

The Role and the Vision of Island Universities in the Asia-Pacific Region for a Sustainable Island Development

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Guam is a territory of the United States located 2,900km southwest of Jeju in the Pacific Ocean. At 544km², it is the largest and most populous island (population: 165,000) in the Western Pacific Region of Micronesia. Guam is the region's main hub for education, healthcare, transportation, and economic activity. Micronesia is comprised of 2,100 islands spread across a land and ocean area of 2.9 million square miles. The region encompasses the world's largest fisheries, true atolls, and a vast diversity of corals, fishes, algae, and invertebrates. However, this Pacific region faces tremendous environmental and sustainability challenges.

Island communities are on the frontlines of rapidly changing environmental conditions, including rising sea level, diminishing food security, and more frequent and intense storms. These communities also experience local environmental stressors, such as pollution and poor land-use practices. In response to these challenges, the University of Guam established the Center for Island Sustainability in 2009. It has since become a focal institute in the Pacific Island region of Micronesia for developing and adapting island-based models to meet the needs of communities in the broader areas of the environment, economy, society, and education. For nearly a decade, annual Regional Conferences on Island Sustainability and grant-funded programming has moved island communities toward a sustainable future.

Island universities are home to the unique perspectives and experiences of island people. Cultivating these unique perspectives can generate solutions to the distinct environmental challenges of island communities. Islanders have a symbiotic relationship with their environment and look to their environment to discover how it relates to their health,

livelihoods, and the economy. Island societies cannot simply replicate societal models of larger countries since they are surrounded by water and have limited access to global resources. The environment shapes the reality of island societies, necessitating islands-based models to achieve sustainability.

Islanders are the least responsible for the causes of climate change, yet they bear the brunt of climate change impacts. Small island governments can do little to force large governments to reduce their carbon emissions, but they can still make an impact locally. Science tells us that island communities can build up resilience to climate change impacts by reducing local environmental stressors. Island universities are institutions where innovative strategies and solutions can be developed through research and student training to reduce local environmental stressors. And, by gathering like we are in Jeju for this forum, island universities can come together to share ideas, raise awareness of our issues, and form regional partnerships to effect global change.