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EVIDENCE BRIEF

The **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council** in collaboration with the **Canadian Institutes of Health Research** and **UK Research and Innovation Arts and Humanities Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council**

SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision-making across all sectors toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **Envisioning Governance Systems that Work**

How islands can grow their own answers

About the project

This project examines how governance shapes power, representation and sustainability in island regions by comparing three cases across three countries: Mackinac Island (Michigan, United States of America), Cape Breton Island (Nova Scotia, Canada), and the Outer Hebrides (Scotland). All regions are culturally significant islands whose economies rely heavily on tourism and are celebrated as a national or regional symbol, yet face ongoing pressures related to land use, economic vulnerability and cultural inclusion.

The research draws on qualitative document analysis, systems mapping and interviews. The analysis is informed by systems-based and relational approaches that emphasize relationships, change over time and how future possibilities are shaped, as well as Tim Ingold's theory of lines.

Together, these approaches frame island regions as dynamic systems shaped over time by relationships among people, institutions, land and history. This systems perspective is informed by Indigenous governance scholarship and post-colonial theory, which show how colonial legacies continue to structure land tenure, authority and participation, as well as how alternative governance arrangements can redistribute power and responsibility. From this perspective, governance is understood as an ongoing process that shapes whose knowledge counts and which futures become possible.

The three cases represent distinct governance pathways. Mackinac Island operates under a highly centralized model characterized by strict land-use controls and limited Indigenous authority. Cape Breton Island reflects a more layered governance landscape, with ongoing efforts to integrate Mi'kmaw rights, institutions and knowledge into land-use planning and environmental governance. The Outer Hebrides demonstrates a model of expanding local control through crofting tenure and widespread community land ownership. Together, these cases illustrate how governance arrangements shape sustainability, resilience and the capacity of island communities to grow their own answers.

Key findings

Tourism dependence creates shared vulnerability, but uneven impacts.
All three regions rely heavily on tourism, involving complex interactions among governments, businesses and communities. Mackinac Island experiences extreme seasonality, with population surges during peak

months that strain infrastructure. Cape Breton's larger population base and more diversified economy reduce seasonal vulnerability, but do not eliminate it. The Outer Hebrides combines a diversified economy with ongoing challenges related to tourism seasonality and demographic change. Across cases, dependence on tourism as a dominant economic strategy increases exposure to external shocks and limits long-term options.

Land governance strongly shapes power and long-term outcomes.
Mackinac Island's land system is dominated by preservation mandates shaped by colonial histories. While environmentally protective, this model limits community influence and constrains adaptation. Cape Breton's land-use planning combines ecosystem-based management with Mi'kmaw knowledge, reflecting a more relational approach. In the Outer Hebrides, crofting tenure, a system of small-scale, regulated land holdings with secure use rights and strong community obligations, and community land trusts have enabled extensive community ownership, embedding land governance within locally accountable institutions and supporting long-term planning.

Meaningful authority matters more than symbolic inclusion.

The degree to which Indigenous and local communities hold real decision-making power significantly affects governance outcomes. On Mackinac Island, Indigenous participation is largely limited to cultural interpretation rather than planning authority. In Cape Breton, Mi'kmaw institutions are formally involved in land-use planning and environmental governance through co-management arrangements. In the Outer Hebrides, land reform and language legislation have institutionalized community rights and cultural recognition. These differences shape not only representation but also the ability of governance systems to respond to change and reflect local priorities.

Policy implications

The findings suggest that sustainable island futures depend less on specific policy tools than on governance arrangements that strengthen local capacity, learning and shared authority. For island and coastal regions seeking to grow their own answers, several implications emerge.

Treat land as a shared responsibility, not just an asset or attraction.
Land governance should reflect the social, cultural and ecological relationships that sustain communities over time. Community land ownership, Indigenous stewardship, and tenure systems that secure collective rights enable long-term planning and intergenerational responsibility. While preservation is important, rigid or centralized control can limit participation and adaptation if not paired with local authority. Cultural economies, land-based work and community enterprises can strengthen resilience without requiring continuous growth or expansion.

Move from consultation to shared decision-making.
Consultation alone does not meaningfully shift power or improve outcomes. Governance frameworks should support shared authority through co-governance arrangements that give Indigenous and local communities real influence. This shift is essential for reconciliation, trust-building and effective long-term governance.

Design governance systems that can learn and adapt.
Island regions face ongoing uncertainty related to climate change, demographic shifts and global economic pressures. Governance structures that prioritize control or fixed outcomes struggle under these conditions. Flexible institutions, iterative planning and long-term relationship-building allow communities to respond to change and shape future possibilities.

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Read the full report

The full report can be read at: [Insert permanent link]