

Kelman, I., S. McNeeley, and H. Lazrus. 2007. "Climate Change and Islands: The Media Serving Society?". ISISA Newsletter (International Small Islands Studies Association), vol. 7, no. 1, p. 4.

Full Text

In the last newsletter, Ilan wrote about "Climate Change and Islands: Scientists Serving Society?" which addressed possible island evacuation due to climate change. The media also has influenced this topic.

In July 2004, the international media publicised the world's first climate change refugees from the island village of Shishmaref, Alaska, although the erosion and storm threats are exacerbated rather than created by climate change. Then, in December 2005, the international media again reported the world's first climate change refugees, but this time from the Lateu settlement in Vanuatu, an island chain in the South Pacific. The islanders moved inland due to sea-level rise plus more frequent flooding.

Back to Shishmaref, the residents have not moved, nor do many desire the move, but a new site has been reluctantly chosen by the community and initial planning for the new site has started. A form of "creeping refugee" has evolved, where a slow migration occurs. Following a community referendum which voted in favor of moving to a new site, Shishmaref is working through some of the issues through a relocation coalition. But real progress is slow, hence the term "creeping". For example, moving the entire village would have a huge cost. The American government, one of the main obstacles to addressing climate change, has not yet committed to pay, suggesting instead a more cost-efficient approach of re-settling in Nome, Alaska. To Shishmaref's inhabitants, Nome is a big city which lacks the cultural and spiritual ties to Shishmaref and the way of life there.

Has the sensation-driven need to find and promote "climate change refugees" obscured the deep and broad philosophical and logistical questions of island vulnerability and evacuation, such as those facing Shishmaref? Tuvalu is another island case study often touted as a poster child for climate change impacts and imminent island evacuation with many of the wider issues lost in the media shuffle. The future of Tuvalu has been emotively predicted to be that of an entire nation of environmental refugees, a forecast with significant implications for the political and place-based identities of Tuvaluans. Let us again heed the long-standing warnings of "The medium is the message" and "Manufacturing Consent".

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Farbotko, C. 2007. "Response to 'Climate Change and Islands: The Media Serving Society?'". ISISA Newsletter (International Small Islands Studies Association), vol. 7, no. 1, p. 4.

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I agree with Ilan Kelman, Shannon McNeeley and Heather Lazrus that more critical attention needs to be paid to discourse of islands and climate change. In thinking about this discourse in the media or elsewhere, a useful question to ponder is whether climate change refugees are being represented simply and uncritically as islanders without islands. In other words, is there effectively a denial of island communities the cultural richness and complexity they possess in visions of powerless victims left with little in the wake of rising sea-levels, increasing droughts and more intense

cyclones? Does an urge to find evidence of climate change help to essentialise island identities as deeply territorial? Although from a humanitarian perspective the label 'refugee' – climate or otherwise – is crucially important for protecting and advancing human safety and dignity, it may also at times function to subjugate the agency of its subjects if they have not been legally categorised as such or have not given their consent to such an identity. Imposing the 'climate change refugee' label on a distant and different 'other' may be useful for climate campaigns pitched at a global level, but what damaging impacts might such a label have for already marginalised people for whom it is, sometimes sensationally and sometimes genuinely, evoked as a signifier of humanitarian concern?