

REVIEW ESSAY:

Islanders' Perspectives on Sustainable Living

Gillian Cambers

*Sea Grant College Program
University of Puerto Rico
Mayaguez, Puerto Rico 00681
GillianCambers@aol.com*

Small Islands Voice is a UNESCO initiated and funded endeavour. For more information visit: www.smallislandsvoice.org or contact csi1@unesco.org

Abstract

An internet forum, supported by the *Small Islands Voice* initiative, has since 2002 provided a place where islanders from around the world could discuss issues and problems and also learn from the experiences of others. This paper provides a reflective overview of the discussions over the past four years and attempts to identify some specific characteristics that identify islanders in their approaches to everyday living. An analysis of the forum respondents shows that approximately two thirds are male; one half come from the Pacific islands; and more than a half are employed in island-based occupations. Discussions have covered infrastructural development; resource management; environmental, social and economic issues. The overview indicates islanders are very willing to speak out and take ownership of their issues and problems and their discussions show a significant level of understanding about the need to balance limited resources and economic development. Proposals for action are practical and feasible and there is a strong vein of common sense running through the responses. Most significantly, islanders show a deep love for their island homes, an attitude of caring about the future development of their islands, and a willingness to try to solve their problems themselves.

Keywords: islands, Small Island Voice, SIV Global Forum, UNESCO

Copyright © 2006 Institute of Island Studies, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada.

Introduction

Islands are special places, although for people living in them they are not idyllic and they are certainly not paradise. Yet ask islanders where home is, even (or especially) ones who have lived abroad in a continental country for decades, and many will respond with the name of their island. But: are islanders any different to people living in mainland countries?

Open-ended opinion surveys, conducted in six island jurisdictions (Cook Islands, Maldives, Palau, Seychelles, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines) in 2002-3, within the framework of the *Small Islands Voice* initiative, attempted to find out the main issues that concerned islanders (Cambers, 2004a). The issues identified, in order

of priority, were: (1) economy, (2) employment, (3) health care, (4) education, (5) need for new infrastructure, (6) environmental degradation. Several other important issues were also identified, although these were not shared equally by all the sampled islands, namely (7) tourism growth, (8) decline in moral and/or traditional values, (9) increased crime and violence, (10) need for good governance.

Were the surveys to be repeated in continental countries, it is likely that similar issues would appear. Most people, in their day-to-day lives, are concerned about the high cost of living, their continued or future employment, the availability of health care for their families and education for their children.

Much of the literature on tropical islands focuses on political groupings such as small island developing states (SIDS). Constraints facing these islands are often highlighted, such as their small size, isolation, limited market diversification and restricted access to external capital (Commonwealth Secretariat *et al.*, 2000; UN, 2005). Many of these characteristics are very relevant when comparing islands with larger continental countries, although it makes more sense to compare islands with other islands of a similar size.

An island, by definition, is “an area of land surrounded by water”, irrespective of size. Many are isolated, at least from continental areas. But very few are totally isolated from other islands since most islands are parts of island groups or chains. In these days of fast air and sea transport, only a few remain really remote and difficult to access. And in terms of isolation, the internet provides most islands with a means of communicating instantly with the outside world, although it is acknowledged that in many islands this is still an expensive mode of communication. Nevertheless it is expanding and likely to improve with each passing year.

An internet forum, supported by the Small Islands Voice initiative, has since 2002 provided a place where islanders from around the world can discuss issues and problems and also learn from the experiences of others. This paper provides a reflective overview of the discussions over the past four years and attempts to identify some specific characteristics that identify islanders in their approaches to everyday living.

Small Islands Voice

Small Islands Voice is an inter-regional initiative, supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), that focuses on supporting sustainable island living activities at the local level through ‘Communities in Action’, and then exchanging experiences and results utilising the media, and in particular the internet.

Instead of concentrating on sustainable development, which for many is an unreachable target, a concept of sustainable island living is evolving, which attempts to personalise sustainable development. In collaboration with the efforts of the Centre for Documentation, Research and Training in the Southwest Indian Ocean to develop a

regional civil society platform, a definition for sustainable island living is emerging: A process that enables everybody to enjoy a decent living and a good quality of life in terms of satisfying their needs (economic, social, ecological and cultural) and creates an enabling environment for the next generation to fulfil its aspirations. Sustainable island living is based on core values such as a culture of partnership based on shared vision, good governance, people's rights, autonomy of the community, and participatory approaches. Furthermore, it attempts to bring the concept to the personal level - every individual and community member has a role to play - and in focusing on the next generation as opposed to future generations, it makes the concept more immediate as a goal to be achieved in an individual's lifetime.

