

Building respectful solutions

Colleen Swan, Chief Albert P Naquin and Stanley Tom

Tribes in coastal Alaska and Louisiana in the United States are among the communities at immediate risk of displacement due to climate change impacts, such as sea-level rise and melting permafrost, as well as other human-induced environmental changes from socio-historical processes and unsustainable development. In the 1990s the people of Kivalina in Alaska began to notice a gradual change in the environmental conditions and weather patterns that resulted in changes to migration of wildlife, a decrease in sea ice and warmer temperatures. The people adapted and became more vigilant in their observations to avoid missing the hunting seasons. Thus began the community's discussions about global warming. However, while efforts to relocate the community are proactively being pursued by the community, no funding has been promised beyond the planning and design phase of the project.

Since the 1970s, the Traditional Council of Newtok, another village in Alaska, has continuously monitored the encroaching erosion of their land and has researched means of mitigation. The conclusion of these efforts was that the village must relocate, as there is no permanent and cost-effective alternative mitigation measure available for remaining at the current site. While relocation has begun, the Tribal Council has faced obstacles due to lack of policy mechanisms and funding barriers, and the full implementation of the relocation plan remains uncertain.

Similar experiences are occurring for tribes in southeast Louisiana. For example, the Isle de Jean Charles tribe inhabits an island which is shrinking and experiencing relative sea-level rise, increasing impacts from storms and hurricanes, and extreme environmental changes from unsustainable extractive practices. With no options left for in situ adaptation, and recognising the need to be proactive if they are to maintain their cultural sovereignty and bring their scattering community together, the Tribal Council began working on relocation. It has a plan in place for a sustainable, renewable

energy-driven community as a model for community-led relocation, and like Kivalina, has no funds or government support to do so.

While communities such as Kivalina, Newtok and Isle de Jean Charles have spent a generation or more working towards relocation, their efforts have been impeded at every step due in large part to a lack of institutional and governance structures to assist communities in their relocation. To move their efforts forward, with very limited resources, the tribal leaders have met with local, state and federal government representatives, have spoken at high-level forums and meetings, and have given interviews to media around the world.

As collaborations are formed¹ and processes are put in place to support communities with their relocation, it is imperative that the tribal and community leaders who have spent a generation and more working on such efforts are the ones guiding the process to help ensure that the communities' rights and cultural sovereignty are held intact. Incorporating diverse knowledge systems and ways of knowing including traditional decision-making processes have to be at the core of the entire relocation process. It needs to be done justly and respectfully, so as to not turn the co-production of planning and implementation into co-optation.

Colleen Swan swancolleen@gmail.com is the Project Coordinator for the Kivalina City Council. Chief Albert P Naquin whitebuffalo@netscape.net is Chief of the Isle de Jean Charles Tribe and leads the Isle de Jean Charles Tribal Council. Stanley Tom stanley_tom2003@yahoo.com is the Tribal Administrator for the Newtok Traditional Council.

The authors acknowledge the support of Julie Maldonado, Robin Bronen and Kristina Peterson in the production of this article.

1. For example, the Rising Voices Workshop, which is a community of Indigenous leaders, Indigenous and non-Indigenous environmental experts, students, and scientific professionals across the United States. www.mmm.ucar.edu/rising-voices-home

