7

Conclusion

Colin Filer and Simon Foale

When we embarked on our adventure with the Sub-Global Working Group of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2002, we already had a mandate to think about small islands in peril or under pressure. However, it needs to be borne in mind that our mandate was generated by the proximity of a specific group of small island communities to the location of marine biodiversity values that were the principal focus of concern to the other parties engaged in a project funded by the Global Environment Facility. So the islanders had to be encountered as a group of actors whose existing livelihood strategies were more or less of a threat to these biodiversity values, and who might or might not be persuaded to adjust these strategies in order to reduce the threat that they posed.

As members of the Sub-Global Working Group, we were encouraged to think of these island communities and their marine environments as 'social–ecological systems' of a certain type. However, when we were obliged to broaden the scope of our vision to include a much larger number of communities, we soon began to doubt whether there was any way to assign each community to a certain type of system. The final report of the Sub-Global Working Group included an assertion that local communities are located at the bottom of a hierarchy of scales at which an ecosystem assessment could be undertaken, and that members of these communities are more or less able to deal with the problem of environmental degradation through the application of their own traditional knowledge and resource management practices, depending on the scale at which the problem is being created (Folke et al. 2005). This way of dealing with the question of scale and the

interaction of different 'knowledge systems' is a common feature of the academic work produced by members of the Resilience Alliance (www.resalliance.org), and featured in a separate contribution to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (Reid et al. 2006). Despite the widespread adoption of this conceptual framework, we were still troubled by the assumption that social institutions and knowledge systems could be attached to ecosystems distinguished as spatial polygons at a particular geographical scale and then construed as instruments for the management—or mismanagement—of the services provided by those ecosystems to human consumers. Our own attempt to think this way, as illustrated in Figure 3.1, made us feel as if we were revisiting the form of cultural ecology propounded by the American anthropologist Julian Steward (1955), in which local 'cultures' are treated as 'adaptations' to local environments.

With that point in mind, the answer to the question implied in the title of this volume should now be obvious. If we think of island ecosystems as ecosystems of a certain type defined at a particular scale, then the size of an island has very little relationship to the lives or livelihoods of the people who live on it or the community of which it is a part. The size of an island is simply something that is easy to measure. The act of classification that was prompted by the idea that some small island communities are 'in peril' because their islands are so small is an act that naturally leads to a recognition that size in itself is not a very important element in their material conditions of existence or the state of the terrestrial and marine ecosystems from which they obtain the 'services' that partially sustain them. Island size is just a vantage point from which to examine the way that people deal with the different 'pressures' that shape their livelihoods, including those that entail some form of environmental degradation. In this respect, there would be no point in attempting to construct a representative sample of small island communities or ecosystems in a specific region because the sampling frame would contain too many variables. As anthropologists, we can only offer a partial vision of the range of variation, recognising that much of that variation consists of things that cannot be measured at all.

Among the things that can be measured, it would seem that remoteness, altitude and population density matter more than island size as material conditions of existence, or as what are called 'states' in the pressure–state–response model of social and environmental change. But the way in which they matter varies with the nature of the pressures and the responses. Population density matters when there are high rates of population growth; altitude matters when sea levels are rising; and remoteness matters when

islanders are dependent on the consumption of things that have to be imported from somewhere else. However, we are not convinced that the relationship between the three components of this model can be grasped on the assumption that islanders are responsible for the responses that they make to the pressures that they experience. In other words, we are sceptical of the assumption that a specific type of social–ecological system possesses more or less of the qualities known as 'resilience' or 'sustainability' because of the choices made by the people who belong to that system as opposed to those who act on it from the 'outside' (Nadasy 2007; Hornborg 2009). The fact that we have chosen to focus our attention on what goes on in a specific type of place should not prevent us from understanding that what goes on in each place is an effect of the unequal distribution of power between the people associated with different places in different ways.

