THE QUARRY

Planet Earth, Red Alert

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A woman draped in purple stands ankle deep in the shallows, and the waves break around her. It is only her body that interrupts the clean line of a sky that meets the water's horizon. The rest of us are gathered up on the rocks. A black veil covers her head, one arm is up in the air, and her hand is something of a constant wobble. At first, my novice ears mistake her war cry for wailing.

I'm standing on Whakatane's pebbled beach in the Bay of Plenty, New Zealand. It's Waitangi Day, and a crowd has gathered to watch the Wakas[1] go out to war. Even the group of boys with gang emblemed bandanas over their faces has turned from their intimate circle. Their cool cigarettes are dropped and snuff ed out with the latest air soled sneakers. Their attention shows respect.

Although Australia has Indigenous people, we do not have an equivalent to Waitangi Day. For those that share views with Tony Abbott,[2] it might be a concept a little hard to grasp. Waitangi Day celebrates the signing of a treaty between the Maori people and the white settlers. And even though Australia does not currently have an Indigenous treaty, I cannot imagine an equivalent day would be very joyful.

As we listened to the chants of rowing men and women echoing around the bay, it is incredible to know that in exactly two months the area would be flooded so severely that even evacuation centres would have to get evacuated. In April 2017, Whakatane homes filled with water

two metres high, treasured letters and books were sodden, photo albums washed away and the woodcarvings of Maraen,[3] rotted.

For New Zealand this would be deemed a 'freak' accident: Mother Nature lashing out as she occasionally does (of course, she has lots of reasons too). However, some 3000-kilometers away, the island of Tuvalu feels these lashings a lot more fiercely and frequently.

The saying, 'trouble in paradise', seems a cruelly shallow way to describe the small nation, though it is fitting. If you google Tuvalu you will be met with pictures of swaying palm trees, bountiful reefs and aqua waters that look like they are straight out of a luxury travel magazine. Alternatively, googling 'Tuvalu climate change' presents an entirely different colour pallet, of children standing ankle deep in brown waters brimming with trash and holding signs saying: To the rest Of the World Please Could you Prepare a place for my country to stay.

Tuvalu is one of the smallest countries in the world, after the Vatican, Monaco, and Nauru. It is an island group in the South Pacific Ocean, halfway between Hawaii and Australia. Its name, Tuvalu, translates to 'eight standing together' and refers to the eight traditional islands of Tuvalu (Nanumea, Niutao, Nanumaga, Nui, Vaitupu, Nukufetau, Funafuti, and Nukulaelae), the ninth island is tiny Niulakita. With a total land area of ten square miles, it consists of nine coral atolls, four of them being reef islands the other five being true atolls. As Tuvalu is low lying, rising no higher than one-point-eight-three metres above sea level, it is particularly threatened by a rising, warming ocean.

Tuvalu is considered one of the world's countries most susceptible to climate change. In the last five years, its media coverage has been dwindling. This is possibly because it is a story that no one is interested in anymore, or perhaps because it only has a population of approximately 11,000. It may also be because our current world leaders don't know how to sustaining their economies while dealing with the critical needs of current science.

Tuvalu could be depicted as a contemporary Atlantis, soon to crumble into the bubbling seas. The thought of a country disappearing altogether seems a part of the way-off future—when the fish are belly up, and we go to museums to see trees. The forces working against Tuvalu are far too many, with beachhead erosion, coastal engineering, environmental mismanagement, overpopulation, deforestation, and deteriorating coral reefs just some of global warming's teammates. A 1989 United Nations report on the greenhouse effect stated that Tuvalu would entirely recede into the ocean in the twenty-first century unless our attitudes and practises affecting global warming dramatically changed. Yet it is the United States that is the world's largest overall polluter[4], and Australia takes the trophy for highest greenhouse-gas emissions per capita[5], and both countries continue to take scant action on climate change.

The spotlight first fell on Tuvalu in 1997. While I was in nappies, crying about a dropped dummy, Tuvalu Prime Minister Koloa Talake addressed a collection of world leaders at the Kyoto conference in Japan. Talake pleaded that immediate action was required, in order for the effects of global warming to stop from growing. While most nations agreed to reduce their emissions, neither the United States nor Australia supported the Kyoto Protocol at the time. Again, in 2000, then Tuvalu Prime Minister Ionatana Ionatana focused international attention on Tuvalu by addressing the United Nations to speak on global climate change and the impact it would have on indigenous cultures, security, and sovereignty. Australia finally ratified the agreement in 2007, but it is clear this reluctant attitude still lingers. Since then, there have been multiple global conferences that have grown in frequency, where the leaders and members of the Tuvaluan public have campaigned for climate change action.

