

## **Extreme Tourism: Lessons from the World’s Cold Water Islands**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Take a typical book on Island Tourism (Conlin & Baum, 1995). The cover shows a young couple frolicking in knee-deep, crystal-clear water, with sun-drenched sand and a beach resort under clear and cloudless blue skies in the background. Only one out of nine chapters dedicated to ‘management practice’ deals with a ‘cold water’ location (Corner Brook, in Newfoundland); and out of 93 different islands or island regions listed in its index, only five can be considered, with some generosity, as ‘cold water’ ones (Antarctica, Falklands, Newfoundland, New Zealand & Prince Edward Island).

The image of tourist destinations as alluring undiscovered paradises has much to do with islands. But these images or tropes are based on one crucial premise - warm climates. So, for example, “...the natural beauty and attractive climate of many island states have enabled them to develop a relatively large tourist industry, by exploiting the advantages bestowed upon them by nature.” (Briguglio, 1996, p. xii). Nature is not always seen as benign: indeed, nature may appear as the principal, insurmountable enemy to a tourism industry. The “mass market practice common in islands” (McElroy & de Albuquerque, 1992) assumes that all islands are warm water islands. Not so.

As one moves away from the tropical through the temperate to the frigid regions of the globe, the ‘paradise myth’ as tourist package is harder, and eventually simply impossible, to justify. Or is it? And if we have been socialized into expecting islands to be malleable, erotic, exotic – as represented in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Johann David Wyss’ *Swiss Family Robinson*, Jules Verne’s *Mysterious Island* (as texts), *Blue Lagoon*, *Live and Let Die*, *Castaway* (as films) and *Big Brother* (as TV serial) – then what would be the cold water equivalent of such islands (Baldacchino, 1997, pp. 58-60; Baldacchino, 2004)? Or is this characterization still waiting to be invented?

## Rationale

Take a typical book on Island Tourism (Conlin & Baum, 1995). The cover shows a young couple frolicking in knee-deep, crystal-clear water, with sun-drenched sand and a beach resort under clear and cloudless blue skies in the background. Only one out of nine chapters dedicated to ‘management practice’ deals with a ‘cold water’ location (Corner Brook, in Newfoundland); and out of 93 different islands or island regions listed in its index, only five can be considered, with some generosity, as ‘cold water’ ones (Antarctica, Falklands, Newfoundland, New Zealand & Prince Edward Island).

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## Eight Key Themes

Tourism is a space-time phenomenon. It concerns activities and experiences entered into at specific locations and for specific time-periods. Cold water islandness is bound to affect both these variables (e.g.: Miller, 1999). In what way? With what implications to the tourism industry? Key, research interrogatives include the following eight themes.

1. – In spite of the voluminous text that has been written about the subject, understanding what is the island “lure” (Lockhart, 1997), or what is it exactly that attracts visitors to islands and ‘islandness’ remains “speculative” (Baum, 2000, p. 215). The physical remove from the mainland, necessitating a conscious decision to cross the water, the chance to get away from it all in a slower-paced environment, and the ability to seek to take in the totality of a destination are presented as three explanations for the inherently distinct adventurism of a trip to an island, especially a *small* island (Baum, 2000, pp. 215-216). How do islands on the extremities of the Earth’s geography and climate seek to promote themselves as tourism destinations, and develop a tourism product? The myth/imagery of the island as paradise has been a powerful one (e.g. King, 1993; Harrison, 2001); so has the discourse of the frontier (Dann, 1996). What

happens when these images are combined? And is the result compatible with the type of tourism that is desirable and appropriate to the locality and its people?