Small Islands Voice' activities relating to sustainable island living are being pursued in 15 island states and territories: Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue and Palau in the Pacific; Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles and Zanzibar in the Indian Ocean; Bahamas, British Virgin Islands, Cuba, Dominica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and San Andres Archipelago in the Caribbean. All these islands are in tropical latitudes, and while most are small island developing states, the Cook Islands, Niue, the San Andres Archipelago, Zanzibar and the British Virgin Islands are not fully independent. The activities themselves (see www.smallislandsvoice.org) range from community visioning and planning in Palau and the San Andres Archipelago to preserving island memories in the Cook Islands; and from wise practices for waste management in Fiji, Maldives and St. Vincent and the Grenadines to the implementation of eco-friendly practices in Seychelles and Zanzibar. Youth-led activities are another area of focus. Following the Youth Visioning for Island Living special event in Mauritius, 9-13 January 2005, (UNESCO Coastal Regions and Small Islands Platform, 2005), where 94 young islanders met to discuss their perspectives of sustainable island living, young people in 37 small island states and territories are working to design and implement projects ranging from inter-generational exchange to strengthening local languages, and from environmental awareness to youth entrepreneurship. (More information is available about these projects at the Youth Visioning website: www.youthvisioning.org).

Sharing these and other experiences is another main focus of Small Islands Voice. Island media (press, radio and television) are one way of maximising the impact of small scale activities at the local level. For example, a community radio station is being established at a high school in the small island of Bequia in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, allowing students to gain experience in media skills, and at the same time to inform and involve the island community in the school's environmental conservation activities. Island to island technical exchange visits provide opportunities for developing local capacity within the framework of south-south technical cooperation, e.g. an islander from the San Andres Archipelago visited Cuba in 2005 to share beach management practices with communities on the south coast of Cuba's Havana Province. Students from Seychelles visited students in the Maldives and decided to work on waste management projects in their respective schools and islands. Meetings, workshops and international conferences are other opportunities for sharing experiences. Whilst reports and publications are an important way of sharing experiences for academic and professional groups, brochures, booklets and videos have proven to be more effective for the general public.

The entire island community has always been the main focus for Small Islands Voice, a difficult grouping because it includes everyone. In the beginning of the initiative it was decided to try and use the internet as one of the ways of reaching and involving all islanders. A Small Islands Voice Global Internet forum was started in September 2002 on a trial basis for a three month period. The substantive responses to the first article totalled 50, added to which the informal feedback indicated that people found the forum interesting and wanted to see it continued. Formal feedback from Small Islands Voice partners during an inter-regional planning meeting (Cambers, 2003) confirmed the success of the forum in reaching island residents. The forum has proved to be one of the most successful components of Small Islands Voice, for while the activities on the ground, by necessity reach only certain islands and specific groups, the forum reaches islanders all around the world from the high latitudes to the equator.

Small Islands Voice Global Internet Forum

Experience gained with a global internet forum called Wise Coastal Practices for Sustainable Human Development (www.csiwisepractices.org), which started in 1999, was used as the basis for designing the Small Islands Voice Global Internet (SIV Global) forum. The software used for the Wise Coastal Practices forum was adapted for SIV Global with the assistance of Scotland On Line.

Receiving the forum messages directly as emails lies at the heart of the success of SIV Global. Postings to the forum are sent out on a regular basis – once every two weeks - by email. In addition, all the messages posted on the forum are available at: www.sivglobal.org. Experience has shown that the email postings are the most important component and initiate almost 100% of the responses to the forum.

Prior to the launching of SIV Global in September 2002, three announcements were made on the Wise Coastal Practices for Sustainable Human Development forum. Many people responded asking to be included in the new forum. Partners in those islands taking part in Small Islands Voice were asked to provide email addresses of persons likely to be interested in the forum. From these small beginnings, the audience has grown so that as of January 2006, there are more than 40,000 addresses on the circulation list. Since the main audience for this forum is the island community, a special effort has been made to include the ordinary person on the street - the bank manager and the watersports operator, the car mechanic and the health care worker, to name but a few examples. Other important audience sectors include the private sector, non-governmental and community based organizations, island governments, the media, and the international community interested in small island affairs.

Key topics to be discussed on the forum are selected with the help of Small Islands Voice partners. For example, the text of the first topic was adapted from a Pacific islands newspaper article (Radway, 2002). The topic article, usually about 500 words, is posted on the forum and is automatically sent out by email to all the addresses on the list. People

send their responses to the moderator. All the responses are carefully read and the most interesting ones – those that are substantive and add to, or differ from the views already expressed on the topic - are selected and posted on the forum at two-weekly intervals, as well as being sent out to the email addresses on the list. The process continues until the number of responses declines, after which a new topic is started. Once a topic discussion is closed, all the responses received are compiled and placed on the Small Islands Voice website.

Generally discussion on a particular topic continues over two to three months (Table 1). The number of responses to each topic has varied between 21 and 84, with a mean of 39.

