Islander Activisms and Resistances: Any Role for Resiliences and Vulnerabilities?

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Author Bio

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Abstract

Activisms and resistances cover a myriad of actions and interactions by and for island peoples and places to support their lives and livelihoods. They are intertwined with island studies academics looking for new knowledge and explanations that can be useful and applied. A similar ethos and interest emerges with respect to island studies' approaches to vulnerabilities and resiliences. How much island and islander activisms, resistances, vulnerabilities, and resiliences can be demonstrated by examining day-to-day islander life and livelihoods? This photo essay aims to contribute to answering this question by presenting and interpreting photos by the author covering islander life and livelihoods, showing how islander activisms and resistances parallel islander vulnerabilities and resiliences. Three lessons result: (1) balance and link external, top-down interventions and locally driven, bottom-up processes;

(2) different knowledges must work together; and (3) these knowledges should be used for actions.

Baseline

The call for papers for this special issue explains that "Activisms, in plural form, encompass diverse ways that people engage in social change," covering numerous actions and communication forms by and for island peoples and places to support their lives and livelihoods. The call then asks, "Can scholarly work stand as activism and a form of resistance?" and answers with "activism as a form of resistance that engages with broader questions of power, disobedience, objection and (in)justice." This baseline summarises academic understandings of intertwined activisms and resistances in which academics seek not just new knowledge and explanations but also usefulness and application of these contributions to support people in their lives and livelihoods, with notable contributions from island studies (e.g., Araya López 2022; Tu 2022).

This ethos and interest parallel other concepts with similar ideas and ideals to which island studies has contributed immensely: vulnerability and resilience (e.g., Campbell 2009; Lewis 1999, 2009; Pugh 2014). With so much island studies work published on island activisms, resistances, vulnerabilities, and resiliences (see also Baldacchino and Milne 2006; Grydehøj 2020; Kina 2022), how much can be demonstrated directly by examining day-to-day islander life and livelihoods? This photo essay aims to contribute to answering this question by presenting and interpreting photos by the author covering islander life and livelihoods. The next section presents islander activisms and resistances as per this special issue's call followed by a parallel exploration of islander vulnerabilities and resiliences. The final section collates lessons from this paper to explore this paper's title.

Islander Activisms and Resistances

Within the definitions of the activism-resistance intersection voiced by this issue's call, islanders express themselves overtly and subtly in many forms.

FIGURE 1. Winin' during Crop Over in Barbados

Barbados annually celebrates *Crop Over*, originally representing a successful harvest but now to display Bajan culture and vitality. The festival, costumes, food, music, and dancing (including winin' in fig. 1) connect across the eastern Caribbean, through visitors bringing their own cultural flavours and connecting with each other using subversive anti-slavery messages to support self-determination (Thompson 2009).

Music connects other islanders, such as within Europe. A music festival on Ireland's Aran Islands brought together islander musicians, including two from Ireland and Corsica (fig. 2). They lacked a common spoken language, instead teaching each other tunes by ear for exchanging art. The musical background of each island evokes the islanders' long histories of seeking independence and continuing activism to promote their own cultures and to achieve political aims (Bithell 2003).

Sport, too, represents activism and resistance, by performing prowess, power, togetherness via teamwork, defeating an opponent collectively, and conveying political messages to large audiences (Kuhn 2015). A lone child kicking a football on a beach in Seychelles (fig. 3) means having fun, itself a demonstration of autonomy through making one's own decisions for oneself. It might or might not portend a future of politicising through sport.

FIGURE 2. Islander musicians

FIGURE 3. Beach football in Seychelles

More overt resistance appears in a political demonstration in Maldives (fig. 4). Since independence in 1965, the country has lacked democratic stability. Maldivian activism and resistance remain prevalent, domestically for politics and internationally regarding perceived climate change impacts in the future. The latter encompasses the Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise held in Maldives' capital from 14-18 November 1989 (Lewis 1990; https://islandvulnerability.org/slr1989.html) through to current-day constructions of the issues (Simonelli 2016).

