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6 Nothing There Atoll? “Farewell to the Carteret Islands”

6.1 Introduction

The Carterets are a portent of catastrophe to come—not only for the other low lying atolls of the South Pacific, but for low-lying coastal communities across the world, from Bangladesh to New Orleans ... These are the Carterets, the islands at the beginning of the end of the world ... Some time next year the islanders will become the world’s first climate-change refugees; within a few years, barring a dramatic reversal, their home will literally go down in history as the first inhabited territory in the world to be swallowed up by global warming (Parry, 2006).

A small number of Pacific islands, notably Tuvalu and the Carteret Islands (henceforth “CI”), have become iconic sites in contemporary chronicles of global warming and sea level rise: the “canaries in the coal mine” and synecdoches for future change. The most anticipated physical impacts of sea level rise (SLR) on islands are coastal erosion, flooding and salinity intrusion, reducing the resilience and viability of small island ecosystems, so stimulating migration. By far the most popular image with regard to climate change is that of disappearing islands and populations forced against their will to become environmental or “climate refugees” (Farbotko, 2010). In the media, but also in various academic accounts, the CI have been widely depicted as the first islands whose population must be relocated owing to climate change and thus the first “climate change refugees” (Connell, 1990; Edwards, 2013; Luetz, 2008; Morton, 2009). So strong has this linkage between the CI and disappearance become that when “Carteret Islands” is put into Google, the automatic categories offered in response are “Carteret Islands Sinking,” followed by “Climate Refugees” and “Relocation.” In 2010 Papua New Guinea issued a set of four “climate change” stamps all featuring the CI. There is an extraordinary national and global fascination with a few tiny islands disappearing beneath the waves (Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012).

The Carteret Islands in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (Papua New Guinea) consists of a single coral atoll, with five populated islets, none more than three metres above sea level (Figure One). That may already suggest a difficult future, but can there then be no other way of thinking about these islands—so frequently doomed to disappear as sea level rises? This chapter examines this perception, seeks to account for the iconic status of the CI—far beyond what might be expected of a tiny island with fewer than two thousand people on the extreme fringes of an already globally marginal Pacific state—and analyses the way in which Western and Carteret Islander activists alike have applied

scientific discourses of climate change to the CI. In short, the chapter queries how the complex history and multiple stressors at work in the CI have become a monocausal, monolithic narrative based on “climate change,” and then offers alternative perspectives.

Figure 6.1: The Carteret Islands, Papua New Guinea.

6.2 (Mis)representing the Islands?

In several reports, from sources distant from the western Pacific, the CI—a single coral atoll 85 kilometres north-east of Buka (Bougainville, Papua New Guinea) (Figure One)—have already been abandoned. In a fairly typical example, the UK Minister of State, while visiting Papua New Guinea in April 2013, stated: “In 2007 the Carteret Islanders, in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, became some of the first in the world to be forced from their homes by rising sea levels and extreme weather.”⁴⁰ Similar emotive and inaccurate statements have been made many times about Tuvalu, rather more

⁴⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-office-minister-hugo-swire-talks-to-port-moresby-chamber-of-commerce>

iconic in constituting an entire nation (Barnett and Campbell, 2010; Connell 2003; 2013). Since only a handful of households have been formally relocated from the CI, and the problems and complexities of resettlement have become longstanding issues, more informed statements about the CI simply focus on problems caused by sea level rise and the urgent need for resettlement.

A suite of quotations follows somewhat similar lines to those of the opening quotation. For the western Pacific, an Australian academic writes:

The people of Tuvalu and Kiribati in the north Pacific, Takuu (Mortlock Islands) and the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea, and Australia's Torres Strait Islanders, are now voyaging towards an uncertain future. Rapidly rising sea-levels and massive king tides are encroaching on their villages and salt is affecting arable land. The mass migration of entire island communities is imminent (Cochrane, 2010: 93).

