FINAL SYNTHESIS REPORT

# Growing Our Own Answers

## Lessons in Self-Governance from and for Island Communities

A knowledge synthesis examining how governance shapes power, representation and sustainability across five island regions in Canada, the United States and Scotland.

**Future Challenge Area**

Envisioning Governance Systems that Work

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# Executive summary

Island regions occupy an outsized place in the national imagination. They are celebrated as symbols of heritage and natural beauty, lean heavily on tourism, and carry histories of colonial dispossession that still shape who holds authority over land and resources. They are also, increasingly, places where communities are trying to take their futures into their own hands. This report ask: what allows an island community to grow its own answers, rather than having answers imposed from elsewhere?

To address it, we synthesised evidence from five island regions that sit at different points along a spectrum of self-governance: Mackinac Island (Michigan, United States), Cape Breton Island / Unama'ki (Nova Scotia, Canada), Fogo Island (Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada), Haida Gwaii (British Columbia, Canada) and the Outer Hebrides and Arran (Scotland). The analysis draws on a structured qualitative review of fifty-nine source documents from which we coded more than two thousand segments, complemented by systems mapping and scoping engagement.

> *Across very different histories and constitutional settings, the same pattern recurs: sustainable island futures depend less on which policy tools a community adopts than on whether it holds genuine authority over the decisions that shape its land, economy, and culture.*

Three findings cut across all five cases. First, tourism dependence creates a shared vulnerability, but its costs and benefits fall unevenly depending on how governance distributes them. Second, the way land is governed shapes power and long-term outcomes more decisively than any single economic intervention. Third, meaningful decision-making authority matters far more than symbolic inclusion

These findings are not a ranking. Each region offers transferable lessons and cautionary tales for the others. Mackinac's preservation model protects a landscape but constrains the community that lives in it. Fogo shows how community ownership of economic assets builds resilience. The Outer Hebrides and Arran demonstrate that land reform and community trusts can institutionalise local control. Cape Breton illustrates the hard, unfinished work of building co-governance across multiple authorities. Haida Gwaii shows what becomes possible when jurisdiction itself is recognised. Read together, they form a learning set for island regions that are seeking to balance external pressures with local agency.

## Three findings at a glance

- **Tourism dependence creates shared vulnerability, but uneven impacts.** Reliance on tourism increases exposure to external shocks and seasonality in every case; governance arrangements determine whether residents capture the benefits or absorb the costs.
- **Land governance shapes power and long-term outcomes.** Ownership models, planning authority and the knowledge systems embedded in land-use decisions are the strongest predictors of whether communities can plan for the long term.
- **Meaningful authority matters more than symbolic inclusion.** Real decision-making power, not interpretive or advisory roles alone, is what enables governance systems to respond to change and reflect local priorities.

# About the project

This knowledge synthesis sits within SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative and addresses the Future Challenge Area of Envisioning Governance Systems that Work. It was supported as a joint Canada–United Kingdom initiative, reflecting a shared interest in how island and rural regions on both sides of the Atlantic can govern themselves sustainably under common pressures: tourism economies, demographic change, contested land, and the legacies of colonisation and internal colonisation alike.

The project compares five culturally significant island regions whose economies depend heavily on tourism and whose identities carry national or regional weight, yet which face ongoing pressures related to land use, economic vulnerability and cultural inclusion. Rather than treating each as an isolated case, the synthesis reads them relationally, as dynamic systems shaped over time by the interactions among people, institutions, land and history.

## Conceptual approach

The analysis is informed by systems thinking and relational approaches that foreground relationships, change over time, and how future possibilities are opened or foreclosed. It draws on Indigenous governance scholarship and post-colonial theory, which show how colonial legacies continue to structure land tenure, authority and participation, and how alternative arrangements can redistribute power and responsibility. Tim Ingold's relational ontology, his attention to the "lines" and entanglements that bind human and non-human life, frames governance not as a fixed structure but as an ongoing process that shapes whose knowledge counts and which futures become possible. Post-normal governance theory contributes the recognition that where stakes are high and uncertainties are deep, inclusive and participatory decision-making is not a luxury but a methodological necessity.