Table 1: Forum Topics and Responses

| No. | Topic | Discussion Period | No. of responses |
|-----|--|-------------------|------------------|
| 1 | Road development in Palau, Pacific www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues1.htm | Oct – Nov '02 | 50 |
| 2 | Beach access in Tobago, Caribbean www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues2.htm | Nov '02 – Feb '03 | 31 |
| 3 | Tourism development in Seychelles, Indian Ocean www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues3.htm | Feb – May '03 | 27 |
| 4 | Foreign investment in Cook Islands, Pacific www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues4.htm | May – Jul '03 | 25 |
| 5 | Crime and violence in the Caribbean www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues5.htm | Jul – Sep '03 | 29 |
| 6 | Exporting water in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Caribbean www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues6.htm | Sep – Dec '03 | 33 |
| 7 | Airport development in Aitutaki, Pacific www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues7.htm | Jan – Mar '04 | 21 |
| 8 | Illegal fishing in Ascension Island, Atlantic www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues8.htm | Mar – May '04 | 32 |
| 9 | Solid waste disposal in San Andres, Caribbean www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues9.htm | Jun – Aug '04 | 54 |
| 10 | Climate change in Tuvulu, Pacific www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues10.htm | Aug – Nov '04 | 40 |
| 11 | Foreign aid in the Pacific www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues11.htm | Nov – Dec '04 | 25 |
| 12 | Community Visioning, Palau, Pacific www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues12.htm | Feb – Mar '05 | 23 |
| 13 | Freshwater supplies in Fiji, Pacific www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues13.htm | Apr – Jun '05 | 65 |
| 14 | Saving for the future www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues14.htm | Jun – Aug '05 | 41 |
| 15 | Renewable energy, Vanuatu, Pacific www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/keyissues15.htm | Sep – Nov '05 | 84 |

The most popular issues were: renewable energy (No. 15), freshwater supplies (No. 13) and solid waste disposal (No. 9). However, since the number of people receiving the forum is steadily increasing, the actual number of responses most likely reflects the changing numbers of people on the list as well as the popularity or relevance of the topic. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the most popular topics are those that relate to

very specific everyday issues – water supply, energy costs and garbage disposal - that exist in all small islands.

Respondents are not asked for any personal information about themselves. At the very beginning of the forum some writers suggested that names should not be used in the forum because it might cause problems for people living in small islands where very often everyone knows everyone else. Furthermore, one non-governmental organization (NGO) informed the forum organisers that they knew of people who had been harassed for statements posted on the forum. Thus an approach was adopted and shared with forum recipients that while it was preferred that writers take ownership of their ideas, should a respondent wish to remain anonymous, then his/her preference would be respected.

Whilst no personal information is solicited, some writers include their addresses and titles, and with other responses, information such as gender, geographical location and place of employment is apparent from the signature, email address or content of the message. Using this information, it has been possible to build a general picture of the people who respond to the forum. This picture is not complete because some email addresses are not location specific and some writers use other people's addresses.

Approximately two thirds of the respondents are male (68%) and one third female (32%). This division was apparent with all but two of the topics: airport development in Aitutaki (No. 7) and community visioning in Palau (No. 12), where the gender breakdown was closer to a 50:50 division.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of respondents by region. It is interesting to note that the Pacific islands account for almost half the total responses to the forum. As mentioned by Thulstrup (2005) in an assessment of the forum in the Pacific: "SIV Global is an outlet through which even controversial opinion can be expressed outside the conventional social structures – and without fear of repercussion." The Pacific is followed by the Caribbean islands, which contributed approximately a quarter of the responses. The other significant group, besides the unknown category, is the Indian Ocean islands, which contributed 11%.

Table 2: Regional Distribution of Forum Respondents

| Region | No. of Responses | Responses as % of total |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Atlantic Ocean islands | 14 | 3 |
| Caribbean islands | 134 | 23 |
| Indian Ocean islands | 64 | 11 |
| Pacific islands | 272 | 47 |
| Other regions/unknown locations | 90 | 16 |
| Total | 574 | 100 |

The respondents were also grouped by occupational background based on signatures and addresses (when included), email addresses and information included in the text of the message. The information was classified into three main categories: (1) island-based

occupations – this category was further sub-divided; (2) regional and international organizations and universities – this category included organizations/universities in islands and continental regions; and (3) unknown.

