



# Case Exploration: Republic of the Marshall Islands

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# Background

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI)

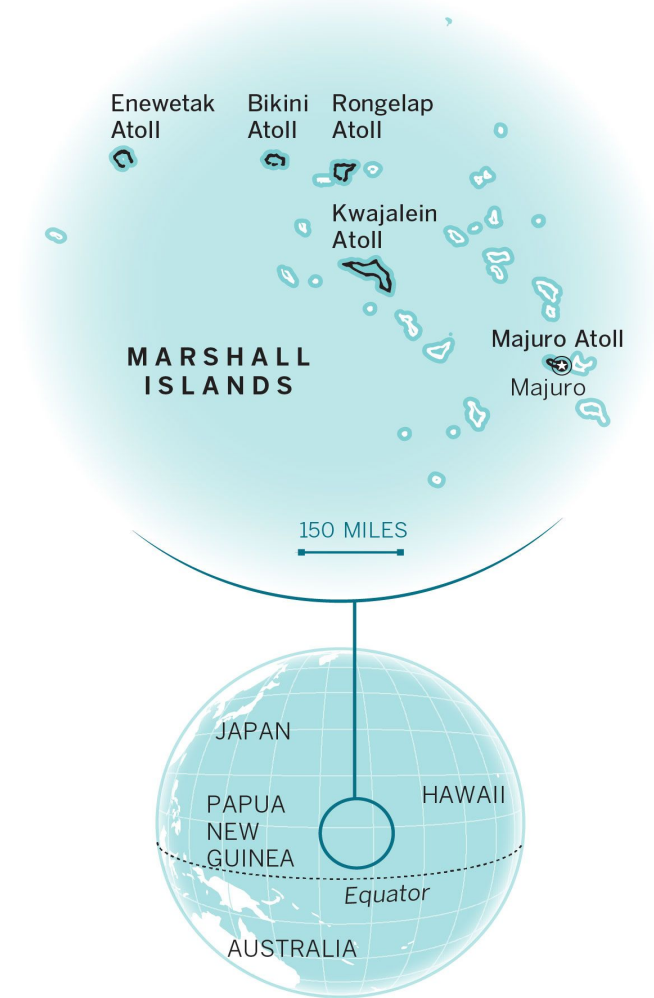
Located in the central Pacific Ocean

The elevation of the Marshall Islands averages just six feet, with many areas roughly at sea level

Strong historical relationship with water and built environment

Over 1,200 islands scattered across 750,000 square miles of ocean

Total land mass is just 113 square miles



53,000 citizens account for 0.00001% of global emissions

# Marshall Islands

Majuro and Arno Atolls



Ocean warms → Sea level rises

Small-island developing states are disproportionately at higher risk of consequences of climate change

Facing relocation in immediate future

Limited adaptive options

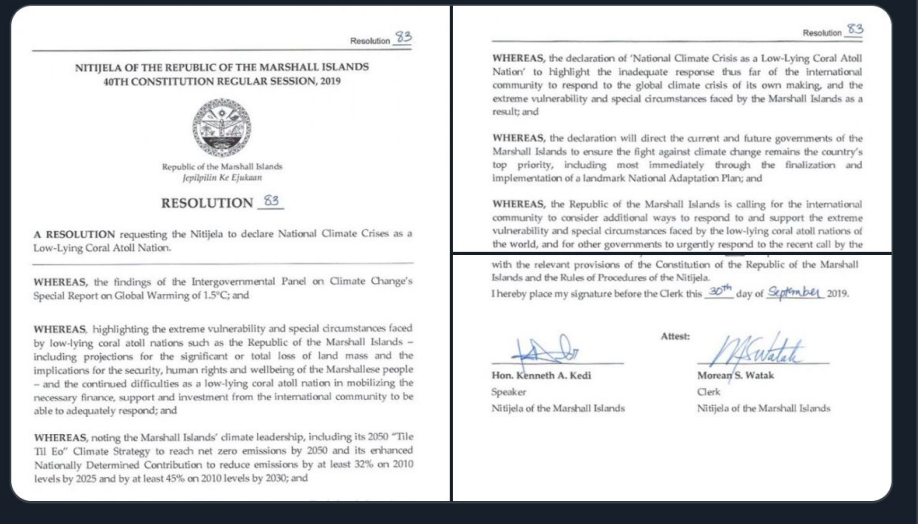
- Voluntary resettlement or displacement



Dr. Hilda C. Heine

@Senator\_Heine

Our parliament has officially declared a national climate crisis. As one of only four low-lying coral atoll nations in the world, the failure of the international community to adequately respond to the global climate crisis of its own making holds particularly grave consequences.



## IMPACTS:

Tropical cyclones

Flooding/waves

Temperature

Damaged reefs

Depleted fisheries

Sea Level Rise

Saltwater Intrusion

Drought



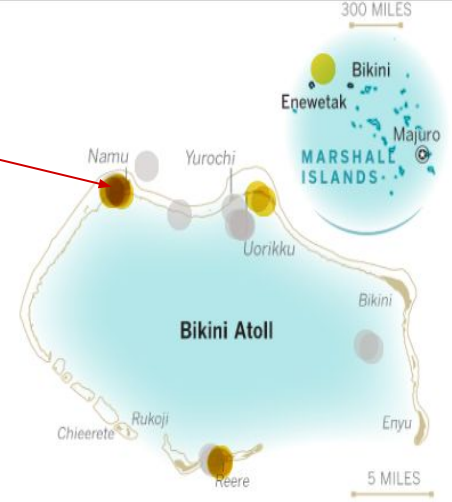
**Tweet from the President of the Marshall Islands, Dr. Hilda Heine, declaring a National Climate Crisis**



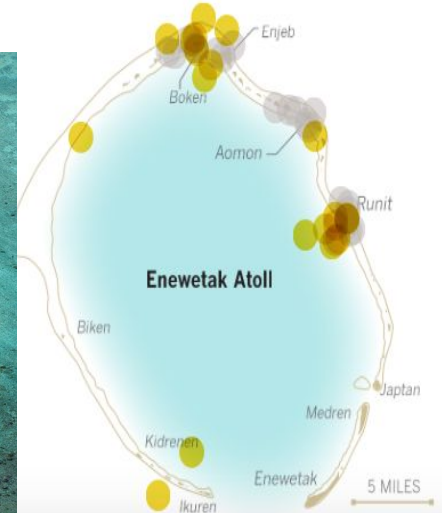
# Historic Loss/Migration

- Marshall Islands occupied by USA in WWII
- Becomes a part of UN Trust Territory under USA jurisdiction
- Populations of Bikini and Enewetak moved off their atolls
- Site was used as official testing ground for USA nuclear bombs (1946-48)
- Destruction of ecosystems/radiation
- Tried to resettle after late 1960s cleanup
- Too contaminated for permanent habitation
- Had to be evacuated once again

Bomb detonation sites



The Runit Dome



# The U.S. put nuclear waste under a dome on a Pacific island. Now it's cracking open.

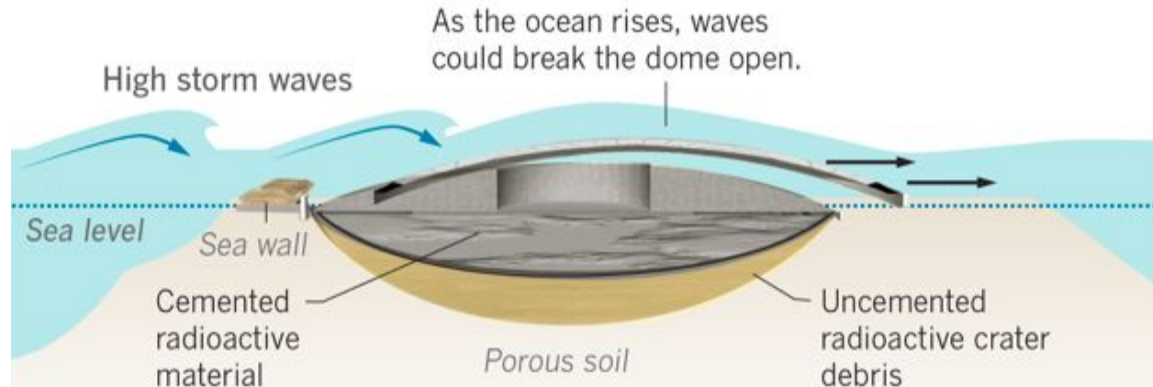
## 1986:

