UNCOVERING ATTRIBUTES OF AN INTERNAL ISLANDS DIASPORA:

Connections and Aspirations to Return

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ABSTRACT: A transnational migration lens has shaped diaspora research in recent decades. Yet exploring diasporas in the context of moves across international borders has obscured sub-national diasporas, and this has led to a gap in our understanding of how such groups can and do contribute to their communities of origin. This article aims to develop a better understanding of the Scottish islands diaspora and to explore its potential to contribute to island communities, including via internal return migration. We present findings from a survey conducted with the Scottish islands diaspora to illustrate how internal diasporas can exhibit continued connection to a 'homeland'. This includes taking an active interest in a 'home' island's future and participating in shared cultural practices that bind individuals together within the diaspora over a sustained period. We find that the Scottish islands diaspora carries many of the hallmarks of its transnational counterparts and highlight how this group has the potential to contribute to the future of Scotland's islands both at a distance and, potentially, via return migration.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, internal migration, return migration, islands, subnational diaspora.

I. Introduction

The concept of diaspora has been of interest to academic researchers and policy makers for some time (Cohen, 1997; Dufoix, 2008; Carter, 2005). However, the focus of this interest has largely been international in scope, considering what expatriates and their descendants can contribute to their 'home' nations after they have crossed national borders and how they continue to enact national cultural identities at a distance. While a diaspora may include such international migrants (Skeldon and Bastia, 2020; Li and Chan, 2018; Lam, 2021) it may also include those whose move is not as 'neat', such as those who moved when national boundaries were redrawn during conflicts or constitutional changes. In addition, less attention has been paid to the ways in which internal migration might also produce diasporas. For example, despite persistent out-migration from rural and island areas over many decades in various national contexts (Halfacree, 2020; Hopkins and Copus, 2018; Atterton et al., 2022; Guan and McElroy, 2012), those who leave would not routinely be labelled as a diasporic group.

The links between diaspora studies and migration studies is clear – since diasporas are created through the dispersion of peoples it follows that migration and wider forms of mobility are inextricably linked with the concept. It is only natural then that, in recent decades, there has been a growing interest in diasporas within studies of transnationalism, geopolitics and wider international migration scholarship (King, 2009). Despite this there remains a paucity of evidence about if and how *internal* migrants maintain connections with their previous place of residence, as well as if and how migrants from island and rural places continue to enact these identities in their new locations. For those with a desire to stem population decline and build sustainable futures for rural and island places, this points to a gap in knowledge about the potential for internal diasporas to support their communities at a distance and via return migration. The aim of this article is therefore twofold: first, to develop a better understanding of the Scottish island diaspora and second, to explore its potential to contribute to island communities including via internal return migration. In doing so, we intend to illustrate the potential benefits of engaging with internal diasporas to support the future of islands and rural areas. As well as informing policy and practice, we hope the article will encourage further research in this area and contribute to the field of island studies by exploring aspects of interlocationality and identity in the island context which are founding principles of this journal (*Shima* Editorial Board, 2007).

II. Defining diasporas: a moving target

Historically the concept of diaspora has been strongly associated with the dispersion of the Jewish peoples and those of African descent (Dufoix, 2008), but this has expanded over time to incorporate wider nationalities, ethnicities and identities. While it is not uncommon these days to hear the term associated with national identities, the term itself remains a contested one (Dufoix, 2008; Carter, 2005; Cohen, 1997; King, 2012; Mitchell, 1997). The narrowest contemporary definition of a diaspora is as "a group of people living outside the country of their birth, who continue to identify with each other on the basis of their shared (usually national) identity" (Skeldon and Bastia, 2020, p. 89), for example Scottish descendants living in Nova Scotia who enact their common roots by speaking Gaelic and practising traditional Scottish music and dancing (Sparling, 2007). More broadly, the concept of the cultural diaspora which spans "multiple locales and maintains a degree of cohesiveness across time and space through intermarriage, common cultural practices, and 'myths of return'." (Nagel

and Boyle, 2020, p. 81) focusses on cultural identity and includes references to potential connections to a 'homeland' while being less prescriptive about individuals needing to have previously resided there. The question of who qualifies to be part of any diaspora and what form a diaspora takes can therefore be relatively nebulous. Several academics have noted diasporic status can be allocated and inherited (see, for example, Burnley, 2005; Li and Chan, 2018), with some definitions going even further, for example the 'Affinity Diaspora' which is described as "a collection of people, usually former immigrants and tourists or business travellers, who have a different national or ethnic identity to a nation state but who feel some special affinity or affection for that nation state and who act on its behalf" (Ancien et al., 2009, p. 4.8). The common thread within these differing definitions of diaspora is the idea of the dispersion of a people who otherwise maintain an ongoing connection to a shared space – whether that space be territorial or ideological.

The mid-1990s cultural turn in human geography encouraged a wider focus in migration literature on ethnic communities, transnationalism and diasporas (King, 2009, King, 2012) and brought with it the concept of heterolocality. This new concept embraced calls to move away from a sedentarist tradition and acknowledged that migrants may "enter a given area from distant sources, then promptly adopt a dispersed pattern of residential location, all the while maintaining strong social cohesion by various means, despite the lack of propinquity" (Zelinsky and Lee, 1998, p. 293). Building on this, Halfacree (2012) developed the concept of dynamic heterolocalism which "is concerned with forging identity and lifestyle through multiple places that does not depend on the core sedentarist assumption of a single, settled home place" (p 214). This, alongside examinations of circulation (Boyle, 2009; Halfacree, 2020), sojourning (Cohen, 1997; Halfacree, 2012; Yeoh and Willis, 1999) and other forms of temporary migration and multi-locational living (Rees, 2020), is helpful in recognising the fluidity and temporality of modern migration patterns. Those who frame the diaspora as a group who have crossed an international border may contest the idea of a diaspora existing within its own 'nation of origin', pointing instead to the concepts listed above as a means of exploring internal migration. However, whilst these concepts focus on an individual's mobility and connection to place, diaspora discussions extend beyond this to include a body of people 'out of place' with an established history (King, 2012) and their connections to each other.

III. Mapping diasporas

At the core of definitions of diaspora is the idea of connection not only to place but also to a distinct culture which transcends borders. To take this into account, however, we must also consider that the nature of borders themselves is subject to debate. In a discussion on territorialization and identity Malkki (1992) highlights the relatively recent rise of the nation state, differing perspectives on territorialization, and the differences between national and ethnographic mapping, all of which must be considered when exploring the concept of diaspora. This highlights that, while diaspora is often defined against the borders created by modern nations, this can fail to take into account the spatiality of cultures which might be more accurately mapped using an ethnographic approach. Mazzullo and Ingold's (2015) exploration of place, time and movement among the Sàmi people highlights one way in which connection to place is understood differently in different cultures. The Sàmi understanding that home encompasses a network of places rather than a single fixed space echoes the concept of heterolocality discussed above. In doing so, it causes us to consider whether the spaces inhabited by the diaspora are, in fact, extensions of the homeland where culture and identity can continue to be enacted and expressed. Within discussions on

mobilities, scholars have already recognised that "it is no longer assumed that emigrants make a sharp break from their homelands. Rather, pre-migration networks, cultures, and capital remain salient" (Lie, 1995, p. 304, see also Halfacree, 2020). However, Ahia & Johnson (2022) argue that diaspora is still often considered through a colonial lens which privileges settlement and rootedness over the tradition of mobility at the heart of Hawaiian culture. Within such a framework they argue that diaspora takes on connotations of expulsion or abandonment, which ignores the continued contribution members of the dispersed community can and do make to the 'homeland'. Contesting the idea of diaspora as a diluted form of culture, they call for a recognition that drawing the diaspora back into our notion of community strengthens that community in several ways, including by increasing its capacity.