Table 3: Occupations of Forum Respondents

| | Island-based Occupations | Regional & International Organizations & Universities | Unknown | Total |
|--|---------------------------------|--|----------------|--------------|
| No. of Respondents | 302 | 106 | 172 | 580 |
| % of Total Respondents | 52% | 18% | 30% | 100% |
| <i>Breakdown of Occupations:</i> | | | | |
| Tourism Organization | 29 - 5% | | | |
| Government Agency | 81 - 14% | | | |
| Elected Political Official | 4 - 1% | | | |
| Private Business | 43 - 7% | | | |
| Media Organization | 32 - 6% | | | |
| N G O | 78 - 13% | | | |
| Professional (lawyer, engineer, consultant...) | 35 - 6% | | | |

The fact that more than 50% of the respondents are employed in island-based occupations would suggest that the forum is reaching its target audience - internet connected islanders across the entire spectrum of occupations. It is also interesting to note that a significant number of responses come from people employed in government agencies and NGOs: 14% and 13% respectively. Island businesses, tourism fields, media organizations and professions (doctors/lawyers/consultants) are other key areas of employment of the respondents.

The media is a particularly important group because they provide an opportunity for spreading the debate to those not connected to the internet. Requests have been received from newspapers in Palau, Samoa, Seychelles, British Virgin Islands and St. Kitts and Nevis to publish some of the forum contributions. A columnist from the *New Zealand Herald* incorporated some of the debate on the solid waste issue (No. 9) into the newspaper of 20th June 2004:

“An e-mailed response to an earlier column posed the question: Do you live in a small island? If I did, I was urged to ‘tell us what you think’. I thought: ‘spam’. But something stayed my hand as it moved quickly to the delete key and I read the message through to the end. It was, in fact, an interesting discussion on a problem peculiar to the people of some island states scattered around the planet” (Stevenson, 2004).

One serious constraint of the forum is that it is conducted only in English. This effectively prevents many non-English speaking islanders from participating. Among the first responses received in 2002 was one lamenting this very fact:

“I was born in and still live in a small island archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean, the Republic of the Cape Verde Islands. We have so many problems, that we would like to talk about them with others who have identical problems. The problem is the language. We speak Portuguese and so it is not easy to communicate in English. But we try our best” (Ludgero, 2002).

Even if time were available to translate the forum topics and responses, the dilemma exists as to which island languages to select.

Views on Sustainable Island Living

The following discussion, based on the SIV Global forum, focuses on the views of islanders on various aspects of sustainable island living. It is not a quantitative assessment, rather a reflective selection of some of the more thought-provoking responses to the forum. The author is one of the moderators of the forum who reads every response, and selects and compiles those responses to be included in the posting every two-weeks.

Infrastructural Development

Four of the forum topics (No. 1, 3, 4 and 7) focused primarily on infrastructure development. The very first topic discussed on the forum dealt with a new road being built in Babeldaob, the largest island in Palau, and essentially posed the question: Are the economic benefits from the new road worth the environmental cost?

The respondents referred to the visual impact of the road: “I am a mackerel salesman and it does not require a college degree to see that when flying into Palau after rainfall the road is a major contributor to the pollution and degradation of our marine environment.” (Asanuma in Asanuma *et al.*, 2002). A few writers opposed the development, e.g. “I live in a small tropical island, Mauritius, with 1.2 million people and one of the highest population densities in the world. Our lagoon is as poor as yours due to over-fishing, mostly non-sustainable coastal development, and industrialization that has polluted the lagoon and destroyed the ecosystems. I urge you to fight against this type of development if you can” (Nayamuth in Bartram *et al.*, 2002). However, the majority of responses proposed a more moderate approach, e.g. “A road can be a treasure as well as a nightmare. If a country is prepared with the necessary mitigative and precautionary measures, a road need not be a nightmare. From my few (five) years of working in the Public Service, I have seen that when a country discusses its project with a wide range of professionals and when the department of planning/environment is willing to stand guard over development activities, the implementation of projects is more successful. (Richards in Belmar *et al.*, 2002). The general tone of the responses was that the road would be a definite economic benefit for Palau. However, the majority of the respondents emphasised that environmental concerns must be taken into account in the planning and construction of the road, and that such infrastructural developments should proceed in small incremental steps.

Another topic focused on foreign investment and asked the question whether a small island country, such as the Cook Islands, where there is full employment, actually benefits from foreign investment (Crocombe, 2003). Garland (2003) from the Turks and Caicos Islands, a small U.K. dependent territory in the Caribbean, responded thus:

“We too suffer from much of the same kind of ‘Who does the development benefit?’ theory here, where our beaches have become congested with million dollar condominiums, built for rich foreigners by overseas workers (since we don't have enough people here to provide the necessary labour force). Meanwhile, our schools have become over-populated with the kids of those overseas workers, brought in to build these so-called major developments, and it becomes the local Government, obviously the poor locals, who have to bear the cost of maintaining these schools. I'm truly of the belief that we as a country should revisit these development plans.”

This response set the tone for other writers who emphasised that very often an island government has too free a hand to negotiate away a country's property and that furthermore some islands stood to lose their unique identity as a result of foreign investment.

