

What Future for European Small Islands? Challenges and opportunities

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Editors' Introduction

As a keyword and a research strand, the 'future' has been recursively and intentionally quoted by the experts in the field of Island Studies: the 'future' of islands as places in the international socio-political context (Niles and Baldacchino, 2011); small islands as the outposts of present and future global processes (Ratter, 2018); the legitimacy of traditional categories in the context of twenty-first-century future challenges (Baldacchino, 2012); climate changes as a series of emergencies that threaten the 'future' of islands (Lal et al., 2002; Pugh and Chandler, 2021); the 'future', or the 'future perspectives', of the debate within the Island Studies community (Grydehøj, 2017); the growth of specific sectors, such as tourism, in the 'future' of island economies (Butler, 1993; Hall, 2010); more generally, the position of small islands dealing with unforeseeable 'future' scenarios, with numerous other intersections, which are not limited to these fields.

Within this prismatic panorama, in this special issue we have chosen to focus on one specific research perspective: the future of small islands within the European political and geographical context. Our first reference was Armstrong's et al. (2012) policies analysis, which discusses the future trajectories of European archipelagos considering the legacies of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) priorities for the periods 2000-2006 and 2007-2013. More recently, in 2021, the European Directorate for International Policies

published Island of the EU (Haase and Maier, 2021). The study aimed to indicate both the ‘state of play’ and the ‘future challenges’ of European island regions. The document explicitly referred to the post-COVID scenario and was linked to the EU 2021-27 Cohesion Policy. On the one hand, small islands were presented as one of the forefronts of the Union's main geographical challenges (depopulation, climate crisis, welfare, social justice, spatial inequalities, regional cohesion, blue growth, migration); on the other hand, they faced a future traced by marginalization and mono-economy horizons (mainly as touristic destinations). ‘Future’ (in the medium term) acted as a keyword in the definition of the European policies for small islands and archipelagos.

Today, in the final phase of the 2021-27 Cohesion Policy—and its regional implementation strategies (notably the ERDF)—and with the implementation of post-Covid recovery plans almost completed at the national levels, the future envisioned just five years ago seems to be materializing. The islands have been the focus of investments aimed at tackling marginalization through digital connectivity and testing ‘smart’ energy solutions. In many cases, they are at the center of environmental governance systems, as with some Mediterranean MPAs, and are the subject of processes of ‘patrimonialization’ to enhance cultural heritage. Meanwhile, tourism continues to grow as the only economic sector capable of attracting investment and driving local political agendas. Economies most closely linked to local ecological knowledge and sustainable relationships with the territories, such as small-scale fishing and agriculture, are reduced to subsidiaries of tourism or symbols of a supposed cultural tradition to be protected.

In other words, small European islands are caught in a dialectic between two opposing forces: economic development and the disconnection of islanders from their territories. To trace the future of these places, it is vital to understand how this dialectic is interrelated with present cultural, political, social and environmental geographies.

Adopting a theoretical framework that recognizes small islands as dynamic spaces with unique identities, challenges and potential, rather than simply peripheral or disadvantaged territories, this special issue, collecting mostly Mediterranean cases, aims to offer a multidisciplinary vision ranging from the analysis of supranational policies to the micro-analysis of lived experiences^[1]. Through a heterogeneous set of methodological approaches, including policy reading, demographic research, studies on perception, participatory action research and visual storytelling, the essays aim to highlight the interplay between vulnerability and resilience, and between marginalization and innovation, which define the future of island territories. The goal is to move beyond a purely developmentalist vision and embrace perspectives that prioritize communities and their rights, memories and aspirations, outlining possible sustainable, equitable and place-based development paths.

