

# Small Islands and Natural Hazards in Historical and Current Perspectives

Rachel  
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**22-24 November 2012, Munich, Germany**

**Sponsors:** Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

**Conveners:** Rebecca Hofmann (RCC), Uwe Lübken (RCC)

**Presenters:** Mike Carson (Australian National University), Shrabana Datta (LMU Munich/RCC, Germany), Carsten Felgentreff (University of Osnabrück, Germany), John Gillis (Rutgers University, USA), Michael Goldsmith (University of Waikato, New Zealand), Arne Harms (Free University Berlin, Germany), Rebecca Hofmann (RCC), Whitney Hoot (Island Research and Education Initiative, Micronesia), Miklós Kázmér (Eotvos University Budapest, Hungary), Ilan Kelman (CICERO, Norway), Andrea Kiss (University of Szeged, Hungary), Katrina Lacher (University of Central Oklahoma, USA), Kent Mathewson (Louisiana State University, USA), Timo Myallantus (University of Turku, Finland), Patrick Nunn (University of New England, USA), Ina Richter (RCC), Justine Walter (University of Leipzig, Germany).

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Small islands have largely been ignored by mainstream historical research. Why, after all, should scholars be interested in the past of seemingly unimportant patches of land, especially if they are located at the “edge of the world”? If they are treated at all, they are portrayed as either a place of desire (i.e., a mythical and, very often, tropical paradise), or as the exact opposite: the epitome of a nearly impossible life, a place where “civilizations” must, almost necessarily, collapse due to the isolation, the limited resource base, and, last but not least, the frequent exposure to natural hazards. Ironically, the latter point has triggered a new interest in small islands. In a world with a warming climate, rising sea levels, and the likelihood of increasingly extreme natural events, these peculiar places have turned into pioneer communities at the forefront of global environmental change (the same can be said for arctic settlements). Yet, while isolation and the prevalence of natural hazards certainly describe important elements of life on small islands, the focus on vulnerability neglects the fact that small island communities have thrived for centuries, often dealing with these challenges successfully. This workshop looked at the complex problem that natural hazards have posed—and still pose—on small islands in a more nuanced way. It focused on the questions of whether and how

disasters defined island life and whether there is something unique and instructive in how small islands have dealt with such hazards.

The workshop opened with two presentations that approached the topic from an island and disaster perspective, respectively. **JOHN GILLIS** (Rutgers University, USA) challenged the traditional notion of islands and suggested that we understand these specks of land in the midst of water as ecotones, i.e. as places where land and water meet, where people live with water rather than at the edge of the land. **ILAN KELMAN** (CICERO, Norway) accentuated the importance of island case studies in the historical development of disaster research. These pioneer research activities have been largely ignored in recent debates on the challenge of climate change for small islands.

The first case study was presented by **KATRINA LACHER** (University of Central Oklahoma, USA). Lacher clearly illustrated the effects of multiple disasters on an Alaskan Native island community. The village of Chenega has been hit by an earthquake and the ensuing tsunami in 1964, by the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, and is currently threatened by rising sea levels. Thus, as Lacher argues, changing environmental conditions have repeatedly forced the native Alutiiq to discuss questions of relocation and rehabilitation, and have transformed their tribal and island identity.

**KENT MATHEWSON** (Louisiana State University, USA) elaborated on invasive species as a particularly severe threat for small islands. Focusing on the history of the Caribbean island of Nevis, Mathewson showed how green monkeys who had been introduced in colonial times challenge the island's long gardening tradition by feeding on fruits and vegetables.

At the beginning of the third panel **MIKE CARSON** (Australian National University) and **PATRICK NUNN** (University of New England, USA) gave a detailed picture of island vulnerability in the past. They focused in particular on the rich history of Pacific island cultures and outlined the various factors that have threatened them, including sea level rise and fall, and an increase in water salinity. In order to prevent "collapse," settlements, subsistence economies, and societal patterns had to be restructured.

