

Island Earth

An Interview with Kate Brown, Executive Director, Global Island Partnership

EDITORS' NOTE *Kate Brown is a passionate advocate for islands with extensive experience in all island regions globally, and brings with her an extensive network of island leaders, blue sky thinkers and people dedicated to supporting islands. She has experience working inside government, nonprofits and inter-governmentally along with a keen sense of the most important elements of the international policy setting space relevant to islands as well as what is needed for implementation to happen.*



Kate Brown

Brown previously served as an Action Strategy Advisor for the Secretariate of the Pacific Environment Programme, a Development Officer for Agriculture Western Australia and an Australian Youth Ambassador for UNFPA – Subregional Office for the Pacific (Fiji). She is originally from New Zealand and lived for eight years in Apia, Samoa. She now resides in New Zealand. Brown holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and politics from Curtin University.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *The Global Island Partnership (glispa.org) is a platform that enables island leaders and their supporters to take action to build resilient and sustainable island communities. Led by the Presidents of Palau, Seychelles and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Prime Minister of Grenada and Premier of the British Virgin Islands, its mission is to promote action to build resilient and sustainable island communities by inspiring leadership, catalyzing commitments and facilitating collaboration for all islands. Since its launch in 2006, the Partnership has engaged high-level leaders to catalyze \$150 million for island action and assisted more than 35 countries to launch or strengthen major sustainable island commitments. It has more than 40 members and 55 friends as part of the island resilience movement.*

Will you provide an overview of Global Island Partnership (GLISPA) and its areas of focus?

The Global Island Partnership is a partnership that was convened in 2006 by two island Presidents, the President of Seychelles and the President of Palau, with the idea of developing a partnership that would enable islands to work together to implement global biodiversity-focused

policy at the local level and within local context. It recognized that island issues were common but that many islands were separated by language, political status (territories, independent countries, subnational jurisdictions) and similar barriers. They needed an organization that could start to reconnect islands around solutions to common problems. As time went on, the leaders of the partnership expanded the focus of GLISPA to include island resilience and island sustainability and the partnership now connects a broad range of islands who are early leaders on taking action on these issues. We have supported many island political commitments to be both realized and implemented and provide a space for island leaders and island champions to work together and inspire and challenge each other.

Islands are a special place to work – they have many problems within a bounded system and have the ability to trial solutions at a scale that can be learned from and replicated in bigger countries. They are often defined by their size and their population but when you look at the area they are responsible for it is a really large footprint on the earth's surface, much of it ocean. We like to think of the earth itself as an island, thus island earth, which has finite resources and which we need to manage appropriately for our future. We can learn a lot from what islands are doing.

In 2020 the Global Island Partnership is focusing on three things:

- We mobilize high-level political will for island commitments and action on resilience and sustainability.
- We build and strengthen partnerships that implement global conservation & sustainability goals on islands, especially the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- We help our members strategize to bring global attention to and support for island solutions and initiatives, especially at major international meetings and conferences.

How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

My leadership style is one focused on living by my values of truth, fairness and justice which in practice is to demonstrate integrity in relationships and interactions at all times, to be honest, to appreciate all perspectives and to make sure that I am engaging with everyone. I am also a New Zealand indigenous woman (Māori) and have a unique perspective that comes from my cultural upbringing which is very Polynesian – consultative, listening, collaborative and group problem solving as our culture focuses very much on the group rather than the individual. This links to how I measure success. I believe that we see success when we lift up all important voices, but I don't measure importance based on people's position, connections or wealth.

I believe for too long that all of these styles of leadership I mention above have been discounted because they are not what many see as the hard-charging more

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masculine style of leadership which we recognize as the model “leadership” based on stereotypes, movies, or literature. We are at a moment where we can recognize that this may not be as effective as these other leadership styles and that a more feminine version of leadership can be equally if not more effective. Effective leadership recognizes that diversity of voice is critical for addressing the issues we face in the modern world – this diversity includes gender, sexual orientation, cultural, ethnic, racial, economic and so on. It also shows that leadership is not about telling people what to do, but rather pulling together the right people to set a strategy or plan and then enabling it to be implemented, adjusted and improved upon. It is not about asserting yourself in everything, it is about holding people accountable for what they say and do, for highlighting successes and mitigating and learning from failure. As a leader, it is critical to live by your values, as too often we see the vast hypocrisy of people going along to get along or who want to advance their careers so they never speak up. You have to be prepared to stand up for things, to do things differently than what everyone else might be doing and to speak up where necessary. I want to be a change maker, I want to work in organizations and with people who are trying to change the world for the better, I want to make a difference to people’s lives – these are the things that influence how I lead. For me, leadership is about people and if people are on board, we can do anything.

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How do island nations, which are facing such challenges, including sea-level rise and economic crisis, build resilience and protect their cultural heritage?

Island nations need to operate at multiple levels in order to build resilience – they need to work together to advocate for their needs and concerns and to identify, share and deliver scalable, integrated solutions. Climate change is having catastrophic impacts on island communities. These are compounded by rapid growth of urban centers, pressure on limited land and water resources, and dramatic biodiversity loss.

Island economies, particularly Small Island Developing States, are vulnerable to climate-related severe weather events, sea level rise, catastrophic natural disasters and other external shocks. While many islands are successfully managing new public health risks presented by COVID-19, they face economic disaster as a result of tourism disruption and the related loss of livelihoods and government revenue. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated other issues islands are grappling with including cyclones, which recently hit Vanuatu, Fiji and the Solomon Islands in the Pacific with hurricane season having started in the Caribbean. As the international community is considering how to recover from the current crisis, and reflect on previous catastrophes, islands can provide key examples of building resilience and reducing risk. They are taking bold and innovative approaches around new mechanisms including finance and insurance, policy tools among other initiatives.

Over the past ten years, island leaders and their supporters have come together to tackle island priorities, but development approaches tend to be “siloed” and treat issues in isolation. These don’t tend to recognize that problems in islands are interconnected and require multi-sector solutions and partners.

Islands urgently need more distributed and resilient infrastructure systems to reduce risk, provide reliable services, and help vulnerable communities adapt. This includes both green and grey infrastructure. It has also become increasingly clear that island responses on their own will not be enough. Public resources alone are insufficient and new partnerships are needed to mobilize large-scale investment in sustainable development initiatives in islands.

Islands have a lot going for them – their people are resilient and are natural leaders in integrated, resilient solutions by virtue of their often-limited geographic area and resources. There is an ability to coordinate across sectors and between islands toward common goals. Islands have long been leaders in launching high ambition commitments and are leading on SDG implementation. Islands have the ability to demonstrate how we can deliver in a locally and culturally relevant way on our global agreements and the Sustainable Development Goals, and ultimately achieve island and global resilience.

There is also an opportunity for islands to lead on the SDGs, uplifting the islander worldview globally for sustainable development solutions which take into account the multiple challenges they face. We need to uplift, communicate and scale island solutions globally and the important message of hope, island values and tangible solutions.

Our partnership has been lucky to have been working for the last 8 months (since the pandemic struck) on a new island leadership initiative focused on the sustainable development goals called the Local2030 Islands Network. In this we have convened a series of webinars where we have identified and shared some of the examples of how islands are facing the pandemic and the resulting economic impacts including looking at the lessons from places who have been through devastating hurricanes and how they have looked at rebuilding. All of our webinars are focused on the idea of building back better. Where

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are the examples where islands are thinking about this and putting it into action? How can these examples be used to inspire other islands?

What responsibility do developed nations have to small island states when it comes to climate resilience?

There is a large imbalance in the burden of climate change at the global level where many of the countries least able to respond to the impacts of climate change are burdened with the most impacts. Some islands in fact will not exist as they are now and will become uninhabitable. Developed nations need to recognize they have responsibility for these impacts, that they benefit disproportionately from their development status and that small island states need special consideration as identified 25 years ago during the Barbados Programme of Action which identified the sustainable development priorities of small island states. This includes financing action and it includes debt relief for countries heavily impacted by climate change impacts and who are also heavily indebted. With COVID-19 there has been a sharp fall in tourism revenues and remittance flows, heavy debt-servicing burdens, high risks to ensuring food security, severe constraints to the fiscal space and vulnerabilities to natural disasters brought about by climate change. It will be extremely difficult for small island states to withstand a double impact when they are hit by hurricanes or cyclones. Scaled-up international development cooperation is critical for ensuring that SIDS are able to stay on track towards sustainable development in the context of climate resilience.