The issue opens with a contribution by Aikaterini Tsampi entitled *A Global Approach between Islandness and Human Rights: The Future of European Islands*, which helps readers to understand the discussion developed in the other papers, in terms of both theory and politics. Tsampi critically examines the European political framework, highlighting that despite provisions dedicated to islands, these territories are primarily viewed as underdeveloped areas. She proposes a paradigm shift, advocating an approach based on ‘islandness’: a holistic concept that recognizes the unique identity, culture, and lifestyle of island communities. Rather than considering islands as mere objects of top-down policies, this approach conceives of them as places led by active communities. The essay’s main innovation is its close linking of the ‘islandness’ approach to a human rights perspective. According to this view, islanders are no longer passive recipients of external aid or

supralocal strategies but can claim justice and participation. Tsampi argues that this comprehensive approach complements existing policies, promoting a more sustainable and equitable model of island governance.

Shifting the analysis from the supranational level to the systemic challenges that arise at the local level, the essay by Anica Čuka, Julijan Sutlović and Josip Faričić, *Geographic and Social Marginalisation: Healthcare Disparities and Challenges on Croatian Islands*, explores one of the most critical spatial features of small islands: the access to healthcare. The paper examines the Croatian archipelago, consisting of over 1,200 islands, only about 50 of which are permanently inhabited. The region is shaped by significant differences in terms of size, proximity to the mainland, and connectivity. The paper's central hypothesis is that the peripheral location of the islands exacerbates health inequalities, with smaller, more remote islands facing the greatest challenges. Through a geographical survey of healthcare infrastructure and a qualitative study based on interviews and questionnaires, the research documents structural inequalities and captures the daily life experiences of islanders. The results confirm that smaller islands often lack basic healthcare services, forcing residents to undertake costly and arduous journeys to the mainland. This structural vulnerability is exacerbated by seasonal tourism, which puts pressure on limited resources. The essay highlights how social marginalization, fueled by demographic decline and limited political influence, further increases inequalities. It concludes by proposing policy solutions aimed at improving access to healthcare for the most vulnerable island communities.

Islands' demographics are further explored in Vera Graovac Matassi and Marin Perko's work, *Socio-Economic and Demographic Implications of Population Ageing on Croatian Islands: The Case Study of Hvar Island*. While ageing is a European phenomenon, it takes on specific and particularly acute characteristics in the context of Croatian islands, which have a long history of depopulation and the emigration of younger generations. This essay analyses demographic trends and their implications, focusing on Hvar, the fourth largest Croatian island by population. Through statistical data analysis combined with structured interviews, the research highlights the distinctive characteristics of ageing on Hvar. Crucial issues emerge, such as the impact of an ageing population on health and social services, changes in family dynamics, and the potential repercussions for the island's future economic development. While older residents generally report satisfaction with their living conditions and lead active and productive lives, the empirical research reveals that specific needs are emerging, such as the need for more organized activities and long-term care facilities. The paper thus offers a detailed insight into how ageing intersects with socio-economic dynamics, shaping the present and future of one of the most important islands in the Adriatic Sea.

'Islandness' and Risk Perception: Climate Change and Marine Diversity Loss in the Campanian Archipelago, by Clara Di Fazio, Eleonora Guadagno and Maria Paradiso, shifts the focus to the vital connection between island communities and the environment. The study examines how the perception of socio-environmental risks is linked with 'islandness' within the Campanian archipelago, comprising Ischia, Capri and Procida. Through a qualitative survey, the research documents risk perception and analyses the level of awareness and adjustments adopted by inhabitants. The study concludes that an effective approach to addressing biodiversity loss and climate change must be multifaceted, integrating education, collaboration, and locally rooted solutions. This outlines possible community-led adaptation strategies.