Of course, anthropologists can also be implicated in this unequal distribution of power. Some of our colleagues, inspired by the work of Epeli Hauʻofa (1994), might argue that we are guilty of 'belittling' the capacity of islanders to improve their own livelihoods, simply by choosing to focus our attention on the small size of the islands on which they live or with which they identify themselves. Some might say that we should either have celebrated the capacity of islanders to be empowered by the revival of traditional forms of resource management (D'Arcy and Kuan 2023), or else paid more attention to the way that other outsiders (or 'outlanders') have misrepresented small islands in imaginative acts of neo-colonial dispossession (Jolly 2007; Alexeyeff and McDonnell 2018), or else allowed the subjects of our own inquiry to speak for themselves instead of casting ethnographic judgment on their lives (Wesley-Smith 2016; Fair 2020). Our defence would be that this is not a book about the contest between alternative ontologies, epistemologies or ideologies. While we acknowledge the shortcomings of the cartographic lens through which islands make their appearance in official statistics or the imaginations of foreign observers, the contributions to this volume are not intended to assess the current state of 'traditional environmental knowledge' in small island communities. For better or worse, most of the islanders whose voices can be heard in these portraits still sound like they are calling out for some form of 'development', or an improvement in their material conditions of existence, not wishing that government officials, foreign investors or boatloads of tourists would simply go away and leave them to their own devices. But the outlandish presence or absence clearly varies a great deal, both in form and intensity, so it is hard to conclude that all these voices are singing the same song.

At one level or scale, which is a regional scale, there is a sense in which all Pacific Islanders *are* now singing the same song, which is a song about climate change. In the 'small island states' of the Pacific Island region, excluding Papua New Guinea (PNG), nearly all communities are coastal communities, and any difference in the size of the islands that they inhabit can reasonably be represented as a divisive distraction from the political imperative of challenging a form of 'development' that will sooner or later outweigh all the other pressures to which these states and communities must find a response. In these circumstances, Hau'ofa's intellectual legacy is represented by groups of activists like the Pacific Climate Warriors, whose actions 'lay the foundation for a Pacific-based counter-discourse that challenges disempowering discourses of drowning islands and helpless Islanders' (Fair 2020: 347). But this kind of 'counter-discourse' is almost entirely absent from the narratives contained in the present volume, simply because we have chosen to focus our attention on communities and ecosystems distinguished at a sub-national—and even microcosmic—scale. If one of these entities had been an atoll formation, like the Kilinailau community identified with the Carteret Islands, then the spectre of climate change would have loomed a lot larger. But atoll communities represent a very small fraction of PNG's small island communities, just as small island communities represent a very small fraction of the country's total population, and even a small fraction of its costal population. That is why the voice of the Carteret Islanders or their representatives makes a louder noise in the sphere of international relations than it does at the sub-national scale where we have situated our analysis. At this finer scale, we should not expect the members or representatives of small island communities to have a distinctive political voice for the simple reason that their material conditions of existence and the factors that influence these conditions are themselves so highly variable. And that is not just the case in PNG, which can hardly be described as a 'small island state', but also in the other states that belong to the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

The case studies presented in this volume might be compared to those presented in a recent World Bank study of the relationship between 'main islands' and 'outer islands' in the small island states of the Pacific Island region (Utz 2021). The authors of this study acknowledge that outer islands exhibit a huge range of variation in size, altitude, population density and relative isolation, and also recognise that this range of variation is hard to measure with national census data. However, they do their best to come up with a statistical assessment of the relationship between rates of out-migration

and what they call an index of 'remoteness'. They are not surprised to find that 'migrants move away from more remote localities toward less remote localities' (Utz 2021: 39), and that 'migration helps keep populations on outer islands stable and mitigates pressures on fragile ecosystems that could arise from expanding outer island populations' (ibid.: 53). To lay the ghost of Epeli Hauʻofa, they go on to declare that:

> The 'Sea of Islands' perspective may contain some hints about ways forward. This implies a system that balances traditional norms and strong relationships that should be maintained in outer islands with the importance of boosting connectivity for migration and agglomeration benefits on main islands.
>
> (ibid.: 54)

Regardless of the jargon, the key recommendation of this study is that Pacific Island governments should avoid the provision of subsidies for unprofitable economic activities on outer islands and do what they can to facilitate various forms of migration.

Unlike the authors of the World Bank study, the contributors to this volume would not expect their observations to make any difference to the practices of government agencies. Indeed, as anthropologists, we are inclined to doubt whether government agencies are willing or able to follow the advice provided by the aid industry. Insofar as the state makes an appearance in this volume, it does so in ways that have nothing to do with the World Bank's observations about connectivity or migration, and in ways that do not seem to be accepted or appreciated by the members of small island communities. At the same time, we find it rather curious that the case studies of outer island livelihoods presented in the World Bank study are not based on the writings of anthropologists or other social scientists who have taken the trouble to conduct fieldwork in island communities, but are instead drawn from the pages of Wikipedia. This is most likely due to the fact that anthropologists were not directly engaged in the study, and the authors did not have time to sift through a pile of detailed ethnographic accounts in a search for information that would have some direct bearing on their portrait of contemporary island livelihoods. But it could also reflect the fact that many anthropologists have shifted their own attention from the production of such accounts to the critical interrogation of the powers exercised or abused by national governments, foreign investors or members of the 'donor community', including the World Bank (Jolly 2007).