Tourism is a very important industry in many small islands and two of the topics focused primarily on this industry. The question was posed whether Seychelles' tourism policy should concentrate on five star beachfront resorts funded by foreign corporations? The majority of the respondents recommended a more balanced approach, such as BurrIDGE (in BurrIDGE *et al.*, 2003): “Seychelles surely needs a balanced ‘basket’ of potential markets from the five-star down to the intimate Creole guesthouse, whose design features and management should be closely integrated with – and of clear benefit to – their local communities, as well as the environment and the economy at large.”

Another topic dealt with the optimal type of tourism development for Aitutaki, a small outer island in the southern group of the Cook Islands. Again the discussion related to the scale of future tourism projects, and the majority of the respondents felt that small-scale tourism development, based on simple island lifestyles, was most appropriate for outer islands.

Common sense pervades many of the responses and discussions and it is impossible in this paper to capture all the examples. One response waxed lyrical as it conceptualised a type of tourism based on the island way of life: “Islands add light and reality to the natural wonder of creation. Tourism poses a dilemma: whether to invite more people and therefore more cash and destruction, or to stop the tourists coming and lose their dollars. A third option might be to open our shores, allow visitors to live and dwell as close as can be to the island way of life. Nothing lush will have to be added. Only then would we see the real tourists coming” (Tabokai in Gerhartz *et al.*, 2003).

The overall consensus coming out of these discussions is that islanders feel that infrastructural development is of benefit to their islands. They welcome the economic

benefits of new roads, and airports. However, when it comes to tourism development, they favour a smaller scale hotel rather than a large resort, and they want to take things slowly keeping overall control in their own hands. Furthermore, with all developments, they are very conscious of environmental issues and wish to see the necessary safeguards taken to maintain healthy environments.

Resource Management

Four of the topics addressed various aspects of resource management: water (No. 6, 13) beaches (No. 2) and fisheries (No. 8). On the issue of beach management and keeping beaches open to the public, the responses were overwhelmingly in favour of having unrestricted public access to all beaches. Respondents from the Caribbean were particularly vocal on this issue, such as:

“Residents of Barbuda, sister island to Antigua, had to resort to using bulldozers to tear down the fences and other barricades. The authorities were silent on the matter but the will and determination of 1,200 residents of Barbuda prevailed” (Marjorie in Gosling *et al.*, 2002).

The responses also illustrated differences in land tenure among the regions, e.g. in the Pacific traditional customs exist whereby a certain village is responsible for a coastal/beach area and has the power to restrict outsiders from these areas (Koche, 2003).

Two discussion topics dealt with water resources in small islands (Nos. 6 and 13). The debate about exporting bottled water brought out differences in the size of an island. Taukolo (in Raj *et al.*, 2003) wrote:

“I am of the opinion that it depends on ‘how small an island’ you are talking about. Water is a business that can be handled by locals - Fiji has done it with Fiji water - and they're not doing too badly either. I think this is a business that can be managed locally, perhaps as a joint-venture with full consultation between the overseas partner, government, non-governmental organizations and the villagers.”

However, views were different on smaller islands. George wrote:

“Kosrae State in the Federated States of Micronesia is considering a foreign investment proposal for a water-bottling project. Kosrae is a small volcanic island, only 42 sq. miles in size with a growing population. The water consumption and use at the local community level is increasing every year. Our water resource is a gift from God for our use, not for foreign investors who are constantly looking for opportunities to exploit our resources and make lots of money from them” (in Biumaiono *et al.*, 2003).

The response from Kosrae is particularly interesting since the writer, Andy George, Director of the Kosrae Conservation and Safety Organization in the Federated States of

Micronesia, after reading and contributing to the discussion on bottled water, was inspired to consider UNESCO's approaches to environment and development issues further and expressed interest in helping one of Kosrae's local communities set up a Biosphere Reserve. After two years of work by the community and the Kosrae Conservation and Safety Organization, the Utwe Biosphere Reserve was approved by the UNESCO *Man and the Biosphere* Bureau in July 2005 as the Pacific's first Biosphere Reserve (Thulstrup, 2005). This is one example of where the forum has had a positive and measurable impact.

In consultation with the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission, a topic on water cuts in Fiji (Newspaper article, 2005) was featured to coincide with World Water Day in 2005. This shows the way in which the SIV Global forum can work with other organizations to bring particular issues to the public's attention.

Environmental Issues

A resident from San Andres Archipelago (Colombia) wrote to the forum asking for help:

“We are now swimming in excessive garbage, with the threat of health epidemics that will be harmful to our children, youth and old people, and without any appropriate management in sight. I would like to hear from other islands, how they manage excessive garbage” (Mitchell, 2004).

