Background:
Rapa Nui is the most isolated inhabited island on the planet, in terms of distance. It is located over 2,000 miles from the coast of Chile, which governs the island. Since 1967, the island has been connected to the outside world with flights to and from Santiago, Chile and Tahiti, with increasing frequency as the years have passed. Cargo ships also sail to the island, and internet and phone service have contributed to modernization of the local community. Considering all this, Rapa Nui is actually quite well connected with the outside world, despite its astronomical physical distance from, well, anywhere else.

Objective:
My objective as an outsider and academic was to better understand the impacts (if any) of Rapa Nui’s geographic isolation on the contemporary culture and lifestyle of the island’s inhabitants.

Data & Methodology:
I used a qualitative approach to my fieldwork, which consisted of spending 3 months on the island, where I gathered 13 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, did archival work in the island’s (only) library, and engaged in participant observation of various events and customs. Upon returning from the field I employed NVivo to help comb through my interview transcriptions, in addition to hand-coding for common themes. I then synthesized the main themes from the interviews with the results of my archival work, field notes, and literature to write my final observations/MA thesis.

Results:
The connectivity linking the island to the outside world is at completely unprecedented levels today. With daily flights to Santiago and weekly ones to Tahiti, supply ships that arrive twice a month, cruise ships that deliver tourists during the summer months, and fairly consistent phone and internet connection, the island has transformed immensely in the short half century since commercial flights to the island began in 1967. One interviewee in particular stressed how drastically the increase in connectivity has altered the islanders’ lifestyle in just a few decades, and also emphasized that she (and many other island inhabitants) do not feel isolated because of this connectivity. If anything, they feel very connected to the world, especially compared to the rural villages in far south of Chile where the only way to arrive is by boat, the nearest airport is over 6 hours away, and there is not even internet.

Discussion:
This study can have implications for island-related research in general, islands and their geography and people are becoming increasingly appreciated and studied in academia. While the case of Rapa Nui is unique, the concepts and findings of my study regarding isolation and connectivity can be very relevant to other islands and island inhabitants. This study was just one, and a rather short one at that, so a great deal of potential remains for future research regarding the community of Rapa Nui and other island communities.

Thesis available at: https://digitallibrary.sdsu.edu/islandora/object/sdsu%3A27620

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