2. – Prevailing weather conditions may be less significant features to visitors to cold water islands than to other locations, since most activities are not highly weather dependent and in some cases – such as angling and bird watching – may actually depend on *adverse* weather conditions (Butler, 1996, pp. 23-24). Small numbers of visitors with very special interests tend to be attracted. To what extent do ‘cold water tourists’ exist as a tourist ‘type’ (after Cohen, 1972)? And how do they differ, if at all, from their warm water cousins?
3. - Given their extreme and insular location, and shorn of the ‘paradise’ hype of sun, sand, sea (and sex?), islands on the top and bottom of the world can be seen as absolutely the most remote and foreboding destinations on the planet. Their appeal appears naturally limited with respect to the conventional mass market. The islanders themselves, of course, may beg to differ. Or would they? Is this condition actually a great advantage in (self-) regulating tourism flows and in preventing an often-irreversible route towards mass tourism and the serious erosion of fragile island ecosystems that so many other destinations have gone for, by design or default? (McElroy & de Albuquerque, 2002, p. 22). After all, “...while it may be desirable that access be improved for local benefit, such steps may well remove the greatest asset that an island may have in controlling the numbers, type and scale of tourism development” (Butler, 1996, pp. 16-17). Their appeal may relate to the “very real feeling of separateness and difference, caused in part to they being physically separate, and perhaps therefore different from adjoining mainlands” (Butler, 1993, p. 71). Jurisdictional specificity (such as being a sovereign state or being a province) can be expected to enhance such a condition of differentiation and, therefore, of intrinsic appeal. Remoteness and insularity also combine to craft tourism destinations whose jurisdiction is not ‘conventional’ – they include special administrative regions, autonomies and other forms of unique political status, like Svalbard (WWF, 2001) and Antarctica (Bauer & Dowling, 2003).
4. – The idea of ‘distance decay’ suggests that the extent of spatial interaction is inversely related to distance (Tobler, 1970). Now, access to islands is usually “... complicated, expensive, hazardous, time-consuming, irregular and unreliable, or any combination of the above” (Butler, 1996, p. 16): leading to expectations of low tourism interest and presence. To what extent should access to islands be mitigated or changed? To what extent is this changing anyway, irrespective of human planning (for example, because of global warming)? What brand of economic development, what means of (air/land/sea) transportation and infrastructure (or mix thereof) lend themselves to a ‘wise’ tourism strategy? Or are such decisions taken with other concerns in mind, and tourism policy is only ‘muddled through’?
5. - Small islands are characterized by “... resource and market scarcity and intense openness” (McElroy & de Albuquerque, 2002, p. 17). This suggests that changes brought about by an exogenous (external) variable such as tourism will be rapid, deep and intimate. Intense openness also means that a small island economy can quickly become dependent on the tourism industry with visitors from faraway, foreign lands and their often fickle tastes and erratic vagaries: a hazardous proposition. Moreover,

the policies and practices of just one tour operator, one airline, perhaps one hotel, could make or break the tourism industry. Service providers in the industry, as with other industries on the cold water location, tend towards being oligopoly or monopoly providers. Is there such a volatility and boom-bust orientation in the tourism industry of cold water islands? Is there a tendency towards concentration of capital, skill or service? With what effects?

6. Specific tourist types are concerned with a search for the novel and the authentic (e.g. MacCannell, 1989). Islands, like frontier regions, have a particular appeal to those tourist types keen on natural environments, traditional cultures, unorthodox scenarios. If the tourism ‘area cycle’ evolutionary model generally holds (*after* Butler, 1980), then the last ‘raw’ outposts of civilization to be discovered by the tourism industry (*after* King, 1997) could be assumed to be these cold water island locations that would (barring the effects of global warming) most likely enjoy the industry’s latest –and final? – boom. As communities in destination regions face the downside of tourism, and as tourists become dismayed at the non-primitive and/or non-authentic character of the natives, the urge to seek out even more remote, genuine, pristine and extreme locations remains strong (Butler, 2002, p.5). It may be just a question of time before all corners of the world are fully integrated into a global tourism vice, as technology continues to make the world smaller and ore accessible. But, it’s a big IF. What if a small, cold-water island has a totally different competitive advantage which suggests its own evolutionary pattern? Can such locations develop their own response to the “changing spatial patterns of nternational tourism” (Williams, 1998)? Is the ‘island as a prison’ its greatest, ltime asset (*after* Royle, 2001, p. 224)?
7. If this is the case, then “their relative inaccessibility, the absence of much evelopment and the presence of few other tourists” (Butler, 2002, p. 5) have been features of the competitive tourism advantage of cold water islands. But this also means that the scale and type of tourism and its development must be closely managed. This may be easier to do in frontier sites where land area is typically large and population levels minimal. In contrast, on small islands, land is finite and the contact between tourists and local residents is impossible to avoid, and potentially tense. Local residents may have needs that run counter to arguments about their own tourism industry’s sustainability; land use conflicts are also more likely (e.g. Latimer, 1985).
8. A final comment concerns the political. Extreme island regions may lie on the political periphery, especially when they have small populations: un/underrepresented in he corridors of power; largely forgotten by centralized policy makers suffering from ‘the urban bias’; dismissed as insignificant backwaters other than, perhaps, in strategic terms. These features may, in themselves, suggest a precarious status which attracts a bold tourist elite (Butler, 2002); but they may also bring about the haphazard and dependent development of a tourism industry which suffers from benign domestic neglect: with non-domestic tourist visitors being catered for by non-local businesses. The long-term consequences of such a condition may not be pleasant.

## Conclusion

In summary, there is certainly scope to look at the world's cold-water islands, in both extreme northern and southern latitudes, as a category of tourism destinations. The comparative and critical perspective afforded by an 'island studies' approach is bound to suggest a series of insights and nuances pertaining to this category of destinations that may have, so far, not been recognized as a distinct category for research purposes.

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