

# A Strategic Review of ISISA



## Rationale

ISISA celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014. The Association is recharged from a very successful and richly interdisciplinary conference in Penghu. A newly elected Executive Committee includes many fresh faces and lots of enthusiasm. ISISA's membership, some 100 strong, has added many new members and some interesting proposals and ideas have been tabled for consideration. These circumstances are just right to have ISISA undergo a strategic review.

## Preamble: Why?

A strategic review is a useful exercise which obliges a rethink of what an organisation has been doing and whether it should continue to do more of the same, revise, or extend its remit to other areas of interest and operation.

Since 1998, ISISA has continued to hold its 'Islands of the World' (IOW) conferences biennially, in association with local partners in different island regions across the globe. Over the years ISISA's efforts have expanded and now include: a website, courtesy of the University of Hawai'i Maui College (<https://maui.hawaii.edu/isisa/>); a regular newsletter twice yearly; an active list-serve ([isisa@yahoo.com](mailto:isisa@yahoo.com)); a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Isisa-International-Small-Islands-Studies-Association/126009170815354>); a Twitter handle (<https://twitter.com/IntSISA>); the support of intermediate conferences; the endorsement of select publications; and the adoption of *Island Studies Journal* (ISJ) as the official journal of ISISA ([www.islandstudies.ca/journal](http://www.islandstudies.ca/journal)).

These developments have largely been adopted piecemeal. There has been limited organizational planning or reflection on the current and future role of ISISA in the changing contexts for islands and island studies.

ISLAND STUDIES is more mainstream than in 1994, when ISISA was formally established. We no longer spend much time writing papers and making statements defending and justifying our pursuits. Developments in the field of island studies include at least four scholarly journals that publish 'island studies', numerous books that are dedicated to islands and island studies (many written by ISISA members); a host of special journal issues dedicated to things island; and various programmes at universities across the globe that advance island studies teaching and research. More organisations now operate in the broad terrain of island studies/nissology and related

policy and research, including: **GIN**, the Global Islands Network, launched – during an ISISA Conference – in 2002; **SICRI**, the Small Island Cultures Research Initiative, founded in 2004; **GLISPA**, the Global Islands Partnership supported by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, established in 2005; the Island Commission of the International Geographical Union (**IGU**), approved in 2006; and **RETI**, the Network of Island Universities, formed in 2010. Various countries also have their own policy or scholarly initiatives, ranging from the Japan Society for Island Studies (JSIS), and the World Association for Island Studies (WAIS) (Korea); to the Irish Islands Federation and the Islands Commission of the Committee for Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR), a lobby group within the European Union.

As the world's oldest, global, island studies organisation, ISISA would now do well to reflect on the circumstances in which it finds itself today, and decide, soberly what's next, the context of its mandate, and its human and material resource availability.

### **Five Topics for Consideration**

The five themes below were identified by the 13-person newly elected ISISA Executive at the end of 2014 as amongst the most important and timely topics for critical review and reflection. Each theme presented below is combined with a synthetic review of the responses of the 24 ISISA members who answered the call for involvement in this strategic review (kindly prepared by Graeme Robertson) and **visible in pink**. The recommended action items that emerge from each of these sets of responses are also identified and **presented in blue**.

1. **Frequency of conferences: ISISA has operated with an 'Islands of the World' (IOW) conference once every two years since 1998. But there will be three IOWs in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Is it now time to move to a more regular, annual conference, while maintaining a clear focus on shifting locations to facilitate the participation of various island scholars, students and practitioners?**

This question generated more detailed answers than any of the others, with all the benefits and threats extensively covered. In simple terms, 4 people favoured having an annual conference, 8 preferred keeping the bi-annual rhythm, and 12 thought a flexible approach should be adopted.

Given that the next three ISISA conferences are already firmly fixed, what are the implications for post 2018? Reverting to a biennial conference format appears the strongest choice as long as the geographical location, size, content and overall quality of the programme extended by the host applicant is very well met.

Within the intervening years between ISISA conferences, however, there is considerable support for smaller, ISISA backed events that could be regional and/or thematic in nature, or a jointly run partnership with another island-related academic institution(s).

There is also scope for ISISA to organise webinars on particular topics of interest and to establish online discussion forums that can stimulate dialogue between conferences.

