



## CARE FOR OUR OCEAN HOME

Following the recent gathering of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania in Suva, Fiji in February 2023, and in the lead up to World Oceans Day (8 June), this issue of *Just Now* takes a deep dive into a major problem affecting the Pacific region, rising sea levels.

The Pacific Islands is the term used to describe over 10,000 islands spread throughout most of the Pacific Ocean. It is comprised of three ethno-geographic groups of islands: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.



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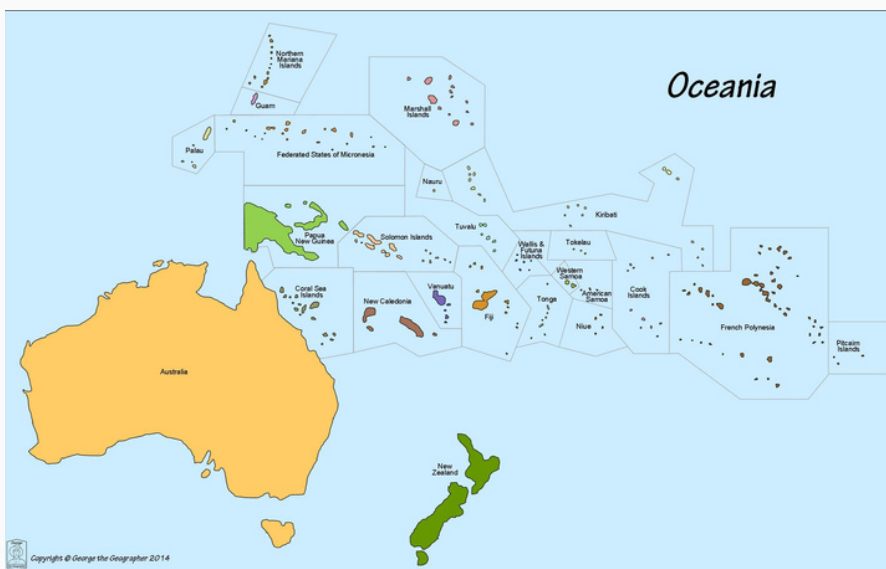
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As the region is made up of many low-lying Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Pacific Nations are unfairly suffering the effects of climate change. Climate change and the ocean are intrinsically linked as rising sea levels are one of the major consequences of global warming.

*Just Now* will take a closer look at one Pacific nation bearing the brunt of climate change: the Republic of Kiribati, an archipelago of 33 islands, which will become uninhabitable within the next 30 years due to rising sea levels. Religious Institutes have been on the ground working in Kiribati for many years. These include the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, the Marist Brothers, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart.

In responding to the devastating impact of climate change, it is crucial to listen to the voices of Pacific Island peoples in the context in which they live.

Sr Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ, Under-Secretary General of the Secretariat of the Synod, who attended the gathering of the FCBCO states: "Our journey towards a synodal Church involves deeply listening to not only the cry of the earth, and the cry of the people but also the cry of the ocean. We need to discern the work of the Spirit and how it is calling us to respond to this urgent crisis."



**"Our journey towards a synodal Church involves deeply listening to not only the cry of the earth, and the cry of the people but also the cry of the ocean"**

*Sr Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ  
Under-Secretary General of the  
Secretariat of the Synod*



*Sr Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ  
Source: CRA*

## Water: 'a symbol of the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor'

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis urgently appeals “for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.” (n. 14)

What is the nature of this new dialogue with Pacific Island peoples? How do we speak of God and creation to people who are experiencing traumatic events such as loss of home, livelihood, culture, and traditions? How do we ensure that Pacific voices and values are properly reflected in the outcomes developed in responding to the challenge of climate change?

In 2020, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development released *Aqua fons vitae: Orientations on water*, a reflection on water management rooted in Catholic Social Teaching. The Dicastery describes water as a “symbol of the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth” and discusses three aspects of water management: 1) water for human use; 2) water as a resource used in human activities such as agriculture and industry; 3) water as a surface, referring particularly to seas and oceans, but also rivers and lakes.