What do you see as the importance of resilience in addressing the global crises the world is facing today?

Resilience, in all its meaning, is critical to addressing global crises. Strengthening resilience enables an individual, an organization and a country to adapt to changing circumstances. It is moving from being a victim of your circumstances to recognizing a situation and responding to it in a way that helps you survive and thrive. It is a constant process of adapting and learning which you can apply to reduce future impacts, to mobilize the human and financial resources needed and it creates a space for real creativity. I see examples of this in my work all the time:

Dominica's effort to build back after the devastating impact of a hurricane and to become the world's first resilient island.

Seychelles effort to undertake a debt swap for climate adaptation which addresses their debt issue while at the same time conserving marine resources and mobilizing resources for local project implementation managed by local people through the Seychelles Climate Change Adaptation Trust.

These are a few examples, but I think islands are real resilience leaders because they have always had to be this way by the very nature of island life. Island life is bounded by the resources available on the island and most are vulnerable to natural disaster. Once we start to listen to the experiences and solutions of island people instead of defining them by the size of their population or of their island we will see a real richness of thought and action and we will put the relationship between developed and developing countries back in balance. Islands shouldn't be seen as just aid or development assistance recipients, but their knowledge, expertise and solutions should be valued for their importance in combatting our global challenges. Many of the islands we work with have mobilized domestic resources for addressing some of these challenges and are asking the international community to help them address the gaps. I see this as a step-up approach rather than a handout. If we learn more about the history of many of the places we are talking about, we would also understand what brings them to their current economic development situation.

How critical is resilience to driving impact in nonprofit work?

This is absolutely critical. Nonprofit organizations should have the goal of eventually doing themselves out of a job – our role is to equip the individuals and organizations we work with and support them with the tools and knowledge to be able to be resilient to what comes their way. Nonprofits themselves will also adapt and change so we are supporting resilience in our clients and building resilience in our organization and in the system itself.

Do you feel that resilience is something a person is born with or can it be taught?

I believe it's a mix of both. Some people are naturally resilient and others need to be given tools and training to achieve it. Sometimes people don't recognize it within themselves. We need to create a resilience mindset in the

individual and the same type of approach in the organizations and governments that people exist within. Building resilience of an individual is never enough on its own. Resilience is more than just addressing climate issues.

How has your personal resilience helped to drive your work?

I am relentlessly positive. A person who views a glass as half full rather than half empty – this to me is an important space to be in. In our work we have been focused for the last decade on identifying bright spots, things that are working and that can be scaled and replicated. This is very much my personal passion. I believe that we are much better placed to do more when we build on what is working rather than always identifying what is not.

I have been through a lot of trauma in my life – particularly when I was a child, but I have always refused to be defined by that. I believe that we will thrive when we build on our strengths and where we adjust for what isn't working or won't work. From my very humble beginnings, I have benefited from learning from others and from working with others who think like me and believe that all things are possible. I sincerely believe this.

You recently moved back to New Zealand from Washington D.C. What has the experience been moving during a global pandemic?

I actually moved right before the pandemic and am forever blessed to be a New Zealander. We recently celebrated our 100th day without any community spread of COVID-19. Our Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, has been a global leader even before the pandemic and she demonstrates many of the qualities that define New Zealanders – common sense, pragmatism, a sense of community and kindness. I have moved to a place that is where my whānau (extended family) is from which lies on the Pacific Ocean. My ancestors have lived here for generations and when I am here, I feel connected to that world, to my history and also to many of the modern issues we find ourselves in. Moving internationally with children is stressful but it seems like the alternative would have been far worse. My children are back at school, playing sports and we are living life normally like we were before the pandemic hit. I have left one child in the U.S. so am kept up to date on the situation there. As I said, I am very lucky on the timing of my move home. ●