**ACTION ITEMS:** ISISA will approach this matter flexibly. However, the default position is to maintain the bi-annual sequence of ISISA 'IOW' events after 2018, while supporting like-minded activities in the intervening, non-IOW years (e.g. 2019), thus offering the possibility of ISISA backed encounters, and especially in parts of the world relatively distant from past or forthcoming ISISA events.

2. Financing and Membership: **ISISA's main expense outlay in recent years has been the provision of scholarships to deserving students to assist their participation at ISISA conferences. Should we formally establish a scholarship fund, and encourage individual and corporate supporters to donate to that fund? Should our financial assets be used in other areas and operations; if so, which?**

**Should we limit membership to individuals, but develop a protocol that would encourage other well-wishes and benefactors, including universities and colleges, to support ISISA in cash (as in the building of a scholarship fund) or in kind (as with the support extended to us by first the University of Tasmania and then University of Hawaii Maui College in maintaining the ISISA website)?**

The continued provision of student scholarships to attend/participate in ISISA conferences was supported by 10 members; but perhaps these funds could be awarded/ divided better between undergrads, post-grads, post-docs, and even non-academics.

The desire for seed funding research was evenly split; but stronger views were given for *not* providing this support.

Corporate/external sponsorship can and should be sought for hosting/organising conferences and maybe also used to offer more scholarships.

Membership fees should become annual, payable using PayPal and with a system introduced to provide automatic reminders. Only one person suggested a reduced fee for students. There was *no* support for having corporate members and no mention whether there should be a separate category for academic institutions/island NGOs joining and paying a higher fee.

A few respondents suggested that ISISA should provide funding for better website design, updating and management.

**ACTION ITEMS:** ISISA membership fees will move to an annual basis, renewable every 12 months, with effect from January 1, 2017 (this being the earliest, most practical date). Membership will be available to individuals only. A 'flat' or common rate will continue to be charged.

Those individuals willing to support the organisation will be encouraged to take out a life membership in ISISA.

Corporate/external sponsorship (but NOT membership), in cash or in kind, shall be sought more systemically for hosting and organising conferences, to offer more scholarships, and to support web design and maintenance, as may be required.

ISISA would also consider supporting initiatives that seek to bridge linguistic divides in island studies. Specific sponsorships may be sought for this end.

In line with current practice, ISISA scholarship beneficiaries should be students, preferably engaged in island-related research at a (post)graduate level and with an abstract accepted at an IOW or ISISA-supported island studies conference.

**3. Communicating with members: some members have expressed frustration at the way in which ISISA continues to slumber between conferences, with minimal membership contact and activity. The Newsletter has been one attempt to rectify this; but it may not be enough. Shifting conferences to annual (rather than biennial) events would improve continuity and membership engagement. An Advisory Council was also set up in 2010 in an attempt to bridge this communication gap. What else can, and should be done? Should ISISA encourage its membership to participate in joint research projects?**

The 20 responses to this question were pretty unequivocal in stating the AC should be disbanded.

There were fairly frequent references for additional and/or better forms of communication. These included having the ISISA website provide more current news items, future event dates, briefing documents, and information about member interests/research/projects to facilitate collaboration.

**ACTION ITEMS:** The Advisory Council will be disbanded (This decision also follows correspondence with each of the current members of the AC.)

The 'inter-conference communication gap' issue is also addressed in response to Item 1. However, ISISA Members will be regularly encouraged to provide relevant information for dissemination in five ways now available: ISISA website, Twitter, Facebook, [isisa@yahoo.com](mailto:isisa@yahoo.com), biannual ISISA newsletter – possibly adding more. If necessary, clearer responsibilities will be assigned for the effective running of these media and network opportunities.

4. Communicating with the rest of the world: **should ISISA reach out to like-minded organisations and support initiatives that impact on island livelihoods? Should we develop a closer, informal or formal relationship with GIN, GLISPA, RETI and/or SICRI? Should ISISA formally participate in the activities of such island related bodies, and with what intent? Should ISISA voice its opinion on matters that concern islands (via media releases, statements on its website, etc.)?**

There was strong support for ISISA to develop closer working relationships with like-minded organisations, especially GIN and RETI.

Five people cautioned strongly *against* ISISA publicly voicing opinion on any political matters.

**ACTION ITEMS:** ISISA will not voice opinions on policy-related affairs.

A better liaison between ISISA and RETI – the network of island universities - has started, with ISISA supporting the RETI event in Orkney in 2015 (a non-IOW year).

