

Harry Ridgewell: So how have islands in the South Pacific been affected by rising sea levels in the last 10 years?

John: Well, in most places the maximum sea level rise has been about 0.7 millimetres a year. So most places that's pretty insignificant. In fact, in all places it's probably insignificant. And the biggest changes to islands' topography have come from things like cyclones and king tides, not the actual sea level rise itself. So sea level rise is one part of climate change, but the cyclones and high tides, which are more to do with El Nino, are consequences of climate change. There's [inaudible 00:00:39] those problems that are affecting the islands most.

Harry Ridgewell: And has cyclones or rising sea levels or climate change in general, has it affected tourism in any of these places?

John: It's too slight to affect tourism, and also the increase in temperature is too slight to affect tourism as well, so effectively it hasn't, no. Tourism has remained much as it has always been. And just a reminder, I guess, that you asked about particular places, and the places most affected are obviously the atoll states because those are the ones that are most at risk to sea level rise, but also most at risk, well not most at risk, but at risk of cyclones and droughts, king tides as well. So they're the ones that are feeling the stress most significantly, but as it happens, each of those, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Marshall Islands, don't really have much tourism anyway. It's very, very limited, so the impact on tourism is slight, but its impact will be felt in other directions.

Harry Ridgewell: And so how will future sea level rise affect islands in the South Pacific?

John: Well, if the sea level rise continues, as we expect it to do at the rate it is presently doing, it's going to affect many places. There are arguments at the moment that it is affecting some places in Fiji, for example, where some villages have moved, but again, and I think that's to do with other kinds of changes as well, but it nonetheless offers precedent for what is going to happen in the future, in any of the small island states. Again, particularly the atoll states, where small increases of sea level at the same time as such things as more intensified cyclones, probably with droughts, inability to respond to those things, will make actually just making livelihoods extremely difficult. So those places will be doing, as they are doing now, looking for migration opportunities.

Harry Ridgewell: So longterm, which islands in the South Pacific will become completely uninhabitable due to sea level rise, and will force its citizens to migrate?

John: It's pretty hard to put your finger on particular islands, rather than to say it's going to be most felt in some places like Tuvalu, Kiribati and Marshall Islands. Now some islands, the smaller ones, smaller islands are particularly at risk, islands without lagoons face particular problems as well because they have poorer livelihoods already. The southern islands of Kiribati are particularly drought prone so they will be the most affected as well. But actually we don't really know because what will probably happen, and what will be most critical in most islands, is probably an unexpected cyclone which will make just living conditions almost impossible.

Harry Ridgewell: So if, as a result, those islands do become uninhabitable due to climate change, what legal rights will those people have as refugees or climate refugees by existing law?

John: Well, by existing law they have no rights as climate refugees. A critical case was written down, the one in New Zealand, where the guy from Kiribati was rejected as a climate refugee because the basic point about being a refugee is you move away from persecution, and whatever else is happening in Kiribati, Tuvalu and Marshall Islands, people are not being persecuted. They may be experiencing problems, but they're certainly not being persecuted by their governments, so there's no particular rationale under present law to deem those people refugees. And that was the basis that you see with law. There's no obvious reason why really that should change in the future in terms of persecution, but I think, as you asked before, you asked a couple of questions about New Zealand climate [inaudible 00:04:50] is making provision for the small number of climate change migrants. It maybe necessary for some governments, like Australia, like New Zealand and others, to devise something like climate change migrant to allow people to migrate from those countries.

John: Now in some cases in a sense that is already happening, because what both New Zealand and Australia have done is we've come up with schemes to allow people to migrate. New Zealand have been more generous. They have a scheme called PAC, Pacific Access Category, whereby something like 75 households a year from both Kiribati and Tuvalu can migrate to New Zealand. Australia and New Zealand have got temporary migration schemes, enabling people to come and stay for several months as agricultural workers. That may be extended into other categories, like carers, like fishermen, and probably some other categories in due course that enable people to come on, I guess a temporary basis, that may turn out to become longterm. But to change the actual form for migration laws are not going to happen in Australia in the near future, and New Zealand's only moving very, very slowly in that direction.

Harry Ridgewell: Do you think New Zealand's prime minister saying that she's going to create this visa will spur other countries to do the same, like Australia?