A British academic describes CI as follows: more than 60% of the territory has fallen below sea level; two uninhabited islands disappeared in 1999 and the island has been cut into two by the sea (Blitz, 2011: 441). In this way, the CI have repeatedly been singled out, with islanders typically being described, here from the Australian Climate Institute think-tank, as “the first direct climate change refugees with islands inundated and damaged, gardens and water supplies destroyed by salt water intrusion and evacuation announced in 2005” (Roper, 2009). A decade ago a British journalist reported:

For more than 30 years the 980 people living on the six minute horseshoe-shaped Carteret atolls have battled the Pacific to stop salt water destroying their coconut palms and waves crashing over their houses. They failed. Yesterday a decision was made that will make their group of low-lying islands literally go down in history [...] the Carterets' people became the first to be officially evacuated because of climate change. Starting as soon as money is available to the Papua New Guinean regional government, 10 families at a time will be moved to Bougainville, a larger island 100km away. Within two years the six Carterets [...] will be uninhabited and undefended. By 2015 they are likely to be completely submerged (Vidal, 2005: n.p.).

The phrase “literally go down in history” by then had become repetitive (Connell, 2013)—as had other similar phrases—while 2015 was soon to become a familiar date for reports on the CI, despite no known scientific or other rationale for this date. Typically “scientists expect the islands to sink back into the sea by 2015” (Anon 2008), while “the 1,700 or so Carteret islanders may be among the first people to move. That's because scientists estimate the islands will be drowned by 2015.”⁴¹ Who the mysterious scientists were has never been revealed.

⁴¹ Keith Jackson. http://asopa.typepad.com/asopa_people/2011/08/the-climate-refugees-of-the-carteret-islands.html

In 2009 the prominent British journalist, George Monbiot, in a report entitled “Climate change displacement has begun but hardly anyone has noticed” claimed that, two weeks earlier, “a momentous event occurred: the beginning of the world’s first evacuation of an entire people as a result of manmade global warming” (2009: n.p.). As stated in a report from the NGO World Vision International:

There has been reluctance to leave, especially among older islanders, but after fighting a losing battle against the ocean for more than twenty years (building sea walls and planting mangroves) it appears the islanders have given up hope, resigned to be among the world’s first “climate change refugees” (Luetz, 2008)

This and similar reports and comments copied, built on and cross-referenced each other, in the absence of formal studies of socio-economic and physical changes in CI, or alternative perspectives. Though such reports have a veneer of accuracy, few indicate that their authors had travelled within a hundred kilometres of the CI, let alone visited the islands themselves. With internet search engines rendering these comments immediately accessible to anyone seeking to make statements on the CI, it is inevitable that the “imminent end” narrative was rehashed many times over. These sources include seemingly reputable (e.g. UN) sources, academics, journalists, film makers and NGOs.

Yet “[t]he vulnerability of the [Pacific] islands is a symbol used by researchers who need problems to investigate, journalists who need problems to sell and NGOs who need problems to solve” (Barnett and Campbell, 2010). For NGOs especially, small islands are sites and sources of refugees, and places that demonstrate the harmful effects of greenhouse gas emissions and overconsumption in the developed world: frontline victims of the excesses of capitalism. Media reports, building on each other and without real local understanding, not unexpectedly invariably attributed environmental problems to climate change and sea level, as they did elsewhere (Connell, 2003; Farkbotko, 2005). Yet only the CI were going down in history at a fixed time, so ensuring their unique iconic status.

The drama of disappearance depicted in media reports is accentuated in pictures and films. Typical photographs from a variety of sources are shown with their original captions in Figures 6.2 to 6.6, all emphasising the fragility and vulnerability of small islands and their populations. Photographs highlight sites of devastation, where islanders waded through what was once dry land, where coconut trees are eroded or fallen, and where water has cut in two the island of Huene in the CI: apparent visible proof of an atoll whose end is near. Documentary films have similarly lingered on disruption, attaching particular significance to high tides and flooding and eschewing residual normality.

Figure 6.2: “The View of Han (Huene) Island from Yolasa Island, both part of the Carteret Atoll. Han used to be one island but has now been bisected by rising sea levels. Fallen coconut trees in the foreground were caused by the erosion of the coastline” (IRIN Asia 8 June 2008). Photo Credit: Pip Starr.

Figure 6.3: “A mother takes her young family to drier ground.” Photo Credit: BBC World Service, “A World Underwater,” 2009.

Figure 6.4: “Rising sea levels have eroded much of the coastlines of the low-lying Carteret Islands situated 50 miles from Bougainville Island, in the South Pacific.” Photo credit: Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert /Greenpeace.