FIGURE 4. A political demonstration in Maldives

Islander Resiliences and Vulnerabilities

Change is eternal, with islands and islanders being no different. Societies, environments, and their inseparability have never been static, bringing opportunity, devastation, and both simultaneously. Modern ferries viewed from the Museum Ship *Pommern* in Mariehamn, Åland, Finland, (fig. 5) contrast historical and contemporary transport modes across many islanders' lifeline: the sea. From a livelihood perspective, Åland's shipping interests have expanded from principally cargo transport and fishing—represented by *Pommern,* which was used mainly to transport grain—to including tourism and duty-free shopping through ferry services.

FIGURE 5. Modern ferries viewed from the Museum Ship *Pommern*

These and other forms of links—such as the bridge connecting Sentosa and Palawan Island in Singapore (fig. 6), are said to build, support, undermine, and ruin resilience (Baldacchino 2007). They are part of resiliences by creating opportunities, options, and means of continuing on-island lives, livelihoods, and lifestyles. They are part of vulnerabilities by augmenting external influences, encouraging islanders to leave, and encouraging non-islanders to purchase second or third homes around the island.
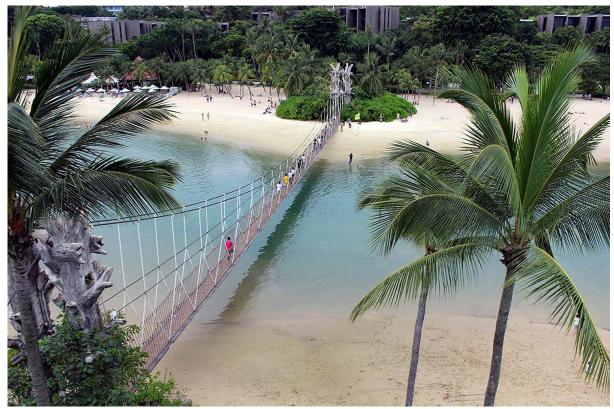

FIGURE 6. The bridge connecting Sentosa and Palawan Island in Singapore

Judgements ultimately depend on the meanings of "resilience" and "vulnerability," examined deeply from islander perspectives as long-term social processes shaping people and places, not static snapshots representing a state of being (Campbell 2009; Lewis 1999, 2009; Pugh 2014). Not all resilience is positive since it is used as an excuse to avoid helping people when they are labelled as "resilient" (Pugh 2014). Not all vulnerability is negative since it might embody desired cultural traits, giving strength and power to thrive with adversity (Lewis 1999, 2009).

For island vulnerability to sea-level rise due to human-caused climate change (IPCC 2021-2022), walls, levees, and other structures are suggested for forming resilience and resisting the sea's advance onto land. Sea walls in Tongatapu, Tonga (fig. 7) and Brownsea Island, Dorset, UK, (fig. 8) reveal the engineering problems that can result. Social problems occur, too.

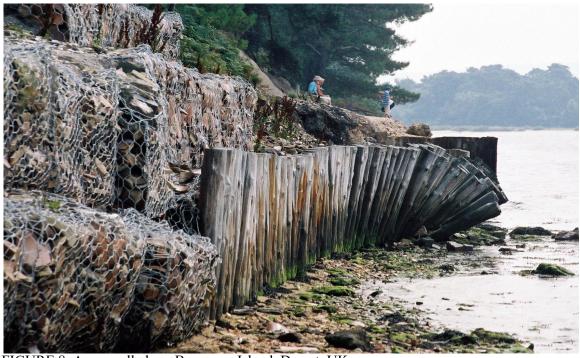FIGURE 7. A sea wall along Tongatapu, Tonga

FIGURE 8. A sea wall along Brownsea Island, Dorset, UK

While these structures can make flooding less frequent and temporarily impede erosion, they tend to increase overall vulnerability and reduce overall resilience. The reason is that people believe that they are fully "protected" by flood "defences," so other measures to reduce damage and save lives are neglected (Fordham 1999; Tobin 1995). When the structures fail, losses tend to be much higher than if the structures had never been built and relied on (Etkin 1999).

