat) and to begin a process of exterminating any special island mammals. Questions to ask include the following:

Were there land mammals before human contact? (Oceanic islands tend not to have had them, but sometimes had lizards and flightless birds.)

Were there *endemic* mammals (peculiar to the island) before human contact? (Several Mediterranean islands once had peculiar elephants, hippopotamuses etc.)

Are there any living endemic animals (e.g. small mammals, frogs, insects, snails)?

Are any animals missing from the island fauna? (Many offshore islands lack badger or hedgehog.)

Have any endemic island races of animals developed since human contact? The

Are any animals now confined to the island because they have become extinct elsewhere (e.g. red squirrel, which survives on the British islands of Anglesey, Isle of Wight, and Brownsea Island)?

Many islands have had unbalanced faunas. The Mediterranean islands had large herbivores but no effective carnivore. In successive generations they got smaller (elephant the size of a calf, hippopotamus the size of a pig). Newfoundland, in contrast, was biased towards carnivores.

Endemic species of mammal have often been replaced by introduced mammals, some of which in time evolve into neo-endemic races or subspecies. Thus the wild goat of Crete is derived from a Neolithic domestic goat. The small, remote Scottish islands of St. Kilda, inhabited since the Neolithic, have a special field-mouse and (formerly) a special house-mouse.

Plants and vegetation

Peculiar island plants tend to be more persistent than island mammals. Thus Crete has lost all its endemic mammals except a shrew, but still has all its known endemic plants, which amount to about one-seventh of the total flora.

Island plants may behave differently from the same species on the mainland. Thus prickly oak, *Quercus coccifera*, is the commonest wild tree in Crete and in Greece. In Greece it is a lowland tree, but in Crete it ascends nearly to the tree-limit at 1700 m in the mountains; presumably it is a special insular variety.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1107093>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1107093>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)