For migrants, interaction with the diaspora can be important as a means of connecting to the familiar while navigating their new location (Collyer et al, 2012), as well as for continued connection to identity throughout generations (Carter, 2005; Burnley, 2005). However, while connections between the diaspora and their origin communities have been shown to take several forms, these have often been viewed through an economic and developmental lens. The remittances sent by migrants back to home communities have been the subject of much attention, not least of all due to their value which reached an estimated $647 billion flowing into low- and middle-income countries in 2022[1]. Financial remittances can take many forms, from support for individuals and households, to offering support at a community or regional level (see, for example, Nagel and Boyle, 2020). These remittances are, however, about more than just financial support; they allow absent migrants to build status and influence in a community which remains significant to them even though they are not physically present. Wider cultural, social and political remittances can also flow from the diaspora (Skeldon and Bastia, 2020) bringing new ideas into the origin community, as well as sharing technical knowledge and expertise gained in the wider world. More formally, national diasporas have been recognised at a strategic level for their potential to act as ambassadors for their country of origin (see, for example, Scottish Government, 2008) and amplify the voice of a country beyond its national borders (Carter, 2005), as well as for their potential as a pool of return migrants who might help tackle skills shortages and demographic imbalance (Ancien et al., 2009).

IV. Diaspora and internal migration

An exploration of international diasporas dominates the academic literature. However, acknowledgement of the strategic potential of engaging with internal migrants has received some attention. For example, Atterton et al (2022) examined a range of actions being undertaken by the Japanese Government to engage with the *kankeijinkō* (relationship population) - a group of internal migrants with connections to rural places experiencing decline (see also Dilley et al, 2022). Similarly, Thurmer & Taylor (2021) note strategies from the government of Tasmania, Australia which has sought to create a diaspora network with the aim of "keeping track of former residents and promoting initiatives to keep them informed about developments in the state through social media applications" (p. 797). More widely, when internal diasporas have been explored, it is generally in the context of return migration. Sowl et al's (2021) exploration of the potential for return migration by young people from rural America utilises a framework which acknowledges that the social capital

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[1] Value of remittances as reported by The World Bank in a press release on 13th June 2023 -
https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/06/13/remittances-remain-resilient-likely-to-slow

individuals develop in their rural communities can be retained following out-migration and notes that "positive ties to home, family, friends, and community members seem to have great impact on rural return mobility or aspirations to return to home communities" (p. 6).

Similar place attachments are also found at the heart of an exploration of return migration among young rural to urban migrants in Western Australia. Here researchers concluded that "it appears that rural and regional place attachment plays an ongoing role in young people's experience, despite the economic opportunities available in urban areas" (Reithmuller et al., 2021: p. 8). In their detailed study of internal return migration to the Northern Territory of Australia, Thurmer & Taylor (2021) examine patterns of return migration to the state to fill gaps in the knowledge around the rates of return amongst internal migrants and the characteristics of returnees. This research is set against a backdrop of proactive action from the state government to engage with 'expats' within Australia to encourage return migration. In an examination of migration in the context of rural economic regeneration, Stockdale (2006) argues that return migration can bring with it important benefits for endogenous development, but that "in order to increase the prospects for return migration changes need to take place within rural communities" (p. 364). In their extensive examination of motivations for return migration among internal migrants in rural Tanzania, Hirvonen and Bie Lilleør (2015) also found evidence of migrants maintaining an ongoing relationship with their place of origin and highlighted that the maintenance of these social networks was an important factor within return migration patterns. In setting the scene for their explorations of return migration, many of these studies foreground the potential of return for individuals and their immediate family. This leaves room for further exploration of the potential for this form of migration at a collective level and the diaspora as a group of unrelated people. It also creates space for explorations of the roles migrants may continue to play in their origin communities at a distance. In particular, the connections these migrants maintain may also help them sustain and develop social capital, place attachment and local knowledge, all of which have been identified as key aspects of resilience building in rural and island communities (MacKinnon and Driscoll Derickson, 2013; Magis, 2010; Matarrita Cascante et al., 2017; Skerratt, 2013) and can potentially help create pathways for return migration. Exploring these areas could be of great relevance in discussions around the future of rural and island communities, particularly for those considering how to tackle population decline and build sustainable futures for these places.

V. The Scottish islands and outmigration

Scotland has 89 inhabited offshore islands (Scottish Government, 2024a) lying off the west and north coasts of the Scottish mainland. The most populated islands are Lewis and Harris (21,031), Mainland Shetland (18,800) and Mainland Orkney (17,200) (National Records of Scotland, 2015), and there is a "long tail" of islands with populations of less than 100. In political discourse, the islands are typically grouped geographically according to their administrative boundaries, and span six local authorities, three of which are island-only authorities (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Shetland Islands Council, and Orkney Islands Council) and three of which also span parts of the Scottish mainland (Argyll and Bute Council, Highland Council, and North Ayrshire)[2] – see Figure 1.