John: There's not much evidence that it's spurring Australia to do anything. But I think if there are really critical problems, I would like to think that Australia will change these rules and regulations and actually act on that, as I feel sure we would in some ways. Let me think. 15 years ago when Nauru was experiencing the sort of problem that its land was likely to disappear under mining, Australia did offer Nauru islands off the coast in Queensland. I'm not sure that will ever happen again, but at least it just shows that in some circumstances, Australia can be rather more generous than it is being at the moment. Hopefully that will change. I think what is also worth remembering is that why I've been focusing on the main atoll states, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands, it's because the argument is that in other Pacific island states, like for example, Papa New Guinea, which has some [inaudible 00:07:26] atolls. Fiji, which is a number of very small islands that are at risk. French Polynesia, which is a lot of atolls. Those, in theory at least, people can migrate within those countries.

John: If are disasters on the atolls, on the coast, people move inland, upland because the land is actually there. There are massive land tenure questions, which are problematic, but at

least that's the assumption, that those countries will be able to do it internally. Now that is not true for Kiribati and Tuvalu, but then if you add up the populations of Kiribati and Tuvalu at the moment, it's about 115,000. That's not a lot of people. So you would kind of anticipate that Australia and New Zealand, perhaps America, or perhaps even Japan might be willing to take a number of those people fairly easily. The Marshall Islands, which has a population of around 50,000, a very significant population, half that population at least, have already gone to the United States, and they can move freely. So that is their choice. That's their option to go to America. The critical places that face changes in the future are Kiribati and Tuvalu.

Harry Ridgewell: So you say that the Marshallese people can move to the US freely, but I read that a Compact of Free Association, which allows them to live and work in the US without a visa, ends in 2023, and there are no guarantees that it will be extended. So are you certain that it will be extended?

John: You can never be certain it will be extended. It was devised in the last century and it's been extended once already and it seems to me quite likely that it will be extended a second time, although with this government, the current government of the United States, you can never be sure of anything, obviously. But it is not a huge burden for America. And there are some reciprocal benefits to America by having the [inaudible 00:09:37] installations in Micronesia, which was past the compact arrangements. So at least at the moment there's a reasonable prospect of it being extended yet again.

Harry Ridgewell: Do you think if it carries on to be extended, but some people end up remaining until the point where it no longer becomes habitable that the US would step in and say, we're prepared for all of you to come here. Considering that they've continued to do nuclear testing since its independence from the Marshall Islands.

John: Well, they haven't continued to do nuclear testing. That programme at least has stopped, but they are doing missile testings. So one of the atolls in the Marshall Islands [inaudible 00:10:25], it is still used. I think it's called the Ronald Reagan Missile Base at the north of the island. So missiles are still being fired there. And the lagoon has to be cleared, and that will eventually happen, so those are the reciprocal [inaudible 00:10:41] that America still gets.

John: [inaudible 00:10:44] I think is, I don't know the biggest to hand, but I think it's got an arrangement by which it will continue to lease that military base until, I think around 2053, or something like that. So a very, very long time beyond the compact, which suggests that [inaudible 00:11:03] hasn't thought much about the disappearance of [inaudible 00:11:07], which is interesting. The point is anyway America has military interests in that region, and for the moment they will, I believe, continue to keep the compact in place.

Harry Ridgewell: So you said the climate refugees specifically don't have any legal rights under being a climate refugee, but do they have any rights as being just a sort of a normal, if you like, refugee under the 1951 convention or any other international law?

John: I don't know that they do. I mean my short answer would be no, but if you asked a lawyer, maybe a little more complex than that. But I think that's, that's why the guy from Kiribati tried to push the climate refugee theme because there was no other particular thing that would-

Harry Ridgewell: Right.

John: And it certainly [inaudible 00:12:01]-

Harry Ridgewell: Sorry, you're cutting out an awful lot now.

John: Oh, really?

Harry Ridgewell: Yeah. Sorry. If you wouldn't mind just trying repeating that, sorry.

John: As far as I can see, there's no evidence of any other refugee provisions that would work for migrants from Kiribati and Tuvalu, as opposed to migrants from perhaps Myanmar or somewhere like that.

Harry Ridgewell: Do you think it's likely that climate refugees are given international legal rights anytime in the sort of immediate future?

John: Doesn't seem to me at all likely, particularly as Europe confronts so many problems with [inaudible 00:12:41] to create a new category. Extremely unlikely.