**SHRABANA DATTA** (LMU Munich/RCC) illustrated with her case study of St. Martin's island in Bangladesh how tourism has disrupted the island's ecosystem and has thus transformed an island with naturally perilous geography into a mainly anthropogenic hazard-scape. **ANDREA KISS** (University of Szeged, Hungary) focused on river islands in the Danube and illustrated the wide variety of late medieval/early modern flood control and mitigation strategies.

**JUSTINE WALTER** (University of Leipzig, Germany) employed a comparison of present-day

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) with the network of Ancient Greek poleis (which, she argued, can also be understood as islands) as the starting point for her analysis of Helike—the capital of Achaia that was destroyed by an earthquake and washed away completely by a subsequent tsunami in 373 BC. **TIMO MYALLANTUS** (University of Turku, Finland) showed that small islands don't necessarily have to be geographically small. His analysis of the Laki eruption in 1783-84 highlighted how even an island of the size of Iceland suffered in a similar way to small islands.

The first panel on the second day of the workshop stressed the importance of myths and memories of sunken islands. **MIKLÓS KÁZMÉR** (Eotvos University Budapest, Hungary), in collaboration with Patrick Colin and Danko Taborosi, combined Palauan mythology with geological evidence to trace Ngeruangel, a sunken atoll in the north of Palau State whose survivors later formed the two ruling clans, representing quite successful coping. Questions of the longevity of social memory and of who creates history in regard to disaster recollections also guided **PATRICK NUNN's** (University of New England, USA) paper. He used myths as cultural proxies to better understand island disappearance. Nunn also pointed out, however, that islands are not just sinking but also emerging. Thus, it made more sense to speak of them as transient rather than fixed in form. As people have always settled in these unstable formations, again, our modern notions of vulnerability and resilience should be carefully questioned. The transient nature of islands is particularly evident in Bangladesh's coastal embankments and the islets in the huge Ganges delta, as **ARNE HARMS** (Free University Berlin, Germany) pointed out. He elaborated in particular on circuits of emplacement and displacement where the dissolving of the physical place turns into poetics and politics of remembering of a landscape that is continually transformed by natural as much as human forces.

The erosion of island life was also accentuated by **INA RICHTER** (RCC) in her presentation on eroding islands in the Chesapeake Bay in the early twentieth century. Over 500 of them have already vanished, while others are rapidly shrinking in size. Life, however, starts to erode from these islands long before the waves brake over them. Economic activities are the first to disappear; social services gradually follow, and finally the people leave.

How the abandonment of an island can lead to the erosion of identity was shown by **WHITNEY HOOT** (Island Research and Education Initiative, Micronesia) in collaboration with Miklós Kázmér and Danko Taborosi. Sorol, a tiny atoll in Yap State, Micronesia, has only two individuals left that still speak the language, although none of the descendants were actually born there or name Sorol as their first identity. They came to appreciate the lesser isolation of their new homes, which raises questions of who determines "loss."

The last panel focused on the current discussion of how climate change challenges small islands and what the small island experience can contribute to climate change research. In his case study on Kabara, Fiji, **CARSTEN FELGENTREFF** (University of Osnabrück, Germany) compared the change of discourse on environmental changes between 1993 and today, spurred by the work of the WWF, who chose the island as a climate witness site. Felgentreff argued that over time and especially in the wake of climate change, old phenomena might get a new label. **MICHAEL GOLD-SMITH** (University of Waikato, New Zealand) discussed how the exploitation of certain island tropes in connection with climate change by the media is a challenge for the small states. Goldsmith used the example of Tuvalu, where colonial history is reflected in today's global net of geo-political power structures. **REBECCA HOFMANN** (RCC) gave a retrospective of the human-nature relationship in Chuuk, Micronesia, to show how structural changes influence current policy making in regard to climate change.

Thus, for two days, the participants at this conference discussed the physical and social entities of small island hazard-scapes, with their ecological vulnerability, power relations, and socioeconomic structures. Their discussions were based on the assumption that time and history shrink distances, making visible transformations that can be studied, serving as points of departure for new research and new ways of thinking.

- Rebecca Hofmann (RCC)
- Uwe Lübken (RCC)