

Kelman, I. 2006. "Climate Change and Islands: Scientists Serving Society?". ISISA Newsletter (International Small Islands Studies Association), vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 5-6.

Full Text

Economic and population centers of many islands and island groups, from the Maldives to Alaska, are being affected by climate change, through extreme weather events plus longer-term creeping environmental changes. Sea-level rise is not the only possible scenario that could cause island destruction or, at minimum, uninhabitability. Ocean acidification, the changing cyclone regime, and ecosystem changes especially to marine resources are forcing the potential for abandoning isles onto the international scientific, development, and sustainability agendas.

In addition to continual islander movements over the millennia, recent precedents exist for island evacuations, mainly due to volcanic eruptions. In most examples, long-term relocation was unsuccessful because the islanders chose to return, even when the volcano continued menacing. That could be considered a positive long-term result from cultural or sociological perspectives. If people wish to remain, fully understanding the consequences, should they be forced to leave their homes and identities merely to save individual lives?

With respect to climate change, how should researchers contribute to a situation where islanders wish to stay on their climate change affected island until they must run or die? Should the scientists actively promote debate on possible impacts given their knowledge of possible impacts? Or should they stay with science and let others--for instance, development agencies and politicians amongst others--lead the way? What would the social impact be, on islanders and on scientists, from formally investigating, publicizing, and being operationally involved in island abandonment decisions?

Physical and social science researchers have an immense amount to contribute to these ethical and policy debates. Naturally, care is essential when becoming involved, but as human beings, should we consider our responsibility to each other? Should scientists consider their first duty to be serving society, even if at times that might mean sacrificing peer-reviewed journal articles and citation counts?

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