Marshall Islands signs a Compact of Free Association with the United States

- grants the island nation the right to govern itself
- also settled "all claims, past, present and future" tied to the nuclear testing and left the responsibility of dome to the island government

## Today:

- Cracks in the dome
- Threats from rising seawater
- Vulnerable to tides/typhoons
- Permeable soil
- Never properly lined



# Why/How is Loss and Migration in the Marshall Islands Currently Happening?

- **Inundation** (flooding) is the #1 concern
  - Floods exacerbated by rising sea levels
  - GHG emission warming the atmosphere
- Seawater intrusion into local homes and buildings
  - Piecemeal seawalls and earthen barriers do little to stop flooding
- Salt water intrusion into freshwater supplies and destruction of farmland
- Stormes used to follow a seasonal pattern but now are unpredictable due to climate variability



An abandoned house the area of Rita damaged by a major flood (**Above**)  
An improvised sea wall at the edge of Majuro Atoll - 2015 (**Below**)



# Primary issues associated with loss/migration in the Marshall Islands

- Economic and property losses
- Minimal job opportunity and political conflict
- Managed retreat is not a viable option
- Cultural heritage lost / at risk
- Loss of cultural identity, language, social structures
- Permanent displacement
- Food insecurity
- Mental health impacts (trauma)
- Physical health impacts associated with ecosystem loss, destruction
  - Disease, infection, diabetes, obesity



# Strategies for Adaptation

- Building sea walls
- Large coastal protection systems
- Incorporating adaptation and resilience into national plans
- Expanding capacity to store rainwater in communities
- Working on food security
- Exploring raising new islands
- Dredging and reclaiming land
- Studying migration patterns



**The Marshall Islands Climate and Migration Project** studies the multicausal nature of Marshallese migration, as well as its effects on migrants themselves and on home communities

## CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION AND THE COMPACT OF FREE ASSOCIATION (COFA):

LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES  
FOR THE CITIZENS OF THE REPUBLIC  
OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

### POLICY BRIEF

MORRIS, K., BURKETT, M., &  
WHEELER, B. (2019)

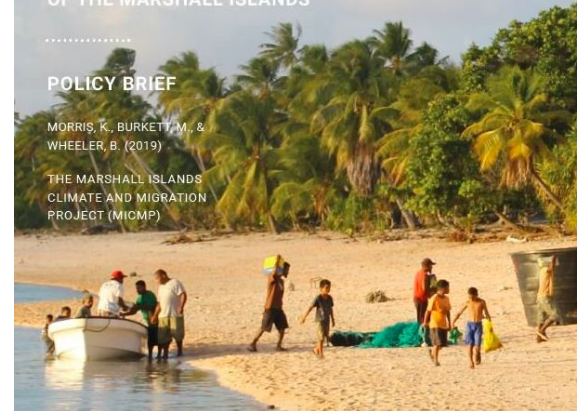
THE MARSHALL ISLANDS  
CLIMATE AND MIGRATION  
PROJECT (MICMP)

REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

Pacific RISA

PACIFIC ISLANDS  
Compact Association Secretariat

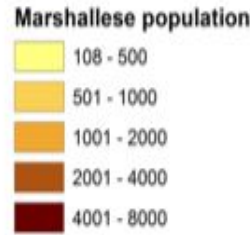
MICS  
Marshall Islands Climate Migration Society



# Reasons for Migration

1. Lack of economic opportunity
2. Desire for education
3. Health care access
4. Climate change impacts

Figure 2: Marshallese population by U.S. state (2010)



**Marshall Islands: A  
third of the nation has  
left for the U.S.**

**Popular Destination Places:**

Hawaii  
Arkansas  
Washington

"People are very sick back home—we need hospitals, doctors, and medications. The majority of people are ill because of bombings, our water, the heat, and the fact we have no healthy fruits or vegetables."

*Marshallese respondent living in Hawai'i, commenting on their Q-sort of the statement, 'Seeking better healthcare is one of the main reasons the Marshallese move to US.'*

"We are in a state of emergency. The government relies on Japan, [the] US, Australia, and Taiwan for infrastructure support. Japan resurfaced roads. In this way, other countries are spoon-feeding RMI as opposed to maintaining resources and sustainable development."