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[2] Informally, Orkney and Shetland are sometimes considered collectively as the "Northern Isles" and many of the islands of the west coast as "the Hebrides" or, alternatively, the "Inner Hebrides" and the "Outer Hebrides". Those located in the Forth of Clyde are also known as the "Clyde Islands".
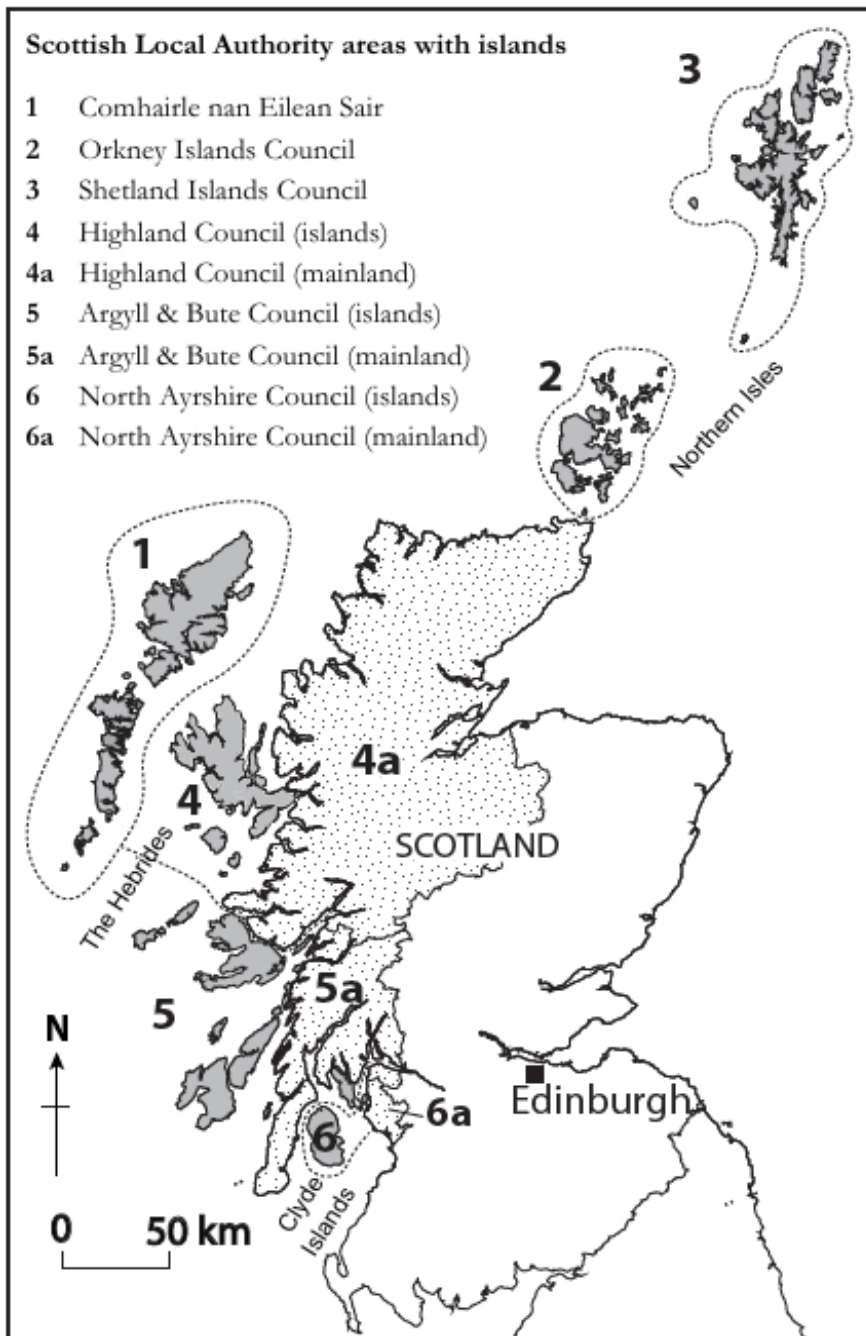
Figure 1 – Island Local Authorities in Scotland.

Out-migration from Scotland's islands and the associated depopulation of island communities is a long-established and continuing demographic trend which has been well documented elsewhere (c.f. Lumb, 1980; Smout, 1969; Atterton et al, 2022; Scottish Government, 2019). This trend comes against a backdrop of falling birthrates and ageing populations in the wider Scottish context, resulting in a range of demographic challenges across the nation (Scottish Government, 2021). However, islands have been identified as one of the key areas likely to face particular challenges associated with long-term population loss and demographic change (Scottish Government, 2024b). Scotland's population is ageing; however, island populations are ageing more rapidly than the national average, with projections indicating that "the percentage loss of working age population in the islands is anticipated to be disproportionately higher than the total percentage loss of population" (Scottish Government, 2023, p. 7). While the 'young old' represent an asset to rural and island communities (c.f. Colibaba et.al., 2021; Philip et. al. 2023; Joseph & Cloutier-Fisher, 2005; Winterton & Warburton, 2014), increasing demands on health and care services can be challenging for island communities to meet. A lower population reduces the human capital available within an island community which may impact negatively on its ability to function on a day-to-day basis. It also reduces demands for goods and services and, in turn, the commercial viability of, for example, retail outlets and leisure facilities. It may also affect the cost per head of supplying essential goods and services to island communities, increasing living costs for residents and limiting the willingness or ability of external actors to provide more than a minimal service level (Foley et al., 2023, Scottish Government, 2024a).

Today, while a proportion of island outmigrants head for international destinations, many relocate to urban areas within Scotland and other nations within the UK to pursue employment or educational opportunities. This pattern of rural to urban migration is similar to movements from mainland rural Scotland to urban centres and is a pattern replicated in many national contexts (see, for example Dyrting et al., 2020; Bock and Haartsen, 2021). It also reflects the long histories of movement which have shaped island identities globally (Guan and McElroy, 2012; Oliver, 2011; Baldacchino, 2008; Joseph, 2021; Kelman & Stojanov, 2021). This mobility does not necessarily mean that ties with the familial and social networks the migrant leaves behind are severed (Halfacree, 2020), nor does it necessarily eradicate the sense of 'islander identity' a migrant may possess. An 'islander identity', that is an identity which may be created, at least in part, by the natural boundary of the sea which "bind[s] the island's inhabitants together, giving them a shared sense of identity (a form of solidarity at its most pronounced)" (Royle & Brinklow, 2020, p. 9), can result not only in a bond that is shared by those from the same island, but also in a shared culture of islandness which can promote solidarity between those from different islands (Foley at al., 2023). This shared culture means that those who migrate away from the islands may seek opportunities to continue to engage with a form of 'home' by connecting with other islanders who might not necessarily be from their own island of origin. Similar patterns are seen in other diasporas, where individuals with roots in varying regions of the 'homeland' join together to celebrate their unifying culture via the creation of spaces which reflect their place of origin (see, for example, Burnley, 2005).

While it is widely known that there is an island diaspora living in mainland Scotland today, members of this diaspora can be hard to identify. This may be because islanders are, as suggested by Ratter (2018), well-practiced in plurality given their cultural history of mobility and are already part of the 'national' culture meaning their assimilation into mainland communities is not as challenging as it could be for other 'newcomers' with more points of difference to the majority in their new location. The integration of selected elements of Gaelic culture, which has importance in many islands off Scotland's west coast, into 'national'

identity also reduces such points of difference. Without the residential segregation commonly associated with other diasporic groups in Scotland (e.g., those of Indian sub-continent heritage in Scottish cities – see Houston, 2010), the islands diaspora is less visible (Johnston et al., 2002). However, generations of island migrants have congregated in key places across the Scottish mainland, creating and maintaining their own 'island spaces' including places of worship, pubs and music venues, which act as important conduits to keep them connected with their island culture and islander identity (Macaskill, 2015). These places have become a mixing pot for people from different islands who share an innate understanding of 'islandness' (Conkling, 2007; Wilson et al., 2015), offering them the opportunity to come together to express and enact an islander identity which binds them to each other in their new location. This group of internal migrants thus possesses several of the attributes which characterise diasporas in the definitions discussed above, providing fertile ground for understanding the shape of internal diasporas, their connection to place, their common activity, and their aspirations for return. It is this group of internal migrants – the Scottish islands diaspora – which is the focus of the remainder of this article.

