

Islands in history and geography

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The main objective of this contribution to the environmental history spring school is to discuss the use of metaphors in various (related) disciplines (see Demeritt 1994 for background) and approaches for examining the relationships between the historical island environment and people. I aim to provide examples pertinent for exploring the production of knowledge about people–environment relations and heritage issues.

Island metaphor has often been used to describe bounded communities striking a balance with their environment by complicated economic and social means. Islands are also easily interpreted in holistic perspective in the spirit of the romantic mystique of the self-sufficient, autonomous, emotionally and aesthetically rewarding ‘little community’. Robert Netting (2008, 309) has called such simplifications that overemphasise functional integration, stability, and regulatory mechanisms within the community and neglect to consider disequilibrium, changes emanating from more inclusive political-economic systems, and instances of evolutionary maladaptation ‘ecosystemic fallacy’. Another widespread approach to environmental history is constructing environmental narratives — stories of apparently inconvertible logic — that link together various assumptions and give them credibility by diffusing and stabilising them. Yet Fairhead and Leach (1998) have demonstrated that what these narratives explain so successfully may actually have not taken place. They argue that the basic flaw is in the methodologies that deduce the nature of past vegetation from observations of present landscapes. In addition, environmental and heritage studies are often informed by current values and assessments and consider the past conditions insufficiently. In juxtaposing controversial and contradictory (hi-)stories of two small Estonian islands (Kessulaid and Osmussaar), a spectrum of assumptions about the island past are critically examined by taking a counterfactual approach to the island history that might have been side-by-side with that can be extracted from the historical documents (maps) and the island environments (see also Gilbert & Lambert 2010).

Further reading and references

Demeritt, D. (1994) The nature of metaphors in cultural geography and environmental history, *Progress in Human Geography* 18 (2), 163-185.

Fairhead, J. & Leach, M. (1998) *Reframing Deforestation. Global Analysis and Local Realities: Studies in West Africa*. Routledge, London and New York.

Gilbert, D. & Lambert, D. (2010) Counterfactual geographies: worlds that might have been, *Journal of Historical Geography* 36, 245-252.

Netting, R. McC. (2008) Links and boundaries: reconsidering the Alpine Village as Ecosystem. In: Dove, M.R. & Carpenter, C. (eds) *Environmental Anthropology. A Historical Reader*, 309-318. Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA.