

Stefan Wallin, Minister of Culture and Sport
European Small Islands Network Conference
9 September 2009, 10 a.m. Dragsfjärd, Kasnäs

Esteemed foreign and Finnish participants of the Islands conference,

As the representative of the Finnish Government, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the meeting of the European Small Islands Network (ESIN) in Finland. It pleases us to be able to share experiences on the development of islands with representatives from other island areas in Europe. We hope that you will get a rounded view of Finland as a country with a myriad of islands as well as of Finnish island policy, and we hope that you will have a pleasant stay with us.

The future of all societies depends on their ability to provide for their youth. The dreams of islanders are familiar to all people — to make a good living, to raise a healthy and secure family, and to leave our children a future of opportunity. The policies for ensuring equal possibilities for youth in the archipelagos have gone thru a major transformation due to the technological innovations. The work of securing the future for islanders and the improvement of their living conditions is continuing, taking into account these possibilities. The Internet is a powerful tool - you can be all alone irrespective of location and yet connected globally. This will change the possibilities - but the change will be slower than we think, and it is always dependent on actual services in the physical world. The youth growing-up today will perhaps be the first to really make good use of this tool.

Finland is a significant European country with regard to islands and water systems. We have 76,000 islands (of more than half a hectare in size), 56,000 lakes, 647 rivers and 314,000 kilometres of shoreline. Taken proportionally, Finland has the largest body of water in the world and is among the largest, if not the largest

island country when it comes to its number of islands.

On the other hand, Finland is a country of small islands because all of the 455 islands with no permanent road connections and permanent population are small by European standards when it comes to the number of inhabitants. However, the area of the islands is often quite extensive. At this time, it is worthwhile to remember that the Finnish island policy pertains also to islands with permanent road connections and island-like areas broken up by waterways and the sea, of which there are quite a few.

Our island and water areas are the locus of a variety of activities. First and foremost, of course, they are the homes and workplaces of people living permanently on the islands. They are also areas of interest for 2 million holiday homeowners, 1.2 million recreational fishermen and women and hundreds of thousands of tourists. They are operational areas of the Finnish Maritime Administration, the Finnish Border Guards, the Finnish Defence Forces and the environmental administration. The catch of professional fishermen and women comes from the sea, lakes and rivers. The island areas are one of the focus areas of nature conservation.

What does the future of Finnish islands look like? What are the factors currently affecting their development? These are worthwhile questions.

I have noticed that the inhabitants as well as the developers of the islands are more optimistic about the development than the experts drawing up population forecasts. I believe this optimism is not just founded on previous unfulfilled pessimistic forecasts.

The challenge of securing services for small populations in remote areas has however not changed. Irrespective of Internet, that actually relies on electricity and connection, there are some the old questions left. Especially those concerning traffic and the environment. The Internet offers new forms but we adults have been rather slow in making good use of them. The Dalsbruk IT centre DIT is offering these possibilities today, and there is place for optimism. The quality of life possible in the small islands is in many ways superior to that in the urban city environment. For some professionals the possibilities seem to offer what they need for a creative process. There are good opportunities for youth interested in culture and other creative skills to return to their native islands after higher education.

We are moving to an age where the production of experiences is an increasingly important source of livelihood. Work is becoming less tied to a place. People value the high quality of their place of residence. Part-time living in the archipelago becomes a natural part of many people's lives. All these are features consolidating the success factors of the island areas.

Development of work and workplaces is naturally a precondition of the development of the islands. Companies working on the islands can utilise the good image of the archipelago in their operations. It is crucially important for this image that natural, landscape and cultural values are upheld. Furthermore, it is very important to improve the condition of the Baltic Sea by quickly stopping emissions there.

Of the traditional sources of livelihood, fishing and agriculture are under constant pressure to adapt.

The EU agricultural and fishing industry policies must sufficiently take into account the special circumstances of the islands that prevent large-scale production.