VI. Methodology

A questionnaire survey was developed to map the Scottish islands diaspora [3]. No such mapping exercise had previously been attempted. The purpose of the survey was to understand i) selected demographic and personal attributes of the diaspora, ii) which islands members of the diaspora had connections to and what, if any, links they retained with their 'home' island, iii) how and where individuals interacted with other members of the islands diaspora, and iv) what, if any, aspirations individuals had for residential return to the island(s). Table 1 presents information about the variables for which data were collected.

The survey was promoted widely using well-established island networks, utilising social media and national and local print and broadcast media in an attempt to bring it to the attention of as large a pool of potential participants as possible. Available online, the survey was open for three months, from late 2022 to early 2023. Anyone aged 18 or over who did not currently live in an offshore Scottish island and who met one or more of the following criteria was eligible to complete the survey: (i) had lived in one of these islands as a child or an adult; and/or (ii) whose family came from an island (including past generations); and/or (iii) who had another strong connection to a Scottish island (for example, regularly working in the island). The eligibility criteria reflect the definition of diaspora used within this research which encompasses prior residence in an island, familial connections, and connections associated with the affinity diaspora, as described above. The mode of administration meant that the sample was self-selecting. Respondents were able to complete the survey anonymously, though some respondents opted to provide personal information to allow researchers to contact them regarding opportunities to be involved in wider research.

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[3] Ethical approval granted by the University of Aberdeen in October 2022.

Topic	Variables
Demographic characteristics and personal circumstances	• Location. • Age. • Gender identity. • Relationship status. • Household make up. • Housing (tenure, property type, facilities, suitability). • Workforce participation. • Employment status and sector. • Time period living away from the island (previous residents). • Age when first / last left the island and reasons for leaving the island (previous residents).
Island connections	• Type(s) of personal connection to the island. • Frequency / type of contact with those living in the island. • Frequency of contact with specific groups of people living in the island (e.g., family, partner, friends, etc). • Methods of keeping up to date with island news. • Visits to the island (frequency, purpose of visits, last visit, impact of covid on visits, access to accommodation on the island). • Involvement in island-related activities (e.g., volunteering, attending meetings about community issues, etc).
Diaspora activity	• Type of contact with islanders in current location (e.g., socialising, working together, etc). • Spaces of interaction with other islanders. • Frequency of contact with other islanders in current location.
Aspirations for return	• Desire to move to a Scottish island in the future. • Type of island they would move to. • Impact of Covid on desire to move.

Table 1 – Topics and associated variables in the survey of the Scottish islands diaspora.

A total of 505 completed responses were received from individuals within the target population with respondents having links to 42 Scottish islands which ranged in size and location. As summarised in Table 2, responses were received from all Local Authority areas with inhabited islands, but the responses were not proportional to the size of these areas' islands populations. Notably only a quarter of responses to the survey (n=128) came from those whose main island connection was to an island off Scotland's northern coast (Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council) despite these islands being home to 48% of the island population included within the research. While the proportion of responses from Orkney and Shetland was smaller than might be expected for their population sizes, the volume of responses from these island groups was nonetheless sufficient to analyse alongside those from other island groups, informing our understanding of the Scottish islands diaspora as a whole, with observations made about specific island groups where appropriate.

Local Authority	Responses	Island populations in 2011[4,5] and % of total islands population
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	209	27,684
	41%	29.73%
Argyll and Bute Council	122	14,546
	24%	12.41%
Shetland Islands Council	74	23,167
	15%	24.91%
Orkney Islands Council	54	21,349
	11%	23.01%
North Ayrshire	33	6,036
	7%	6.90%
Highland Council	13	341
	3%	0.37%
Total	505	93,123

Table 2 – Survey respondents by Local Authority area

VII. Results

The data gathered through the survey were analysed in order to map the characteristics of the Scottish islands diaspora specifically as a means of improving our understanding of internal diasporas more generally. The data gathered included demographic characteristics and personal circumstances, island connections, diaspora activity, and attitudes towards return migration. Relevant findings from the survey are presented below. While it should not be assumed that the size of a diaspora will be directly proportional to the size of the resident population, given the multiple factors which affect migration which can be experienced to different degrees in different locations, we note that results reported here may provide a picture weighted towards those with connections to specific geographical locations or types of island and further analysis would be required to understand any particular nuance between islands. However, unless otherwise indicated, the survey results do indicate a sharing of practices across those with connections to differing island archipelagos.

VIII. Demographic characteristics and personal circumstances

A majority of those who responded to the survey identified as female/a woman (62%, n=313) with a further 35% (n=177) identifying as male/a man, and 2% (n=11) identifying as non-binary (see Table 3). While research has pointed to the higher likelihood of women moving away from rural areas (for example, Čipin et al, 2020; King, 2012) it is not possible to know whether the attributes of survey respondents in this regard reflects the gender balance of the diaspora or if it is the result of other factors such as gendered preference for participation in research of this nature. Similarly, while responses were submitted from a range of age groups, the

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[4] Population data from the 2011 census was the most up to date island-level data available at the time of writing. Although local authority data has been released for the 2022 census, data separating out the mainland and island populations for Argyll and Bute Council, Highland Council and North Ayrshire Council had not, as of 1st March 2024, been released.

[5] A decision was made not to include the islands of Seil and Skye in the research project since they have fixed links to mainland Scotland. The population figures presented therefore exclude Seil and Skye.

largest share of responses came from those in mid-life. Again, it is not possible to ascertain whether the age profile of respondents reflects the make-up of the diaspora in general. On the one hand, the well documented outmigration of young people from the islands (Alexander, 2021) might cause one to assume that young people are underrepresented in these results. However, 71% (n=296) of the 414 respondents who stated they had lived in a Scottish island indicated that they were aged 24 or younger when they moved away, with a further 14% (n=57) leaving before the age of 35. In addition, 54% (n=224) of those who had previously lived in an island indicated they had left more than 20 years ago. These attributes point to a diaspora who were originally predominantly young out-migrants but who have now aged in their new locations. It is useful here to note that the majority of urban-rural migrants in the UK are mid-life adults, indicating that the age profile of survey respondents is such that it may be assumed that it captures a potential pool of return migrants to Scotland's islands. Furthermore, the percentage of respondents aged 65 and over (12%, n=62) is around half of the proportion of this age group at a national level. This could be a reflection of this group being less likely than younger adults to engage with the types of online fora used to promote and administer the survey. Retired respondents made up 17% (n=88) of the sample with the remaining respondents being economically active (74%, n=417) or individuals who might otherwise be considered part of the potential workforce, including those who were currently occupied with caring responsibilities and who do not work outside the home (2%, n=8), those undertaking full time study (5%, n=25), and those currently unable to work for health reasons (2%, n=12). These economic attributes hint to a Scottish islands diaspora containing economically active, mid-life adults who, as return migrants, could contribute to island labour markets. This is particularly pertinent given the demographic challenges faced by many of Scotland's islands.

