Island Studies Journal, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2016, pp. 5-8.

GUEST EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Thematic Section: Sustainable development and environmental conservation in the Outermost European Regions

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ABSTRACT: The Outermost European Regions (OERs) are geographic areas which are part of a European Union Member State, but situated outside continental Europe. All OERs except French Guiana are islands or archipelagos. They face several challenges to full development – remoteness, insularity, terrain and climate constraints, economic dependence and a narrow range of exportable commodities or services. Nevertheless, the European Commission advocates for these regions the assumption of a new paradigm: turning their natural and socioeconomic handicaps into assets. This strategy makes the sustainable development and environmental conservation strategies and policies of OERs especially challenging in scientific, technical and political terms. This *Island Studies Journal* special section on *Sustainable Development and Environmental Conservation in the Outermost European Regions* includes five articles that describe, analyse and address directly social-ecological systems' issues in insular Portuguese and Spanish OERs (Azores and Canaries, respectively). These studies propose novel concepts, strategies and models aiming towards designing and implementing better and more cost-effective sustainability and environmental conservation policies in these remote European regions.

Keywords: environmental conservation, islandness, islands, Outermost European Regions, social-ecological systems, sustainable development

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Introduction

The Outermost European Regions (OERs) are geographic areas which are part of a European Union Member State, but situated outside continental Europe. As of April 2016, nine territories (six French, two Portuguese, one Spanish) are registered as having OER status: French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Mayotte, Réunion, Saint-Martin (France), Azores, Madeira (Portugal), and the Canaries (Spain). In 2011, about 4.5 million people lived in the OERs, representing 0.9% of the EU population. All OERs except French Guiana are islands or archipelagos (and even French Guiana, surrounded by ocean and rivers on all sides is, in many respects, an island).

Island systems represent one of the challenges of our time: how to balance ecological integrity with economic development and collective quality of life (Baldacchino & Niles, 2011). They constitute a particular example of integration through space and time of multiple natural, social and economic functions. This integration is materialized in a set of land use systems and social structures adapted to the particular natural constraints and resources framed

by available technologies (Fernandes, Guiomar, Freire & Gil, 2014). As islands, most OERs face several obstacles to full development (remoteness, insularity, terrain, climate, economic dependence and narrow range of the goods they produce) which have been mitigated by European Union cohesion policies. Nevertheless, serious environmental issues such as climate change, environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and proliferation of invasive alien species have to be directly and especially addressed by using the most reliable scientific information and the most advanced technologies (Gil, Fonseca, Lobo & Calado, 2012). Furthermore, the European Commission communication entitled "The Outermost Regions: An asset for Europe" (COM(2008)/642), advocated an alternative approach, focusing on the potential contribution of these regions to overall growth and development in Europe. The strategic priority is to turn the handicaps of OERs into assets. All these circumstances make the sustainable development and environmental conservation strategies and policies in OERs especially challenging in scientific, technical and political terms. This *Island Studies Journal* (ISJ) special section includes five articles that describe, analyse and address directly several social-ecological systems' issues in Portuguese and Spanish OERs (Azores and Canary, respectively). These studies propose novel concepts, strategies and models aiming to design and implement better and more cost-effective sustainability and environmental conservation policies in these remote regions.

Contents of this thematic section

Socio-ecological systems (SES) can be defined as integrated systems of ecosystems and human society, with reciprocal feedback (Anderies, Janssen & Ostrom, 2004). In the first article, Banos-González, Martínez-Fernández and Esteve-Selma (2016) use Fuerteventura and El Hierro (Canary Islands) as case-studies and present an integral dynamic model, which in combination with other methods (indicators, policy and scenario analysis), may constitute a useful tool for the quantitative sustainability assessment and the management of real island SES.

Arts-based research paradigms guide ways of knowing, doing, being and becoming. In terms of methodology, it is as varied as the practices of the artists/scholars involved. But the defining element is the "primacy given to interacting with and making art" (Conrad & Beck, 2015). The second article, written by Neilson, Pato, Gabriel, Arroz, Mendonça and Picanço (2016), consists of a multi-voice script that highlights the process of 5 years of research with coastal fishing communities in the Azores islands (Portugal). This text is constructed via arts-informed research methodology and consists of two parallel, creative narratives, intermittently interrupted by visual cues. This work calls for looking at the sea through new eyes, hearing with new ears, feeling differently and awakening to the possibility of knowing the sea in unfamiliar ways.

The establishment of Protected Areas is considered one of the most representative examples of conflict between individual needs and collective interests (Bonaiuto, Carrus, Martorella & Bonnes, 2002). In the third article, Bragagnolo, Pereira, Ng and Calado (2016) present a new approach to understanding and mapping local conflicts within Protected Areas in small islands by integrating qualitative data and spatially explicit information. This research takes stock of the benefits, needs and constraints related to Pico Island Natural Park (Azores) as perceived by local stakeholders. It subsequently identifies and transposes the conflicts distilled from the stakeholder discourse into spatially representative visual maps using GIS.

The proposed method provides a springboard towards effective conflict management for PAs in Pico Island, showing a relatively low-cost and straightforward approach to minimising future local conflicts which could be adapted to other similar OERs.

Tourism can play an important role in small islands' economies, presenting some advantages over export of goods and traditional services, namely through job creation, tax revenues and increased value of local products (e.g. Seetanah, 2011). However, tourism-related benefits can generate socio-economic inequalities if not properly shared among local communities, accruing human-conservation conflicts and increasing environmental impacts (Brockington, Duffy & Igoe, 2008). In their article, García-Romero, Hernández-Cordero, Fernández-Cabrera, Peña-Alonso, Hernández-Calvento and Pérez-Chacón (2016) analyze the impacts of urban-touristic development in four aeolian sedimentary systems in the Canaries. Their results indicate that the systems affected by urban-touristic development have experienced significant environmental changes, mostly due to deficiencies in the planning and management of these sites.

In the fifth and last article, written by García-Rodríguez, García-Rodríguez and Castilla-Gutiérrez (2016), the authors analyze the main socioeconomic and land-use changes resulting from the introduction in the 1960's of seawater desalination plants in Lanzarote and Fuerteventura (Canary Islands). These facilities enabled both islands to benefit from the development of mass tourism, capitalizing on their favourable weather conditions and excellent beaches, as well as their unique natural and cultural landscapes. The development of this new activity has prompted unprecedented, and often poorly planned, urban and demographic growth and shifted the economy of these islands towards construction and services. This successful demonstration of how desalination and renewable energy technologies can improve both environmental and socioeconomic conditions in an arid region, is a beacon of hope for other islands with similar climate conditions and with access to inexhaustible seawater.

Conclusion

This special section contributes towards an improved knowledge of sustainable development and environmental conservation in the OERs. It may be especially useful to small island researchers, technical officers, stakeholders and decision makers generally, as they might be able to develop and support more sustainable and cost-effective science-based policies.

Finally, I take this opportunity to acknowledge all those who have contributed towards this *Island Studies Journal* special section. I thank all authors who submitted their manuscripts for consideration of inclusion. I also thank all the reviewers who have provided timely and critical feedback to the authors, thereby helping them to significantly improve their manuscripts.

Acknowledgements

The participation of Artur Gil as Guest Editor of this special section was supported by a Post-Doctoral fellowship from the FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (reference: SFRH/BPD/100017/2014), funded by the National Budget of the Ministry of Education and Science of Portugal and by the European Social Fund.

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