



# AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The homes of many Pacific islanders are threatened by increased storm surges, rising sea levels and sinking atolls, creating a growing number of environmental refugees. Here, researcher **Taloi Havini** highlights the plight of one such group, the Carteret Islanders.

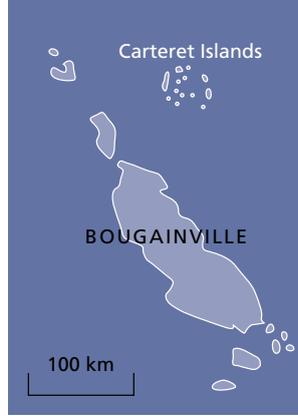
Throughout much of the Pacific, the tribal possession of land underpins the traditions and beliefs that define the Custom or *Kastom* of each culture. But when ownership of land is threatened or people lose their land, what then becomes of these cultures?

Several Pacific communities in tropical and sub-tropical regions are set to lose their low-lying islands. Increased coastal erosion – caused by changes in climate, weather patterns and unpredictable seasons – are greatly affecting the daily lives of these communities who live by their traditional *Kastoms*.

This situation now faces the people of the Tulun or Carteret Islands, located 120 kilometres north-east of Bougainville. The Carteret Islanders urgently need to relocate their population of over two thousand to the Bougainville ‘mainland’ and are reportedly the world’s first environmental refugees. Their circular atoll, with a total land area of 0.6 square kilometres, has a maximum land height of just 1.2 metres above sea level.

Over the last ten years, people have witnessed the loss of sixty per cent of their land, and the islands are expected to disappear completely by 2015. Further to the east, the islands of Kiribati and Tuvalu are similarly endangered.

opposite: This family of Carteret Islanders faces an uncertain future. Photo © Pip Starr.  
 right: Bougainville and the Carterets. Map: Jeremy Austen.



But the land will become uninhabitable long before it finally succumbs to the sea. The people report that the encroaching sea also threatens the sustainability of their natural resources and agricultural livelihood – saltwater intrusion into water tables is compounding a lack of other freshwater sources, and high king tides and tidal waves have exhausted all physical efforts, such as planting mangroves and building sea walls, to halt coastal erosion.

Having accepted the inevitable, the Carteret people are demonstrating remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. A recent forum held in Bougainville by the community advocacy group Pacific Black Box provided a platform for youth to express their concerns on climate change. They face not just the loss of their land but also the problem of preserving Kastom in resettled areas. Delegate Jerryanne Hugo, 17, offered a frightful insight into the complexities of migration and its wider impact across the Pacific Rim. ‘Where will we go? Will we be able to live together? At the same time, we don’t want to lose our way of life, our families, our clans and our culture. We grieve for our lost past as we prepare to leave our island home’, she said.

Another forum participant and Carteret Islander, Ursula Rakova, appeals to industrialised countries to take more responsibility for tackling climate change. ‘Carteret Islanders are victims of climate change. We do not emit greenhouse [gases], let alone drive cars on the island; [we] do not have an airstrip on the island; yet we have become victims of others’ doing’, she said at the 2007 UN Climate Change Convention in Bali.



Carterets advocate Ursula Rakova speaking at the plenary session of the Pacific Black Box Forum, Bougainville, April 2008. Photo © Pacific Black Box, Inc.

A strong advocate for her people and the founder of community group Tulele Peisa (which means to ‘ride the waves on their own’), she points to the need for greater awareness of the problems, as well as more urgent action from industrialised nations, to finance relocation and adaptation, deploy ‘climate friendly’ technologies, commit to reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and develop other policies that tackle the effects of climate change on vulnerable communities.

‘Environmental refugees are not well provided for, perhaps due to the fact that there is limited knowledge about climate change [in the Pacific]. At present there is only support for emergency services, but not for environmental refugees’, she said. Yet it is food insecurity and decreasing supplies of fresh water that are likely to be the main health threats from climate change, according to the United Nations. And these will affect developing countries first, compounding existing poverty and hunger unless prompt and urgent measures are taken at the local and grassroots level.

For its part, Australia has now acknowledged the reality of climate change, with Prime Minister Rudd’s prompt support for the UN’s climate roadmap and Kyoto Protocol to take effect by 2013.

While acknowledging that Australia is now placed to take a leading role in the Pacific, the Carteret Islanders have little time to lose. Committees such as the Carteret Integrated Relocation Program have identified the most pressing local need as greater advocacy on climate



Bougainville and Carteret islanders have produced a documentary about their plight called *An uncertain future*. Photo © Pacific Black Box, Inc.

## ON THE AGENDA



above: *Beroana*, shell money from the Carteret Islands. Photo Carl Bento. E27527

right: The signs of environmental change. All photos © Pip Starr.

top: The encroaching sea killed these palms in the early 1980s.

middle: Huene Island, one of the Carterets, was cut in two by the sea in 1984.

bottom: This sea wall was constructed in the late 1970s and is already redundant.

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change and its impacts. They also want to continue their relationship with their island, their history and their roots.

The islanders are proactive in their own relocation strategies and have begun by sourcing five safe homes for families on nearby north Bougainville. In keeping with climate change consciousness, these new homes are being equipped with locally appropriate technologies such as solar energy. The land has been provided by local landholders who share ancestry with some Carteret Islanders.

When asked of their fate as environmental refugees, the islanders defiantly place the maintenance of their cultural identity as a top priority. Of their historical experiences, the elders recite their Tulun ancestors related to the Hanahan people of Buka in north Bougainville. For hundreds of years they occupied the atolls and traded over long distances as skilful sea voyagers. One tangible example of their *Kastom* is *beroana* (shell money). Highly prized and once widely traded, this traditional currency is made from the shell of a marine clam, *Tridacna*. It is used in land transactions, weddings, funerals and for other ritual purposes; and once again, *beroana* will be

exchanged, this time for the land provided to the refugees in Bougainville.

It is clear that the challenges of climate change require the combined efforts of governments, multinational companies, aid agencies, local leaders and vulnerable communities. Nowhere is this more pressing than in the Pacific, where thousands of people will need to relocate within the decade. And among the first of these are the Carteret Islanders who, despite their vulnerability, are actively addressing major global issues through their traditional *Kastom*.

*Taloi Havini is an Indigenous postgraduate researcher from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville and is President of Pacific Black Box, a group she helped establish in 2007.*

At the time of going to press, promised funds from the PNG Government towards the islanders' relocation costs had not been released to the Carteret or Bougainville communities.

Further reading

Pacific Black Box website: [www.pacificblackbox.com.au](http://www.pacificblackbox.com.au)

United Nations Development Program, 2008. Human Development Report 2007–08.