Figure 6.5: “The two halves of what was once Huene Island, which was cut in two in the 1980s. Its twin, Iolasa, is going the same way. When the tides rise stingrays and sharks swim around. Then when the water goes down, the place is wet and stinking. Then the mosquitoes breed and the children get malaria and diarrhoea.” Photo credit: Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert.

Photographs, their captions, and films are dramatic depictions of a disappearing island and people and a graphic visual substitute for the absent science: “simultaneously scientific denotations of global warming and cultural connotations of danger and vulnerability” mirroring wider apocalyptic scenarios of catastrophe, hopelessness, misery and doom (Manzo, 2010). Moreover, disappearing islands seem idyllic. PNG’s own study records: “islands, which, from space, look like the beads of a necklace lying on a turquoise background” (Memafu, 2011). The *Times* depicts “the Carteret Islands—among the smallest, most beautiful and most remote inhabited islands in the world” (Parry, 2006: n.p.).

6.3 Thinking About Sinking

The Carteret Islands group consists of an oval-shaped atoll, ranging from approximately 10 to 20 kilometres in diameter, with six main named small islands and an entire surface area of about 0.7 sq. kms (70 hectares). Sea level rise in the western Pacific is faster than in most parts of the world, but the highest recorded rate in the region—close to Tuvalu—is 5.1 mm per year, and that rate has only occurred in recent years. No good records of sea level rise exist for CI, or nearby islands; it is unlikely to be more than that of Tuvalu but probably in excess of the average 3.1 mm per year recorded for the Western Pacific, and almost certainly increasing (Connell, 2015). While that is significant for the CI, in itself and for the time being sea level rise creates few problems.

Short term cyclical events have had a much greater local impact on environmental change than sea level rise. The CI are outside the normal cyclone belt but occasional storms produce storm surges (sometimes called king tides) that create overwash, as waves traverse the islands. More significant for short-term climatic events is the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), a quasi-periodic climatic pattern that occurs across the Pacific roughly every five years, and has occurred for centuries (well before significant greenhouse gas-induced global warming), changing sea surface temperatures and air surface pressures. At the peaks of ENSO cycles more extreme weather occurs. During these periods sea levels are unusually high, storm surges more frequent and overwash more common. Overwash can reduce potable lens water to a brackish water supply unsuitable for drinking for more than six months, and destroy fresh food supplies (in taro beds) for at least as long. That was the situation during 1989 and in mid-2008, when La Niña was in place, partly accounting for problems that brought in the media at critical times of obvious disruption.

Distant source wind-waves, emanating from the eastern Pacific and not associated with regional circumstances, have been an occasional source of inundation of low-lying areas; late in 2008 swell created considerable damage in the CI at a time when regional sea level, due to La Niña conditions, was unusually elevated (Hoeke et al,

2013). The impact would have been greater had it arrived during a peak of spring tides or in stronger La Niña conditions.

Relative sea level rise, both cyclical and irregular, is considerably influenced by tectonic change, and particularly strong vertical movements around the nearby convergence of the Australian and Pacific plates. Geophysical data on movements on the plate boundary are extremely scarce, other than in the Torres Islands (Vanuatu), where between 1997 and 2009 the islands subsided by about 117 mm—one of the highest recorded subsidence rates in the world, effectively quadrupling more gradual sea level rise, resulting in considerable flooding and local resettlement (Ballu et al, 2011; Siméoni and Ballu, 2012). Similar explanations account for parallel changes in other parts of the Solomon Islands and PNG, all close to the plate boundary, and for changes in CI (Duguman, 2009; Connell, 2015).

Human impacts from the construction of seawalls, removal of mangroves, and sand mining have also had significant impacts on erosion and coastal change (Connell 2003, 2013, 2015). There is little information on such factors in CI, though they are likely to have made some contribution to localised coastal erosion. Monbiot (2009) did note that there were “compounding factors—the removal of mangrove forests and some local volcanic activity—but the main problems appear to be rising sea levels.” Parry also stated “there is no doubt that the islanders have unwittingly made their own contribution to the problem. Unlike many tropical reefs, the Carteret atoll seems little damaged by bomb fishing—but the mangroves that once formed a natural sea wall around the islands were stripped away for firewood a generation ago” (Parry, 2006). Dynamiting of reefs occurred when the population grew during the Bougainville crisis of the 1990s (Regan, 2010). Various sea walls have been constructed at least as early as the 1960s and a survey team in 1964 reported that, already, “erosion is a constant menace in these islands” (quoted in O’Collins, 1990). Erosion has been greatest and most visible in the more modified parts of atolls, especially where people lived at high densities. On many Pacific atolls, islanders are conscious that erosion is part of a “normal process”—more of the same—and have long taken steps to modify and defend eroded areas and secure land elsewhere, at least as early as the 1970s (Bridges and McClatchey 2009; Connell 2015; Pam and Henry, 2012; Rubow, 2013). While Carteret Islanders have not apparently commented on past changes, and present changes may be substantially greater than at any time in the recent past, some contemporary changes are the outcome of cyclical and recurrent environmental changes.