I was already touched down dry in Sydney when I heard of the floods in Whakatane. It was at home that I began to wonder about the surrounding Pacific Islands. I wondered about the phone calls being made, whether any crackly lines voiced that it could be contributed to climate change?

Amongst the stalls nearby Whakatane beach that February I first became aware of an organisation called 350 Pacific. It is an organisation dedicated to connecting individuals from the Pacific islands who are trying to campaign and raise awareness about climate change. As a Maori girl, I was intrigued. Scrolling through the Facebook groups, I stumbled upon that of Tuvalun multiple global conferences that have grown in frequency, statuses of some of their young and active members, such as Betty Melton.

When I skyped Betty, she was in Perth where she studies at Murdoch University in Engineering, majoring in Renewable Energy. She believes renewable energy is how we will save the world. Hesitantly[6], she told me of what life is like in Tuvalu, her home.

The biggest change, she says, is that there are no longer seasons. ‘It’s more than thirty most of the time, it didn’t use to be that hot'. What I’m most interested in, however, is not so much the physical. I want to know how the community feels living where the impacts of climate change are so tangible that they are forcing people to leave. In 2014, for the first time, New Zealand granted a family from Tuvalu legal residency as refugees from climate change.

‘Yes, a lot of people have migrated because of this, gone to Fiji New Zealand. They go in packs. But even the people that have stayed have had to move their homes more than once.’ Most of the people are anxious, she tells me. Mothers and grandmothers are worried about their children’s future. ‘They are worried that, in the future, Tuvalu won’t be there. You know what the scientists say, that Tuvalu will be the first to go.’ Yet when I press her about the perspectives of the older generation she continues that in fact, ‘most don’t agree with what the scientists are saying. They say

that climate change is happening but they don't believe it [Tuvalu] is going to go. They say scientists have been saying that for a long time, but yet we are still here… Back home, they are really religious… they have the hope of what God provides. We do believe in climate change because we are experiencing it, but we still have the hope.'

Since 1990 scientists have mapped the increasing number of tropical storms and cyclones that Tuvalu experiences. In the years between 1970 and 1990, only three tropical storms, hurricanes or cyclones struck Tuvalu.[7] However, between 1990 and 2005, the islands experienced thirteen.[8] 2015 then brought on what Betty described as the worst that Tuvalu had seen, causing over $360 million dollars of damage.[9] High tides are probably one of the biggest problems that Tuvalu faces on a daily basis: the constant creeping water. I canreepingly one of the biggest problems that Tuvalu faces on a daily basis over $360 million dollaring. How could you plan for a future so uncertain? 'Yes,' Betty agrees, 'the government talks about it a lot, on social media and they use the radio for educating people about climate change, most of their trips overseas… Most of what they do is for the climate. Our government and our people do not want to move… that is not a choice.'

Fifty-Fifty seems a rather casual way of describing the chances of your nation surviving, that's how Betty puts it. 'We are working on the fifty increasing,' she laughs.

'Do you believe it is possible to undo the damage?' I ask.

'Reversing the effects are impossible, but we can minimize,' she says through the screen. 'If we are sinking, there will be another island next.'

'Do you think these effects will have an impact on Tuvaluan culture?'

'It hasn't had any effect on the culture. That is still there.' What I was hinting at though, was what the possible impacts might be on the culture of a community spread across the globe.

As she tells me these things, I wonder why it is the first time I have really heard them. Is it because the populations are small that these stories do not receive sound? Perhaps, once in a while when the Very Important (Orange) Man takes a break from his tweeting:

'Global warming is an expensive hoax!'[10]

Some days at the bottom of the pages a mention of the changes the earth is going through will appear through vicious scrolling. Perhaps a picture of a polar bear will win some kind of award, and we will all nod our heads 'how sad, how sad.' We won't hear though, about the man who moved his brothers grave three times because of the changing tides. As Vlad Sokhin, a photographer of the effects of climate change in the Pacific said, "this is a story about people who stand to lose everything—people who may need to flee their native home and never come back. These people are refugees, but they're not running from war or an oppressive government. They're seeking asylum from climate change."

