

Not drowning but fighting: Pacific Islands activists

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Focusing on climate-induced migration rather than mitigation can be at odds with grassroots demands and can make the future uninhabitability of some Pacific Islands appear as a foregone conclusion.

Eleven coal ships were due to collect their cargo from Newcastle in Australia during the daytime of 17 October 2014. Only one ship succeeded in doing so. The other ten were turned away because thirty Pacific Islanders and hundreds of Australians had decided to resist, sailing out, blockading and occupying the harbour using kayaks and traditionally built canoes. The action, organised by climate advocacy network '350 Pacific', was part of the Pacific Climate Warriors campaign, designed to make the connections between the actions of the Australian fossil fuel industry and the impacts that anthropogenic climate change is having on many Pacific Islands.

The Pacific Climate Warriors tour united activists from twelve different Pacific Island countries, received international media attention and followed Australian coal from the pits to the coast. It also targeted the company offices and banks that are facilitating the expansion of Australian coal, concluding with an exuberant eight-hour occupation of the global headquarters of ANZ, a major fossil fuel investor and the primary banking service open to many Pacific Islanders.¹



What can be learned from the sight of two brave men from the islands of Tokelau facing up to the might of the Australian coal industry in a wooden, hand-made canoe?

Firstly, it can challenge us to re-think the relationship between climate change, displacement and Pacific island states, and recognise that while low-lying atoll countries are sometimes treated as foregone victims of climate change, already lost to sea-level

rise, many communities in these countries have not given up the fight. Indisputably, there is a severe threat that people will be displaced, internally or internationally, and in the case of the Carteret Islands this displacement has already begun. Yet if we focus solely on managing displacement in these countries then we run the risk of making the loss of those homes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Pacific Climate Warriors did not stop ships in order to secure their future as climate refugees. Instead they issued a call for large polluting companies and states to take responsibility for their environmentally destructive actions and take mitigating action before it is too late.

Secondly, the narrative of Pacific Islands as inescapably lost to rising seas is often tied to representations of the affected populations as passive victims of climate change. The Pacific Climate Warriors actively reject this stance and offer a positive alternative vision of climate-threatened communities – “We are not drowning, we are fighting”. Their campaign articulates a culturally grounded narrative of strength, agency and courage in the face of potential displacement.

Thirdly, the actions of the Pacific Climate Warriors encourage us to think about whose voices we are listening to in relation to issues of potential climate-induced displacement, and where those voices can be heard. The growth of 350 Pacific indicates that grassroots civil society advocacy networks are an ever more significant force to be reckoned with.

While it is still early days for their campaign, the Pacific Climate Warriors present a grassroots message of hope and agency, in contrast to narratives of inevitable climate-induced population displacement. They

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remind us that all is not lost in Oceania and that, with committed effective action on climate change, mass forced migration in the Pacific may never come to pass.

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1. For more on the Pacific Climate Warriors see <http://world.350.org/pacificwarriors/>.