6.4 The Carteret Islands: A Recent History

Carteret Islanders reportedly fled from Buka in pre-contact times to settle the island and displace a previous Polynesian outlier population (Mueller, 1972). Difficulties in maintaining livelihoods were frequent in other nearby atolls in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Bayliss-Smith, 1975), and it is highly likely that this was also

true of CI. In post-war years the island periodically experienced food shortages of varying severity, at least since the 1960s, associated with a steadily growing human and pig population, and the increased conversion of coconuts into copra to generate income, so reducing local food supplies. Between the 1960s and 1980s administration patrol reports regularly remarked on food and timber shortages, and occasionally made reference to malnutrition, while CI were often singled out as the Bougainvillean atoll with the most severe development problems (e.g Kukang et al, 1987). Some islanders worked away and when the Bougainville Company no longer took crew from the Carterets for their ships “they cut the people short of everything” (Mueller, 1972). In the 1950s and 1960s the islands were known to be subject to occasional inundation during storm surges, especially during strong wind conditions.⁴² Resettlement was considered by the colonial administration at least as early as the 1960s (Mueller, 1972). By the 1990s very little land was cultivated and the main foods eaten were fish and coconuts, alongside imported foods such as rice and flour. People were dependent on driftwood and timber brought from Buka for construction. An agricultural survey in 2002 recorded at a time when the population was still increasing:

There are clear indications of stress in the Carteret Islands. There are serious and chronic food supply problems. ... so severe that it is possible that inadequate nutrition is inhibiting children's mental development. There are also clear signs of environmental stress. The area on Han Island which was previously devoted to swamp taro production was flooded by sea water several years ago. The small areas of swamp taro pits were then abandoned. These problems are not new and have been reported for up to 40 years (Bourke and Betitis, 2003)

Breadfruit, swamp taro, sugar cane and bananas were all produced in the recent past but bananas died during the late 2000s. Stress has been recurrent.

Adequate demographic data for the CI are absent. The resident population is likely to be around 1,200 and the number of Carteret Islanders living elsewhere is likely to be about 300, but there is no means of being sure. The Admiralty Handbook recorded the CI as having a population of 440 in 1940; after the war that had grown to 574 in 1954 and 864 in 1970 (Mueller, 1972). The resident population at the time of the 2000 census was 979 people giving a population density of 1224 people per sq. km, the highest of any Bougainvillean atoll and the highest density in PNG (Bourke and Betitis, 2003). To remain at home in the islands as conditions worsened was regarded as relative deprivation, and by then roughly a third of all Carteret Islanders lived on Bougainville. The closure of the mine and a decade long period of civil war, violence and deprivation across Bougainville resulted in return migration to the CI and increased pressure on local resources, particularly as opportunities for trade were especially limited during this time. By chance that coincided with the initiation of global and regional concerns over climate change and sea level rise (Connell, 1990).

⁴² <http://ianmott.blogspot.com.au/2007/03/rising-sea-levels-or-just-sinking.html>

The following two decades were unusually difficult. In the 1980s cash incomes were erratic and unreliable since the sale of copra, shells, *bêche-de-mer* and other marine products was dependent on fluctuating prices and irregular transport to Bougainville (O’Collins, 1990). During the Bougainville crisis transport worsened considerably, and remained difficult thereafter as Bougainville only slowly returned to normality and “outer islanders” (a neologism) were further marginalised. Various Carteret Islanders live off-island, mainly in Buka (Bougainville).

