

Technology & Resources

Climate migrants

A newly coined word, ‘climigration’, summarizes the fate of islanders forced to flee from higher sea levels, rising because of global warming

by Jacopo Pasotti

While it’s still not clear how the climate will evolve, scientists are now virtually certain about one thing: the sea level will rise, and it will do so quickly. Experts on the *Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change* (IPCC) wrote in their latest report, published in September, that between 1900 and 2010 the globally averaged sea level has risen by 1.7 mm a year, while the annual rise between 1993 and 2010 was 3.2 mm.

Without massive cuts in emissions, the global sea level could rise by 52-98 cm in the next 90 years, and by much less - between 28 and 61 cm - if global emissions were slashed. Plus oceans are getting hotter, and the increased energy will mean more powerful typhoons and

hurricanes, which will force many communities to move. But where to, how and when are still unanswered questions.

Ten percent of the world’s population lives in coastal regions lying less than 10 m above sea level. For these people, the increase in extreme weather events, coastal erosion, rising sea levels and sea water contaminating drinking water pose serious threats. Entire families and communities will have to move. This new phenomenon has now been given its own name, *climigration*; migration forced by climate change, the only possible option for many hundreds of thousands of people.

The media, environmental organizations, even scientists and

politicians have magnified the problem, preferring to swap the term ‘migrants’ with the more dramatic ‘climate refugees’. But the term refugee refers to people who flee their homeland and are housed in temporary accommodation. The problem with this is that “those who have been displaced because of climate change and rising sea levels cannot be classed as ‘refugees’, according to the definition in the United Nations’ Convention relating to the Status of Refugees”, says Edward Wolfers, a professor at the University of Wollongong in Australia. And the Refugee Council of Australia has already announced it will not recognize climate migrants as refugees.

In the meantime, the first ‘official’ climate migrant has appeared. He is Ioane Teitiota, from the Kiribati islands in the Pacific, who has applied for asylum in New Zealand. If he and his family returned home, they would suffer serious harm, he claimed: the sea will swamp most of the island and there is no future for his family or the Pacific island nation’s remaining 100,000 inhabitants. Teitiota’s application is currently being considered by New Zealand’s Supreme Court.

Studies on climate immigration are very new, and unfortunately the initial results complicate the scenario. For example, many islanders have already had to relocate from the minuscule Carteret Atoll – 2,500 residents – to the larger island of Bougainville, in Papua New Guinea. Increasingly storms and sea water flooding the land are forcing the entire population to prepare for evacuation. But there are problems: “There is a reluctance: both on the part of property owners who don’t want to give way to





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the migrants, and the Carteret islanders, who don't want to forgo their ancestral lands", explains Wolfers.

Many island societies do not want to be treated like refugees. For example, the inhabitants of the island of Tuvalu strongly contest being pigeon-holed as testimonials of the victims of climate change. As Carol Farbotko writes in the journal *Global Environmental Change*: "There is a tendency to discount long histories of ordinary mobility among affected populations [...] and the inhabitants of Tuvalu [...] are being used as the immediate evidence of displacement [...] to present a particular (western) 'crisis of nature'".

Whereas Farbotko has interviewed the local communities and discovered they have a natural tendency for mobility. The islanders say "We have always moved in the past. We've transferred from one island to another". And they'd be on the move again, if no one gets in their way.

The researcher concludes by saying that climate migration is not necessarily a crisis that generates refugees, but more a natural form of adaptation.

But the problem remains about how to deal with the populations that risk having to leave highly populated archipelagos like the Maldives (350,000 residents), the Seychelles (90,000) and Vanuatu (240,000).

There is still no solution on the horizon. While Maldivian and Kiribati islanders debate plans for very sci-fi floating islands or platforms, experts ponder how to handle mass migration issues. But on one point at least they all agree; the migration process must be discussed with the societies involved.

"I'm convinced a new concept must be developed to tackle this situation, unless we intend to consider these communities as mere migrants", continues Professor Wolfers. Populations must participate in

relocation planning to reduce the impact on the culture of those who are having to move and for host countries.

Immigration has long been a standard response to environmental changes, so all one has to do is "remove the barriers that prevent migration", according to a team of experts from Columbia University led by Alexander de Sherbinin, in an article published in the magazine *Science*. They warn that a plan needs hatching for the permanent resettlement of populations which must allow for their integration; so they must be provided with work, education and guarantees that their cultural values won't be lost. But discussions on this point are still very much at sea. **E**

Jacopo Pasotti has worked as a geologist. He now writes and takes photographs on science, environment and society. He teaches scientific communication in Italy and Europe.