This started a heated debate among islanders from as far apart as the Aran Islands (off the coast of Ireland) to American Samoa in the South Pacific, contributing 54 separate responses describing their problems and approaches to solid waste management (Cambers, 2004b). The debate concluded with a contribution from some students in the Bahamas, sent by their teacher:

“Our story has a happy ending - as of three weeks ago there will never be any more burning of garbage on our island! Our beautiful serene island can once again have clean air surrounding it. We wish all islands which have similar problems the best of luck in getting your officials to accept other methods of getting rid of your garbage other than stockpiling it on your island, or dumping it in the sea, or burning and spreading toxic fumes. Remember, we students can become involved - after all we will inherit what is left of these islands and personally, we want them to remain clean, green and serene” (Hope Town students in Hope Town students *et al.*, 2004).

The discussion on climate change following the article by Hanley (2004) was in many ways one of the most controversial debates, with a large number of different perspectives, from total denial to total outrage. Responses ranged from Ausiy, writing from Zanzibar:

“I think to talk about climate change is the same as talking about life on Mars. Let's talk about serious things like poverty. I believe most of the residents of these islands are poor. If somebody is hungry and you give him [*sic*] food, you

have helped him. It is better to deal with the things that the people need” (in Ausiy *et al.*, 2004).

To this comment by Prasad:

“Rising sea level is indeed a core concern for the Pacific island countries. It is equivalent to or even more threatening than terrorism. I imagine that putting a sudden stop to the greenhouse gas emissions would not immediately eliminate the problem, if indeed it was possible” (in Beggs *et al.*, 2004).

It was interesting that while some responses lamented the actions of the industrialized countries regarding their greenhouse gas emissions, many islanders focused on what they themselves could do to mitigate the problem. Proposed actions ranged from coral reef restoration (Goreau *et al.*, 2004) to replacing diesel fuels with vegetable oils (Beggs *et al.*, 2004). This characteristic of islanders relying on themselves is perhaps one of the traits that distinguish people living in small islands from those residing in larger continental countries. For as Wulf (in Ausiy *et al.*, 2004) says:

“For Samoa we are doing our best to adapt to these new changes [climate change and sea level rise]. Helping communities to help themselves. We need assistance from the developed countries and they should be forced to assist us, providing financial means to help the most vulnerable adapt. However, our only hope is ourselves, we cannot depend on those who cause the problem and turn their back. We should utilize our own resources and our expertise, be well prepared and ready. Maybe then there will be less panicking.”

The forum discussion on disaster relief (Tuiloma-Palesoo, 2004) initiated a similar discussion, namely that islanders need to integrate modern trends with traditional knowledge so as to prepare and build resilience during and after disasters. Turpin (in Amos *et al.*, 2004) emphasised this point:

“In Tobago, torrential rains caused massive landslides in the north, cutting us off for days, with no communication, no water, no power, ice and food running out. After the initial shock, everyone pitched in to help. However, there is an attitude to expect the government to do everything for us. This is not good. Greater preparation is needed and with the changes in global climate, we can expect a lot more disasters.”

Social and Economic Issues

In some ways all of the forum discussions encompass social and economic concerns of islanders. However, there were three discussion topics that focused specifically on these areas: increased crime and violence (No. 5), saving for the future (No. 14) and substituting coconut oil for diesel fuel (No. 15).

The discussion on crime and violence, an immensely complex subject, was extremely interesting with coverage of many different aspects, from harsher penalties to the impact of the media and the power of listening. Mommsen (2003) concisely summarised an island approach to this problem:

“There are influences inside and outside the island community that promote harmony and violence. To understand what those influences are and to act constructively to bring more peace and less disruption to the community requires everyone’s cooperation - top to bottom. Focus has to be on that which is in your control. The village needs to reinforce the foundations of moral behaviour in the family, the schools, and in its own honest behaviour - for no generation will follow the rules of a hypocritical role model. The young are influenced more by what you do then what you say.”

The topic dealing with sustainable development and saving for the future generated an interesting discussion on population growth. Some islanders described their problems of overpopulation, such as Mitchell (in Mitchell *et al.*, 2005):

“Today, the Archipelago of San Andres, Providence and Santa Catalina, a part of Colombia, is experiencing the uncontrolled migration and continuous residence by citizens from mainland Colombia, and displacing us as a people from our own homeland. This has been ongoing since 1953, when our territory was declared a free port, and is resulting in an alarming increase in population.”

While on other islands, maintaining a viable population may be the issue:

“Here in the Federated States of Micronesia the net population increase between 1994 and 2000, as the census shows, is nearly zero. Emigration has solved whatever problems of uncontrolled growth we once had. We ought to concentrate now on more serious issues - like suicide” (Santos in Leys *et al.*, 2005).

Perhaps not surprisingly the discussion on the substitution of coconut oil for diesel fuel (Deamer *et al.*, 2005) generated the largest number of responses. In a time of rising fuel prices, everyone was interested in finding ways to save money. The use of coconut oil as an engine fuel was a new concept for many islanders, some of whom were accustomed to using coconut oil for hair preparations and medicines:

“But how could we get gallons of this oil, at what price, when here [Puerto Rico] a little bottle of coconut oil (maybe 2 oz.) is sold for hair preparations at almost a dollar? Who would start this type of industry?” (Font in Early *et al.*, 2005).