From this vantage point, "governance systems that work" are not those that maximise control or efficiency, but those that can learn, adapt, and hold authority close to the communities who live with the consequences of decisions.

## Methods

The synthesis combined three methods. A structured qualitative document review assembled and coded a corpus of fifty-nine sources across the five regions, government master plans and economic development strategies, governance and co-management agreements, constitutional and legal texts, peer-reviewed research, and community and sector reports. Documents were thematically coded, generating 2,123 coded evidence segments organised under recurring themes such as seasonality, land rights, co-governance, traditional ecological knowledge, community wealth-building and power asymmetries. Systems mapping then visualised the actors and relationships in each region, distinguishing collaborative from oppositional ties and identifying which institutions occupy central versus peripheral positions. Finally, scoping engagement with knowledgeable individuals helped test and contextualise emerging patterns.

The corpus is uneven by design and by circumstance. Cape Breton / Unama'ki, as the project's home region, was documented most intensively, while the Scottish corpus is more concentrated. Where evidence is thinner, the report says so plainly rather than over-reaching. A summary of the coded corpus appears in the appendix.

## A note on the five cases

The five regions can be read along a spectrum of self-governance, not a hierarchy of success, but a range of arrangements for who holds authority over land, economy and culture. Mackinac Island anchors one end with a highly centralised preservation model and limited Indigenous authority. Haida Gwaii anchors the other, where Haida jurisdiction is increasingly recognised in law. Between them, Fogo Island demonstrates community economic ownership, the Outer Hebrides and Arran show land reform and community trusts, and Cape Breton / Unama'ki occupies the difficult middle ground of emerging, layered co-governance. The table below orients the reader before the case profiles that follow.

| Region | Dominant governance pattern | Defining mechanism |
|---|---|---|
| **Mackinac Island** | Highly centralised preservation; limited local and Indigenous authority | State park mandate and historic-district controls |
| **Fogo Island** | Community economic ownership within a small municipal frame | Co-operative and social-enterprise asset ownership |
| **Outer Hebrides & Arran** | Expanding local control through land reform | Community land trusts, development trusts, crofting tenure |
| **Cape Breton / Unama'ki** | Layered, emerging co-governance across multiple authorities | Mi'kmaw institutions in land-use and fisheries co-management |
| **Haida Gwaii** | Recognised Indigenous jurisdiction and government-to-government co-governance | Constitutional Haida authority; title recognition |

# Case profiles

*Each profile sketches the governance context, draws out what the coded evidence shows, and closes with the lessons the case offers the wider learning set, including lessons that flow back toward the other regions, not only toward Cape Breton.*

## Mackinac Island, Michigan (United States)

Mackinac Island is among the most tightly governed landscapes in North America. Roughly four-fifths of the island is state park, administered by the Mackinac Island State Park Commission under legislation dating to 1895; the remainder is a patchwork of private and leased land overlaid by multiple local historic districts created under Michigan's Local Historic Districts Act. The result is a preservation regime of unusual strength, one that has protected a remarkable built and natural heritage, and that draws roughly a million visitors a year to a car-free island defined by its Victorian character.

The coded evidence is dominated by the themes one would expect of such a model: protected areas, land-use planning, seasonality and infrastructure pressure recur throughout the city's master plan and the park commission's reporting. The island's economy is overwhelmingly seasonal; the documents describe a warm-weather destination where ferries run constantly and hotels fill in summer, then a sharp winter contraction constrained by limited off-season transport. Preservation and tourism are mutually reinforcing, but they also lock the island into a narrow economic band and concentrate planning authority in commissions and committees rather than in a broad-based community process.

Most striking, for a project concerned with whose knowledge counts, is how Indigenous authority appears in the record. The Great Lakes region was governed by Anishinaabe and other Indigenous peoples for millennia, and the documents acknowledge this history. Yet in the contemporary governance material, Indigenous presence surfaces largely as cultural interpretation and historical narrative rather than as planning authority. The evidence is explicit that traditional ecological knowledge tends to remain secondary to Western science and is not yet treated as equal in decision-making. Indigenous self-determination appears as context, not as a live structural feature of how the island is run today.

