

# In Pacific, Growing Fear of Paradise Engulfed

Kristof, Nicholas D . New York Times , Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]02 Mar 1997: 1.

[ProQuest document link](#)

---

## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

There was no typhoon, no rain, no wind, just an eerie rising tide that lapped higher and higher, swallowing up Mr. Abeta's thatched-roof home and scores of others in this Pacific island nation.

That tidal surge was followed by another one in February. The flooding has helped focus minds here on warnings that global warming could cause the seas to rise enough in the next century or so to obliterate island nations like this one scattered in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

"The only resource we have is water," said Phillip Muller, Foreign Minister of the Marshall Islands, another country that could easily be drowned by rising seas. "Our livelihood is the sea. Now all of a sudden, it's not a friend. It's threatening our existence."

## FULL TEXT

One sunny day in January, as Teunaia Abeta stood by and watched horror-struck, a high tide came rolling in from the turquoise lagoon and did not stop.

There was no typhoon, no rain, no wind, just an eerie rising tide that lapped higher and higher, swallowing up Mr. Abeta's thatched-roof home and scores of others in this Pacific island nation.

"This had never happened before," said Mr. Abeta, 73, who wore only his colorful lava-lava, a skirtlike garment, as he sat on the raised platform of his home fingering a home-rolled cigarette. "It was never like this when I was a boy."

That tidal surge was followed by another one in February. The flooding has helped focus minds here on warnings that global warming could cause the seas to rise enough in the next century or so to obliterate island nations like this one scattered in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

"The only resource we have is water," said Phillip Muller, Foreign Minister of the Marshall Islands, another country that could easily be drowned by rising seas. "Our livelihood is the sea. Now all of a sudden, it's not a friend. It's threatening our existence."

Officials of some 160 countries are gathering in Bonn to try to negotiate cutbacks in the emissions of heat-trapping gases linked to global warming. Although most experts agree that these gases may cause the seas to rise, there are major disagreements about the scale of the change and the severity of the problem.

Gases like carbon dioxide are suspected of causing global warming by effectively creating a greenhouse around Earth. Warmer temperatures, in turn, are linked to a rising of the seas in two ways: by causing the water to expand

as it warms, and by melting glaciers and icecaps.

"It's so close to the heart here," said Giff Johnson, editor of the Marshall Islands' newspaper, "because you're talking about people's very existence being wiped out by the ocean rising. It scares the hell out of people to think that their country might just be gone."

Industrialized countries like the United States are responsible for most of the greenhouse gas emissions, and they are reluctant to curb industry much while the scientific jury is still out on the seriousness of the effects. That annoys the island nations, which argue that by the time the jury reaches its verdict they may be visible only at low tide.

"It's like little ants making a home on a leaf floating on a pond," grumbled Teburoro Tito, President of Kiribati. "And the elephants go to drink and roughhouse in the water. The problem isn't the ants' behavior. It's a problem of how to convince the elephants to be more gentle."

Many of the island countries in the Pacific, including Kiribati (pronounced KIH-rih-bus), are collections of coral formations. Usually a string of islets around a turquoise lagoon, they resemble not so much nations as sandbars.

Each island peeps just a few feet above sea level and is only about a hundred yards wide, sometimes less. Many homes offer bicoastal views, from sea to shining sea, and a country like Kiribati, situated about halfway between California and Australia, can at low tide be three times as big as at high tide.

In such countries the lagoon is central to the economy and national identity, for children play in the water from infancy, and many adults fish or sail for a living. The Kiribati men in their loincloths go out in outrigger canoes each day to catch tuna, and the women wade out on the coral reef to dive for shellfish and net smaller fish for dinner.

The countries most likely to go under the sea include Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu, all in the Pacific, and the Maldives, in the Indian Ocean. Many other island countries, including Tonga, Palau, Nauru, Niue and the Federated States of Micronesia, may lose much of their territory but for now are probably not in danger of total submersion.

The populations are tiny: Kiribati has 75,000 people, and only 10,000 live on Tuvalu. Those numbers pale beside the 150 million additional refugees worldwide forecast as a result of climate change by 2050, according to a 1993 academic study published in the journal *BioScience*. Other studies suggest that a rise of 3 feet in ocean levels would force the evacuation of perhaps 70 million Chinese and 32 million Bangladeshis. One-fifth of Bangladesh would also disappear.

Yet at least countries like Bangladesh would survive, though perhaps in truncated form. The Pacific islanders fret not only about whether their countries will exist outside of history books, but also about changes they see in their climate today. For all the scientific uncertainty about global warming, they insist that the weather has been getting stranger in recent years and has produced some unprecedented tidal surges.