It is easy to think that New Zealand is untouchable, that the home of the skyrocketing Mount Cook will be a refuge for the other smaller nations to cling too. However, the recent flooding in Whakatane is a reminder that New Zealand is also, just a collection of Pacific islands like Tuvalu. Two larger islands, to be specific. As Betty said if Tuvalu goes, who will be next? 10,800 residents of Tuvalu are by no means the only ones at risk of losing their homes to climate change. While the estimates of future migrants vary widely, from tens of thousands to one billion, there's little question that an increase in climate refugees is on the way. There is meaning in what Betty and 350 Pacific campaign say, that if we save Tuvalu, we save the world.

As I write this, a past leader has just made a statement about climate change being good. He believes that climate-related deaths will be beneficial.

Injustice to the planet, injustice to the people.

The threat to the Pacific islands is more than a means of measuring how truly troubled our planet is, this threat to Tuvalu is a threat to all countries. And given the much greater connection to the land that Indigenous people have, their loss will be the greatest. It is also somewhat frustrating that places like Tuvalu with the smallest contribution to climate change are receiving the consequences. Kylie Loutit, who wrote her thesis on Māori interactions with Climate Change and discussed how vulnerable populations, such as indigenous people (like that of New Zealand and Tuvalu), face risks that are disproportionate to the relatively small contributions they make to greenhouse gas emissions.

It can be considered, however, that climate change may provide a stage for Indigenous empowerment and advocacy of Indigenous worldviews through involvement in climate discussions. Empowerment and cultural understanding might even contribute to Indigenous resilience against climate change. As despite making up only four percent of the world's population (between 250 to 300 million people),[11] Indigenous people use twenty-two percent of the world's land surface. These areas reflect eighty percent of the planet's biodiversity and are near eighty-five percent of the world's protected areas. [12] Maintaining important fisheries, water systems and regenerative forestlands are all part of Indigenous peoples profound knowledge base.

There might be one way that climate change can be addressed, by listening to the people who are being most affected. To change the perspective that Indigenous peoples are merely victims of climate change. That they are the drowning people. The knowledge of Indigenous People should offer them certain opportunities and platforms. That there is the potential to mitigate the risks and disintegration of their lands, such as those of Tuvalu, as well as address the centuries of marginalisation.

It is unlikely that climate change will mean a group of Indigenous people rise to become the world's most powerful players, but I wonder what that world would look like? Though, when I watched the woman stand in the shallows of Whakatane beach, I did not think of the waters as rising. I was watching the Wakach ride the bay.

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[1] Canoe

[2] "This outrageous and completely over-the-top attack on Australia Day by mad leftie council".- Tony Abbot 16 August, 2017.

[3] Maori meeting house

[2] "This outrageous and completely over-the-top attack on Australia Day by mad leftie council".- Tony Abbot 16 August, 2017.

[3] Maori meeting house

[4] Justin Gillis, Nadja Popvich 'The U.S. Is the Biggest Carbon Polluter in History. It Just Walked Away From the Paris Climate Deal', https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/01/climate/us-biggest-carbon-polluter-in-history-will-it-walk-away-from-the-paris-climate-deal.html.

[5] Uma Patel and Naomi Woodley, 'Australia's greenhouse gas emissions rising, Government figures show' http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-22/australia-greenhouse-gas-emissions-increasing-environment-report/8143110

[6] Betty thought I was a scammer when I first got into contact with her about Tuvalu.

[7] AJ Smith, Klima Tuvalu 'http://klima-tuvalu.no/tuvalu-and-climate-change/the-consequences-of-climate-change-on-tuvalu/'

[8] AJ Smith, Klima Tuvalu 'http://klima-tuvalu.no/tuvalu-and-climate-change/the-consequences-of-climate-change-on-tuvalu/'

[9] United Nations Development Program, Crisis Response, http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/crisis-response/past-crises/tuvalu.html.

[10] Tweet by Donald Trump, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/6/1/15726472/trump-tweets-global-warming-paris-climate-agreement

[11] N Alexandratos, World Agriculture Towards 2030/2050: the 2012 Revision. http://www.fao.org/3/a-ap106e.pdf

[12] The World Bank, The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Biodiversity. https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTBIODIVERSITY/Resources/RoleofIndigenousPeoplesinBiodiversityConservation.pdf