The discussion quickly showed that several Pacific islands were quite advanced in using coconut oil as a substitute for diesel, for example in heavy equipment and ocean-going vessels in the Marshall Islands; and for power generation in Fiji and Samoa (DeTerville *et al.*, 2005). Islanders from temperate latitudes displayed an interest:

“Given global warming, perhaps it is now time for countries in temperate areas (New Zealand where I live is one) to find the types of coconut trees that can transplant successfully. We have now successfully begun olive tree plantations – is there any information that olive oil is also suitable for replacing diesel fuel?” (Hohepa in Currie *et al.*, 2005).

On a very practical note, Marjoram (in Currie *et al.*, 2005) pointed out:

“Apart from technical and economic considerations, one other point is that following vehicles using coconut oil is quite a pleasure due to the beautiful smell, rather than the unpleasant hassle of following smelly, smoky trucks.”

Several islanders responded with suggestions for utilizing other forms of renewable energy that would certainly be more sustainable than fossil fuels and possibly also cheaper (Fox *et al.*, 2005).

Conclusions

Among the key conclusions arising from this reflective overview of the discussions on the SIV Global forum is the fact that islanders are very willing to speak out about a variety of issues relating to sustainable island living. The SIV Global forum has provided a space to talk, to share problems and propose solutions, to put forward controversial views without fears of retribution, and most of all to learn from other islands. Islanders are able to relate easily to other islanders, regardless of culture or geographical location.

The people responding to the forum topics, despite coming from a variety of occupational backgrounds, are well informed about the issues facing their islands. Although the views put forward may often be conflicting, they are nearly always well thought through – indicating that respondents have read the forum topics and responses, thought about their content, and then responded.

Common sense and logical thinking also permeate the responses. Solutions proposed to particular problems are nearly always practical and relevant to the scale of what is feasible in a small island.

Respondents to the forum are well aware that finding the right balance between their limited resources and future economic development is critical, and that furthermore this balance is constantly changing both within islands and over time.

Overall, there are two inter-linked traits that stand out. Firstly, respondents showed a deep love for their island homes and a caring attitude about how their islands should develop in the future. Problems and issues are acknowledged, as solutions and positive approaches are sought. There was little tendency to place the blame for these issues on outside factors. Secondly, respondents displayed a willingness to try and solve island problems themselves, although they sometimes acknowledged outside help was required.

It is this desire for positive change and for making it happen that makes reading the SIV Global forum so enriching and rewarding.

A response to the forum, sent in 2002 by the Vice-President of Palau, Sandra S. Pierantozzi, illustrates many of these conclusions:

“Yes, we are very concerned about the environmental degradation from the Compact Road. However, let us not close our eyes to the very fact that some of the worst environmental degraders are Palauans themselves! I just returned today from the inauguration at Ngarchelong. On the way, I can see damages to the environment such as the rock quarries and coral dredging. Some of these activities are not directly related to the road project, and they are also being conducted by our own local people. Sometimes, it is so easy to point fingers at others; but if the people of Palau do not wish to have their land destroyed, they should be the first to protect it, not exploit it” (Pierantozzi, 2002).

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization which initiated and continues to support the *Small Islands Voice* initiative; to those involved in the Small Islands Voice Global forum: Fathimath Ghina, Claire Green, Jennifer Heath, Khalissa Ikhlef, Stephanie Ledauphin, Hans Thulstrup, Michael Tran, Dirk Troost, Michelle Verkooy; to *Scotland On Line* for hosting the forum and its mailing list; and to Pynee Chellapermal for providing comments.

References

Amos, M., Jackson, V., Nair, T. & Turpin, P. (2004) Surviving Natural Disasters, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=84

Asanuma, S., Conrich, B., Emaurois, C., Iroga, R. & writer from Tuvalu. (2002) Further Views on the Palau Road, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=9

Ausiy, H., Harries, C., Harris, P. & Wulf, V. (2004) Climate Change – Less Panicking, more Action, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=76

Bartram, D., Heinin, R., Nayamuth, R. & Silvers, J. (2002) Balancing Development and Environment, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=6

Beggs, E., Prasad, S., Ward, J. (2004) Three different Ideas for Action on Climate Change, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=72

Belmar, H., Isamu, T., Johnson, J., Pilcher, N., Richards, L., Rod & Szyjan, R. (2002) Controlling Development, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=7

Biumaiono, S., George, A., Maneniaru, J. & Tebano, T. (2003) Island Water Resources are too Precious to Export, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=46

Burridge, G., Singh, S., writer from Nevis. (2003) Balancing different Types of Tourism Accommodation, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=22

Cambers, G. (2003) *Small Islands Voice: Laying the Foundation*. Coastal Region and Small Island Papers No. 13, Paris, UNESCO, www.unesco.org/csi/pub/papers2/siv.htm

Cambers, G. (2004a) *Small Islands Voice: Voices in a Changing World*. Coastal Region and Small Island Papers No. 16, Paris, UNESCO, www.unesco.org/csi/pub/papers3/world.htm

Cambers, G. (2004b) Compilation of Responses to Topic 9: Solid Waste Disposal in San Andres, www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/Comp9garbage.htm

Commonwealth Secretariat and The World Bank (2000) *Small States: Meeting Challenges in the Global Economy*. London, Report of the Commonwealth Secretariat/World Bank Joint Task Force on Small States.