Better liaison with GIN - Global Islands Network - depends on the new status of GIN, possibly as part of the Island Studies Programme at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), Canada. (Coincidentally, GIN was officially launched at the IOW held at UPEI, in 2002.)

ISISA officials involved in national and international conferences of a scholarly nature should publicise their responsibility and role as ISISA office holders in their presentations, to improve ISISA's visibility, and raising the ISISA profile.

5. What do you think about ISISA? What do members think about ISISA? And what is it about our Association that makes it stand out from other bodies?

There was very positive feedback from 21 answers. ISISA merits included being cross/multi/inter/trans-disciplinary (mentioned 8 times); wonderful (twice); special (twice); unique; welcoming/friendly; independent and virtual; international in outlook; unique sense of community. The opportunities for interaction with non-academics/engagement with practitioners working on the ground also cited.

Overall feeling is there is great scope for expansion/development without having to adopt a rigid formal structure. ISISA should strive to maintain a global pre-eminence of promoting island studies as a recognised field of scholarly endeavour.

Some 'quotable quotes' include:

ISISA is the oldest and largest global association for island studies. Its purpose is to advance study, stimulate curiosity and debate about islands. Because of this, ISISA brings together people interested in and from all walks of island life.

ISISA is wonderful in its openly-lived inter-disciplinarity, without regional and ecosystem boundaries.

ISISA's main objective should be to help establish island studies as a recognised field of interdisciplinary scholarly endeavour and serve as the 'home' for researchers in this field. Secondary objectives should include facilitating knowledge exchange between academia and the real world.

I am very new to ISISA and island studies. I can say that I am very grateful for how welcoming it has been so far. It has also proved to be quite productive for my research and professional development, connecting me with several persons whom I will be collaborating with in the future.

ISISA is a wonderful organization which successfully bridges the gap between subject disciplines. The conference is a wonderful opportunity to meet a diverse range of people working on 'island studies'.

ISISA's wide inter-disciplinary approach to island specific issues is quite unique and important, something ISISA should be proud of.

The organisation's merit is its inter-disciplinarity, bringing together scholars from very different research disciplines and approaches.

The strength of ISISA ... is its focus on island studies combined with its seeking engagement with practitioners. At most academic meetings, we do not have the benefit of listening to and discussing with people who are 'working on the ground'. ISISA provides ample space for action-oriented research as well as a forum for academic research and the experiences of professional practitioners to meet.

Islands are fragile and different. In many ways, islands are a microcosm of society, of the adjacent continent. Islands are the canaries of society; sounding alarms before other places. Islands are very special places. They have a way of shaping us. ISISA needs to continue to hold true to advancing this discourse.

The 'Apology' is the story of the trial of Socrates relayed by Plato. In the story or report, Plato comments on the gadfly which pesters the horse over and over again to move, to consider a different stand, a different view or approach, not to accept what is known or accepted without personal exploration. It is my belief that ISISA is the gadfly and the gadfly is a pest which challenges the status quo; strives for people, researchers, to re-examine popular positions through island focused studies in an effort to reconfirm findings from previous studies or to acknowledge weakness within previous studies or to the acceptance of concepts and view as they apply to islands.

To me ISISA is the banding together in unity of islands and island scholars for the betterment of islands as a whole. One island's voice is small, their troubles seem insignificant, of unimportance to the global world. But when similarities of many islands are placed before the world, the problem of one becomes the problem of many. ISISA links like-minded scholars to support each other's efforts to explore and discover similarities but also to appreciate island differences. ISISA links islands, for no island should be alone against the world. And it is my hope that our association will be perceived as a resource by islands for reliable island-focused studies; something they can find resourceful.

**ACTION ITEMS:** ISISA will strive to uphold the values and objectives that are implicitly or explicitly referred to in these candid comments.

## **Conclusion**

Such a comprehensive strategic review, one that takes on board all these views in a 'big picture' assessment, is a timely consultation exercise that clarifies the ideas of the ISISA Executive, then engages the membership, and provides the ISISA Executive with the clearer action programme that would then be implemented over the 4 years of its mandate, and perhaps beyond.

The ISISA Executive will now consider the action items and determine how best to pursue them. Some will require amendments to our Charter.

Thank you all for your engagement in this exercise; and to Marina Karides for edits to an earlier version of this document.

*Professor Godfrey Baldacchino*

*30 March 2015*

*President, ISISA*