To complement this focus on perception, Lorenzo Brocada's essay, *Vulnerability and Resilience Analysis of Mediterranean Protected Small Islands: A Comparative Analysis of the Cross-Border Region Interreg Marittimo*

(Italy/France), focuses on the management of island ecosystems. The paper presents the results of a study—conducted in collaboration with the Marine Protected Area of the Island of Bergeggi in Liguria, Italy—which aimed to analyze the vulnerability and resilience of a small island territory (under protection). A focus group was organized to gather the opinions of various stakeholders on the local perception of the concepts of resilience and vulnerability, and on the work carried out by the Marine Protected Area. This research was conducted using participatory techniques. The analysis does not stop at the single case study, but is enriched by a comparative perspective, drawing comparisons between Bergeggi and other similar cases in the north-western Mediterranean (the Interreg Maritime Italy/France area). Through a benchmarking analysis based on a series of vulnerability and resilience indicators, Brocada questions the rigid duality between these two concepts. He highlights that the factors determining the resilience of a protected area are complex and interconnected, and that a participatory approach is essential to align academic research with the perceptions and needs of local communities.

The next group of articles takes an even more forward-looking approach, exploring the role of education, young people and storytelling in shaping the future of islands. Giambattista Bufalino and Donatella Privitera's essay, *Reimagining Education in Insular Territories: Pedagogical Innovation and Social Sustainability in the Aeolian Archipelago*, examines social innovation in island education. It focuses on how island territories can overcome the perception of disadvantage and transform into dynamic educational spaces. Through the case of the Network of Schools of the Minor Islands (SIMI) and an analysis of six schools in the Aeolian Islands, the authors investigate the challenges posed by remoteness and limited resources. The essay demonstrates that these schools not only ensure educational continuity, but also act as catalysts for lifelong learning, resilience, and community cohesion in the face of depopulation. Drawing on theories of place-based education and resilience, the authors argue that island schools exemplify adaptability and creativity. They position themselves as pioneers, helping to create sustainable and inclusive learning environments that strengthen the identity and vitality of island communities.

The work of Pietro Agnoletto, Antonia De Michele and Nicoletta Tomei, *Multidisciplinary methods on islands' future imaginaries: The Islands 4 Future project on the island of Ponza, Italy*, focuses on the agency of younger generations. The essay describes one of the actions of Islands4Future—a multidisciplinary and participatory intervention on Ponza—the largest island in the Pontine archipelago. In a geographical context of socio-economic vulnerability exacerbated by tourist monoculture, the project sought to empower young people, who are often a vulnerable social group, by providing them with a 30-hour educational program. Activities such as participatory mapping and filmmaking transformed participants into active researchers, enabling them to express their vision for the island's heritage and future. Thus, the contribution highlights the usefulness of multidisciplinary approaches in reconciling the descriptive-interpretative dimension of research with its potential for transformative action.

The issue concludes with a deeply reflective and methodologically innovative contribution by Patrizia Domenica Miggiano: *Nostalgia and memories of everyday life: A Narrative-Visual Study of Sant'Andrea Island (Gallipoli, Italy)*. The potential of narrative practices in planning strategies for the protection and enhancement of vulnerable island territories is explored through this narrative and visual study, which uses biographical methods, in particular everyday life stories. The study presents a film project conducted on Sant'Andrea Island, near Gallipoli in Puglia, Italy. Currently uninhabited and inaccessible to visitors, the island was home to a small community until around fifty years ago. Through filmed narrative interviews, former inhabitants were invited

back to the island to share their memories. Rather than viewing nostalgia as a regressive feeling, the author conceptualizes it as a progressive force capable of creating a bridge between the past, present and future. This collection of life stories provides an opportunity to consider how these narratives could inform new approaches to space planning by restoring the central role of collective memory and lived experience in territorial governance processes.

When read as a single research contribution, these papers offer a rich and detailed overview spanning diverse geographical scales and disciplinary frameworks. Starting with an examination of regulatory and political frameworks, the collection delves into the structural challenges of demographics and access to public services. It then explores the complex relationship between society and the environment through the lenses of perception and management. Finally, it looks to the future by investigating the transformative power of education, youth agency and storytelling. The result is a comprehensive picture of the present and future in which European small islands are active subjects whose trajectories are intrinsically linked to the availability of political and cultural tools that facilitate listening to voices, recognizing rights and enhancing the memories of their inhabitants.

Endnotes

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