Approximately two thirds of respondents (68%, n=343) reported that they currently lived in mainland Scotland at the time of the survey. About a fifth (18%, n=90) lived elsewhere in the UK, and 8% (n=42) lived overseas (6% of respondents declined to answer). Of those living in mainland Scotland who reported a location (n=339), 55% resided either in Scotland's three largest cities – Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen – or in the local authority areas bordering these cities. This finding is not unexpected primarily due to the fact that out migration from Scotland's islands often follows a path which leads to large urban areas as migrants seek work and higher education opportunities (Alexander, 2021; Lumb, 1980). However, it also illustrates the persistence of historical trends whereby 'island hub populations' have congregated in Scotland's cities which have, in turn, become home to venues and organisations associated with the islands (see the section 'Diaspora activity on the mainland' for further discussion).

The majority of respondents, 71% (n=360), were married or in a long-term relationship and 38% (n=190) of respondents stated they lived with their children or the children of their partners. These attributes mean that residential relocation decisions would likely need to take into consideration other household members, and this is of importance if the potential of the islands diaspora as a group of return migrants is being considered.

		Age group							
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	Total
Female/ woman	All	15 3.0%	37 7.3%	68 13.5%	88 17.4%	73 14.5%	22 4.3%	10 2.0%	313 62.0%
	Economically active	8 1.6%	32 6.3%	63 12.5%	82 16.2%	47 9.3%	4 0.8%	1 0.2%	237 46.9%
	Retired	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 0.2%	1 0.2%	21 4.2%	18 3.6%	9 1.8%	50 9.9%
	Other	7 1.4%	5 1.0%	4 0.8%	5 1.0%	5 1.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	26 5.1%
Male/ man	All	4 0.8%	31 6.1%	26 5.1%	41 8.1%	46 9.1%	24 4.8%	5 1.0%	177 35%
	Economically active	3 0.6%	29 5.7%	25 5.0%	36 7.1%	33 6.5%	4 0.8%	0 0%	130 25.7%
	Retired	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 0.2%	11 2.2%	20 4.0%	5 1.0%	37 7.3%
	Other	1 0.2%	2 0.4%	1 0.2%	4 0.8%	2 0.4%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	10 2.0%
All	All	24 4.8%	72 14.3%	94 18.6%	130 25.7%	123 24.4%	46 9.1%	16 3.2%	505 100%
	Economically active	13 2.6%	63 12.5%	88 17.4%	118 23.4%	82 16.2%	8 1.6%	1 0.2%	373 73.9%
	Retired	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 0.2%	2 0.4%	32 6.3%	38 7.5%	15 3.0%	88 17.4%
	Other	11 2.2%	9 1.8%	5 1.0%	10 2.0%	9 1.8%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	44 8.7%

Note: the category 'All' includes the 11 individuals who self-identified as non-binary and 4 individuals who elected not to disclose their gender identity.

Table 3 – Demographic attributes of survey respondents

IX. Island connections

Survey responses were received from people who specified links to 42 different offshore Scottish islands of varying size and characteristics. Participants who identified links to more than one island were asked to specify an island against which to frame their responses to survey questions about island connections. This reduced the number of islands considered in the paragraphs that follow to 39. Responses covered islands located in all six Scottish local authority areas which include inhabited offshore islands[6], with populations ranging from 8

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[6] Argyll and Bute Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Highland Council, North Ayrshire Council, Orkney Islands Council, and Shetland Islands Council.

to over 21,000[7] (see Figure 1 for map of Local Authority areas). These islands ranged in size from just 24 hectares to over 217,819 hectares and varied widely in terms of on-island amenities and transport connections to the Scottish mainland.

Survey responses allowed a distinction to be made between respondents who had previously lived in a Scottish island and those who had not previously been permanent island residents. This distinction aligns with a broad understanding of who can be part of a diaspora, reflecting diverse place-based attachments to, in this case, Scottish islands. Of the total sample of 505, 82% (n=415) had previously lived in at least one Scottish island. A further 90 respondents had not previously lived in a Scottish island but reported at least one of the following island connections: having family or a partner who currently live or previously lived in an island (including past generations); owning a property in an island; and visiting the island regularly for work or holidays (see Table 4). Almost all respondents (97%, n=490) had either lived on an island themselves or had family or a partner who lived on an island now or in the past (including previous generations). Only 7 (1%) respondents indicated that their only connection to 'their' island was though regular holidays.

Stated island connection for respondents who had not previously lived in a Scottish island *(as reported by 90 individuals)*	n (%)
I have family or a partner who live there now.	47 (52%)
I have family or a partner who have lived in the island in the past (including past generations).	60 (66%)
I have family or a partner who live there now and I have family or a partner who have lived in the island in the past (including past generations).	40 (44%)
I own a property on the island.	22 (24%)
I have had to visit the island regularly for work.	8 (9%)
I have holidayed on the island on a regular basis.	68 (75%)

Note: respondents were able to choose more than one option in response to this question and totals therefore exceed 90 responses / 100%.

Table 4 – Island connections reported by those who had not previously lived in a Scottish island.

In order to develop an understanding of how individuals maintain social connections with 'their' island, respondents were asked to indicate the methods they use to keep in contact with people who still live there and the frequency with which they use these methods (Table 5). Respondents were able to select multiple means of contact. A large proportion, 40% (n=202), reported contact with someone in the island using one or more of the methods listed on a daily basis, with a further 32% (n=161) indicating that this occurred at least once a week. Only 7% (n=33) indicated that they have no current contact with someone living in the island by any of the means listed. Beyond the mapping of these personal connections, the survey also identified the means used by members of the diaspora to keep updated about what is happening in the island more widely. Social media was the most common means, being used by 89% (n=447) of respondents. However, despite the now ubiquitous use of

[7] Populations reported as per the 2011 census, which was the most up to date census data available at the time of writing.

social media, those in the diaspora still rely heavily on personal contact with those living in the island with 85% (n=427) reporting that they get updates about what is happening in the island through direct interactions with those still living there. Local media was used by 59% (n=298) of respondents to keep up to date, with this ranging from the websites of local newspapers to community-level newsletters which are distributed in some islands and sent out to those in the diaspora.

Contact method	Frequency of use % (n)					
	Every day	At least once a week	At least once a month	Less often	Never	No response
Texts / direct messages	24% (119)	32% (160)	15% (78)	13% (68)	<1% (4)	15% (76)
Phone	8% (39)	30% (152)	20% (99)	19% (97)	5% (27)	18% (91)
Social media	28% (143)	27% (136)	12% (63)	11% (55)	6% (28)	16% (80)
Postal mail	0% (0)	<1% (3)	4% (21)	47% (235)	19% (99)	29% (147)
Visits to the island	<1% (2)	<1% (1)	5% (27)	82% (412)	1% (7)	11% (56)
Visits from islanders	<1% (2)	0% (0)	5% (23)	69% (346)	8% (42)	18% (92)

Table 5 – Type and frequency of contact with those still living on the island.