> *Mackinac's preservation model is environmentally protective and globally admired, and it is precisely its centralisation that limits community influence and the island's capacity to adapt.*

**Lessons for the learning set.** Mackinac is the cautionary anchor of the comparison. It demonstrates that strict land-use control can safeguard heritage while simultaneously narrowing economic options and holding authority away from residents and Indigenous nations. For regions tempted to treat preservation or designation as an end in itself, including parts of Cape Breton and the Scottish islands where conservation status is expanding, Mackinac is a reminder that protection without local authority can ossify a place rather than sustain it. Its experience underlines the report's central distinction between symbolic cultural inclusion and meaningful decision-making power.

## Fogo Island, Newfoundland and Labrador (Canada)

Fogo Island offers a very different answer to the same pressures. A small North Atlantic island shaped by the cod fishery and its collapse, Fogo has become internationally known for a place-based development model in which community-owned and social enterprises, most prominently the Shorefast organisation and its associated businesses, alongside the older Fogo Island Co-operative Society, reinvest tourism revenue into the local economy and cultural life. The famous Fogo Island Inn is the visible tip of a deeper strategy: keeping ownership of productive assets in community hands.

The coded evidence centres on local economic development, community engagement, community wealth-building and community control. A recurring insight is that Fogo weathered the turbulence of the fishery better than many comparable communities precisely because harvesting, processing and marketing were community-controlled; a community-owned processor behaves differently under stress than an absentee one. The amalgamation of the island's municipalities and school system appears in the record as a deliberate act of consolidating community capacity, "changing to stay the same," in the language of one source, rather than as a loss of local identity.

The evidence is equally candid about the model's tensions. Fogo remains dependent on a narrow economic base and is exposed to the risk that heritage itself becomes a commodity, the "creative destruction" by which the marketing of a rural idyll can erode the very qualities that made it distinctive. Feedback loops appear directly in the data: more visitor vehicles consume finite ferry capacity, which then constrains the fishery and construction sectors that residents depend on. Tourism is both lifeline and stressor.

> *Community ownership of economic assets is what converts tourism from an extractive force into a regenerative one, but it does not, by itself, resolve the vulnerability of a narrow economic base.*

**Lessons for the learning set.** Fogo's contribution is the clearest demonstration in the comparison that community wealth-building is a governance choice, not merely an economic one. Its model of retaining asset ownership speaks directly to Cape Breton's tourism strategy, to the Outer Hebrides' community trusts, and even to Mackinac, where preservation has not been paired with community economic ownership. Equally, Fogo's candour about heritage commodification and ferry-capacity feedback loops is a warning to every tourism-dependent region in the set: ownership shapes who benefits, but scale and seasonality still need active management.

## The Outer Hebrides and Arran (Scotland)

Scotland's islands carry their own history of dispossession. The Highland Clearances were a form of internal colonisation that displaced communities and concentrated land in few hands, and the resulting patterns of ownership remain a live political issue. Against this backdrop, Scotland has pursued one of the most ambitious programmes of community land reform in Europe, supported by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and a wider land-reform agenda. The Scottish cases in this synthesis, community land ownership in the Outer Hebrides, and community development and marine governance on the Isle of Arran, illustrate what expanding local control can look like in practice.

The coded evidence is organised around island development trusts, community engagement, land rights, community wealth-building and community control. The record documents how communities have moved from being tenants on estates to owners of their own land: a ballot of residents across the crofting estates of West Harris gave overwhelming support to a community buyout, and Arran's development trust has pursued affordable housing and local economic strategy through a mix of influence and direct action. A distinct strand concerns marine governance: the Lamlash Bay no-take zone off Arran, Scotland's first community-driven fully protected marine reserve, appears as a case of residents themselves initiating conservation, with survey evidence on local awareness and attitudes toward the reserve.

The evidence is honest about limits. Arran's decade of community development shows revenue growth and a high quality-of-life ranking, yet population and demographic decline persist as unresolved problems, and affordable housing remains a structural challenge driven in part by private land ownership. Land reform institutionalises local control; it does not automatically reverse depopulation or market pressures. The Scottish material also surfaces a transferable methodological point that recurs in the synthesis: the importance of local-level data for understanding the flows of people, goods and resources on and off an island, and the capacity this gives communities to exert control over what comes in.

