

Erosion and Culture: An Examination of Climate Displacement in Coastal Louisiana

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INTRODUCTION

On the Louisiana coast, erosion and flooding threaten the survival of the indigenous villages of Pointe-au-Chien and Isle de Jean Charles. Oil companies have submerged the bayou by cutting canals through the land, causing erosion, saltwater intrusion, and sea level rise.¹ Additionally, the fuel these companies produce contributes to climate change, which causes an even greater rise in sea levels. The presence of the oil industry also hurts the shrimp and fish industries, which are critical to indigenous culture. Eventually, climate change will make the Louisiana coast uninhabitable.² Displacement has already begun on Isle de Jean Charles: there were 78 homes on the island in 2002 but only 25 in 2012.³ Some call it migration, which implies an intentional decision. Displacement reflects the reality that these people are relocating as a last resort. Displacement can also be more than just physical. People living in an environment that is “drastically altered and degraded” can experience the same stress and risks as those who are physically relocated.⁴ The coastal tribes (Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe and Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians) face an uphill battle in the effort to keep community members safe from flooding without sacrificing the culture that is so tied to this land. However, moving to a place free from climate disasters is not necessarily safer for the community if it destroys the culture; therefore, we need to redefine safety. In this paper, I will address the plans currently underway to solve these problems and explain the steps we need to take to keep these communities safe from flooding while preventing cultural loss.

I. Current Perspectives

There are disagreements among scholars and journalists on how to best approach climate displacement, the forced migration caused by climate change, in Louisiana. Jake Bittle, author of *The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration*, thinks that displacement is inevitable and that we should not subsidize families living in risky places through affordable flood insurance. Instead, the United States should focus on helping people relocate by making it easier for people in dangerous locations to find and pay for housing in safer places.⁵ While the cultural extinction of tribes on the Louisiana coast devastates Bittle, he accepts it. His proposed solutions focus more on protecting people from danger because he thinks

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cultural extinction will be hard to avoid. He sees a future in which coastal Louisiana is unlivable and such environmental circumstances will force community members to disperse. Others argue that affordable flood insurance near the coast is vital for families who decide to stay put and keep their community together as long as possible. High insurance prices would displace locals regardless of the success of restoration efforts.⁶ Many residents agree. They take pride in being adaptable and overcoming challenges. Resilience, the ability to respond to stress and maintain system identity and function, is important to the people living on the Louisiana coast.⁷ After Hurricane Katrina, many households have kept only what they need in their home and are ready to rebuild and stay in place after a storm.⁸ However, environmental changes are becoming more rapid. Storms and floods will become more frequent and severe until the coast is no longer livable.

II. Approaches

As solutions attempt to balance safety from floods with holding a culture together, it is crucial that indigenous community members are involved in decision making. When governments use cost-benefit analysis to decide on solutions and where to prioritize protection, they often neglect culture and underestimate the downsides of moving inland.⁹ Working with native groups to understand their priorities is important. The United States has a history of forced relocation of indigenous groups. The 1830 Indian Removal Act forced five Native American tribes in the Southeast to move to what is now Oklahoma. Isle de Jean Charles is the result of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians escaping that move.

Forced removals are a violation of human rights. Indian removal in the 1800s involved death and cruelty, and it was difficult for communities to thrive in a new place after displacement. We need to ensure nothing resembling forced removal occurs again. Migration must happen only if the indigenous communities feel it is best for them.

As long as indigenous communities are empowered to choose their path, the government must play a pivotal role in aiding adaptation and relocation. We need a government agency dedicated to the issue of climate displacement.¹⁰ Currently, most funding comes after a specific disaster such as a hurricane. There is less funding to help communities facing more gradual forms of climate change like rising sea levels and coastal erosion. The Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act should give the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) a greater ability to deal with “slow, ongoing climate-induced environmental changes.”¹¹ The legislation requires a presidential disaster declaration for federal funds to be used toward disaster recovery and hazard mitigation efforts.¹² Much more federal assistance is available for immediate threats than for communities suffering from slow changes. Federal support should put as much effort towards assisting relocation as is put towards rebuilding.

Government-assisted relocation is not without precedent. Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration, one of the public programs he enacted during the New Deal in the 1930s, which relocated struggling families to neighborhoods planned by the federal government. Agencies can apply the same principles to help families whose neighborhoods are being lost to rising sea levels.

FEMA has started to include the possibility for community relocation in its plans, but the current process has flaws. In August of 2022, the federal government created a Community-Driven Relocation Subcommittee led by FEMA and the U.S. Department of the Interior. The goal of this subcommittee is to connect communities that want to relocate with the resources available to them. The program is voluntary and supports groups that want to move to a safer place or whose habitat has become unlivable. With that said, the government does not always meet the communities’ needs. The Isle de Jean Charles Resettlement

Project, for example, chose a new site that “lacked direct access to the water that had sustained the island tribe for generations.”¹³ When movement becomes necessary, preventing cultural extinction is difficult. Additionally, some fear that the local government will allow the newly uninhabited land to be used for tourism.¹⁴ The government encouraging a native tribe to move out for the sake of increasing tourism on the coast would show a lack of integrity, but there is no problem if the move is voluntary and the government has no ulterior motives.

