

Rising Tide, Sinking Nation: The Effect of Global Warming on Kiribati

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The Republic of Kiribati, a country of about 100,000 people spread across 33 coral atolls, is sinking. Two of Kiribati's uninhabited islands have already been claimed by the rising sea level. The Vice President of Kiribati (pronounced Keer-ree-bahss) has stated, "...our very survival as a nation and as a people with a distinct culture and way of life is being threatened by global warming and sea level rise." The UN, WWF, and Greenpeace have also documented the impact of rising sea levels on this nation, with the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission marking Kiribati as "extremely vulnerable." The pace at which the islands of Kiribati are sinking demonstrates an immediate threat to life on Kiribati, necessitating relocation for its citizens. The precariousness of their existence, worsened by severe overpopulation, rampant disease, absence of arable land and a lack of clean water, nutritional food and medical services, is forcing many Kiribati citizens to consider relocation. Currently, New Zealand and Australia are accepting the immigration of small numbers of citizens of Pacific island nations each year.

The purpose of this project is twofold. First, we will create a reverse cultural orientation package consisting of a personal video and pictorial collection of the unique culture and vibrant society of Kiribati. This multimedia album will promote retention of the Kiribati cultural heritage and will facilitate assimilation for the I-Kiribati (citizens of Kiribati) in new countries. An educational component will accompany the media, with the aim of disseminating information about how global warming is affecting Kiribati, information about possible relocation areas, and how reverse orientation works. Upon returning to the US, the second project phase will include a multimedia exhibit at Tufts in September 2007, serving as a platform for fostering cross-cultural understanding between the Tufts community and the I-Kiribati. This will expand into a traveling exhibit around Boston, in high schools, and at conferences and symposia about climate change.

The applicants are two Tufts seniors, graduating in May 2007. The in-field portion of the project will involve travel to Kiribati for a two-month stay to conduct loosely guided interviews with the I-Kiribati with the intent of cultivating storytelling and documenting specific elements and places integral to I-Kiribati culture. Conducted in public space and private homes using both video and photographic recording, the sum of these interviews will be reproduced on DVD and in print form, which is why DVDs, photo paper and a printer are included in the budget.

Upon returning to Tufts, the students will create a collaborative showcase of photographs and television screens looping uncut video footage augmented by a speaker on global warming and group discussion. The media of film and photography capture the exact words and images of the I-Kiribati culture, encouraging a human connection and facilitating a cultural exchange between the Tufts community and Kiribati. Kiribati is a real-world example of the consequences of unsustainable growth and development. This reality is a crucial contribution to the education of the next generation global leaders—Tufts students. The exhibit demonstrates the relevance and consequence of global warming, placing a human face on rising sea levels.

The Tufts exhibit will launch a program to project the story of Kiribati to the rest of Boston and beyond. First, we will partner with existing climate change initiatives at Tufts, such as the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts and the Environmental Consciousness Outreach. We will expand into public forums and conferences on climate change, including collaborating with projects at nearby universities. We also plan to take the exhibit to high schools as both an artistic compilation and an informative, scientifically relevant cross-cultural exchange. Finally, with enough support, we would to travel with the exhibit to New York, Washington, and other interested cities. The exhibit at Tufts will initiate a much larger campaign of education and awareness raising, giving a face to the consequences of global climate change.

Though we are undecided as where to present the exhibit, we have spoken with Jeanne Koles, Tufts' Galley Outreach Coordinator, about exhibit space in the Aidekman Arts Center, and this multimedia exhibit could be presented there for several weeks. Afterward, we will bring the exhibit to the Somerville/Medford community, into the greater Boston area, and beyond.

At Tufts, Ben Mann has offered to work with us on the exhibit. Mr. Mann, Program Coordinator for the Institute for Global Leadership, has served as the liaison for all of the EXPOSURE/VII Photo exhibits in the Aidekman Gallery, including "Vanishing," "The Case Against Milosevic," and "Envoys of War." He will guide our exhibit through the application process and into its final exhibition.

This project will promote peace in a unique way. As citizens of the world, we are united with the I-Kiribati in their struggle to survive, as the situation in Kiribati is a mortal issue. Without documentation and acknowledgement of its unique culture, Kiribati may disappear, its inhabitants dispersed, with no record of what their lives were like. Each individual collection of photographs and video will become family relics of what may become a lost culture. We must stress that these collections will also serve as reverse cultural orientation for future neighbors of migrating I-Kiribati in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. As Kiribati's VP explained to the UN, "For countries such as Kiribati global warming and sea level rise are critical security issues... We have and will continue to call on the international community to agree on a unified global response to these phenomena." In essence, we are answering this call and in doing so safeguarding international security, promoting sustainable development, and reminding Westerners that we are all connected. This project promotes a desire for peace through understanding, transcending cultural difference, appealing instead to a sense of humanity.

This proposal stemmed from one student's desire to enact social change through video in combination with the other student's five-month stay in New Zealand: prompting a desire to address this issue from a different point of view. One student is a Peace and Justice Studies major, experienced in taping and producing documentaries in unusual conditions. Her coursework includes Producing Films for Social Change, Advanced Filmmaking, Photography, and EPIIC: Oil and Water. This student is also involved in the Tufts Energy Security Initiative and is working to bring a panel on this subject to Tufts for the EPIIC symposium. Both students are also members of EXPOSURE, an on-campus organization dedicated to social activism through photojournalism, and this student has lead public workshops at Tufts teaching video and editing techniques.

The other student is a Biology major with a concentration in ecology and sustainable development. Coursework relevant to the issues concerning Kiribati include Marine Ecology, Contemporary Biosocial Problems, Environmental History, and Media and Intercultural Communication. This student is a member of Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), an organization who advocates for equitable application of human rights. Both students are working, as Photography Manager and a senior Editor respectively, for the new PHR magazine *Required Reading*, to be distributed school-wide March 2007.

As graduating seniors with no definitive future plans, we are committed to this project and our purpose to raise awareness about this issue. After the exhibit at Tufts, we aim to expand the exhibit to other venues, beginning in the greater Boston area and developing a traveling exhibit for other major cities. Though other funding may become necessary, this project will launch a much larger educational campaign about the human face of global warming. This moment in history provides a unique opportunity for social change. Now is the time to step forward and make a definitive statement about the connections between our actions and the environmental impact on the lives of others.