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CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Island Transport Challenges: Four Island Jurisdictions; Seven Island Perspectives

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Island transport systems are as unique as the islands themselves, shaped by geography, politics, and community needs. Transport development raises key questions: does increased connectivity enhance or diminish islandness? Can large-scale projects balance economic goals with environmental sustainability and community needs? This special section brings together seven studies from four island jurisdictions to explore how transport configurations influence and redefine islandness. From the transformative role of fixed links in the Faroe Islands to the challenges of seasonal air travel in Akureyri, Iceland, and the extensive ferry networks in Hong Kong, these articles underscore the complexities of island connectivity. A case from Penang, Malaysia, illustrates grassroots resistance to artificial island creation, highlighting tensions between development and conservation. Together, these contributions offer fresh perspectives on the evolving role of transport in shaping island life and identity.

The transport challenges facing island peripheries are unique and complex. Researchers studying island transport are particularly interested in how water bodies shape transport infrastructure and travel behaviours on islands. For nearshore islands, fixed links—such as bridges and tunnels—are often constructed to expand transport capacity and to overcome ‘aquagraphical’ barriers. In contrast, more remote offshore island archipelagos, for instance the Faroe Islands, while dependent on traditional air and sea transport to access the island, are becoming interconnected by fixed land links.

This special section aims to deepen island studies’ understanding by presenting a diverse range of studies on transport configurations for islands and examining how these interact with island communities. The overarching questions are in line with key concepts in the broader island studies: what defines islandness (Ronström, 2021), and is it negative (e.g., isolation) or positive (e.g., tranquillity)? Will connectiveness hasten the originally slower island spatiotemporality (Gillis, 2004)?

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Further questions arise as to how islands can—or should—maintain their unique characteristics if they are increasingly connected by sea (ferries), air (planes), or even land-based links like overwater bridges and underwater tunnels. Political and economical considerations also play a significant role in island transport, as large-scale infrastructure projects require substantial capital investment and are often driven by highly top-down decisions aimed at achieving greater connectivity (Scanlon, 2024). Are these projects truly in the interest of island communities? Can grassroots movements ever contest such top-down decisions?

This special section consists of seven articles covering four island jurisdictions, three of which focus on the Faroe Islands, an archipelago in the North Atlantic known for its growing interconnectedness via progressive expansion in fixed links. One paper is about Akureyri in North Iceland, which showcases how air transport affects tourism seasonality and island community life. Two papers concern Hong Kong, with its extensive mainland-island transport connections. Finally, an article about Penang, Malaysia discusses ‘right to the island/sea’ contestations, highlighting the tensions between development and conservation in relation to reclamation and artificial island creation.

The section first begins with three studies on the Faroe Islands, illustrating how fixed connections between islands have transformed this isolated archipelago. With the development of extensive fixed links, what was once a disconnected archipelago has evolved into a metaphorically unified ‘single island.’ This has in turn expanded the original typology of islands community by its fixed-links, as originally proposed by Leung et al. (2017).

The first paper is Sancho Reinoso and Heleniak’s (2024) study, which provides a demographic analysis of transport developments over six decades, supported by high-quality maps. The authors examine the re-configuration of core-periphery relationships. This fixed-link expansion has impacted on population distribution and regional development in the Faroe Islands. While fixed links have encouraged population growth in connected areas, unlinked islands have seen stagnant growth, contradicting the intended policy goal of a more balanced development.

Second, Chan Santana et al. (2024) present ethnographic research to unpack the parallel growth of tourism to turn the local fishing-based economies into more lucrative and globally-connected tourism and service-based economies. The collective islandness of the Faroes can be viewed as an attraction, or ‘insular tourism’ development. While tourism brings massive economic benefits, it however creates social and environmental impacts that are unevenly distributed.

The third and final paper about the Faroe islands is Gaini’s (2024) poetic essay titled ‘The roundabout at the edge of the world’, which offers a unique perspective on the islands’ evolving transport landscape. It examines how tunnels, bridging the surface and subsurface, reshape islandness by blurring centre-periphery as new shared spaces.

These three papers about the Faroes beg the question: what really is an island? As the Faroe Islands are now mostly interconnected, they are increasingly understood as a single island—a miniature version of larger mainlands or islands. Perhaps, in this case, the distinguishing factor is the size and scale of the landmass.

Next, we turn to the larger island of Iceland also in the northern Atlantic, where Chan Santana et al. (2024) study the effects of air transport on Akureyri, peripheral to the capital Reykjavík. Using extensive qualitative data, they examine how airport infrastructure expansion interacts with local capacity-building and seasonal tourism. This study also uses Social Arenas Mapping to highlight the social and economic impact of improved air connectivity for isolated communities.

The focus then shifts to Asia, first to Hong Kong, with Lau et al. (2024), exploring how ferry services connect Cheung Chau, a peripheral ‘true’ island with no fixed links to the core centre. Despite the decline of ferry use since the 1970s, the study highlights how ferry services remain essential to Hong Kong’s island communities, at the same time allowing residents to preserve their unique identities.

Another study by Lau et al. (2024) presents a technical analysis of Hong Kong’s rather dense ferry network using graph theory. By evaluating various network metrics, the authors identify challenges in inter-island connectivity and propose improvement suggestions to better utilise Hong Kong’s impressive yet struggling ferry network. The study highlights how lack of intermodal transfer and pier distance hinder efficient ferry use, limiting the ferry network’s potential.

Finally, Giosa (2024) concludes the special section by documenting the *Penang Tolak Tambak* (Penang Rejects Reclamation) campaign by a coalition of environmental groups and fishing communities against top-down artificial island creation. The project is part of Penang’s strategic urban plan to fund and build new transport corridors. This paper expands the concept of the ‘right to the island’ to encompass also the ‘right to the sea’, advocating for the preservation of productive natural fishing grounds and its associated livelihoods.

This special section presents a compelling exploration of island transport challenges across four diverse island cases in the Atlantic and the Pacific. Together, these articles provide an original and insightful overview of both established and emerging themes in island transport research. This collection significantly contributes to the scholarship on transport’s role in shaping islandness, insularity, and remoteness, while examining themes of island identity, the water-land interface, the dynamics between archipelagos and aquapelagos, and the varying impacts of ferries, fixed links, and air connections on islands of different scales.

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