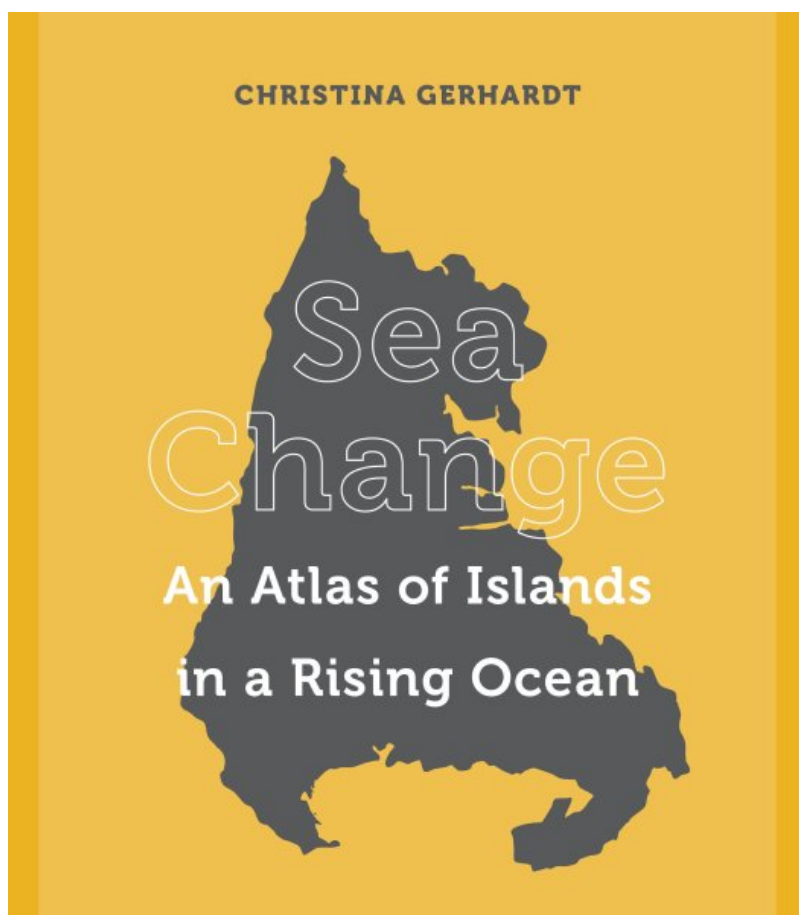




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# **Book review: Sea change : an atlas of islands in a rising ocean**

**reviewed by Sam Hidde Tripp**



What makes an atlas? Simply put, it's a collection of maps. Less simply, it's a collection of maps with geographical facts about the area being mapped. In *Sea Change: An Atlas of Islands in a Rising Ocean*, Christina Gerhardt —writer and editor—and Molly Roy—cartographer— go further than geographical facts to include the voices of these maps. Forewords from Bill Mckibben, Hilda Heine (Marshall Islands) and Dessima Williams (Grenada) introduce an emphasis that these voices



are inseparable from the lands they come from. So in addition to the standard atlas fare, we see essays and poetry from the current and displaced inhabitants of each island being mapped.

The facts and figures included in each section are beautifully and thoughtfully conveyed. One of the elements that stood out to me most were the timelines. When examining the consequences of climate change, it is disingenuous and irresponsible to separate those consequences from the legacy of colonization, and the islands featured in *Sea Change* should be given the same consideration. In addition to timelines, which often highlight colonization and exploitation of resources, there are also distances listed in relation to other islands featured in the book. In this way, each chapter exposes and recovers connections across time and distance.

It feels important to note, for those considering the book, that the maps seem sparse when compared to similar works. Gerhardt's background as an environmental journalist comes through, and some may be disappointed by its text-heaviness. It's also important to note, however, that the maps are accessible and effective, and that the book's aesthetic appeal is undeniable. This makes it likely to resonate with a broader audience. Roy excels in this type of cartography, as some may know her from her other collaborations (e.g. *City of Women* with Rebecca Solnit, UC Press: 2016).

For example the first map in the book, of Deal Island, is simple yet gorgeous. Despite the lack of detail in the three page map, it perfectly conveys its message of showing the reader the current landmass of the island compared to its estimated landmass in 2050 and 2100. You can flip the pages to see the land disappear before your eyes. It is poignant and alarming to actually see how much the world stands to lose, and what is at stake for the peoples of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). To evoke Jeremy Williams' 2023 review in *Earthbound Report*, this illustrates that there is likely no "greater climate catastrophe than to see your home wiped from the map entirely."

By making Deal Island both the cover and introductory map, Gerhardt also illustrates that sea rise is not something that only affects far off nations, these remote islands in some distant sea; Deal Island is just off the coast of Maryland. If the testimonies of islanders from across the globe is not enough to convince the reader of urgency, perhaps proximity will be the wake-up call for those not already fighting for their land, their culture, and their lives.



*Sea Change* also highlights local efforts that are being made to combat and adapt to the rising tides. “We are not drowning, we are fighting!” echoes Williams in her foreword. Islanders are considering and implementing a variety of strategies. These range from the tangible—such as geoengineering to raise parts of their islands or desalination plants to reclaim water supplies that have been contaminated by storms and sea water—to the more abstract creative, social, and political movements. Relocation is also mentioned in several contexts, reminding the reader once again of what is being lost.

This atlas is the latest in a necessary trend of critical works that challenge the traditional dissemination of scientific information. It is passionate and artful, which in the past has been dismissed as “unscientific,” as if emotions and aesthetics have no place in deciphering the world around us; one need only look at archival atlases to know that this is simply not true. *Sea Change: An Atlas of Islands in a Rising Ocean*, challenges our perceived lack of connection to land that is, actually, not so distant. It is a worthy addition to any library or personal collection, and will appeal to geographers, librarians, artists, writers, or anyone who is looking to restore a sense of connectivity across a changing seascape.

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