The Study of Regions

The study of regions is one of the oldest and most fundamental themes of scholarly inquiry and has long engaged academic interest alongside systematic approaches to scientific understanding. While populations and land areas of the Pacific Islands are relatively small, this vast archipelagic world is in many ways unique and offers special opportunities for regional study. Courses focusing on the Pacific Islands are offered at many universities, and Pacific Island Studies programs have been established. There is currently a vital need for a basic reference on Pacific Islands environment and society, which this book aims to fill.

The revaluation of place in the social sciences and humanities offers a contemporary rationale for the study of regions. As political boundaries have become permeable to economic, demographic, and cultural flows, distant places and regions come increasingly into view. Yet local institutions and cultures endure, providing the reassurances of stability, tradition, authenticity, and care. Modernization, long seen as transcending place and region, is conditioned by locale (Daniels 1992). Even in Hawai‘i and New Zealand (sometimes considered part of the Pacific Rim) there is keen awareness of the historical and current linkages with other parts of the Pacific Islands region.

Regions are at best models of the real world. This is particularly so for the Pacific Islands, which range from far-flung coral atolls to large islands with fast-flowing rivers and high mountain ranges; from cultures where traditional chiefs still hold power to those where indigenous languages have become endangered. The boundaries of regions are notoriously difficult to define. Yet like all models, regions allow useful generalizations. Like other forms of education, regional awareness is an essential mode of dispelling ignorance, misunderstanding, mistrust, and conflict (Johnston 1990).
Rationales for Pacific Island regional study have been discussed by Wesley-Smith (1995). The diversity, isolation, and small-scale dimensions of islands and island populations present laboratory-like opportunities for research on general questions about nature and society. Information from the Pacific has sparked debate and rethinking on topics ranging from evolution to philosophy and culture. National interest has been an important factor in launching and funding regional studies programs. Regional study can also provide a venue for reorienting education to become more attuned to local needs and local empowerment.

The relation between researcher and researched, and the ethics thereof, has been the subject of heated debate and was a key question in the Native Pacific Cultural Studies on the Edge symposium (Diaz and Kauanui 2001). The case has been made for a moratorium on any ethnographic studies by non-native scholars (Trask 1991; Hereniko 2000). Teiwa (in press) cautions against a “war-cry for ownership of knowledge and resources that can block critical investigation—even by indigenous people” and suggests that the critical question may be “not who does the work, but how it is done.”

The status of New Zealand and Hawai‘i as “First World societies,” as well as New Zealand’s location outside the tropics, have often led to the exclusion of these island groups from the field of Pacific Island Studies. Some studies of the Pacific Islands exclude New Guinea or New Zealand since major portions of these islands were rifted from continents. These islands are included in this volume as they do have much in common with other Pacific Island groups, and the ecological and socioeconomic contrasts relative to smaller, tropical islands enriches the comparative analysis of the region.

Organization and Scope

To address the need for a regional study, overviews of key topics in Pacific environment and society have been presented in this volume. While no rigid style was imposed, authors were requested to address issues of theory, historical change, and regional variability. To give priority to explanation, the chapters are organized by subject, covering both the natural environment and human society. References to particular locations are made where necessary for explanation and example and to illustrate intraregional variation, as deemed appropriate for the respective topics.

The book opens with the Physical Environment (chapters 1 through 6), which provides the foundation for the Living Environment (chapters 7 through 9). Coverage of society begins with History (chapters 10 through 12), followed by selected aspects of Culture (chapters 13 through 21). This sequence provides a broad basis for the subsequent focus on Population (chapters 22 through 26) and Economy (chapters 27 through 34). Interdisciplinary connections are present throughout, and a certain degree of overlap was unavoidable. Thus the chapter on politics is placed in accordance with its strong historical emphasis, but it could alternatively have been grouped elsewhere.

Within the book’s geographic scope are the island groups of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia (Clark 2003). While there are cultural affinities between the Pacific Islands and Southeast Asia, the latter region has experienced two millennia of powerful influences from Asian civilizations. In the Pacific, distance and other factors (such as disease in lowland New Guinea) permitted society to develop in relative isolation from Asia, fostering a largely independent historical trajectory. Within the region, environmental and cultural differences are considerable, yet the Pacific Islands have much in common; they are joined, rather than divided, by the world’s largest ocean (Hau‘ofa 1993).

The study of the Pacific Islands region draws on the work of many academic disciplines, and the selection of authors has not been constrained within a narrow disciplinary or ideological framework. Authors include natural scientists, social scientists, and humanists who have devoted their research and careers to the Pacific Islands region and who have experience, including fieldwork, and knowledge of the relevant literature. Several authors are of indigenous descent or affiliation. Most are faculty members at Pacific Island universities and long-term residents of the region. All chapters were reviewed by competent scholars in the appropriate fields.

Themes

Among the chapters, emphases differ considerably depending on the subject and the interests and areas of expertise of the authors. Nonetheless, it is possible to briefly present four key themes tying together the diverse chapters in this volume. These include environmental process (chapters 1 through 9), social change (chapters 10 through 21), population-resource relations (chapters 22 through 34), and the Pacific Islands as a region (a theme implicit in this project as a whole).

Environmental process. Island groups as diverse as New Guinea, Hawai‘i, Niue, and Tokelau are products of plate tectonic activity. Prevailing pressure and wind systems influence ocean currents and rainfall, which in turn affect landforms, biota, and the feasibility of human settlement. Having evolved in isolation, island ecosystems were severely affected by the arrival and proliferation of human settlers. This disturbance is exacerbated today by increasing overexploitation, soil erosion, exotic introductions, species extinctions, and pollution.

Social change. Factors of size and distance left island societies vulnerable to colonial intervention. Traditional systems of leadership, social organization, and beliefs have changed significantly since contact. Island societies have adapted and have been able to benefit from modern technologies and cultural offerings. Concurrently, there is a desire to maintain and revive indigenous identity and the arts. Systems of tenure, law, and governance introduced during the colonial period are being re-evaluated today.

Population-resource relations. Relative to continents, the Pacific Islands are remote, fragmented, and resource-poor. Population growth remains high, straining the capacity of governments to provide jobs and services. Subsistence horticulture and fisheries are losing ground. Sources of economic output include agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture, mining, tourism, and offshore fisheries licensing and other schemes. The emerging communications industry holds promise. Yet island communities remain dependent on foreign aid and migrate in large numbers to Pacific Rim countries.

The Pacific Islands as region. The Pacific Island region is the world’s largest grouping of islands, spanning a third of the Earth’s
surface. Both physical environments and ecosystems have striking similarities across the region. Island societies have common roots and historical experiences, and they share many cultural features. Regionalism persists today through transnational networks of kin; a plethora of regional organizations; a literary and artistic renaissance; a close-knit academic community; and related identities, cultures, and destinies.

New in the Second Edition

The second edition of this book includes new chapters on gender, music and dance, logging, and development. The chapters on education, urbanization, health, ocean resources, and tourism have been replaced under new authorship. Additional collaborators have joined the chapters on geology, water, biogeography, art, and migration. Sadly, two of the contributors, Alison Kay and Ron Crocombe, are deceased and not able to view their chapter updates in print. Fortunately, Brenden Holland was able to work with Alison Kay’s chapter and undertake an excellent and thorough updating.

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I dedicate this book to Bryce and Shirley Decker.

BIBLIOGRAPHY