Of interest is that 88% (n=444) respondents indicated that visiting the island was a method they used to keep up to date with what is happening there, but the frequency of visits was variable. Only 73% (n=367) reported visiting the island in the last 12 months, perhaps a reflection that the cost and logistics involved in visiting many Scottish islands restricts the ability of respondents to visit more regularly.

The survey also asked questions designed to help elucidate the ways in which the diaspora currently engages with community life in the island whilst living at a distance, beyond keeping abreast of local news as noted above. To assess this, respondents were asked to indicate which on-island activities over the previous 12 months they had been involved in – either in person or online. A number of respondents indicated that they continue to maintain social networks in the islands through attendance at on-island community events such as ceilidhs and dances (42%, n=210) or social events such as birthday parties and personal celebrations (36%, n=182). Responses also indicated that the diaspora are not simply passive consumers of island news or observers of contemporary island life, with more than a quarter of respondents (27%, n=138) indicating that they play an active role in island life to some degree. In Table 6 we see that members of the islands diaspora had responded to consultations which affect the island, helped out at island events, attended meetings about community issues, participated in fundraising for local causes, and volunteered for community organisations. Although rates of involvement in some of these activities is relatively low, participation in these areas potentially provides an opportunity for those in

the diaspora to continue to build and maintain social capital by providing key support for their islands, as well as providing opportunities for continued personal connection to the island. In addition, these findings point to the fact that some members of this group maintain an active interest in the future of their islands, including to the point of ensuring their voices are heard with regard to important policy decisions.

Type of on-island activity	% (n)
Attending community events on-island	42% (210)
Attending other social events on-island	36% (182)
Taking part in social media discussions relating to the island	35% (178)
Responding to consultations which affect the island	15% (75)
Helping out at an event on-island	9% (43)
Fundraising for local island causes	6% (29)
Attending meetings about island community issues	6% (28)
Volunteering for an island community organisation	5% (27)
None of the above	32% (164)

Table 6 - Engagement in activities on-island and at a distance

X. Diaspora activity on the mainland

The survey asked questions designed to explore how island culture and islander identity is enacted in the daily lives of the diaspora. Potential opportunities for islanders to interact with each other in off-island locations in order to express this identity were collated using knowledge of existing island networks and used to create a question set where respondents were asked whether they had undertaken any of the following off-island activity in the last five years[8]: socialising with friends from their own or other islands; visiting pubs, churches, or other spaces, or attending events or clubs which they associate with the Scottish islands; living or working with people they know through their island connections; and / or planning trips back to their island with other islanders. It was found that 73% (n= 370) of respondents reported activity in at least one of these areas and this normally involved interacting with islanders who were not permanent island residents. There may, of course, be additional points of interaction not captured in these results. Of the 370 who indicated some form of contact with other islanders, 221 interacted with the diaspora in more than one way, with 126 respondents indicating interaction with the diaspora using three or more methods. These findings point to a group of people who use multiple methods to maintain island connections and enact their islander identity within the diaspora. While contact with other islanders living in off-island locations was less frequent than contact with those still living in the islands, 13% (n=65) of all respondents reported interacting with members of the islands diaspora on a daily basis, with a further 28% (n=141) stating this occurred at least once a week, and 21% (n=104) reporting this happened at least on a monthly basis. This indicates that interaction with the diaspora is a regular part of life as opposed to something occasional.

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[8] A period of five years was chosen to reflect that much of the activity was restricted for a substantial period of time due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, of the options provided, socialising with friends from their own island was the most popular type of diaspora activity undertaken by survey respondents (see Table 7). It is, however, interesting to note that 22% (n=82) of respondents engaging in diaspora activity had not socialised with people they know from their own island, rather they engaged with other islanders in some way. The fact that 58% of those who were involved in some form of off-island diaspora activity socialised with friends from other islands who now live in an off-island location provides the first indication that members of the diaspora seek connections across the island network, not simply from their own islands, and thus there is an expressing of generic islander identity in respondents' behaviour. This is also seen in the mixing of those with connections to islands in different archipelagos in common spaces in the mainland. Whilst there is a popular perception in some quarters that islander activity in Glasgow is restricted to interactions between those with connections to west coast islands, survey respondents with connections to both the Northern Isles and west coast islands indicated that they frequented many of the same pubs and attend many of the same cultural events in the city, activities which provide opportunities to meet and interact with other 'islanders'.

Type of diaspora activity (as reported by 370 individuals)	% (n)
I have socialised with friends from my island who now live off-island	78% (289)
I have socialised with friends from other Scottish islands who now live off-island	58% (216)
I have planned trips back to my island with other islanders who live off-island	35% (130)
I have attended pubs, churches, or other spaces off-island which I associate with the Scottish islands	33% (123)
I have worked with people I know through my island connections	30% (107)
I have attended events or clubs off-island which I associate with the Scottish islands	22% (81)
I have lived with people I know through my island connections	22% (81)

Note: respondents were able to choose more than one option in response to this question and totals therefore exceed 370 responses / 100%.

Table 7 – Off-island contact with other islanders in the last 5 years.

Findings highlighted in Table 7 also point to interactions which have been anecdotally reported in island networks, but which have received little attention in the academic literature. These include attending venues, events and clubs which the islands diaspora associate with the islands, and responses to an open-ended survey question confirmed that these include *specific* pubs, churches, music events and sports clubs. For example, a group of pubs in the west end of Glasgow were repeatedly referred to as places where survey respondents from both north coast and west coast islands went knowing they would meet others with island connections. The Park Bar in Glasgow was mentioned by name by 54 respondents who had stated they had 'visited pubs, churches, or other spaces off-island which I associate with the Scottish islands', with additional references made to neighbouring establishments and wider references to 'islander pubs' in Glasgow. So established are such venues in Glasgow's west end that they are often referred to in island circles as the 'Teuchter

Triangle'[9]. Although Glasgow appears unique in terms of the number of venues associated with the islands, specific establishments in Edinburgh and Aberdeen were also named by several respondents as islander hubs serving a similar purpose, particularly for those from Orkney and Shetland. What many of these venues have in common is their importance in the traditional music scene in Scotland, with the regular live traditional music on offer being a specific point of cultural reference for islanders. The importance of music to respondents was also reflected in the large proportion of respondents noting that they perceived specific music events as islander spaces within their mainland lives. The annual *Celtic Connections* festival held in Glasgow and concerts by popular Western Isles band *Peat and Diesel* were each mentioned ten times by name, alongside wider references to named bands from the islands and generic references to 'island bands'. Alongside an opportunity to enjoy live music, attending festivals and concerts is likely to provide opportunities to meet up with other islanders – both those living in the mainland and those visiting from the islands specifically for the event.

