

CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Policy-oriented Research and Island Management Within Island Studies

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This paper introduces the special section on ‘Policy-oriented research and island management within island studies’. The paper discusses island studies’ relationship with and engagement with policy-oriented research and the world of practice. It asks how island studies can learn from and influence trends elsewhere within global academia as well as how it best can influence the sustainable management of island communities.

Introduction

The sustainable management of islands has been a major strand of island studies since the early days of the field. Part of the innovation of island studies lay in its taking of an island-centred perspective, which involved understanding how island societies could best manage themselves. This represented a departure from perspectives that regarded island management in an abstract manner and that often took a large-state perspective as standard. It is part of a still ongoing shift from asking “What is best for the island?” to asking “What do islanders want?”

Neither of these questions have ever had straightforward answers. There is no consensus as to what is best for the island *or* for islanders. Furthermore, island studies exists in a scholarly ecosystem in which islands continue to be studied in a top-down manner and from the outside looking in. Nor have other research traditions remained static. The approaches that Bertram and Watters (1985) challenged in the 1980s, for example, have themselves been supplemented and in some cases superseded by other ways of studying and perceiving islands, ways that deploy new methods or that address new environmental, economic, and political realities. That is, island studies today exists in a different scholarly environment than it did at the time of its inception.

Writing in a publication like *Island Studies Journal*, it is easy to forget that most studies of islands are not situated within the traditions of island studies. Most scholars of islands do not know that island studies exists, and

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they develop theories and methods without awareness of the decades of advances in island studies. Yet for all that top-down approaches often seem to dominate in the wider scholarship, alternatives have also emerged. Some of these approaches are more sensitive to islanders' needs, and some of them have been encouraged by the same scholarly trends that elsewhere have been guiding island studies itself.

As a result, it is important that island studies is always open to insights and innovations from the wider scholarship. This will enable the field to remain relevant while also positioning it to level informed criticism at approaches that do not reflect the field's wider values.

How does island studies research interact with policy?

Island studies is a diverse field, and some elements of it have stronger policy orientations than others. The field originated in research that directly concerned and contributed to policy. However, as more and more nuanced theories and models of island development were constructed, it became natural for part of island studies to turn inward and engage in discussions with itself. This is indeed a hallmark of a mature research field.

It remains a challenge to combine abstract theory with a policy orientation. For example, Yaso Nadarajah and Adam Grydehøj, two leading island studies authors, both come from policy research backgrounds, and they accordingly have many policy and practice publications (e.g., Grydehøj, 2018; Grydehøj et al., 2024; Nadarajah, 2022, 2023), but they also have numerous more abstract articles on the representation of the island within research (Grydehøj et al., 2020; Nadarajah, 2021, 2021; Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016). Similarly, Jonathan Pugh early on mixed policy and theory (e.g., Pugh, 2013, 2017) but has recently been more focused on reflective considerations about island scholarship (e.g., Chandler & Pugh, 2022; Pugh, 2018; Pugh & Chandler, 2021). The more fully theoretical publications not only remain separate from practice but also often remain separate from discussions about island research from outside island studies.

At the same time, there has never been more policy-oriented island studies research than there is today. Godfrey Baldacchino did much to establish a practice-sensitive theoretical base for island studies in the 1990s and 2000s (e.g., Baldacchino, 1993, 2006), and he continues to publish policy-relevant research (e.g., Baldacchino, 2020, 2021, 2023). Authors such as Wouter Veenendaal (2021), Beate Ratter (Ratter & Hennig, 2019), Jack Corbett (2023), Ilan Kelman (2020), and Jan Petzold (Petzold et al., 2023) also demonstrate how island studies approaches can inform policy-oriented research. Furthermore, authors are forcefully making the case that practice cannot ignore theory, and vice versa: for instance Aideen Foley et al.'s (2023) 'Understanding "islandness"', Ilan Kelman's (2023) 'The island as a political interstice', and Adam Grydehøj et al.'s (2021) 'Practicing decolonial political geography' all foreground theory in approaching policy.

Considerable policy-oriented is published in the pages of *Island Studies Journal* itself. Social sciences papers comprise around 70% of articles published in the journal (Grydehøj et al., 2023), and many of these are focused on specific policy questions. The most-recently published issue of *Island Studies Journal* (Volume 19, Issue 1) includes 11 papers, of which nine can be said to be in the social sciences, and of which eight can be said to have straightforward policy relevance. Some, such as Abrak Saati's (2024) study of Cape Verdean journalists, demonstrate how authors can creatively apply existing island studies theory to new practical research areas. However, others represent high-quality research papers concerning conditions on islands that largely exist outside of the island studies research environment: Tezar and Rukuh Satiadi's (2024) study of climate change risk perception on small islands in Indonesia and Narvada Gopy-Ramdhaney and Boopen Seetanahisk's (2024) study of land prices in Mauritius both present results that are pertinent for island studies but have not clearly benefited from earlier research within island studies itself.

The question is whether all research that is placed within island studies needs to reflect current knowledge and approaches in the field *and* current knowledge and approaches outside the field. It might be sufficient for the field as a whole to contain both kinds of research, without insisting that the field is only open to people to individual pieces of research that do everything at once. What is clear is that if island studies wishes to claim that researchers of islands should attend to island theory, then it is equally important for island studies to attend to non-island studies research and practice.

This special section

Focus is needed on how better linking island studies research with both the world of practice and with the wider policy-oriented research concerning islands. This present special section on 'Policy-oriented research and island management within island studies' represents a modest step in this direction. The three papers in this special section all take different approaches to considering how island studies might engage with current theory and practice concerning island sustainability.

In their article on 'Regionalizing the Sustainable Development Goals for island societies: Lessons from Iceland and Newfoundland', Stoddart et al. (2024) compare understandings of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in one small island states and one subnational island jurisdiction. They consider how issues of jurisdiction, environment, economy, and islandness itself affect the ways in which particularly interested publics do and do not interpret sustainability. These authors' comparative use of survey and focus group data furthermore provides important methodological insights for island researchers who wish to understand the thinking of key informants.

Crouteix's (2024) paper on 'Small islands and islets: Laboratories or key sensors for environmental policies in the Mediterranean Basin?' similarly studies how researchers and policy formulators approach island sustainability.

This article analyses such approaches in light of interventions from island studies itself, ultimately highlighting areas in which this specific research and policy environment diverges from and converges with theories concerning the specificity and generalisability of island contexts. A mixed-methods approach is used in part to show the nuances and contradictions underlying what might at first glance appear to be relatively straightforward objectives.

In their paper on ‘Systematic literature review on alternative governance arrangements for resource deficient situations’, Nurhasanah et al. (2024) provide insight into academic researchers’ approaches to governing island sustainability through community-based ecotourism. This study at once highlights the richness of the island sustainability research both inside and outside island studies as well as underlines the relative lack of research concerning grassroots efforts at sustainable development in the most vulnerable and resource-limited of island communities. Systematic literature reviews are common within the social sciences but are often fraught with methodological pitfalls. This paper shows how well-designed systematic literature reviews can reveal genuine trends, presences, and absences in the published research materials.

Conclusion

We hope that this special section can provide inspiration for researchers within island studies to continue engaging with and creating links with policy-oriented research, particularly in the area of managing islands for sustainable development. This among the most important of tasks, if not the most important task, for island studies today.

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