Lessons

Three lessons emerge from the photos, helping to explore this paper's title. Lesson 1 is that activisms and resistances balance and link external, top-down interventions and locally driven, bottom-up processes. Haynes, Barclay, and Pidgeon (2007) detail how Montserrat needed local input combined with externally driven science to address volcanic eruption-related vulnerability and resilience faced there since 1995. Further inspirers and inhibiters for Montserrat emerge from the island of Manhattan, where a sculpture reflects the United Nations headquarters (fig. 9), a body offering guidance—which might or might not be useable and useful—through funded, local projects (e.g., UNDP 1999) and global, voluntary mechanisms (e.g., UNISDR 2015).

FIGURE 9. United Nations headquarters, Manhattan, New York, U.S.A.

Lesson 2 follows that using different knowledges together supports interpreting and applying activism, resistance, resilience, and vulnerability. These knowledges include scientific, indigenous, local, vernacular, and traditional, with overlap among them. Scientists in Norway linked local and external knowledges on the Norwegian island of Smøla (fig. 10) for proposing and analysing preferences and expectations for different futures (Thomassen et al. 2008). Assuming that individuals can be categorised demographically based on a single photo, how representative are they of the islanders of Smøla? What advantages and limitations occur when separating out specific groups to have their own discussions rather than everyone working together (Acocella and Cataldi 2020)?

FIGURE 10. Linking knowledges for Smøla, Norway

Lesson 3 indicates how to use these knowledges for action. In fig. 11, this Samoan family's roof was said to have been damaged during Cyclone Heta in 2004. It might or might not have been; it is possible that the roof was broken before the cyclone. No matter how the roof was damaged, the situation is not just about tying the roof to the walls using local materials (e.g., Reardon 1992). It is also about the family's own choices and lack of choices in how and where they live, melding activism, resistance, resilience, and vulnerability through disparate influences from multi-scalar governance to local available livelihoods and from globalisation to corruption. Together, they create long-term situations of activism, resistance, resilience, and vulnerability (and lack thereof) concatenating to be exposed by small-scale damage to one roof (Hewitt 1983; Lewis 1999; Wisner et al. 2004).

FIGURE 11. A Samoan family's damaged roof

Fishing livelihoods for islanders of Yell, Shetland, Scotland, fuse the three lessons. Fishing used to be much more prominent (e.g., Byron 1980), along with farming, knowing the peril that fishing boats and their crews sometimes never return (vulnerability). The Fishermen's Memorial at Gloup, Yell, (activism) (fig. 12)–representative of many other island statues and of assumed gender roles–has a fisherman's wife perpetually gazing out to sea, hoping to glimpse her disappeared husband finally arriving back. Now, Shetland's fishing boats (fig. 12) have GPS, radar, sonar, emergency beacons, and access to detailed weather forecasts, warning systems, and professional search and rescue services (resilience). Dangers and deaths are not precluded but are expected to be minimised (resistance).

Vulnerability remains in selecting or feeling forced to select the fishing livelihood, with resilience in using these local food sources to resist importing products that might be more

processed. The family who at the time owned the boat (fig. 12) showed livelihood activism by also farming, running a bed and breakfast, and working on an inter-island ferry.

FIGURE 12. Fishing and the Fishermen's Memorial at Gloup, Yell, Shetland

In displays of resistances and resiliences, many islanders around the world affirm that they would not change their island lives, livelihoods, lifestyles, opportunities, or limitations. In island vulnerabilities and activisms, they find island resistances and resiliences—and vice versa. Meanwhile, external observers including researchers continue to tally, analyse, and judge what they feel should be defined and represented as activism, resistance, resilience, and vulnerability. Photography is one depiction, with advantages and difficulties, as with all depictions, and as with all terms, including the quartet for this paper. In the end, the role for activisms, resistances, resiliences, and vulnerabilities must emerge from islanders, regarding how they wish to examine, present, and act on their understandings and experiences with island and islander activisms, resistances, resiliences, and vulnerabilities.

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