Formal resettlement from CI has had two phases. The first resettlement began in 1984, with a plan to relocate Carteret Islanders to an area north of Arawa in Bougainville (adjoining a similar settlement for migrants from the other Bougainville atolls), but this scheme ended in 1989 with the outbreak of conflict. Several households had been established, and garden food was being sent back to the CI, but the resettled households returned to the CI during the crisis. In the twenty-first century, after the resolution of the crisis, a second attempt at resettlement began. That phase sought to relocate 50% of the island’s population by 2020. Neither the government of PNG nor that of the now Autonomous Province of Bougainville gave this priority or purchased land for resettlement, leaving the task to a local CI organisation, Tulele Peisa (“Sailing the waves on our own”) with some support from the Catholic church in Bougainville. Tulele Peisa regularly reported relocation being needed because of “rising sea levels.” The lack of state-provided land meant that an “ideal opportunity for securing land for some of the world’s first climate change displaced persons was lost” (Displacement Solutions, 2012: 18). Obtaining any land beyond the 81 hectares donated by the church, let alone suitable land for successful relocation, was extremely difficult, and Tulele Peisa had no financial resources to secure land or develop a settlement (Edwards, 2013). By 2011 no more than ten households had relocated to Bougainville, and there were frequent disputes with nearby landowners. Resettlement was unusually difficult because of the unwillingness of Bougainvilleans to relinquish or lease land, the tensions of a post-conflict period in which employment opportunities were scarce, and the absence of kin to facilitate the kind of migration that has occurred in other atoll contexts. Despite frequent stresses, and several attempts, Carteret Islanders have been unable to establish multi-sited livelihoods.

Making a livelihood on atolls has always been regarded as precarious: “coral reefs with their low sandy islets provide the most limited range of resources for human existence and are the most tenuous of habitats for man [sic] in the Pacific... Maintaining a livelihood is a considerable task” (Thomas, 1963). In pre-colonial times atolls achieved sustainable development partly through extended geographical ties, typified by socio-economic linkages across atolls and between clusters of islands. Elaborate exchange systems and reciprocal regional and local socio-economic-political ties contributed to sustainability (Alkire, 1978; Bayliss-Smith, 1982), though sometimes involving feuds, warfare and violent conflicts over land, resources and fishing grounds (D’Arcy, 2006, 2009). Survival necessitated external ties. Small islands could not afford to be insular. Without mobility and migration life could be particularly difficult.

Nearby Nukumanu atoll experienced a considerable population reduction in the 1870s following overpopulation and famine, though overpopulation was unlikely to be the sole explanation, and adjoining Takuu experienced a similar decline, prompting administration interest in resettlement (Bayliss-Smith, 1975; Moyle, 2007). Migration became a widespread household strategy, for diversifying sources of income to minimise risks, resulting in the establishment of a culture of migration and dependence on remittances (Connell, 2008, 2013, 2015). Pacific atoll islanders established their own settlements on central high islands, such as Guadalcanal, Pohnpei and Chuuk and Guam, or moved to central urbanized atolls such as Funafuti, Tarawa and Majuro, in search of superior incomes, education and health services. Unlike so many other atolls the CI were unusually disadvantaged, particularly evident after the Bougainville crisis and the dual failure of resettlement schemes.

6.5 Inside the Garbage Can

Small islands offer sites where the great global narratives of climate change can be comprehended, interpreted and made tangible and visible, and where “proof” of the reality of climate change can supposedly be constructed from indigenous testimonials (Farbotko, 2010). Environmental knowledge in the CI is a product of history and culture, influenced by scientific analysis, but mediated through the media and local transformation. Carteret Islanders, like Tuvaluans (Connell, 2003), are not passive in the face of science but actively construct their own environmental knowledge based on both observation and knowledge transmission. The science to which they have been exposed, limited as it is, confirms exactly what they have observed. Local fears and distant perceptions confirm, enhance and emphasise each other, so eclipsing the space for local causalities and explanations.

