To be forgotten is to die a little. It is to lose some of the links that anchor us to the rest of humanity

Aung San Suu Kyi, 2012

As the twenty-first century has evolved, economic and political issues that hitherto dominated debates over development have increasingly taken on environmental themes. Nowhere is this more evident than in small island states. The aim of this book is to examine how the interactions between economics and environment play out within the changing geographies of small islands and small countries. It focuses on those island realms conventionally perceived as ‘developing’, rather than ‘developed’, which has therefore also meant a focus on tropical islands. It is precisely these tropical islands (alongside continental deltas) that are usually considered at most risk from environmental change, notably global warming and sea-level rise. This book seeks to respond by examining these risks, alongside other forms of vulnerability, and the extent to which even in and between small islands risks and outcomes vary enormously. It also attempts to shift from more conventional approaches to the political economy of island development towards a more political ecology, geography and ethnography.

The book was being completed at what seemed an auspicious time for considering environmental changes in small islands: greenhouse gas emissions had increased by a record amount in the previous year, even in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis. The financial crisis and subsequent Eurozone crisis brought both regulation and a new bout of Western introspection. In what seemed a curiously Melanesian acronym, the political economies of the PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Spain and, above all, Greece), struggled to survive. Both financial crises contributed to global recession and concerns over aid and remittance flows, migration, investment and tourism. In 2011 global aid spending fell for the first time in 14 years. Meanwhile the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) announced that a quarter of the world’s agricultural land was degraded, and the world population reached 7 billion. After the Japanese tsunami the future of nuclear power had become more
uncertain, the melting of Arctic sea ice at an unprecedented rate was being blamed on human activity, extreme temperatures in the United States were being seen as the ‘new normal’ and United Nations talks on a global treaty on climate change had stalled in the empty promises of Durban. The Rio+20 Earth Summit was written off before it had begun. Island states were frustrated at the inaction that measured their marginalization, and fearful of the consequences of environmental change, perceived as a transnational threat to national development and security.

While this book primarily focuses on tropical and independent island states, it emerged from an earlier and much briefer study undertaken as a consultancy to the British government. This had a particular interest in the UK’s overseas territories, most of which are themselves tropical, but which include the distinctly cool Falkland Islands and Tristan da Cunha, so they have also been included here in passing, as have other dependent territories. There is some Pacific bias, partly because of greater personal familiarity, but the Pacific has been rather better served by research in relevant areas than the Caribbean and Indian Ocean. The breadth of coverage has meant that the book is necessarily synthetic and second-hand in places, but consistent trends frequently recur.

At one time or another I have been fortunate enough to be able to visit all but two of the small island states (and many of the individual islands) that are discussed here. I am grateful to many people on many islands, from the Cayman Islands to the Maldives, from Bermuda to Rapanui and from Woleai to Aniwa, for their wisdom and information, their cups of tea, bowls of kava and sometimes stronger forms of sustenance. I am grateful to Neil Adger for inviting me to undertake the earlier project that enabled me to think more widely about the relationship between environmental and economic change. I am also grateful to Conway Pene and Olivia Dun for the maps, Cluny and La’avasa Macpherson for loaning a title, James Terry and Randy Thaman for their comments on an earlier version of Chapter 6, Wes Morgan’s corrections on trade, Mark Hampton’s thoughts on tourism, Robert Aldrich’s scalpel to, and Godfrey Baldacchino’s detailed reading of, Chapter 8, and Amelia Roberts’ and Yayoi Fujita’s patient reading of so much of the book. The usual disclaimers of course apply. They are neither responsible for the intermittent acronym soup, nor for my wish to cite a myriad sources and predecessors and include mini-vignettes. Ultimately, in that vein, it would be remiss of me not to thank Google for being there when all else had failed.