## "What is the nature of this new dialogue with Pacific Island peoples?"



As *Aqua fons vitae* states: "According to the teaching of the Catholic Church, water is a common good, the adequate management of which contributes to the realisation of the common good of the entire human family." (n. 20) The Dicastery calls on all people "in our different capacities as religious leaders, policy-makers and legislators, economic actors and businessmen, rural subsistent farmers and industrial farmers etc., to jointly show responsibility and exercise care for our common home." (n. 13)

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 1992 (UNFCCC) is the governing document on climate change policy in the Pacific. Article 4.8 provides that full consideration be given to the impact of any policy responses on small island countries, countries with low-lying coastal areas and countries whose economies are dependent on the production of fossil fuels. Article 4.2 obliges developed countries to assist developing countries vulnerable to the impact of climate change with meeting the costs of adaptation.

However, Kathleen P. Rushton in her journal article "Pacific Island Peoples: Resilience and Climate Change" describes how many commentators have been critical of the discourse that has developed within the scientific and wider community concerning Pacific peoples (p.1). Discussion has focussed on vulnerability, smallness and isolation of Pacific peoples and has presented no other option than to flee as refugees (p. 1).



**"... water is a common good ... which contributes to the realisation of the common good of the entire human family."**

*Aqua fons vitae: Orientations on Water (n. 20)*



Critics such as Jon Barrett and John Campbell argue that this view oversimplifies the issues and overlooks the actualities of the lives and livelihoods of the people and their resilience. It also ignores the role adaptation can play and undermines the pressure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the developed world (p. 1).

350 Pacific is an example of an organisation that has emerged in response to the challenges of climate change that articulates a uniquely Pacific voice that is resilient, assertive, and innovative. Adopting the imagery of a warrior, 350 Pacific leader Itinterunga Bainteit describes what it means to be a Pacific Climate Warrior: "It means critically challenging the faults of Western-centric development systems that continue to harm the environment [and] show[ing] strength by taking solidarity action for a common purpose to leave the planet earth better than when we found it. It also means courageously speaking up, mobilising and scaling up our efforts as a community to ensure that all human rights and dignity of vulnerable and marginalised communities are honoured and defended."

350 Pacific also sees faith-based communities as playing an important role in response to climate change. Koreti Tiumalu, the Pacific Coordinator from the organisation says this: "We cannot build a Pacific Climate Movement without engaging our faith communities. Faith is pivotal to our people, and like the ocean, it connects us. In the face of the climate crisis, we need prayer to carry our people and faith to build resilience".



**"It means critically challenging the faults of Western-centric development systems that continue to harm the environment . . ."**