In response to the request to identify events or organisations which respondents associated with the islands 18 individuals named specific island-related organisations based in the mainland, or events run by them, as spaces of interaction with other islanders. These included the Orkney Association, *Up Helly Aa*[10] celebrations in Edinburgh, and *Gatherings* held by island associations in Glasgow. The latter are a phenomenon specific to the west coast islands and are run by organisations originally formed to provide practical and cultural support to islanders who migrated to Glasgow in the late 19th and early 20th century. Organisations such as The Glasgow-Lewis and Harris Association (established 1887), The Glasgow-Jura Association (established 1892) and The Tiree Association (established 1900) run annual 'Gatherings' in Glasgow which attract both those still living in the islands and members of the mainland dwelling diaspora to share in an evening of traditional culture in the city, including song and dance. The long-established nature of these organisations provides evidence of one of the key components required for diaspora formation: stability over time. While some of the original functions of the organisations may have ceased (e.g., helping islanders find employment and housing in their new locations) their importance in retaining cultural identity and connections between the on-island and diaspora communities remains significant.

Finally, many of the islands associated with survey respondents lie off the west coast of Scotland and are within the Gàidhealtachd where Gaelic language and culture remains strong. Diaspora interaction with Gaelic culture on the mainland is seen through attendance at a range of events including national and provincial Mòd[11] festivals and Gaelic-language church services, choirs and lectures. The request to identify clubs which respondents

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[9] The *Dictionary of the Scots language* defines *Teuchter* as "1. A term of disparagement or contempt used in Central Scotland for a Highlander, esp. one speaking Gaelic, or anyone from the North. 2. A country person; an uncouth, countrified person (Cai., Bnff., Ags., Edb., Rxb. 2000s). Jocularly also applied to animals.". (https://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/teuchter, no page numbers). The word has, however, largely been reclaimed by this population to refer to specific forms of culture related to the Highlands and islands.

[10] *Up Helly Aa* is a series of annual festivals native to Shetland which celebrates the Norse history of these islands. Many in the Shetland diaspora return 'home' for *Up Helly Aa* celebrations and some of those unable to do so are known to attend off-island celebrations with other Shetlanders.

[11] *A Mòd* is a festival celebrating Gaelic language and culture by providing competitors of all ages with opportunities to display skills in a range of disciplines including "music and song, highland dancing, instrumental, drama, sport, and literature." (www.ancomunn.co.uk/nationalmod no page numbers).

associated with the islands elicited fewer responses, though one notable comment came from a respondent highlighting his involvement in a mainland-based islands sports team. While all the other players in the team came from islands which were geographically distant and culturally different to his own, he stated in response to an open question that "I appreciate the connections and similar mindsets and cultures". Once again this points to the valuing of a shared understanding of islander identity that is not simply connected to single islands or specific archipelagos.

XI. The Scottish islands diaspora: a pool of potential return migrants?

As noted earlier in the article, continued demographic decline in most of Scotland's islands has led to policy efforts designed to encourage in-migration to the islands. The potential of return migration in a number of national contexts has been explored as a means of stemming endemic rural population decline but return migration in an islands context has received little attention as a means of supporting internal population redistribution. Beyond exploring their continued connection to the islands and ongoing off-island diaspora activity, the survey asked those with island connections if they had any desire to live in an island in the future, a means of ascertaining whether there is a potential pool of return migrants amongst the Scottish islands diaspora. As reported in Table 8, approximately two thirds (65%, n=327) of respondents expressed some aspiration to move to a Scottish island in the future. The strength of this desire and the timescale for any potential return varied. No information about whether moving to an island is a realistic option for those expressing a 'definite' desire to do so is available, nor do the findings identify factors which may turn someone who expresses they 'might' want to make the move into someone who 'definitely' wants to or who ultimately decides against a move. The findings do, however, offer a useful starting point for better understanding return migration aspirations and decision-making processes. If and how areas such as demographic characteristics, life stage, and employment sector might influence attitudes towards return are explored in Gow et al. (forthcoming).

Aspiration to return	% (n)
I might want to move to a Scottish island in the long term	43% (217)
I currently have no desire to move to a Scottish island	35% (178)
I definitely want to move to a Scottish island in the long term	13% (65)
I might want to move to a Scottish island in the short term	4% (18)
I am actively making plans to move to a Scottish Island	3% (15)
I definitely want to move to a Scottish island in the short term	2% (12)

Table 8 – Aspirations for return among survey participants.

Of the 327 respondents who indicated they had some form of aspiration to return, 54% (n=178) indicated that they were only interested in moving to an island that they had specified they had some form of connection to in a previous survey question. Respondents who were open to moving to other islands were then given the option of identifying multiple island types they might consider moving to. Of these respondents, 68 indicated that they would consider moving to an island located in the same region as an island they already had a connection to, and 36 stated they would move to another island of a similar size and type to the island they had a pre-existing connection with. A further 77 respondents indicated

that they would be open to considering a move to any Scottish island in the future, potentially emphasising that an understanding of and appreciation for island life in general may play a role in this form of migration decision making. In addition, these aspirations appear to show some stability in the context of wider events, with 83% (n=418) of respondents indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic had had no impact on whether they would consider moving to an island in the future. Survey findings therefore provide clear evidence that the Scottish islands diaspora has the potential to play a role in addressing the logistical and demographic challenges faced by many of these islands as a result of depopulation via return migration.

XII. Discussion

In line with the aims of this article, the research presented herein has helped develop a better understanding of the Scottish island diaspora and explore its potential to contribute to island communities including via internal return migration. In doing so we have illustrated that diaspora communities based on a shared notion of territory and culture can exist within the confines of national borders. We have shown clear evidence of members of the Scottish islands diaspora both sustaining ongoing relationships with the islands they have connections with and seeking ways to enact their islander identity in their current location through a variety of activities. These activities routinely bring members of the diaspora into contact with people from a range of islands, allowing us to highlight existence of a Scottish *islands* diaspora based on a shared *islander* identity, rather than merely a multitude of island diasporas associated with specific islands (in contrast with Teerling and King's (2012) findings in Cyprus). Furthermore, we have identified spaces of diaspora interaction including long-established venues and events in 'hub' cities in mainland Scotland which bring diasporic islanders from all island regions into shared spaces which they strongly associate with their islander identity. As such, our findings show signs of several key indicators of a diaspora including continued engagement with the 'homeland', continued identification with others in the group based on a shared islander identity, and common cultural practices, all of which are framed within a long-term and established history of Scottish islands diaspora activity in mainland Scotland.

We have reported that survey respondents actively sustain connections to the 'homeland' using a variety of methods which are likely to maintain their local knowledge and engender social capital and place attachment in relation to these island communities. This includes maintaining personal connections, keeping up to date with what is happening on the island, participating in community activities, and taking an active interest in the future of 'their' island. This is worthy of note for a number of reasons which relate to the second aim of this article: to illustrate the potential benefits of engaging with internal diasporas. Firstly, this indicates that some communities are already exploring and engaging with the diaspora to fulfil volunteering roles or aid with development work, which aligns with Ahia and Johnson's (2022) call to acknowledge the diaspora as a means of extending community capacity. This might be particularly important for smaller communities who may have limited resources locally and may consequently be a key consideration for those working in policy and development in island settings. Exploring how to engage with and empower this cohort may unlock hitherto untapped potential. However, we echo Nagel and Boyle's (2020) cautionary note that we must remain mindful of where the balance of power lies within such networks if we are to ensure that actions taken truly reflect the needs and aspirations of those living in the origin community and are not unduly swayed by the voices of those less likely to feel the immediate impact of decisions on the ground.