With the exceptions of Monbiot’s reference to “compounding factors” and Parry’s reference to islanders’ own contribution to the problem, in both cases seen as secondary to sea level rise, no reference to recent environmental changes in the CI has suggested an origin in anything other than climate change. Climate change and sea level rise embrace the totality of observed changes and scientific explanations. Nothing else is possible, resulting in a “garbage can logic” where unusual, seemingly inexplicable, changes have occurred, and a confluence of factors have been condensed and simplified into a narrative of monocausality. With scientific studies quite absent in the CI, “climate change” (or “sea level rise”) has become the sole source of environmental change: a “garbage can anarchy” where once separate and complex phenomena have become systematically interrelated (e.g. Connell, 2003; Corlett, 2008; Hulme, 2010). It would be almost impossible to imagine any environmental phenomenon less directly observable, more remote from daily experience and more dependent on science for its “truth” than climate change. The science and data of climate change are constantly contested and its effects can neither be accurately predicted nor spatially or temporally

determined. Any influences on climate change occur far from the island Pacific, and cannot be attributed to local activities, hence perceived physical changes that may have alternative explanations can still be attributed to climate change and sea level rise: instances of “promiscuous corroboration” (cf. Rudiak-Gould, 2012a, 2013a).

Media and occasional NGO accounts are replete with romanticised statements such as “Island chief John Kela doesn’t understand the science of climate change. But he sees that the ocean surrounding his island is rising” and “Even as the last veneers of organic matter are pushed out to the ocean, Tobasi [in Han] prays daily for his island. He knows that life on the atoll is coming to an end” (Luetz, 2008: 17, 20). Science is constantly given short shrift. Ursula Rakova, the CEO of Tulele Peisa, frequently returns to this theme. While noting that she has heard alternative explanations for local problems, from volcanic activity to tectonic change: “We don’t know much about science; all we know it’s happening all over the world” (quoted in Oxfam, 2008). Later: “We do not know much about science but we watch helplessly as the tides wash away our shores year in and year out” (Rakova, 2012). Distant causes absolve local people from responsibility. Among Carteret Islanders there is only a single recorded dissenting voice to the monocausal climate change narrative, and this dissenter appears to have been quashed: “I used to think that it’s because of unreligious activities of the people. They seem not to be following the Ten Commandments” (Dreiling, 2009). Climate change is the sole culprit.

Physical changes are considerable and eminently visible. The leader of Piul observed: “‘When I was a small boy this shore began out there’ Mr Tubin [sic] says, pointing to a spot 150 metres out to sea. ‘One year ago it was five metres out from here. There were houses here, and fruit trees’” (quoted in Parry, 2006). Some sites are particularly striking. “Chief Bernard Tunim of Piul Island points to a decaying coconut stump nearly 200 metres offshore ... ‘That used to be our shoreline only ten or 15 years ago. Look how the sea is eating us away. We are only a small island, the king tides have already swamped our gardens and soon we will have to leave. The future of my island is now only for fish, not people’” (Bohane, 2009). Various films of the CI, and other atolls such as Takuu, and the numerous films of Tuvalu, are replete with local people demonstrating the disappearance of their land, usually by wading where it was. “We are right where my grandfather’s house was ... out there were coconut trees and some other fruit gardens” (CNN, 2007). Little can be more dramatic than food gardens and coconut palms—the basis of livelihoods—awash in the ocean. Nothing more is needed for the media to apply the “refugee” label. Small islands are thus marginalized through the creation and reiteration of emotional geographies tied to particular named sites, such as burial areas, to remembered places that have disappeared, to the particular island and the atoll as a whole.

Before erosion life was good, and vestiges of that remain, especially to those people who have no wish to migrate. On Huene, where only two families still remain, Selina Netoi pointed out: “I may not go. You can sleep outside and no one comes to disturb you. I like to watch the wind blowing in the palm trees. I don’t have to pay

anything, everything is free” (Tweedie, 2009). By contrast “On the mainland you can’t get something for nothing” (Redfearn and Metzger, 2010). Selina also observed “You do not get lonely here ... There is the sky and the sea and the trees, all changing. And there are people over there [nearby Iolassa]” (Redfearn and Metzger, 2010).

For a fifty-year-old man:

Here we are simple fishermen. We love fishing. If you go fishing and catch many fish, you would come and share what you have with me, and I would do the same. We look after each other, here on these islands (Tweedie, 2009).

Figure 6.6: Climate change refugees.