*Itinterunga Bainteit, 350 Pacific Leader*

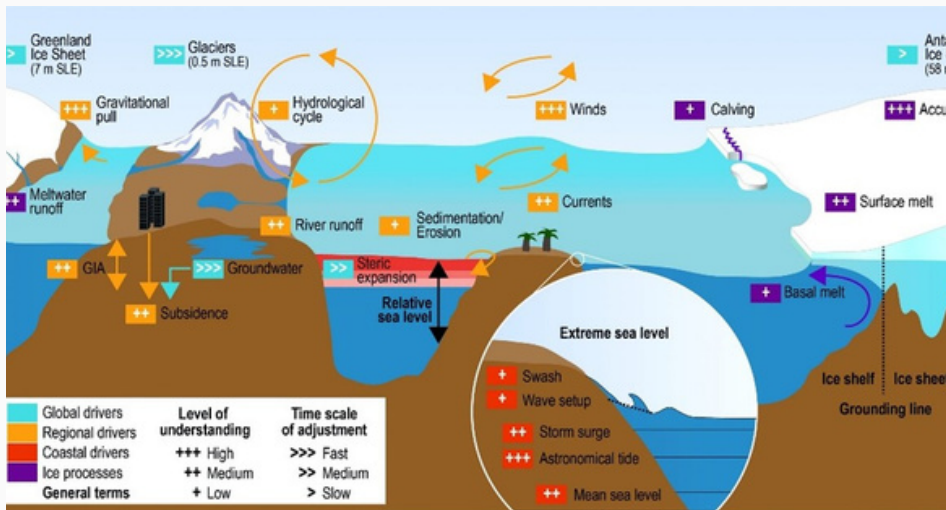


# Impact of Rising Sea Levels: Kiribati

The [Australian Science Academy](#) defines climate change as “a change in the pattern of weather, and related changes in oceans, land surfaces and ice sheets, occurring over time scales of decades or longer”. The [climate change](#) the world is currently experiencing is due to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions that has occurred since the start of the industrial revolution. This has resulted in the greenhouse layer trapping too much heat in the earth’s atmosphere, leading to global warming. Some of the consequences of this global warming include stronger storms, shrinking ice sheets, glacial retreat, decreased snow cover, sea level rise, extreme flood and drought and ocean acidification. Figure 4.4 demonstrates how the effects of climate change impact sea levels.

The [Republic of Kiribati](#) is a low-lying island nation that is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. It is made up of 32 atolls that are only 2 meters above sea level and one coral island. The coral atolls span 3.5 million square kilometres of ocean but comprise a land area of only 810 square kilometres. Kiribati’s [population](#) in 2021 was 128,874, with over half Kiribati’s people living on the main atoll of Tarawa, which has only 15 square kilometres of available land.

**Figure 4.4** | A schematic illustration of the climate and non-climate driven processes that can influence global, regional (green colours), relative and extreme sea level (ESL) events (red colours) along coasts. Major ice processes are shown in purple and general terms in black. SLE stands for Sea Level Equivalent and reflects the increase in GMSL if the mentioned ice mass is melted completely and added to the ocean



**"The Republic of Kiribati . . . is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change."**

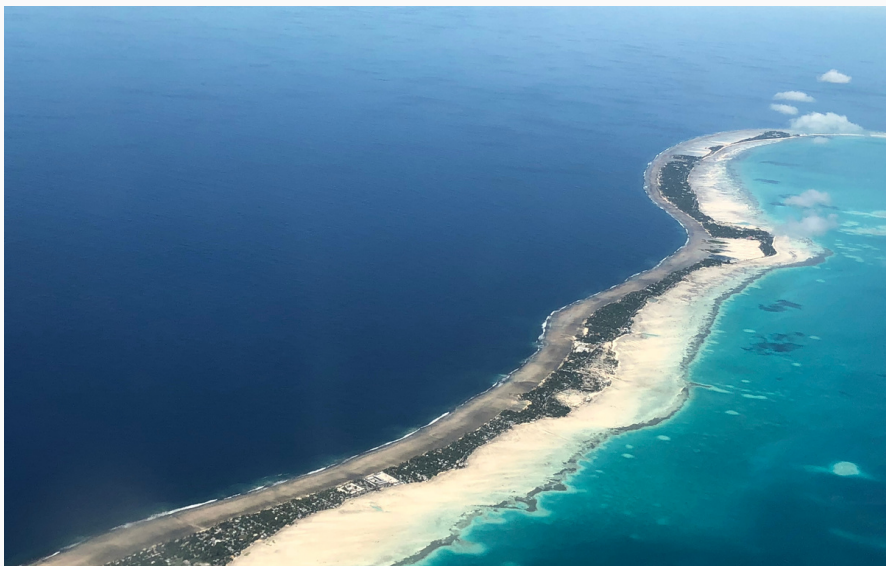


*Seabirds at dawn, Kiribati  
Source: Meg Kahler, SGS*

Research conducted by the Pacific Climate Change Science Program indicates that Kiribati will “experience increasing temperatures, changes to rainfall, ocean acidification, more extreme weather events and sea level rise.” There will be a significant increase in the number of very hot days and warmer nights and there will be longer droughts. Rainfall will increase with more intense storms and heavier rainfall. If emissions continue to be low, by 2055 sea level will rise 9 to 25cm; if high, 10 to 29 cm.