Secondly, for those who aim to tackle depopulation, findings from the survey reported above indicate that the Scottish islands diaspora is a group worthy of attention, and not simply because of the levels of interest in return migration indicated by this research. While in-migration has been identified as being key to tackling depopulation in Scotland's Sparsely Populated Areas (SPAs) (Copus, 2018), where such in-migrants might come from and whether or not the personal biographies of potential in-migrants should include connections with the SPAs have not been specified. Researchers have noted the importance of place attachment, social capital and local knowledge in creating resilient rural places (MacKinnon and Driscoll Derickson, 2013; Magis, 2010; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017; Skerratt, 2013). This is particularly pertinent given that "migration on the scale required to ameliorate the rate of depopulation of the SPA area would likely present challenges in terms of integration with respect to culture, tradition and community cohesion" (Copus, 2018 p. 11). Place attachment, social capital and local knowledge require time to develop, and yet this research shows that those with within the islands diaspora are already likely to possess these assets, meaning that engagement with this group in relation to return migration and island repopulation has the potential to yield benefits beyond simply boosting population numbers.

In relation to diaspora activity, we have shown that many of those surveyed engage in regular interaction with other 'islanders' in off-island locations as a means of maintaining and enacting their islander identity whilst living elsewhere. Our findings indicate that such activity was not confined to contact with those from islands the respondent was familiar with. Instead, there is a sharing of a common 'islander' identity, not limited to language or location, echoing the research of Conkling (2007) and Wilson et al. (2015). This finding in itself provides an interesting insight into the culture of / associated with Scottish islands, in that it both indicates elements of shared culture across the islands, even those at a distance, and provides examples of how the culture of individual islands is used as a basis to create 'island spaces' beyond the borders of the islands themselves. This also raises some interesting considerations for those concerned with community development and tackling depopulation in the islands as it indicates the potential for members of the diaspora to feel affinity with islands other than their own. This is highlighted to an extent in diaspora engagement with a range of islands but is most clearly expressed in the proportion of those interested in 'return' migration who would consider moving to a range of islands. Many of the islands most affected by depopulation are those with the lowest population levels, meaning that they are also likely to have fewer representatives in the islands diaspora available to support their communities a distance or consider return migration. Yet 'affinity' with a place has already been recognised at national level as a tool for productive engagement with the diaspora (Ancien et al., 2009, p. 4.8). The findings of this research therefore indicate the potential for further exploration of this area to examine whether there is potential to capitalise on this to improve support for islands of all shapes and sizes.

The research presented here has identified a significant level of interest in potential return migration to the islands amongst the group surveyed. Though the strength of this feeling and the timescales involved vary, further exploration of how personal attributes, island connections and diaspora activity may influence any migration aspiration could prove valuable in assessing how best to engage with this group to assist return migration given the potential benefits such migration could accrue to island communities. Furthermore, more detailed investigation of attitudes to return, the barriers and opportunities which frame this, goals for return, and experiences of return migration among this group, may yield useful insights to assist communities and policy makers seeking to support repopulation efforts in the islands. While some may assert that wider concepts such as heterolocality and circulation are a sufficient frame within which to address these questions, we argue that the main focus

of these concepts is on the individual migrant. Possibly because of this these forms of mobility have yet to be fully embraced by policy makers looking at sustainable and strategic development of rural and island places. Widening this perspective to include aspects of belonging and affinity which pertain to the diaspora within the national boundary is likely to allow for a better understanding of how this group can and do contribute to these communities, and how they might be embedded in future development strategies.

Whilst this research offers many useful insights into understandings of diasporas, it is important to consider its limitations. As noted above, we recognise that, with 74% (n=377) of responses to the survey coming from individuals whose main island connection was to an island off Scotland's west coast (the Hebrides and the Clyde islands), findings may over-represent attributes of this sub-section of Scotland's island diaspora and under-represent attributes of those with connections to the Northern Isles. Further, we have not presented an analysis here that discriminates between survey responses by connections to individual islands or to island type using a grouping such as, for example, Gow et al.'s 'Typology of Scotland's islands' (2023). The context of this research, including the self-selecting nature of the sample and the methods used to promote the survey, is likely to have attracted responses from those who are already active participants in the islands diaspora to some degree. While a range of methods was used to promote the survey, information on opportunities to participate was most widely shared on social media and it is possible that the platforms used to share the survey were more orientated towards those with west-coast connections rather than towards the diaspora with links to the Northern Isles. Relying on social media may also have affected participation from those groups less engaged with this form of communication, including those in older age groups. These potential limitations illustrate a generic challenge associated with undertaking survey-based research online, including the researcher's lack of control of who receives an opportunity to participate in the research. It is therefore important to emphasise that the purpose of the findings presented here is not to suggest that the survey results reflect the activities of all islanders who leave their islands, rather to begin to examine the range of activity that those who are engaged in the diaspora might undertake and highlight the potential for further exploration of this group.

XIII. Conclusion

In this article we aimed to develop a better understanding of the Scottish islands diaspora and explore its potential to contribute to the islands, including via return migration, in order to illustrate the value of engaging with internal diasporas. We have highlighted that, while national and multinational diasporas have been widely acknowledged by researchers and policy makers as an area of interest, less focus has been placed on internal diasporas. Using the Scottish islands diaspora as an example we have shown that internal diasporas have the ability to maintain a cohesive identity based on a shared understanding of culture and territory that is enacted through both continued connection to the islands and activity in their current places of residence. Although the data gathered from the survey was not evenly distributed across all island regions, responses were received from all regions, with a number of common themes emerging. These themes indicate a shared sense of islander identity across Scotland's archipelagos, as well as connection to specific islands, and suggest opportunities for more detailed research in this area as well as further targeted data gathering from areas with lower representation.

We have also shown the potential for the islands diaspora to contribute to the sustainable future of their origin communities, both through activity which supports communities at a

distance and as potential return migrants who already possess local knowledge, social capital and place attachment, all of which have been shown to be key for community resilience. In doing so we have strengthened the understanding of internal diasporas, offering an alternative lens through which to view internal migrants which may assist communities and policy makers in taking steps to increase resource and capacity in sparsely populated areas by engaging with this group. Specifically in relation to depopulation, we have highlighted that gaining further understanding of how the characteristics of the diaspora can affect aspirations for return migration, and what opportunities and barriers people encounter in exploring this, might provide valuable insights to assist the development of strategy and resource allocation in key areas. While there is value in improving our awareness of how heterolocality and circulation works in practice amongst islanders in order to support repopulation efforts, widening our knowledge of internal diasporas can further help us understand where there might be as yet unexplored opportunities to mobilise this group to ensure we can maximise their opportunity to contribute to the future of the islands they retain strong connections to.

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