Harry Ridgewell: Do you think the islands in the South Pacific are owed reparations by the international community for arguably being the biggest causes of sea level rise, and how far back should we go when evaluating who has the largest moral responsibility in taking climate refugees?

John: Well, I would believe that countries who've contributed to climate change have a moral responsibility to provide reparations, to provide migration opportunities and so on. But how do you allocate the source of what, carbon, whatever. It would be astonishingly difficult, and whether any country, particularly at the moment, would admit it is their fault for having caused this problem, seems to me extremely, extremely unlikely. So I can't really see that happening. It'd be nice to think that it would, but I can't see it.

John: And so what you're getting at the moment is simply a continued aid flow to the small [inaudible 00:13:59]. Additional funds for certain [inaudible 00:14:03] rights to release for mitigation and so on. But that's in some ways trivial. In some ways it's typical to use those funds. It's certainly not going to have a deal with the basic climate change problem.

Harry Ridgewell: Considering that Europe has struggled dealing with the migration of over 1 million refugees since 2015, how do you think it will fare in the future when inevitably many of these climate refugees end up heading towards Europe?

John: Well, in this part of the world they won't. There are obviously some people from the South Pacific who are in Europe, but migration streams from the Pacific are to New

Zealand, to Australia, to America, and that's probably just about it. And within the region in a small way as well. So, yeah. And the numbers are fairly small. So I said before, if you think only of Kiribati and Tuvalu, you're thinking about 120,000 people at maximum at the moment.

John: If you're thinking about migrants of some of the other small states which face problems, you'll probably double or perhaps triple that number, but those numbers are still nothing like the numbers that will face problems in states, countries like Bangladesh, for example, coastal areas of India, maybe coastal areas of China as well. And those are the countries that are going to produce the greatest potential flow of climate migrants, and those countries perhaps will be oriented to Europe. I suppose in thinking about the small countries of the Pacific, the greatest difficulty perhaps will be to convince New Zealand the priority for their small number of potential migrants over the large numbers of people that are likely to want to migrate from countries like Bangladesh.

Harry Ridgewell: So a Kiribati national lost his appeal for asylum in New Zealand in a case that would have made in the world's first climate refugee. Do you think that set a precedent for other countries that they don't need to accept climate refugees?

John: Yes. I think it has done. And there's no sign that anybody else from any other country has taken up this notion since then as far as I know.

Harry Ridgewell: And how likely do you think countries near Pacific islands like Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, how likely, or Papua New Guinea, do you think they are to take in climate refugees in the future?

John: I'm quite certain, depending-

Harry Ridgewell: Sorry, you're cutting out an awful lot again.

John: [inaudible 00:16:59]. I don't know why that is. And it is by and large a process, so it's [inaudible 00:17:10] inextricable perhaps, so when critical, hard to determine, these issues will become cyclones [inaudible 00:17:22] significant percentage of their particular [inaudible 00:17:28]. And then I would assume that New Zealand and Australia would help take in those migrants.

Harry Ridgewell: Sorry.

John: No-one can [inaudible 00:17:42], particularly Australia at the moment, but I think that-

Harry Ridgewell: Sorry, it's cutting out so much, I might have to email you and get you to reply by email for that question if that's okay. We'll try with one more. If not, then I might have to get you to reply by email. So as part of the Paris Agreement, countries agreed to give 100 billion in loans and donations each year from 2020 to finance projects that enable vulnerable countries to adapt with the impacts of climate change. I was just wondering if those vulnerable countries have already received any of that money, and if not when they will do?

John: I'm not sure when they receive that, to answer that question. But I can say that they're [inaudible 00:18:34] and states have planned activities. It isn't always very easy to manage those, develop them into a [inaudible 00:18:48], activities gone into some vague notions of [inaudible 00:18:52]. Activities like [inaudible 00:18:58]. But it's a great difficulty for the small states, if we go back to Kiribati, that you only have to look at the atoll, it's long and it's thin, [inaudible 00:19:12] easily by building things like sea walls. Even if a lot of money comes, the actual physical task of some of the smaller [inaudible 00:19:23], it may mean that some countries, perhaps, some islands are sacrificed and other islands are saved.

Harry Ridgewell: Okay. Thank you, John. Sorry. The quality became so bad at the end I only got bits of what you said.

John: Sorry.

Harry Ridgewell: No, no, no. It's okay. I'm was going to say, would it be okay if I just followed up with some questions on email?

John: Yeah.