However, long before the island is submerged due to rising sea levels, it will become uninhabitable due to a lack of fresh water. The people of Kiribati rely on lenses (wells) for their supply of fresh water, and these are under threat from sea water inundation due to high tides and storm surges. Supplies of food sourced from coconut and andanus trees will also decrease because of land lost from inundation and erosion.

Compounding these problems are the effects of badly implemented and unsustainable aid and development strategies and the depletion of fish stocks due to illegal fishing and overfishing by international fishing boats.



*Tarawa, the main atoll of Kiribati, where over 50 000 people reside.  
Source: Meg Kahler, SGS*

**“... long before the island is submerged due to rising sea levels, it will become uninhabitable due to a lack of fresh water.”**



*Drying fish, Kiribati  
Source: Meg Kahler, SGS*

# Climate Resilient Development Pathways

The experience of Kiribati illustrates that the effects of climate change are multi-layered and far-reaching. As the [IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate](#) (IPCC Special Report) states, "there are no panaceas for solving these complex issues." (Section 4.4.6) However, this does not mean that action is futile, or the only solution is forced migration.

Paragraph 4.4.1 of the IPCC Special Report identifies five different responses to sea level rise which, when taken together, comprise a vision for Climate Resilient Development Pathways.

They are:

**Protection** – this reduces coastal risk and impacts by blocking the inland propagation and other effects of mean or extreme sea levels (ESL). Eg. dikes or seawalls

**Accommodation** - includes a range of biophysical and institutional responses that mitigate coastal risk and impacts by reducing the vulnerability of coastal residents, human activities, ecosystems, and the built environment. Eg. floating houses or raising house elevation

**Advance** - creates new land by building seaward, reducing coastal risks for the hinterland and the newly elevated land. Eg. land reclamation.

**Retreat** - reduces coastal risk by moving exposed people, assets and human activities out of the coastal hazard zone.

**Ecosystem-based adaptation (EbA)** - involves a combination of the 'protection' and 'advance' strategies described above which are applied in a hybrid fashion and based on the sustainable management, conservation, and restoration of ecosystems. Eg. the conservation or restoration of wetlands and reefs.

"... there are no panaceas for solving these complex issues."

*IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*





As the IPCC Special Report concludes: “. . . the wise application of the planning, public participation, conflict resolution, and decision analysis methods assessed above can help coastal communities, cities and settlements develop locally relevant, enabling and adaptive SLR [sea level rise] responses.”

Chiara Porro, the Australian Ambassador to the Holy See, states: “Pope Francis has issued a clear call to action in response to climate change. Important conversations amongst scientists, faith leaders, political leaders, policy makers, the people of the Pacific and the wider international community are crucial when approaching this problem.”

## A Matter of Justice

However, while there are solutions that can reduce the impact of rising sea levels, the ability of a nation to implement them depends to a large extent on the financial resources available. Kiribati is a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) with limited financial resources. It is largely reliant on income generated from (now extinct) phosphate mining reserves, the issuing of fishing licenses to developed countries such as Japan and I-Kiribati employed as seamen.



*Small outer atoll, Kiribati. Kiribati is comprised of 32 atolls and one coral island.  
Source: Meg Kahler, SGS*

**"Pope Francis has issued a clear call to action in response to climate change."**

*Chiara Porro, Australian Ambassador to the Holy See*



*Chiara Porro  
Photo used with permission*

As Anote Tong, former President of Kiribati states in an [ERA media release](#): "My people in Kiribati are effectively paying the price for the world's addiction to fossil fuels and, unfortunately, our ability to adapt is severely curtailed by our lack of resources. I see I-Kiribati people build sea walls out of coral because they have nothing else available. I have watched houses swept away by the sea with no replacement available."

Patty Fawkner SGS, Congregational Leader of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, a congregation that has been living and working in Kiribati for over thirty years, states: "I have just returned from visiting Kiribati where the climate emergency is obvious. It is a matter of justice that those of us in the developed nations, the heavy emitters of greenhouse gases, should assist poorer countries like Kiribati. Australia needs to become a better neighbour to our Pacific neighbours."