*Marshallese respondent living in Hawai'i, commenting on their Q-sort<sup>104</sup> of the statement, 'In RMI we are quite able to deal with disasters, such as droughts, floods and storms.'*

"Climate change was initially not a factor. We move for better education, but now I could not return. I am terrified of living on the atolls when you can hear the ocean pounding the reef."

*Marshallese respondent living in Hawai'i commenting on sea level rise as a factor that would affect their decision to migrate back to the Marshall Islands*

# “Heritage” to the Marshall Island People

- Heritage in the Pacific defines their cultural identity and remains inseparable from their social, economic and environmental well-being
  - The ocean, waves, and landscapes all encompass heritage to them
- Locals mention the cemeteries as being extremely important to their culture
- Culture and identity is tied to this land

## At risk:

Cultural significance tied to ocean navigation

Spear fishing

Local handicrafts

Food

Physical locations and landscapes



Will a deal to slash shipping emissions help save the Marshall Islands from rising seas?

Source: Mashable



# Opportunities and Limitations of Migration on Cultural Preservation

## **Opportunities:**

Spreading of culture to mainland U.S.

Social mobility, education, health care... preservation of culture through prosperity and health

## **Limitations:**

Face challenges of cultural preservation when removed from their physical islands

Architecture and traditional landscapes lacking in the U.S.

Eventually you won't be able to travel back to the Marshall Islands... permanent loss

Although currently migrants can still return to visit these islands, it is usually difficult as the average price of flight is \$2000

## Common Challenges to the Pacific Region

- “Significant lack of representation of Pacific cultural and natural heritage outside the region”
- “Large geographic area, isolation and resource limitations that restrict access to information and assistance, and the ability of Pacific people to contribute to global forum”
- Limited financial and human resources
- **Climate Change**

## Aims and Goals

- Actively engage the community in conserving their heritage
- Create UNESCO sites around the island
- Representation of the heritage of the Pacific region on the World Heritage List
- The protection and conservation of Pacific heritage is supported by partnerships
- The Pacific nations nominate and effectively manage their World Heritage sites

# Marshall Islands- RMI

Continue building awareness of the RMI residents and raise the level of understanding on the importance of preserving their heritage and coordinate with government agencies, NGO's, and private sector involved in heritage based projects.

2. Improve the political will of leaders on the importance of streamlining issues and agencies to prevent duplication.

3. Implement World Heritage Action Plan into the Historic Preservation Plan (5 year Plan) that is being drafted by the Historic Preservation Office.

# How Might Heritage Policy or Practice Need to Evolve to Better Address Loss/Migration Challenges?

- Set up faster relocation efforts for the Marshallese people
  - Form groups abroad that make the transition to a different location easier
- Ensure that relocation is voluntary
- Promote World Heritage Nominations
  - Doing so would create more of an effort to preserve these lands
- Strengthen “Contract for Free Association” with the United States



Bleached coral at Bikini Atoll, part of the Marshall Islands, in August 2018. Source: Los Angeles Times



# Leading From The Front

Raising ambition of their action so others follow suit

- Reduce vulnerability
- Increase solar

## Marshall Islands first nation to submit new, binding climate targets

Nina Chestney

3 MIN READ



LONDON (Reuters) - The Marshall Islands is the first country to submit new, binding climate targets to the United Nations this week, sending a signal to other countries to commit to more ambitious emissions cuts, a government statement reviewed by Reuters shows.

In 2015, nearly 200 nations pledged in Paris to limit the rise in global temperatures to well below 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit), and ideally to 1.5C, with a sweeping goal of ending the fossil fuel era this century.

# Discussion Questions?

*How can the Marshall Islands function politically and economically when one third of the population has already migrated? How can this civilization continue?*

Opinions

## Don't let rising seas drown the Marshall Islands

“If the Marshall Islands cannot be saved, how will others manage? By the year 2050, up to 1 billion people — about 10 percent of the world’s projected population — could become climate-change refugees because of rising ocean levels, according to the United Nations. If only for this reason, the world should not let the Marshall Islands drown.”

By **Hilda Heine** and **Patrick Verkooijen**

April 10, 2019, The Washington Post

# Sources

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