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What is small island sustainable development about?

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Abstract

Sustainable development is often stated as an objective of management strategies for small islands. However, relatively little work has explicitly considered what sustainable development means in the context of small islands. This article explores the nature of the development process on small islands and considers this in the context of different interpretations of sustainable development. A case study of the Galapagos is presented which considers the drivers and threats to development in these islands. The case study helps illustrate some of the multiple interpretations of sustainable development that are possible in a small island context. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider the meaning of Sustainable Development in the context of small islands. To help answer this question some key interpretations of the sustainable development problem shall be considered in the context of island issues and the development pathways open to islands. A case study of the Galapagos Islands is presented including the results of a recent tourism study there. The case study is used to illustrate several points raised in the discussion.

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2. Definitional issues—what is an island?

At first sight the definition of an island is simple. Indeed, the apparent clarity of boundaries, the very *insularity* of islands, makes them a tempting object of study. Initially, islands may appear to be clearly definable units, where all inputs and outputs can be measured, providing a useful ‘laboratory’ to test theories of sustainable development. Island communities that have survived for millennia with limited resources at their disposal may offer insights into sustainable development.

On closer inspection things become less clear and we are presented with some difficult questions. When is a rocky outcrop an island? When is an island a continent? Analysts engaged in comparative studies of islands have frequently adopted arbitrary thresholds based on area and/or population [1,2]. In the case of small states, Selwyn [3] has long argued that such quantitative thresholds are meaningless, and King [4] suggests that such thresholds may make artificial distinctions between islands that are qualitatively comparable. Attempts to set physiographic criteria are ultimately equally arbitrary [5].

Extending our definition to include social, economic and political parameters, questions become more complex. What is an island community? Does it include seasonal workers, islanders who travel for their work, expatriates who maintain family or economic ties? When does an island have political autonomy and the ability to determine its own future? When considering the nature of island autonomy it is perhaps useful to consider a continuum ranging from the smallest islands with the least political and economic autonomy through to the largest fully independent island states. Fig. 1 attempts to illustrate this continuum and some of the pressures acting upon it [6].

Fig. 1 attempts to illustrate different states of independence ranging from fully incorporated islands with little or no autonomy to large, fully independent states. In

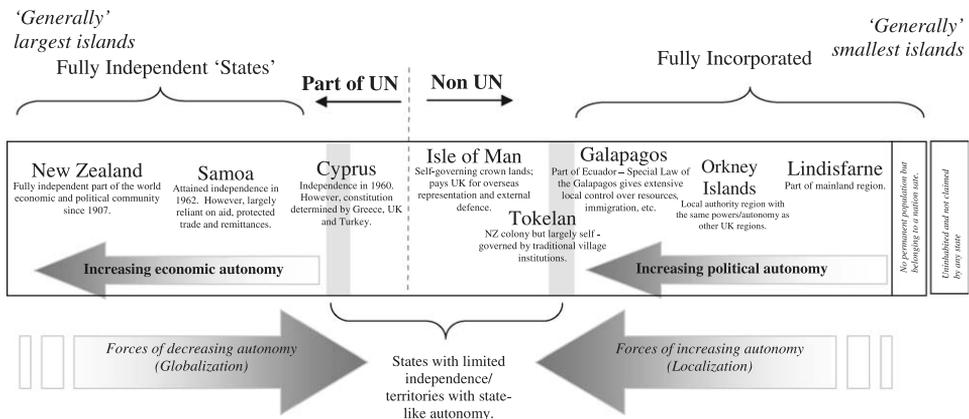


Fig. 1. Island autonomy.

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