The meeting of COP 27 held in Egypt in 2022 passed a resolution that may go some way towards addressing this injustice. A decision was made to establish a [Loss and Damage Fund](#). This fund aims to provide financial assistance to nations most impacted by the effects of climate change. Although many details remain to be negotiated, it represents an important first step towards tackling this problem.

In addition to this, on 5 March 2023, after almost 20 years of protracted negotiations, delegates of the Intergovernmental



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*Patty Fawkner SGS,  
Congregational Leader of the  
Sisters of the Good Samaritan*



*Patty Fawkner, SGS.  
Used with permission*

Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (otherwise known as BBNJ) signed the 'High Seas Treaty'. This new agreement protects 30 per cent of the world's oceans, provides more funding for marine conservation and regulates access to and use of marine genetic resources. It lays a vital foundation for achieving the ocean-related goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

The meeting of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania in Suva also acknowledged the need to take action. The Bishops said in their concluding statement: "We recognise ecological conversion as an urgent mission priority not only for us, but also for the whole Church. Furthermore, we feel called to make our voices heard at the highest levels of government in our own countries, and also at the global level – in the Church and broader society – for the sake of our ocean home and its peoples."

Asaeli Rass, SVD Provincial Leader of the Divine Word Missionaries attended the gathering of the FCBCO as a Facilitator. He said of his experience: "It was an opportunity for Church leaders to witness first-hand the impact of climate change. Visiting the extractive mine in Togoru and hearing about the effects of rising sea levels from a local landowner in Nakavu Village were powerful experiences. It is important for leaders to realise how immediate the environmental threat is to the lives of people in the Pacific.

We live in a wounded world and are called to be the light of Christ to the wounded people and situations we encounter. Responding in practical ways to caring for our oceans is one way to do this."

## What you can do

While adaptation and accommodation are necessary responses to rising sea levels, particularly for nations like Kiribati, equally important is mitigating the emission of greenhouse gases. This is something the whole world is responsible for, especially the developed world, and is something that can also be carried out on an individual level.

**"We live in a wounded world and are called to be the light of Christ to the wounded people and situations we encounter."**

*Asaeli Rass, SVD, Provincial Leader of the Divine Word Missionaries*



*Asaeli Rass, SVD  
Source: CRA*

Jacqui Remond, co-founder of the Laudato Si Movement in Australia and former director of Catholic Earthcare, offers practical suggestions for what we can do at the individual and local level: "So, going back to the basics of understanding the water cycle and how in our local ecosystems of Church we're engaging with water at schools and parishes; putting in simple filtration systems and making sure that we're reducing our impact on the pollution of water through the products we buy; changing from a consumer mentality, and carrying our own water bottle, are simple ways that we can enact and show the witness of our love for water and our Creator God . . ."

The Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea have published a guide to Environmental Sustainability called *Simple Daily Gestures*. Aimed at members of religious congregations, this guide sets out ways to care for the environment in our everyday lives. With an interactive checklist, this is a practical way to mitigate the emission of greenhouse gases and care for our ocean home.

**"[There] are simple ways that we can enact and show the witness of our love for water and our Creator God . . ."**

*Jacqui Remond, Co-founder of the Laudato Si Movement in Australia*

## **On Another Note . . . A Message from Anne Walker, National Executive Director**

Catholic Religious Australia has been busy in the justice space responding to the pressing social and environmental needs of our society. CRA welcomed the passing of the Secure Jobs, Better Pay Bill, having made a submission to Parliament supporting its introduction. CRA also applauded the major reforms to environment laws announced by Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek in December 2022. Perhaps the most significant win to celebrate in the justice space was the long-awaited announcement by the Albanese government of the end to Temporary Protection Visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas. CRA has been steadfast in its opposition to immigration detention and has consistently called on the government to generously welcome people fleeing places of persecution.



We thank our member institutes for their continued support for the work CRA does in advocating for the marginalised in our society and welcome any feedback. Please email [secretariat@catholicreligious.org.au](mailto:secretariat@catholicreligious.org.au)

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anne".