Crocombe, R. (2003) Foreign Investment: Who needs it? SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=30

Currie, J., Hohepa, P., Innocent, P., Marjoram, T., Mitchell, D., Mohammed & Sitiveni, I. (2005) Getting started with Coconut Oil, SIV Global forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=122

Deamer, T. & Etuati, K. (2005) Alternatives to rising Oil Prices, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=116

DeTerville, A., Hertel, U., Johnson, G., Probert, H., Williams, D. (2003) Pacific Islands showing the Way with Coconut Oil, SIV Global forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=120

Early, R. & Font, M. (2005) Using Coconut Oil as an Engine Fuel, SIV Global forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=118

Fox, L., Hamlet, L., Sabra, Sahayam, Seeto, J. & Voi, M. (2005) Energy Sources in our own Backyard, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=124

Garland, A. (2003) Fostering Development Where It Matters: The Turks and Caicos Islands, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=32

Gerhartz, J., Mitchell, D., Naylor, R. & Tabokai, T. (2004) The 'island-way' of doing things, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=54

Gosling, G., Grant, G., Marjorie, Maureen, Moore, J., McKinnon, J. & Taripo, J. (2002) Support from around the World for keeping Beaches open to the Public, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=15

Goreau, T., Lee, C., Suaesi, T. & Tebano, T. (2004) Are we Panicking about Climate Change? SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=74

Hanley, C. (2004) Climate is changing – What can we do? Adapted from 'Mercury and tides climb, as climate change rises on global agenda,' San Juan Star, Puerto Rico, 23 May 2004 and posted on SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=70

Hope Town students, Mitchell, D., Wagner, J. (2004) Clean, green and serene – a message from island youth, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=68

Koche, A. (2003) Response in Compilation of Responses to Topic 2: Beach Access in Tobago, www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/Beaches.rtf

Leys, G., McMurray, C., Santos, O. & Vernon (2005) Balancing People and Resources, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=112

Ludgero. (2002) Response in Compilation of Responses to Topic 1: Road Development in Palau. www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/compilation_responsesforkeyissues.rtf

Mitchell, D. (2004) Solving Island Garbage Problems, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=61

Mitchell, D. & Szmant, A. (2005) Controlling Population Growth, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=110

Mommsen, B. (2003) Breaking the Cycle of Crime and Violence, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=42

Newspaper article. (2005) Water Cuts normal for Consumers in Fiji. Adapted from *Fiji Times*, 7 February 2005 and posted on SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=96

Pierantozzi, S. (2002) Response in Compilation of Responses to Topic 1: Road Development in Palau, www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/compilation_responsesforkeyissues.rtf

Radway, S. (2002) Development at any Cost. Adapted from *Pacific Daily News*, 25 March 2002 and posted on SIV Global forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=1

Raj, S., Taukolo, S., Tebano, T. (2003) Success Stories from Pacific Islands about exporting Water, SIV Global Forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=45

Stevenson, P. (2004) Notes from Small Islands on Rising Tides of Rubbish, *New Zealand Herald*, 20 July, www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/Forum/NZherald.htm

Thulstrup, H. (2005) Impact of SIV Global in the Pacific, www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/inter-reg/SIVplanmeet-svg3e_Thulstrup.ppt in G. Cambers, ed. *Communities in Action: Sharing the Experience*. Report on 'Mauritius Strategy Implementation: Small Islands Voice Planning Meeting,' Bequia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, July 2005, www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/inter-reg/SIVplanmeet-svg3.htm

Tuiloma-Palesoo, D. (2004) Handout Mentality, SIV Global forum, www.sivglobal.org/?read=82

UN Report of Mauritius International Meeting to Review the Implementation of Programme of Action for Sustainable Development of SIDS, (A/CONF.207/11), 2005, http://portal.unesco.org/en/file_download.php/5388cf680b40a260bf6bd5ca4dd30ba1MauritiusReport.pdf

UNESCO Coastal Regions and Small Islands Platform. (2005) Report on Youth Visioning for Island Living. Phases 1 and 2. Report prepared for the Lighthouse Foundation, www.unesco.org/csi/YV/documents/Youth%20Visioning%20Report.pdf