The government needs to dedicate resources to helping tribal communities, either by helping them find a way to keep living in their current locations and adapt to the changing landscape or by helping them relocate to a new location. The state of Louisiana is expecting Isle de Jean Charles to be gone by 2050, and Pointe-au-Chien will be underwater not long after that.¹⁵ Whatever these communities choose in the short term, they will eventually need to find a new place to live. The sooner they start planning for that transition, the smoother it will be. Continuously rebuilding after storms puts a strain on our public resources. The more people that live in places susceptible to dangerous hurricanes, the less aid will be available to each family. However, the strain on the system is worth it because of the value of keeping a culture together. Displacement is unavoidable in the long term. The end goal for these communities is to keep their culture alive as they transition to a new space, which is tough due to their connection to the land.

Certain overarching guidelines for climate relocation will give these tribes a better chance of both upholding culture and staying safe from coastal erosion. The fundamental principle is self-determination, meaning that the community can freely develop their culture and make their own decisions about internal governance. It is important that community members lead the relocation process. When they move, indigenous communities need the “right to safe and sanitary housing, potable water, education, and other basic amenities.”¹⁶ Managing movement in a way that listens to the needs of indigenous groups will help minimize cultural loss, but the connection to the specific place makes migration a threat to the culture. Many people living in native tribes on the Louisiana coast have a strong attachment to their village, so resettlement will hurt the community. The tribes have spent years developing skills and knowledge specifically tied to the place they live, such as tailored fishing and shrimping practices.¹⁷ At some point, displacement will become obligatory, and they will lose some history and culture, but collaboration between the government and communities can lessen the downsides of relocation to safer land.

As an alternative to community wide resettlement, the government could also help individual families looking to move to a safer place. For people to move to places less affected by climate change, affordable housing must be available. Tax credits for people starting mortgages in new cities are one way to provide post-disaster aid.¹⁸ More funding for housing vouchers would help people find places to rent in safe locations in Louisiana or other states. Expanding affordable housing in major cities would create an attractive option for people that need to leave the coast. This solution has drawbacks, as a city is a stark difference from a coastal town and could be a culture shock. However, it is still beneficial for coastal residents to have an affordable option if they decide or if environmental conditions force them to move.

CONCLUSION

The government needs to assist households and indigenous communities with combating climate change in their chosen way. For now, the tribes of Pointe-au-Chien and Isles de Jean Charles should choose if they want to adapt to living on the Louisiana coast or move out. In the long term, displacement is inevitable. The government should support indigenous families in finding an affordable place to live somewhere with a temperate environment, protected from rising seas, and access to fresh water.¹⁹ Any program, whether governmental or led by nonprofits, should help communities relocate in a way that allows them to continue

traditional practices and keep their culture alive. Also, making plans to adjust to climate change cannot make us forget about serious efforts to reduce emissions and find ways to sequester carbon from the atmosphere to reverse climate change. In sum, coastal erosion and cultural loss in Louisiana is a “wicked problem,” a problem that is complex and has unclear solutions.²⁰ Families that stay on the coast are vulnerable to floods and destruction, but relocating without losing culture is a nearly insurmountable task. The best way forward is to let the indigenous communities be the guiding voice.

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² Anya Groner, “When the Place You Live Becomes Unlivable,” *The Atlantic*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/10/when-place-you-live-becomes-unlivable/620374/>.

³ Julie Koppel Maldonado et al., “The Impact of Climate Change on Tribal Communities in the US: Displacement, Relocation, and Human Rights,” in *Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples in the United States*, ed. Julie Koppel Maldonado, Benedict Colombi, and Rajul Pandya (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2014), 98.

⁴ Julie Koppel Maldonado, “A Multiple Knowledge Approach for Adaptation to Environmental Change: Lessons Learned from Coastal Louisiana's Tribal Communities,” *Journal of Political Ecology* 21, no. 1 (2014): 70, <https://doi.org/10.2458/v21i1.21125>.

⁵ Jake Bittle, *The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023), 282.

⁶ Kevin Fox Gotham, “Coastal Restoration as Contested Terrain: Climate Change and the Political Economy of Risk Reduction in Louisiana,” *Sociological Forum* 31, no. S1 (September 2016): 800, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.1227>.

⁷ Fikret Berkes, “Environmental Governance for the Anthropocene? Social-Ecological Systems, Resilience, and Collaborative Learning,” *Sustainability* 9, no.7 (2017): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su9071232>.

⁸ Jessica R.Z. Simms, ““Why Would I Live Anyplace Else?”: Resilience, Sense of Place, and Possibilities of Migration in Coastal Louisiana,” *Journal of Coastal Research* 33, no. 2 (March 2017): 413, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44161446>.

⁹ Maldonado, “Multiple Knowledge Approach,” 73.

¹⁰ Maldonado et al., “Displacement, Relocation, and Human Rights,” 100.

¹¹ Maldonado et al., “Displacement, Relocation, and Human Rights,” 101.

¹² Robin Bronen, “Climate-induced Community Relocations: Creating an Adaptive Governance Framework Based in Human Rights Doctrine,” *N.Y.U. Review of Law and Social Change* 35 (2011): 366.

¹³ Bittle, *Great Displacement*, 133.

¹⁴ Bittle, *Great Displacement*, 133.

¹⁵ Maldonado et al., “Displacement, Relocation, and Human Rights,” 98.

¹⁶ Maldonado et al., “Displacement, Relocation, and Human Rights,” 103.

¹⁷ Simms, ““Why Would I Live Anyplace Else?”” 413.

¹⁸ Bittle, *Great Displacement*, 280.

¹⁹ Bittle, *Great Displacement*, 274.

²⁰ Horst W. J. Rittel et al., "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155-169, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730>.