

Editorial

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“Island biological diversity” is the theme selected for the current issue of *INSULA, the International Journal of Island Affairs*. This issue is the result of a joint effort by three organizations that are actively involved in island environmental and development affairs: the International Scientific Council for Island Development, the Small Island Developing States Unit of the Division for Sustainable Development of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. This issue is being published in the run-up to two important international meetings of relevance to island environments: the seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, to be held in Kuala Lumpur in February 2004, and the Small Island Developing States international meeting for the review of the Barbados Programme of Action, which will take place in Mauritius in August 2004.

Islands are home to an extraordinary high proportion of endemic species per unit of surface area, and to unique ecosystems. However, this richness is counterbalanced by its fragility. While the wealth of their biodiversity is a source of goods and services that support economic development, threats to island environments have direct and indirect consequences on their entire social and economic fabric. Indeed, since the Barbados Conference in 1994, biodiversity resources are considered a key factor in shaping sustainable development strategies for island regions. The Barbados Programme of Action identified the strategies and policies that would allow islands to safeguard their traditional heritage and natural resources while opening their societies to the new opportunities offered by international markets.

Reducing the ecological vulnerability of islands is part of this strategy and requires that a series of interactive factors be considered. Firstly, the size of small island developing States reduces their assimilative and carrying capacity, leading to problems associated with water production and storage and waste management. Their relatively large coastal zone, in relation to the land mass, also makes small islands prone to erosion. Moreover, low resistance to outside influences facilitates the rapid and devastating spread of invasive alien species, with the consequent endangerment of endemic species of flora and fauna.

Climate variability and change is affecting vast proportions of island territories, resulting in proportionately large land losses, particularly in low-lying islands. Small islands are prone to natural disasters, and the impacts of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, cyclones, hurricanes, floods and tidal waves on island territories are often devastating. Last, but certainly not least, the significant impact of economic development, and mass tourism in particular, on small island environments is leading to a fast depletion of agricultural land and marine and coastal natural resources.

A number of eminent island experts have collaborated in producing this issue of *INSULA* and elaborate on the status and trends of, and threats to, island biodiversity. They also provide extensive coverage of matters related to the environmental vulnerability of island ecosystems. Many of them offer possible solutions to prevent and manage some of the causes of biodiversity loss. Selected case-studies illustrate how sustainable development policies and strategies have been successfully translated into action.

Despite the catastrophic outlook suggested by available data on the status and trends of biodiversity, in particular on alteration of island habitats of world importance, it should be acknowledged that much is being done to find

new alternatives for the management of natural resources, and that most of the small island developing States are in the forefront of the struggle for sustainable development. But, although success stories are being recognized daily, much has still to be done.

This issue of *INSULA* is intended to sensitize the world community of the need for immediate action and to renew the commitment to the sustainable development of islands. Building on what has already been stated in the Barbados Programme of Action and what will be reiterated in Mauritius, the Convention on Biological Diversity is ready to take up the challenge and lead the international community in efforts to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of small island biodiversity. Thematic areas and cross-cutting issues dealt with in the Convention are already addressing many of the threats, and it is envisaged that the Conference of the Parties will endorse a new programme area focusing on island biodiversity.

We wish to invite the world community to join in efforts to conserve and sustainably use these environments which may once have been portrayed as tropical paradises but which today, more realistically, are the most endangered and vulnerable ecosystems of our planet.

Finally, I would like to express my particular gratitude to all the authors for their willingness to contribute to this issue of *INSULA*.