Many years ago, the geographer Murray Chapman pointed to a different source of weakness in the kind of analysis presented in the World Bank study, which can also be read as a source of weakness in the conceptual framework of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and the Resilience Alliance. This is the idea that a community's 'responses' to a change in its material conditions of existence, or the supply of ecosystem services from its immediate neighbourhood, can be characterised by some general statement about patterns of migration or circulation.

> Metaphors such as 'rural–urban drift' and 'circulation,' or technical terms like 'emigration' and 'depopulation' that evoke powerful images, do not ipso facto convey the contemporary ebb and flow of Pacific Island movement, nor its inherently volatile and ambiguous character.
>
> (Chapman 1991: 265)

Chapman was attempting to deconstruct the dualistic metaphors whereby Western scholars, including anthropologists, had sought to understand the movement of Pacific Islanders between different kinds of places—or, if you like, between different types of social–ecological systems distinguished at a certain scale. Nowadays, some anthropologists and geographers might say that these unfounded dualistic metaphors include the contrast between land and water, nature and culture, or society and environment. The contributions to this volume do not go quite so far. Instead, they allow for the existence of small island communities and ecosystems whose local members or managers can make their own distinctions between such things, but without making the assumption that there is a single model or conceptual framework that can make sense of their behaviour, let alone comprehend their interaction with all the other actors who exert some influence over their lives.

References

Alexeyeff, K. and S. McDonnell, 2018. 'Whose Paradise? Encounter, Exchange, and Exploitation.' *Contemporary Pacific* 30: 269–295. doi.org/10.1353/cp.2018.0028

Chapman, M., 1991. 'Pacific Island Movement and Socioeconomic Change: Metaphors of Misunderstanding.' *Population and Development Review* 17: 263–292. doi.org/10.2307/1973731

D'Arcy, P. and D.D.D.-W. Kuan (eds), 2023. *Islands of Hope: Indigenous Resource Management in a Changing Pacific*. Canberra: ANU Press. doi.org/10.22459/IH.2023

Fair, H., 2020. 'Their Sea of Islands? Pacific Climate Warriors, Oceanic Identities, and World Enlargement.' *Contemporary Pacific* 32: 341–369. doi.org/10.1353/cp.2020.0033

Folke, C., C. Fabricius and others, 2005. 'Communities, Ecosystems, and Livelihoods.' In D. Capistrano, C. Samper, M.J. Lee and C. Raudsepp-Hearne (eds), *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Multiscale Assessments, Volume 4*. Washington (DC): Island Press.

Hau'ofa, E., 1994. 'Our Sea of Islands.' *Contemporary Pacific* 6: 148–161.

Hornborg, A., 2009. 'Zero-Sum World: Challenges in Conceptualizing Environmental Load Displacement and Ecologically Unequal Exchange in the World-System.' *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50: 237–262. doi.org/10.1177/0020715209105141

Jolly, M., 2007. 'Imagining Oceania: Indigenous and Foreign Representations of a Sea of Islands.' *Contemporary Pacific* 19: 508–545. doi.org/10.1353/cp.2007.0054

Nadasdy, P., 2007. 'Adaptive Co-management and the Gospel of Resilience.' In F. Berkes, D. Armitage and N. Doubleday (eds), *Adaptive Co-Management: Collaboration, Learning, and Multi-level Governance*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. doi.org/10.59962/9780774855457-014

Reid, W.V., F. Berkes, T.J. Wilbanks and D. Capistrano (eds), 2006. *Bridging Scales and Knowledge Systems: Concepts and Applications in Ecosystem Assessment*. Washington (DC): Island Press.

Steward, J.H., 1955. *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Utz, R.J. (ed.), 2021. *Archipelagic Economies: Spatial Economic Development in the Pacific: Synthesis Report*. Washington (DC): World Bank. doi.org/10.1596/36749

Wesley-Smith, T., 2016. 'Rethinking Pacific Studies Twenty Years On.' *Contemporary Pacific* 28: 153–169. doi.org/10.1353/cp.2016.0003

This text is taken from *Small Islands in Peril?: Island Size and Island Lives in Melanesia*, edited by Colin Filer, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/SIP.2024.07