

## No Man Is An Island – SCIENCE Features Simron Singh, Social Scientist & Supporter of the Tsunami-Struck Nicobar Islands

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The current issue of SCIENCE features an article on Simron Singh, a human ecologist and anthropologist, and his work on the Nicobar Islands both before and after the massive tsunami hit Southern Asia in December 2004. In the wake of the disaster, Singh was asked by tribal elders to help them rebuild their society. He helped in many ways and the Austrian Science Fund FWF supported some of his activities. However, as a result of his relief work, the scientist in Singh evolved from an objective observer to an involved supporter then to an active participant in change. SCIENCE describes how he and his colleagues felt about this inevitable development.

Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle" states that observing a system influences that system. This is bad enough for the objectivity of science, but what if the observed system is also influencing the observer? This question is one faced by many social scientists. In fact, can – or should – a human scientist, when faced with tragedy, maintain a completely detached approach for the sake of science? Simron Jit Singh, a scientist at the Institute for Social Ecology in Vienna tells Richard Stone in the current issue of SCIENCE what it meant to him when the society he was studying was threatened with extinction.

The feature describes how Singh had studied the remote culture of the Nicobars in the Indian Ocean since 1999, fascinated by the unique richness that resulted from limited contact with outsiders. All that changed when a close Nicobarese friend, Rasheed Yusuf, radioed him: "Central Nicobars entirely washed out ... do something as soon as possible." The devastating tsunami of December 2004 had just swept through.

### A Decisive Dilemma

In SCIENCE, Singh relates what happened next. "I really had no choice", states Singh simply, referring to the decision he had to make. But what now seems like a split second decision was in fact a long-running dilemma being overtaken by events. This is evident in the sensitive portrait of Singh that Stone presents. He spoke to many of Singh's colleagues, who confirmed that he had been struggling for some time with a dilemma. Should he facilitate the introduction of some aspects of modern life to the Nicobarese in order to keep their cultural heritage alive, or leave Nicobarese culture entirely untouched, but destined for extinction.

A colleague of Singh, Wolfgang Lutz, a demographer at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Vienna and leader of the World Population Program, recalls Singh's quandary in SCIENCE. "It was evident from the past experience of many other populations that even the most benign interventions, such as helping to reduce child mortality, will change the living conditions and therefore also the culture. My personal preference as a scientist was to restrict our role mostly to observation." The tsunami, Lutz says, "made such considerations obsolete."

### Individual & International Support

Arriving in the Nicobars in January 2005, Singh was confronted with utter devastation. Leaving the culture untouched was no

longer an option. In a joint effort, Singh gave the best support and advice to the islanders that he could, while his research supervisor back in Vienna, Prof. Marina Fischer-Kowalski, Director of the Institute of Social Ecology, was rallying institutional support. The University of Klagenfurt, which oversees her institute, spearheaded a fundraising drive for reconstruction. Working with Caritas Austria and Universal Music, which donated the proceeds from sales of a CD, the university set up the Sustainable Indigenous Futures (SIF) Fund to support self-rehabilitation efforts. Also, the Austrian Science Fund FWF funded the assessment of sustainable development.

Stone's feature continues, describing how Singh maintained a well-balanced approach to providing help, giving advice and encouraging further development by the islanders' own means. For instance before the tsunami, the Nicobarese economy was almost entirely reliant on coconuts. Now they have also learned to derive income from fishing and garden plots. In *SCIENCE*, Brian Durrans, deputy keeper in the British Museum's Asia Department comments on Singh's action: "What Simron is doing that's so special, is a combination of refusing a patronising isolationist option while encouraging the Nicobarese to become their own advocates. It's a pretty inspiring approach in conditions of sudden catastrophe."

That he is an inspiration to his fellow scientists seems of little concern to Singh. For him, inspiring the Nicobarese is of much more immediate importance. And to this end he often opts for quite practical methods. Together with the Austrian journalist Oliver Lehmann he recently published a generously illustrated book on Nicobarese culture. He took 500 copies back to the islands. "I hope the images of their own culture will strike an emotional chord with them and add to the energy they now need so much to manage their future," says Singh, who also donated proceeds from sales of the book to the SIF.

Vienna, 6th July 2006

Image and text will be available online from Friday, 7th July 2006, 09.00 a.m. MEZ onwards:  
[www.fwf.ac.at/en/public\\_relations/press/fwf-feature-2006...](http://www.fwf.ac.at/en/public_relations/press/fwf-feature-2006...)

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