"These aren't storms, they're surges," said Mr. Johnson of the Marshall Islands. "It's nice weather, and all of a sudden water is pouring into your living room. It's very clear that something is happening in the Pacific, and these islands are feeling it."

By some accounts, there have also been more frequent storms, changing weather patterns and other unexpected

events, like a tidal wave that recently washed over the island of Kili in the Marshall Islands. Nobody has any evidence that global warming is the culprit, but there is a tendency now for people to point to any odd weather and blame the greenhouse effect.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study was issued last year by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an international group of experts. It suggested that seas may rise 18 inches by 2100. But it emphasized the enormous uncertainties and suggested that the real figure could be much lower or higher.

Even a rise of two or three feet would devastate Pacific island countries like Kiribati. President Tito says such a rise would leave the country uninhabitable.

Some people find the notion that their country might disappear so overwhelming, and so frustrating because there is so little they can do about it, that they choose not to worry too much.

"What can we do?" asked Johnny Johnson, a middle-aged Marshall Islander. "Nothing but sit around and see our people washed away by the water."

Roote Claude, whose home was flooded recently in Kiribati, simply laughed – a bit nervously – when asked if her country would sink below the waves.

"God will protect Kiribati," she said, in a tone that seemed to reflect more hope than faith.

Technical solutions like sea walls are available to protect low-lying lands. In Japan, some two million people live below the high-water mark.

But the solutions are unaffordable for most low-lying island countries. In Majuro, the capital of the Marshall Islands, where the islets are in some places only as wide as the two-lane road that traverses each of them, a single wave often sprays the country from coast to coast. One study found that protecting the capital alone would cost up to three times the total national economic output.

To be sure, some studies also point to benefits from global warming. Mid- and high-latitude countries might enjoy not only warmer weather but also longer growing seasons.

This is small consolation to the Pacific islands, which last year began a climate monitoring project to gather evidence of rising seas and changing weather. So far, 39 countries have formed the Alliance of Small Island States to press for an obligatory 20 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2005.

The United States endorses the idea of legally binding cutbacks, to be adopted late this year in an international conference in Japan, but only by 2010 and with various conditions. In the meantime, America's industrial carbon dioxide emissions are growing by 8 percent a year, environmental groups report.

Developing countries are also a growing source of greenhouse gases. A corollary of China's economic boom is that it is projected to overtake the United States as the leading source of such gases early in the next century.

And in the Pacific, people are beginning to look at the sea in a new way, with suspicion.

"People here think of the ocean as their source of livelihood, as their friend," said Ross Terubea, a Kiribati radio

reporter. "It's hard to think that it would destroy us."

### Photograph

In Pacific island nations like Kiribati, the specter of global warming threatens more than their beaches. (Nicholas D. Kristof/The New York Times)(pg. 1); Teunaia Abeta, a Kiribati islander, knows what bad weather can do to the tide but was unprepared for what happened recently on a beautiful day, when the water eerily rose past usual high-tide levels to engulf his house. (Nicholas D. Kristof/The New York Times)(pg. 16)

Map of Pacific Ocean highlighting Kiribati islands: In Tarawa and other low-lying Pacific islands, floods have raised fears of global warming, which many say could eventually bring submersion. (pg. 16)

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Tidal waves; Floods; Greenhouse effect
<b>Location:</b>	Pacific Islands Kiribati Islands
<b>Lexile score:</b>	1470 L
<b>Publication title:</b>	New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y.
<b>Pages:</b>	1
<b>Number of pages:</b>	0
<b>Publication year:</b>	1997
<b>Publication date:</b>	Mar 2, 1997
<b>Dateline:</b>	TARAWA, Kiribati
<b>Section:</b>	1
<b>Publisher:</b>	New York Times Company
<b>Place of publication:</b>	New York, N.Y.
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, New York, N.Y.
<b>Publication subject:</b>	General Interest Periodicals--United States
<b>ISSN:</b>	03624331
<b>CODEN:</b>	NYTIAO
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspapers
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English

<b>Document type:</b>	News
<b>Accession number:</b>	04448444
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	430763131
<b>Document URL:</b>	https://search.proquest.com/docview/430763131?accountid=47409
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright New York Times Company Mar 2, 1997
<b>Last updated:</b>	2017-11-15
<b>Database:</b>	eLibrary,US Newsstream

---

Database copyright © 2020 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)