For a younger man in Han:

It’s a holiday island, paradise. When you wake up you think about fishing. You can just sit and relax. Check if your coconuts are growing. You don’t have a hefty workload (in UNU, 2009)

Since the cause is evidently climate change, as the ‘chief’ of Piul has stated:

We are frustrated and we are angry at the same time. We are victims of something we are not responsible for. We believe that these islands are ours, and that our future generations should not go away from these islands. I think it’s about time these industrialized countries realized that these island countries in the Pacific are taking the toll. We are bearing the brunt of these [greenhouse] emissions (quoted in Westwood, 2008: 37)

This theme is repeated in almost every account: local people, with no capacity to influence climate change, victimised by distant forces. An anonymous Islander said: “We have mixed feelings of anger and sorrow at the same time. We don’t want to lose our ground. Losing our island is losing our lives, losing our identity, losing our custom and whatever we have” (Dreiling, 2009). Living on Bougainville would necessitate abandoning some aspects of culture (notably material culture) and adapting to new livelihoods in a different physical, cultural and linguistic environment. Despite the threats to livelihoods in the CI, only some of the Islanders, mainly younger families, wish to go. Becoming part of a wider world is not without emotional costs: “home” remains on the atoll.

6.6 Conclusion: 2015 and All That

Contrary to recent journalistic and local commentary, the CI face multiple problems, only one of which is climate change. Sustainable livelihoods have been under extreme pressure for more than half a century while expectations for development have increased. Sea level rise, though posing a serious problem in the future, is yet to have a significant influence on environmental change in the CI. Flooding and coastal erosion have been the result not of climate change-induced sea level rise but of tectonic changes, seismic events, ENSO-related tidal and storm surges, cyclones, wind-driven waves, and local actions. Indeed, significant physical changes were occurring on coral atolls long before the late 1980s when the first news of the “greenhouse effect,” climate change and global sea level rise reached the Pacific region.

But once this scientific concept did arrive, both on the CI and in Western newsrooms, it became possible for a complex historical, ecological, and social situation to be brushed aside in favour of the “grand narrative” of climate change (see Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012; Kuruppu and Liverman, 2011; Rudiak-Gould, 2011, 2012a). Disappearing islands and people—climate refugees—are emotional matters, drawn on by NGOs, journalists, and islanders themselves to encourage global mitigation and adaptation and to draw attention to the excesses of capitalism. While catastrophic narratives of inundation, flight and loss may be unhelpful for Tuvaluans and Marshall Islanders, who largely favour in situ adaptation over relocation (Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012; Rudiak-Gould, 2013a), in the CI, where environmental degradation is unusually severe and migration opportunities few, this rhetorical gambit provides a moral context that might shape a desired diasporic future. Not surprisingly Islanders have no wish to be “tectonic refugees,” where no human influences exist, and morality is absent. Likewise, whereas in most atoll contexts climate change is a distraction (Gaillard, 2012) from the necessity of achieving daily livelihoods, and climate change induces a sense of powerlessness, what might otherwise be powerlessness has been transformed in the CI into a potential means of gaining new livelihoods.

For centuries atoll islanders have diversified livelihoods by migration. Islanders themselves and colonial and post-colonial authorities recognised migration and resettlement elsewhere as a means of alleviating poverty and food insecurity, and formal resettlement schemes were sometimes put in place. In many other islands, islanders developed their own strategies for migration, colonisation or resettlement elsewhere. Maintaining an adequate local livelihood and achieving sustainability on the CI has always been difficult, and has worsened with increased population pressure and detachment from Bougainville during and after the crisis. During both the crisis years and the extreme weather condition of the late 2000s the CI needed greater connectivity to diversify local livelihoods. A growing culture of migration and significant environmental degradation increasingly emphasise each other.

As elsewhere migration and resettlement are entwined with ambivalence between the desire for migration and possible superior living standards and a preference for holding on to the security and certainty of home. Not all Carteret Islanders wish to leave, anchor populations will remain, and, should depopulation occur, the islands will become fishing grounds. Tulele Peisa hope to retain a small population in the Carterets but not “most of those with income-earning potential” (Displacement Solutions, 2012). Migration simply provides necessary flexible and productive livelihoods. Islanders are not impotent but, because of land and political issues in Bougainville, have limited migratory options. Local agency is not passive, but in difficult circumstances has effectively moulded global forces (through the narrative of climate change and disappearing islands and people) into external concern and widespread acceptance of the necessity for resettlement. A negative climate change discourse has been turned into both a romantic essentialism of place and a weapon of the weak (Scott, 1995). Carteret Islanders face a difficult future in a troubled nation but a “natural” hazard has provided one means of overcoming the challenges of development on an unusually small, densely populated and resource-deficient island: despite the “scientists”, most Islanders will still be there long after 2015.