



On Islanders

George Putz

Inhabited islands are something like aquaria. They are capable of self-maintenance, but like an aquarium, their functional components lack diversity, and are continually stressed. Compared to a continental community, there are fewer eco-options or strategies by which an island community can adjust to changes. The kinds of history Maine islands are experiencing today are not evolutionary. They are impulsive and vigorous, and for all the difficulties of adjustment people are having in mainland towns, they are nothing compared to those being faced by islanders. That an island's human community is like an aquarium is not simply a metaphor or analogue, for social life on an island is quite literally life in a goldfish bowl.

The list of islander characteristics is familiar; but in each case the features are written larger and more stark in an island context:

Independence — small boats and social circles demand it if a personality is to survive.

Loyalty — ultimate mutual care and generosity, even between ostensible enemies.

A strong sense of honor, easily betrayed.

Polydextrous and multifaceted competence, or what islanders call handiness.

A belligerent sense of competition, interlaced with vigilant cooperation.

Traditional frugality with bursts of spectacular exception.

Earthy common sense.

Opinionated machismo in both the male and female mode.

Live-and-let-live tolerance of eccentricity.

Fragile discretion within a welter of gossip.

Highly individualized blends of spirituality and superstition.

Above: Peter Ralston
Skeet MacDonald, Isle au Haut



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A complex oral tradition, with long memories fueled by a mix of responsible record-keeping and nostalgia.

And finally, a canny literacy and intelligence.

Until the late 1950s the maritime economic focus of the island I moved to fit the traditional values and character most people associate with self-reliant islanders. Central to this fitness was the ability to create and maintain virtually everything required for an equitable and ordinary life — houses, food, clothing, boats, equipment and gear, entertainment and fun. If you could not make it yourself, it was readily acquirable by trade in time and kind.

Many things conspired to end this fit; most particularly advances in several mainland technologies. Small gas engines grew into the Chevy-Olds family of V-8 engine blocks; there was an explosion in electronic navigation and communication technology; and, finally, synthetic fibers, coatings, and plastics all helped encourage an irreversible shift from labor- to capital-intensive efforts. And with capital comes accounting, and a vastly more complicated participation in the world of the mainland. What you once made, you must now buy. What once you repaired, is now placed in the hands of a specialist.

Islanders are also adapting to rapid changes in the seasonal community, and the inevitable growth of tourism.

Caretaking and maintenance jobs become increasingly available options, though attended of course by a general propensity to care less about the property of others, as increasingly “others” exist

outside the circle of community sentiment.

I suspect most readers of this publication love islands and have a deep place in their heart for their inhabitants. Yet many of those same hearts believe that conventional seasonal tourist-based development can benefit Mane island towns. Yet, for the life of me, I can't see how that can work. Tourism, in particular, is a direct anathema to everything that allows islands to function with community integrity. It's one thing to live in a goldfish bowl with neighbors that share generations of curious history; it's quite another to be behind an aquarium glass for the entertainment of total strangers.

My own suspicion is that the growth of seasonal tourism fundamentally betrays a sense of pace; of island time.

Islanders feel isolated, because they are isolated; and the consequent reticence and sense of irony that comes out of this isolation was much more compatible with the aspirations of the rusticators and pilgrims of old, than with the active, can-do, do-good inclinations of the modern visitor, seasonal resident, bored-but-hyperactive retiree, not to mention full time midlife transplants with firm notions of what's good for other people.

Hospitality has always been nearly a religion on islands, but it now must compromise itself and become ever more choosy as islanders have to know in advance, for instance, which visitors appreciate the smell and sounds of maritime work.

It is, at the very least, bad manners to care about any aspect of an island and its phenomena,



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without caring also about its people — past, present, and future; not with sympathy and patronization, but rather with empathy and plain honesty. It is for good reason that many, if not most, conservation and preservation efforts are viewed as a kind of class predation by islanders. Until interested personnel in conservation and research understand islanders, whole realms of knowledge and experience simply will not be open to study. Ninety percent of the useful information to come out of island study is known already, scattered through the hearts and minds, attics and backyards of islanders. Much of the vast material is yet to be discovered by researchers.

What is at stake in the midst of the furious pace of these changes?

First, islanders are among the last Americans who as a group can presume their sense of place;

Second, islanders are hunters and gatherers by tradition and instinct. Within bounds of strictly understood codes of decency, the world and its inhabitants are resources.

Third, and in apparent contradiction to the above, islanders are extraordinarily good and assiduous nurturers and husbanders. The usual outsider's impression that commercial fishermen are strictly exploiters fails to notice the fact that lobstering has become mariculture.

Fourth, the feelings of isolation and the uncanny sensitivity to signs of a change in the weather and what it can bring, gives islanders an unusually keen sensibility to natural history.

Fifth, there is a self-consciousness about islandness among islanders. I call it cellarhole melancholy. This is a generalized sense of loss, of what could have been, of what probably happened that shouldn't have; of the blood, sweat, and tears that permeates every foot of island rock, soil, and beach.

Sixth, island institutions are deep and traditionally effective, for they seldom operate solely for the advantage of their members. What is gained in them is a celebration of identity and fellowship. They are a blend of romanticism, of oral literature, of forum, of unity in rites, of security, sharing, of wit, art, commiseration — all the truly important things in life.

Seventh, there are the heritages, used symbolically on islands on a daily basis with all their myths, habits and stories, incumbent skills, traditions and uses. There is a lifetime of study and work in these heritages: fishing, boats, and boatbuilding. Quarrying and stonework. Farming and forestry. Architecture and community design. Arts and literature. Trail and shores. Hunting, gathering and folk crafts. Even science. For all island towns have their archaeologists, rockhounds, birders, flower pressers, woodlot managers, whale watchers, and so on, and many of them are doing first-class work. Islanders share a common sense with other islanders worldwide, in much the same way that scientists share a

common sense worldwide on such things as denotation, logic, control, and proof.

America needs her islanders. It is, of course, fatuous and arrogant to speak of preserving island communities. The die is cast and history shall have its way. But there is still in the Maine archipelago, and on islands elsewhere, an intact vision of the world which differs from that of others and which offers not merely diversity and its advantages, but a sensibility about the world that the world could use, since citizens everywhere are coming to realize that the earth itself is an island. In this sense, mainlanders are the pre-Copernicans, and islanders are the most sophisticated, modern, and up-to-date. Islanders know about islandness and all of us should have some of this imprinted on our consciousness.

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