A reduction in state jobs in the archipelago, as well as elsewhere in the countryside, is an unfortunate reality in Finland. This has been mainly caused by technological development in the security sector in particular. However, opportunities provided by technology have not been sufficiently exploited to reverse the trend. Information technology enables the transfer of jobs to the countryside and the island areas. This must be promoted.

The Island Development Act, which was enacted in 1981, has, in general, been a success. The best subsidies and supplementary allocations in Finland, and possibly in the whole of Europe, have been available for developing the sources of livelihood and municipal services on the islands. Programme allocations from the EU are also available for island areas in the current seven-year period. Despite the ongoing change in municipal structure, municipalities with island areas will definitely also in the future receive island subsidies to produce basic services. Finland has possibly the best-organised island traffic in Europe. The state organises and pays for practically all of the island ferry traffic in the largest island areas. Nature conservation has been promoted by establishing extensive national parks and other nature reserves. The landowners have been duly compensated.

The investments in the islands have also paid off. The development of the islands has been generally more positive than that in other remote rural areas since the beginning of the 1980s. The unemployment rate and the income level are better than in rural areas generally.

Tourism and holiday homes present significant opportunities for the islands. Finland aims to make island tourism an appealing factor at a European level. Significantly increasing investments in product development and marketing are also on

the agenda. The development of tourism is greatly boosted by the living and rich Finnish- and Swedish-speaking island cultures. As a Swedish-speaking Minister of Culture, it has been my pleasure to notice island dwellers' love for their own minority language in many island areas throughout Europe. In the summer, one can undergo a breathtaking cultural experience. Tourism brings with it work opportunities, particularly for young people and women, which ensures a balanced population structure.

Over 30,000 new enterprises are established in Finland each year. The government especially wants to encourage youth to entrepreneurship. Living in a small society, where your parents work in a lot of different sectors according to seasons and are familiar with the hard work of running a small business, can be both an asset and an advantage. Entrepreneurship has always been a trademark for the inhabitants of the small islands. This is a heritage much sought after and valued today. To the youth present, I urge you to take care of this heritage and be proud of it. In the global world the unique and the original are values that last.

Living part of the year on islands is a significant and developing phenomenon and a veritable trump card for these regions. There are almost 2 million regular holiday-home users in Finland, while there are 850,000 permanent inhabitants in remote areas. Sure enough, the permanent population in remote areas has decreased but simultaneously even more part-time inhabitants have replaced them.

Better exploitation of the purchasing power and competence of holiday guests as well as the free capacity in holiday homes are interesting if gigantic challenges to the islands. This work is only beginning. It is necessary to support the transformation of holiday homes into second and first homes, but how this is done must be left to the municipalities' discretion. State authorities should not prevent this de-

velopment, which presents no problem from the perspective of societal structure. Waste-water management must, of course, be organised but the technology for doing that exists already.

It must be noted with pleasure that the environmental effects of holiday homes have proved manageable. As a Minister of Sport, I must further point out the beneficial effects of the natural physical exercise afforded by island life on the physical condition and health of the population.

Preconditions for commuting from islands to the mainland must be ensured by high enough maximum limits on tax deductions as well as well-functioning traffic connections.

Islands will also continue to need support from the state in the future. Therefore, support for island areas must also be continued through EU structural policies as well as national regional policies during the next planning period.

A positive future for the islands requires an active approach and island-friendly decisions from us decision makers, for example, on traffic solutions, tax decisions and regional policy decisions. For my part, I have actively promoted these perspectives in the Government, for example, during the budget negotiations.

Dear friends of islands

Islands, water systems and coastal regions are the most attractive areas in Europe. There is significant societal interest in them. This is evidenced by the island policies included in the EU Charter and the revised Treaty, the harmonisation of policies on the European coastal regions, marine policies and many other things. Internationally approved climate objectives also affect island areas in various ways.

I thank Finland's Öar – Suomen Saaret ry (FÖSS) for their fine work in organising this seminar. I wish FÖSS in Finland and ESIN in Europe success in engaging small islands in the island development work and in making their voices heard in national governments and in the European Union.

Have an inspiring and pleasant islands seminar.