> *Land reform and community trusts can institutionalise local authority in law and title, the strongest structural lever in the comparison, yet authority still has to contend with demography, housing markets and the cost of living.*

**Lessons for the learning set.** Scotland is the comparison's evidence that community ownership can be embedded in legislation and tenure rather than resting on the success of individual enterprises. Its community land trusts and crofting tenure offer a model that Cape Breton and Fogo can read against their own arrangements, and the Lamlash Bay reserve links directly to the marine co-governance themes in Cape Breton and Haida Gwaii. For its own part, Scotland can draw from the Canadian cases, particularly on integrating Indigenous and minority-language institutions into governance, where the Gaelic parallel to Mi'kmaw and Haida language revitalisation is instructive.

## Cape Breton Island/Unama'ki (Nova Scotia, Canada)

Cape Breton/Unama'ki is the project's home region and its most intensively documented case, with more than a thousand coded evidence segments drawn from economic development strategies, tourism plans, Mi'kmaw governance and fisheries studies, cultural and language resources, and food-systems research. It is also the most analytically complex, because it sits in the middle of the self-governance spectrum: neither the centralised control of Mackinac nor the recognised jurisdiction of Haida Gwaii, but a layered landscape in which multiple authorities are actively negotiating their relationships.

The thematic profile is revealing. Seasonality, cultural tourism and economic tourism benefits dominate the corpus, confirming that Cape Breton shares the tourism dependence common to the whole set, though its larger population and more diversified economy soften, without eliminating, the seasonal vulnerability seen acutely on Mackinac and Fogo. Alongside these sit a dense cluster of governance

themes that distinguish Cape Breton: Indigenous worldview, Indigenous governance, co-governance, multi-level governance, participatory governance, power asymmetries and legal recognition all appear frequently.

The Mi'kmaw governance material is the analytical heart of the case. The evidence describes a genuinely plural authority structure, Mi'kmaq rights-holders, Mi'kmaq elected governments, and the Mi'kmaq Grand Council as the traditional socio-political body, and the real difficulty of sharing decision-making across federal and provincial systems and within Mi'kmaw governance itself. Netukulimk, the Mi'kmaw concept of taking only what is needed and governing resources consistent with their capacity to renew, recurs as an organising principle for stewardship. Fisheries governance features prominently, including the long aftermath of the recognition of treaty rights and the search for a governance model that shares authority rather than merely allocating licences. The evidence does not romanticise this: it documents power asymmetries, the constraints imposed by the Indian Act, and the reality that community participation by rights-holders can be limited even within Indigenous decision-making.

Cape Breton's Gaelic heritage adds a second cultural-governance layer with no equivalent in the other North American cases. Language preservation and cultural revitalisation appear throughout the corpus, linking the region to the Scottish cases and underscoring that cultural recognition is part of governance, not a decoration on it.

> *Cape Breton shows co-governance as a live, unfinished process, formal Mi'kmaw involvement in land-use planning and fisheries is real and growing, but the distance between consultation and shared authority is exactly where the hardest work remains.*

**Lessons for the learning set.** Cape Breton is where the comparison's other cases become useful resources rather than abstractions. Haida Gwaii offers a horizon of what recognised jurisdiction can achieve; Fogo offers a model of community asset ownership; Scotland offers land-reform mechanisms and minority-language institutions. In turn, Cape Breton contributes to the set a detailed picture of the middle of the journey, the institutional plumbing of multi-level governance, the friction of legal pluralism, and the work of integrating Mi'kmaw knowledge into mainstream planning. For other regions, its lesson is sobering and practical: formal inclusion is a necessary step, but only the transfer of real authority changes outcomes.

## Haida Gwaii, British Columbia (Canada)

Haida Gwaii anchors the high-autonomy end of the spectrum and serves as the comparison's benchmark. The coded evidence is concentrated on ecosystem-based management, Indigenous governance, self-determination, land rights, legal recognition and co-governance, a profile that differs sharply from Mackinac's and that even exceeds Cape Breton's in the centrality of recognised authority.

