



Pacific Calling Partnership information sheet

Small nations at the forefront of climate change: Tuvalu

"There are no boundaries to the effects of climate change. We are dealing with saving human lives - and therefore saving Tuvalu is also saving the world." Enele Sopoanga, Tuvalu Prime Minister, 2014.

Overview

Tuvalu is one of the smallest countries in the world. It is an independent island nation within the British Commonwealth with a population of 10,000 in 2016. It is made up of nine islands – three reef islands and six true atolls. The total land area of the small, sparsely populated atolls and reef islands in the South Pacific Ocean is just 27 square kilometres.

It is one of the most vulnerable nations in the world to the effects of climate change. Most of the land is two to three metres above sea level with the highest elevation 4.6 metres.

Climate-change induced sea level rise is inevitable. Cyclone Pam in 2015 forced the evacuation or movement of just under half the nation's population.

History

The name Tuvalu roughly translates to "Eight standing together." This refers to the eight traditional islands of Tuvalu. The ninth island, Niulakita, was only inhabited in the 1950's and was not a part of ancient Tuvalu. The nine islands, from north to south, are: Nanumea, Niutao, Nanumaga, Nui, Vaitupu, Nukufetau, Funafuti, Nukulaelae and Niulakita. Tuvalu is made up of primarily Polynesian people.

Tuvalu' and Kiribati's recent history is closely linked, despite the fact that Tuvaluans are Polynesian and I Kiribati are Micronesian: In 1819 the nine islands of Tuvalu were named the Ellice Islands by British seamen and claimed for Britain. They were administered as a British protectorate and then a British Colony along with the Gilbert Islands, now known as Kiribati, just to their north.



Coconuts are an important part of the diet



President Enele Sopoanga with PCP members and Maina Talia from TuCAN

In October 1975 legal separation from the Gilbert Islands (Kiribati), took place. On January 1, 1976, full administration of the new country of Tuvalu was transferred to its capital, Funafuti, from the Kiribati capital Tarawa. Tuvalu became an Independent Constitutional monarchy on October 1, 1978 and joined the United Nations in 2000.

Geography

Six of the nine islands have lagoons open to the ocean, while two have landlocked regions and one has no lagoons. None of the islands have streams and there is no drinkable ground water. Therefore, all of the water used by Tuvalu's people is gathered via catchment systems and is kept in storage facilities.

Tuvalu's climate is tropical with two distinct seasons, a wet season from November to April and a dry season from May to October. Air temperatures are relatively constant throughout the year around 30 degrees.

The sparsely populated atolls and reef islands have palm-fringed beaches and many WWII sites. Tuvalu's heavy rainfall in the wet season gives it a more luxuriant vegetation than nearby Kiribati. Forest covers 33% of Tuvalu's land areas. The Funafuti Conservation Area off Funafuti atoll shelters fish and turtles and has several uninhabited islets sheltering sea birds.

People

Tuvalu is a nation of just 10,000 people, the size of a small Australian coastal town such as Ulladulla on the NSW south coast. There are only 8 kilometres of roads on Tuvalu. In 2016, of its 10,000 people, 6,000 Tuvaluans live in the capital Funafuti. Population density is 385 people per square kilometre. Life expectancy is 65 years.

Economy

The Tuvaluan economy is one of the smallest in the world. The coral atolls have very poor soils and there are no mineral exports. Tuvaluans make a subsistence living growing coconuts, banana, breadfruit and taro and the public sector dominates economic activity.

Tuvalu has few natural resources, except for its fisheries. Earnings from fish exports and fishing licenses for Tuvalu's territorial waters are a significant source of government revenue with an exclusive maritime economic zone of 1.2 million square kilometres. In 2013, revenue from fishing licenses totalled more than 45% of GDP. An important source of income is drawn from remittances from workers on international commercial ships.

Official aid from foreign development partners is important. The Tuvalu Trust Fund, an international trust fund established in 1987 by development partners, grew to \$141 million in 2013 and is an important cushion for meeting shortfalls in the government's budget.

Currency is the Australian dollar and Tuvaluan dollar. Tourism provides 20% of GDP.

The country is isolated, almost entirely dependent on imports, particularly of food and fuel, and vulnerable to climate change and rising sea levels, which pose significant challenges to development.



Tuvalu's changing climate

Research by the Pacific Climate Change Science Program, a collaboration between CSIRO, the Australian Bureau of Meteorology and the Tuvalu Meteorological Service, shows that Tuvalu will experience: increasing air and sea temperatures; rainfall and ocean acidification along with more extreme weather events and sea level rise.¹

Tuvalu already experiences waves and tides that destroy sea walls, inundate villages and salinate water sources.

Cyclone Ula in 2015 provided an example of what Tuvaluan's can expect from future climate events:

¹ Australian Bureau of Meteorology & CSIRO, 2011 *Climate Change in the Pacific: Scientific Assessment and New Research*, Vol 2. P230

gale-force winds and pounding rain, uprooted trees, ripped off roofs and damaged homes. The 10,000 people of Tuvalu are on the front line of climate change because they live on low-lying islands without a protective shallow shelf around them.

In places, coral bleaching caused by the warmer and more acidic seas has reduced the availability of fish, the major source of protein.

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that sea level rises due to climate change is likely to make many of the islands of Tuvalu uninhabitable by 2100 due to the salination of the natural water supply with some islands becoming totally submerged.

Adaptation

Adaptation strategies such as installing rainwater tanks and restoring mangroves are being implemented, but the Tuvalu Government has few resources to implement large scale adaptation measures such as sea walls. The Tuvalu Government climate change adaptation policy does not include migration, although some Tuvaluans are eligible to migrate to New Zealand under the Pacific Access Category, a voluntary economic migration schemes with up to 75 per places per year.

"Tuvalu's future at current warming is already bleak. Any future temperature increase will spell the total demise of Tuvalu with all our fundamental rights of survival and sovereignty. No leader carries such a level of worry and responsibility that the total of its territory and all its citizens will disappear. We need a permanent mechanism anchored in the Paris Treaty." Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga²



² Prime minister Enele Sosene Sopoaga World Climate Change Conference 2015 (COP21), on November 30, 2015