

Natural Disasters, Displacement, and History

Why Look Back?

In recent years, climate change debates have emphasized that we are likely to see people displaced in the future as a result of sea level rises, desertification, drought, and an increasing number of extreme climatic events. So far, however, the fact that environmental displacement has a history has scarcely been mentioned. Even if the extent of the climatic changes unleashed by human action is unprecedented, cultural coping mechanisms will to a large extent be influenced by existing legacies, traditions, memories, and path dependencies; in other words, by history. Thus, it makes perfect sense to look back.

Our Project: *Climates of Migration*

Climates of Migration is a the three-year research project jointly conducted by the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society and the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen (KWI), and generously funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. It looks at the historical intersections between environmental change and migration in three modules: "Climates of Famine;" "Climates of Colonization;" and "Disaster Migration." The RCC team looks in particular at how societies in history have coped with floods, sea level rises, and the ensuing destruction of livelihoods. We have focused especially on the mobility strategies the affected societies have used (or have been forced to use) to deal with such events.

Natural Disasters and Displacement

History shows that natural catastrophes have given rise to a broad spectrum of (forced) movement, ranging from evacuation and flight in the initial phase of an extreme event, to the transformation and relocation of entire cities all the way to permanent displacement.

Vanishing Islands of the Past

Islands, as volatile geographical entities, have always been particularly vulnerable to extreme natural events. Their life-cycle is largely determined by processes such as subduction, erosion, sea-level rise and fall, and storm surges. As a result, islands in mythological times and in recent pasts have disappeared, while others have been severely destroyed by typhoons, tsunamis, or droughts. Historical examples allow us to take a look at how island societies have dealt with the loss of land, the intrusion of salt water, the destruction of property, and the specter of complete destruction in a much longer timeframe than current

Disaster Mobilities

Whenever people live in a vulnerable environment, they develop their own particular methods of coping. One of the most important strategies to deal with disastrous events has been and continues to be mobility. It varies in its temporal and spatial extent and ranges from voluntary movement to forced relocation.



Relocation:

Shawneetown, Illinois, a small city on the banks of the Ohio River, took drastic measures to protect its citizens from inundations. After the devastating 1937 flood of the Ohio, the local elite decided to move the entire city three miles up the hill to higher ground. As effective as this solution is, it has hardly been practiced due to the high costs involved and because of the attachment of people to a certain place.



Tipping Point: Holland Island

In the 1880s, Holland's Island – a small patch of land in the Chesapeake Bay – began to be washed away at a rapid pace. Over the next 40 years, almost 50 percent of its western side became submerged. At first, the inhabitants employed adaptive measures and moved around the island to drier places. In 1918, however, yet another storm in a long series of drastic events drove the first families away, some time before the island became physically uninhabitable. A few years later, the remainder of the families, who had intermarried and had close bonds to one another, had moved almost collectively to the counties on the mainland that were closest to their former home. The tipping point for this kind of disaster migration turned out to be the severance of social ties, which caused



Vertical Mobility

People on the volcanic islands of Chuuk, Micronesia, have a long history of seeking refuge in caves or in other sheltered locations in the mountains where they sit out typhoons or tsunamis. Covered pits filled with preserved breadfruit paste are conveniently located around the shelters.



Migration:

The 1927 Mississippi River Flood

One of the very few natural catastrophes in United States history that has triggered outright migration is the 1927 Mississippi River flood. This catastrophe created widespread devastation and suffering, mostly within African-American communities. At the same time, it was also employed by many as an opportunity to escape the slavery-like conditions in the South and migrate to Northern cities.



Forced Relocation

A series of extreme events in the early twentieth century played into German Colonial policy in the Pacific to centralize island populations and to secure a steady supply of laborers on plantations. Under the auspices of giving humanitarian aid, major parts of atoll communities were relocated to larger islands. In general, natural catastrophes have been instrumentalized a great many times to displace populations