The Constitution of the Haida Nation asserts that the Council of the Haida Nation holds hereditary and Aboriginal title to the entire lands, waters, sub-surface and airspace of Haida Gwaii, and commits the Nation to full independence, sovereignty and self-sufficiency while setting resource policies consistent with nature's capacity to produce. This is not aspiration alone: the evidence documents government-to-government agreements with British Columbia and, more recently, federal recognition of Haida title,

described in the record as a step beyond recognition toward reconciliation, in which Haida governance, jurisdiction and stewardship are upheld through collaboration and an orderly transition. The Haida Gwaii Watchmen, hereditary governance through matrilineal clans, and co-management of protected areas all appear as functioning institutions rather than historical references.

Crucially for the synthesis, recognised authority does not appear to come at the expense of environmental protection, it is the vehicle for it. Ecosystem-based management is the single most frequent theme in the Haida corpus, and it is exercised through Haida authority rather than against it. Conflict in the record clusters around the points where external regulatory regimes, for example in mining and mineral tenure, have failed to recognise inherent rights, which is precisely the friction that recognition is intended to resolve.

> *Haida Gwaii is the comparison's proof of concept: where jurisdiction is genuinely recognised, governance can be both more self-determined and more ecologically protective at the same time.*

**Lessons for the learning set.** As the project's preliminary scoping anticipated, Haida Gwaii does not so much complicate the thesis as confirm it. It demonstrates the end-state that the distinction between symbolic inclusion and meaningful authority points toward, and it shows the other regions what is structurally possible. For Cape Breton, it is a horizon for Mi'kmaw governance; for Scotland, a parallel in which land and authority are reunited; for Mackinac, the sharpest possible contrast, a place where Indigenous knowledge is the governing framework rather than an interpretive overlay. Its lesson for all is that recognition of jurisdiction is not a risk to stewardship but a foundation for it.

# Cross-case synthesis

Read side by side, the five cases yield three findings that hold across radically different histories and constitutional settings. Each is grounded in the coded evidence from all five regions, and each carries implications that run in every direction across the set.

## 1. Tourism dependence creates shared vulnerability, but uneven impacts

Every region in the synthesis relies on tourism, and every region's evidence is marked by seasonality, infrastructure pressure and the economic-benefit themes that come with it. But the cases make clear that dependence is experienced unevenly, and that the difference is governed, not given. Mackinac experiences extreme seasonality that strains a narrow infrastructure and locks the island into a single economic mode. Fogo's evidence shows tourism feeding back into the very ferry and service capacity that residents and other sectors depend on. Cape Breton's larger and more diversified base cushions the shock without removing it. The Outer Hebrides and Arran combine a diversified economy with persistent seasonal and demographic strain. Across the board, leaning on tourism as the dominant strategy increases exposure to external shocks and narrows long-term options.

What separates the cases is whether communities own the terms of their tourism. Where assets are community-controlled, Fogo's enterprises, Scotland's trusts, Mi'kmaw community-owned cultural tourism in Cape Breton, more of the value stays local and more of the risk is collectively managed. Where authority sits elsewhere, residents tend to absorb the costs of seasonality and congestion while the benefits flow outward. Tourism, in other words, is not inherently extractive or regenerative; governance decides which it becomes.

## 2. Land governance shapes power and long-term outcomes

The strongest predictor of a community's capacity to plan for the long term, across all five cases, is how land is governed, who owns it, who plans it, and whose knowledge informs those decisions. Mackinac's land system is dominated by preservation mandates rooted in colonial-era legislation: environmentally protective, but constraining of community influence and adaptation. Cape Breton's land-use and marine planning increasingly combine ecosystem-based management with Mi'kmaw knowledge and institutions, a more relational approach that is real but still consolidating. The Outer Hebrides and Arran show the most direct structural lever in the set: community land trusts, development trusts and crofting tenure that move land into locally accountable hands and make long-term, intergenerational planning possible. Haida Gwaii embeds land and ocean policy within recognised Haida jurisdiction, exercised through ecosystem-based management.

