

## **Title: The Rising Tide: Kiribati, School: Tufts University**

### **Student Information:**

**Casey Beck and Austin Blair. Citizens of USA, graduates of Tufts University, May '07**

Casey Beck, who majored in Peace and Justice Studies, and Austin Blair, who majored in Biology, are 2007 alumni of Tufts University. Our vision toward peace was to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between the Republic of Kiribati (pronounced Ki-ri-bis), a small nation of 107,000 people on 33 coral atolls in the Central Pacific Ocean, and the United States. Kiribati, a nation that is relatively unknown in the US, is one of the six most vulnerable countries to sea level rise. Thus, we endeavored to explore the culture of Kiribati through the lens of global climate change.

Our project goal was two fold. First, we wanted to document Kiribati culture using photographs and video in Kiribati for two months (May 31 to July 31, 2007) in order to make pictorial packages and distribute them to people in Kiribati and to the National Archives. Secondly, upon our return to the US, we planned to create an art exhibit that displayed Kiribati culture and how it is being affected by global warming. In addition, we wanted to hold a panel discussion on climate change to assess both problems and solutions with specific focus on life in the Pacific islands.

The Projects for Peace grant funded the majority of our travel, equipment, and living expenses from May to September. Several Tufts departments helped with the cost of our opening night.

We are pleased with the outcome of the project, both in country and back at Tufts. Upon arrival in Kiribati, we spoke with the appropriate governmental ministries to gain permission to conduct our project. We learned that visiting the outer islands would be necessary to becoming involved with the traditional Kiribati culture as Tarawa (the capital island) is modernizing and has a different culture. After a week on Tarawa, we took a 6-hour boat to Maiana, the closest outer island. There, we met with a Peace Corps volunteer who helped us find home stays with two different families. Each was the family of an unimwane (a male elder) and because of their influence in the community we were able to attend many cultural events, such as botakis (a feast/dance/party), a unimwane meeting, lagoon fishing trip, student marching in preparation for Independence Week and a Protestant Church service. These kind and generous families were happy to feed and house us, as well as to let us photograph and video them living their daily lives. This access allowed us a unique window into Kiribati culture and even exceeded our expectations for the type of video and photographs we could get.

After spending 10 days on Maiana, we returned to Tarawa. Later that week we took a 26-hour boat ride to the central island of Kuria, for another 10-day stay. On Kuria we once again met with the Peace Corps volunteers and were taken in by a unimwane and his family. Our stay was similar to Maiana in that we were allowed close access to many daily activities including clean-up (the mass clearing of undergrowth by villagers for the purpose of promoting coconut tree growth), large botakis, a day at a primary school, and a tour of the island.

On each of these outer islands we were able to conduct video interviews with the unimwane we stayed with, older women in the community, teachers, a professor and government officials. We were able to ask them, in English or through a translator, about life in Kiribati and about their experiences with global warming. People were candid with us and willing to tell their stories on camera and explain their observations of rising sea level, erosion, hotter days and nights, and how these changes were affecting everything from fishing to making copra (the dried meat of coconuts).

After our two stays on outer islands, we spent our last 4 weeks on Tarawa and experienced the weeklong, 28th annual celebration of independence from Britain. We were able to attend and document many of the events such as the beauty contest, sporting matches, canoe (a type of sailboat) racing, and capture the overall carnival atmosphere. The pinnacle of this time on Tarawa was our invitation to the National Banquet, where we met President Anote Tong, and our subsequent interview of the President. Global warming and sea level rise are his main concerns for the country, and he was a valuable interviewee. While in Tarawa, we were able to document environmental damage by taking a boat trip to an islet in the Tarawa lagoon that no longer bears trees and is now submerged at high tide.

While in Kiribati, we were able to create two movies, one of our time on Maiana and one of Kuria, and make DVD copies. We also brought a printer and printed hundreds of photos for people we met and the

National Archives. We also gave them copies of the DVD. We were pleased to learn that even on the outer islands DVD players are common enough that people could view our videos, and that the I-Kiribati highly value photographs.

On the whole, we feel that the goal of recording Kiribati culture through photo and video was a great success, as was making copies of the materials for the people we met and the government. While the trip to Kiribati was taxed our physical and mental abilities, we feel that it was quite successful and worthwhile, both for ourselves and in connecting the peoples of Kiribati and the United States.

Back in America we spent the month of August preparing for our exhibit and building our website. In addition, along with a group of Tufts professors from Peace and Justice Studies, Urban and Environmental Planning and Policy, LGBT Center, International Relations and Civil and Environmental Engineering we helped to found the Climate Change and Climate Justice Series at Tufts—a series of interdepartmentally sponsored events to address climate change from the perspective of climate justice. Our exhibit will run in the Slater Concourse of the Aidekman Arts Gallery for five weeks. It consists of 31 12"x18" framed photographs with captions, a video display showing looping video, and information on the effects of climate change worldwide and in Kiribati specifically. We also included maps that detail Kiribati's location.

Our exhibit opening and panel discussion, held on September 10th, marked the first event in the Climate Justice Series. We feel that the exhibit provides an intimate and unique sense of the culture and people of Kiribati. Both students spoke on the panel as well as professor Bill Moomaw who is a lead author on the International Panel on Climate Change reports; Aditya Nochur, a fellow 2007 alumnus and recently published author on climate justice; Tikataake Taberannang, a Kiribati native, and his wife, Heidi Bowen, a returned Peace Corps volunteer who was in Kiribati. The panel discussion and following reception were also very well received. Overall, we felt that in Kiribati and back at Tufts, we met and even exceeded our desired goals.

With this project, we feel we have strengthened a bond between Kiribati and people in the United States that was begun by the Peace Corps. The layperson who sees our exhibit or website can learn about a culture that is unknown to her and learn how her consumption of energy is affecting this culture through global warming.

We learned that the countries least able to cope with global warming will be the most effected, both geographically and because they have the least resources. Simultaneously, those people most affected by global warming are ones who have no say in how the policy to deal with it is written. However in Kiribati, a marginalized nation, we were heartened by the strength of their culture and their warmth and generosity. We met people who said that they would turn off their generators at night if it would help stop global warming. This was the epitome of a sensible, logical approach to the issue. While we were surprised at how pragmatically and emotionlessly they talked about losing their homes to sea level rise, after this project we realized that imagining losing your entire country is unfathomable. In Kiribati we experienced a taste of raw humanity and humanity, perhaps, at its best.

We are excited for the future of The Rising Tide: Kiribati. We are planning to take it next to Syracuse University and the surrounding community, mirroring our exhibit at Tufts. We also hope to connect with our alumni network in order to take the exhibit to cities across the country. Additionally, if possible, we would like to connect with the Davis UWC Fund to bring our exhibit to other UWC schools within the next 6 months to a year.

Please visit our website at: [www.therisingtidekiribati.org](http://www.therisingtidekiribati.org)  
and see an article in the Tufts Daily about the project: [Tufts Daily Article](#)

*Climate Change and Climate Justice Series*

# The Rising Tide: Kiribati

Exhibit Sept. 5-Sept. 30, Slater Concourse  
Panel Discussion and Opening Reception Sept. 10, 5 pm, See Below



**September 10**  
 Opening Reception  
 5 pm: Preview  
 (Slater Concourse in Aidekman)  
 5:30 pm: Panel Discussion  
 (Alumnae Lounge)  
 7 pm: Reception with food/drinks

Look for the next event in the Climate Justice Series:

**Boston**  
October 9

Sponsored by: Peace and Justice Studies, WSSS, International Relations, LGBT Center, and IGL.