The throughline is that land governance is never merely technical. It encodes who has standing to shape the future. Tenure systems that secure collective rights, Indigenous stewardship, and community ownership all enable long-term responsibility in ways that centralised or absentee control does not. Preservation matters, but as Mackinac shows, rigid or centralised control that is not paired with local authority can limit the very participation and adaptation that sustainability requires.

## 3. Meaningful authority matters more than symbolic inclusion

The clearest finding of the synthesis is also its most consequential for policy: the degree to which communities, and especially Indigenous nations, hold genuine decision-making power is what shapes governance outcomes. The cases form an almost continuous gradient. On Mackinac, Indigenous participation is largely confined to cultural interpretation, and traditional ecological knowledge is documented as secondary to Western science. In Cape Breton, Mi'kmaw institutions are formally involved in land-use planning and fisheries through co-management arrangements that are real but still maturing toward shared authority. In the Outer Hebrides and Arran, land reform and language legislation have institutionalised community rights and cultural recognition. On Haida Gwaii, authority itself, title, jurisdiction, constitutional governance, is increasingly recognised.

These differences shape not only who is represented, but whether a governance system can actually respond to change and reflect local priorities. Consultation that leaves authority untouched produces little; the transfer of real influence produces adaptation, trust and stewardship. This is the distinction on which the whole comparison turns, and it is visible in the evidence of every case.

## Cross-cutting patterns

Three further patterns run beneath the headline findings and are worth naming for the regions that will use this report.

- **Marine and coastal governance is a shared frontier.** Lamlash Bay in Scotland, Mi'kmaw fisheries co-management in Cape Breton, and Haida marine stewardship all show communities asserting authority over coastal waters, a domain where co-governance is being actively invented and where the cases have most to learn from one another.
- **Cultural and linguistic revitalisation is governance, not ornament.** Gaelic in Cape Breton and Scotland, and Mi'kmaw and Haida language and knowledge systems, recur as integral to authority and identity. Where language and culture are institutionally recognised, communities tend to hold more substantive power.
- **Local data is a precondition for local control.** The Scottish material in particular highlights that communities cannot govern flows, of people, goods, housing, resources, that they cannot see. Investment in local-level data is a quiet but recurring enabler of self-governance across the set.

# Policy implications

The findings suggest that sustainable island futures depend less on which specific policy tools a community adopts than on governance arrangements that strengthen local capacity, learning and shared authority. The implications below are written for island and coastal regions on both sides of the Atlantic, and for the Canadian and UK policy communities that support them, seeking to grow their own answers. They are not region-specific prescriptions; each draws on the full comparison.

## 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, not only its value as real estate or scenery. Community land ownership, Indigenous stewardship, and tenure systems that secure collective rights, the trusts and crofting tenure of Scotland, the recognised title of Haida Gwaii, the community ownership of Fogo, enable long-term planning and intergenerational responsibility. Preservation remains important, but Mackinac demonstrates that rigid or centralised control can limit participation and adaptation if it is not paired with genuine local authority. Cultural economies, land-based work and community enterprises can build resilience without requiring continuous growth.

## Move from consultation to shared decision-making

Consultation alone does not meaningfully shift power or improve outcomes. Across the cases, the regions that responded best to change were those that gave communities, and Indigenous nations in particular, real influence over decisions. Governance frameworks should therefore support shared authority through co-governance arrangements: formal roles in planning and resource management, recognised institutions, and the resourcing that makes participation real rather than nominal. For Canada this is inseparable from reconciliation and the implementation of recognised and treaty rights; for the United Kingdom it connects to the land-reform and community-empowerment agenda. In both settings, the shift from being consulted to deciding is what builds trust and durable governance.

## Design governance systems that can learn and adapt

Island regions face compounding uncertainty, climate change, demographic shifts, housing pressure and global economic volatility. Governance structures that prioritise control or fixed outcomes struggle under these conditions, while flexible institutions, iterative planning and long-term relationship-building allow communities to respond and to shape future possibilities. Practically, this means investing in local-level data and monitoring, supporting community-controlled economic assets that can absorb shocks, and building the marine and coastal co-governance capacity that several of the cases are pioneering. Adaptive governance is not a single policy but a posture: holding authority close to communities, and designing for learning rather than permanence.

## Implications by region

While the lessons are mutual, the comparison points each region toward a different leading edge of work.

| Region | Leading edge suggested by the comparison |
|---|---|
| **Mackinac Island** | Pair its strong preservation regime with broader community and Indigenous authority; treat traditional ecological knowledge as an equal partner in planning, not interpretation alone. |
| **Fogo Island** | Protect against heritage commodification and manage tourism scale and ferry-capacity feedback loops, while continuing to extend its community-ownership model into new sectors. |
| **Outer Hebrides & Arran** | Build on land reform and community trusts to tackle the unresolved demographic and affordable-housing pressures that ownership alone has not solved; share Gaelic-institution lessons with Cape Breton. |
| **Cape Breton / Unama'ki** | Move co-governance from formal involvement toward genuinely shared authority in land-use and fisheries; draw on Haida jurisdiction, Fogo ownership and Scottish trusts as concrete models. |
| **Haida Gwaii** | Continue translating recognised jurisdiction into operational co-governance, and serve, as it already does, as a reference point for nations and regions earlier in the journey. |

# Conclusion

The title of this project, growing our own answers, is also its finding. Across five island regions separated by thousands of kilometres and very different constitutional arrangements, the communities that are most able to sustain themselves are those that hold genuine authority over their land, their economy and their culture. Tourism dependence is a shared condition; the legacies of colonisation and internal colonisation are widely shared; the pressures of seasonality, demography and climate fall on all of them. What differs is who gets to decide what to do about it.

The five cases are best understood not as a ranking but as a single learning set strung along a spectrum of self-governance. Mackinac shows the limits of protection without authority. Fogo shows the power of community ownership. The Outer Hebrides and Arran show that local control can be written into law and tenure. Cape Breton shows the difficult, generative middle ground of building co-governance across many hands. Haida Gwaii shows what becomes possible when jurisdiction is recognised, and that recognition strengthens stewardship rather than threatening it. Each has something to teach the others, and together they offer island and coastal regions a practical orientation: treat land as a shared responsibility, move from consultation to shared decision-making, and design governance that can learn.

*This synthesis was conceived as a Canada–United Kingdom collaboration, and its value grows with continued comparative work, deepening the Scottish evidence base, extending the marine co-governance comparison, and testing these findings with the communities themselves. The conversation this report opens is, fittingly, one that the islands should continue to lead.*

# Appendix: methods and evidence base

The synthesis is grounded in a structured qualitative review of fifty-nine source documents across the five regions. Each document was read and thematically coded, producing 2,123 discrete coded evidence segments. Coding captured both substantive themes (for example seasonality, land rights, co-governance, ecosystem-based management, community wealth-building, traditional ecological knowledge, power asymmetries) and case-bridging themes (lessons learned, comparative insights, and cross-regional implications) that the team built into the coding frame to support synthesis across cases.

The corpus is summarised below. Its uneven distribution reflects both the project's focus on Cape Breton / Unama'ki as the home region and the documentary material available to the Canadian team for each case. Findings for regions with smaller corpora are reported conservatively and triangulated against the wider literature and, where available, scoping engagement.

| Region (corpus) | Source documents | Coded segments | Position on spectrum |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Cape Breton / Unama'ki** | 25 | 1,197 | Emerging co-governance |
| **Fogo Island** | 10 | 342 | Community ownership |
| **Haida Gwaii** | 8 | 260 | Recognised jurisdiction |
| **Mackinac Island** | 10 | 190 | Centralised preservation |
| **Outer Hebrides & Arran** | 6 | 134 | Land reform / trusts |
| **Total** | **59** | **2,123** | — |

### Limitations

Three limitations should be read alongside the findings. First, the corpus is documentary and was complemented by scoping rather than extensive primary fieldwork, in keeping with a knowledge-synthesis design; the report describes governance as represented in the available record. Second, the cases are unevenly resourced, and the Scottish evidence base in particular is more concentrated than the others and would benefit from the fuller bi-national collaboration the grant envisaged. Third, governance arrangements in several regions, notably Haida title recognition and Mi'kmaw co-management, are actively evolving; the report captures a moment in a moving process and should be read as a contribution to an ongoing conversation rather than a final word.

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