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# Racism, the environment, and persecution : environmental refugees in Tuvalu

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RACISM, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND PERSECUTION:  
ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES IN TUVALU

by

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A Major Research Paper  
presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in the Program of  
Immigration and Settlement Studies

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## RACISM, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND PERSECUTION: ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES IN TUVALU

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of environmental refugees through a literature review and discourse analysis of media coverage on Tuvalu. Tuvalu is predicted to be the first nation lost to sea level rise and its government has been active in attempting to secure a place of asylum for its citizens. Although the term 'environmental refugee' is not an official one, it is widely used. Therefore, a case study is used to illustrate how environmental refugees are constructed in the public eye. Using a political economy and political ecology approach, the power dynamics that lead to disproportionate environmental destruction in poor, racialized areas as well as unequal access to migration are questioned. Looking at two major newspapers each from Canada, the US, Australia, and New Zealand, and one from Tuvalu, the discourse surrounding environmental refugees reveals how the term is constructed and used for varying agendas, from environmentalism to racial exclusion.

### Key words:

Environmental refugees; climate change; forced migration; environmentalism; Tuvalu

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INTRODUCTION

It has long been predicted that by 2050, the Pacific island state of Tuvalu will be completely uninhabitable. These predictions have been based on growing evidence of climatic changes which, whether natural or anthropogenic, are now beginning to take a serious toll on nations like Tuvalu. Rising sea levels and increased extreme weather events have led to soil erosion, land degradation, decreased crop yields, and general loss of homeland, livelihood, and culture. And Tuvalu is not alone.

Worldwide, countries are suffering severe environmental degradation related to not only climate change, but also development projects, natural disasters, industrial accidents, or deliberate dumping and destruction. Much of this environmental degradation takes place in the developing world, where people have the least amount of political or economic power to successfully resist it. In many circumstances, this degradation becomes so severe that people are left with no choice but to flee, leading many to define them as the world’s environmental refugees.

They have been defined, debated and discussed since 1985 when the United Nations sponsored an Environment Programme report written by Essam El-Hinnawi, who defined them broadly as those forced to flee environmental disruptions threatening their existence (El Hinnawi 1985: 4). It is estimated that there are approximately 25 to 50 million environmental refugees in the world today (Acketoft 2008: 1; Boon & Tra 2007: 88; PACE 2009: 3; Renaud et al. 2007: 17). Yet still no policy exists to address or protect this not-so-new category of people.

Barriers to officially recognizing environmental refugees are innumerable. Refugee protection organizations are already overwhelmed with numbers; nations are reluctant to

open their borders for reasons of national identity, economic prosperity, and security; and assigning the label 'refugee' entails persecution, meaning someone is to blame (Conisbee & Simms 2003: 26-7; McNamara 2007, 2008; Salehyan 2008; Zetter 1991, 2007). Few are ready to take responsibility for environmental degradation, whether it takes the form of climate change, capitalist-driven development projects, or self-interested dumping or exploitation. In contrast, other stakeholders have a vested interest in defining environmental refugees, including environmentalists or forced migrants themselves fleeing environmental degradation and seeking rights, recognition and protection.

Taking a political economy and political ecology approach, this paper deals with many of the social, political, economic, and environmental tensions and inequalities between the developing and industrialized worlds<sup>1</sup> while exploring the topic of environmental refugees. It does this through a literature review of related fields followed by a case study on climate change in Tuvalu, which includes a media discourse analysis of the use of the term 'environmental refugee'. Through the literature reviews and discourse analysis, it is shown that the term has different value, for a wide variety of reasons, for each stakeholder in environmental refugee cases.

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<sup>1</sup> There are several terms in use to make a necessary differentiation between countries' political and economic global statuses. Terms such as First and Third World are problematic and outdated. Other terms such as the global North and South are less offensive but due to this paper's occasional focus on Australia and New Zealand, are also less appropriate. The terms developed and developing countries provide a recognized dichotomy, however, I take issue with the implications of the terms. The meaning of 'developed' - a sense of economic and social advancement and superiority - seems to imply that these countries have completed the process of development and now stand as globally established pillars of success. From a political economy perspective, the exploitation and abuse of power inherent in many of the practices of these 'developed' countries calls into question exactly what has been developed and how. Especially from the political ecology framework that I also approach this paper from, which recognizes the importance of the environment and of sustainability, the capitalist and consumerist practices of these countries are far from 'developed'. In keeping with part of this established dichotomy, I choose to retain the use of 'developing' despite its similarly problematic nature, but I replace 'developed' with 'industrialized' to emphasize what has been developed in these countries, at great cost to the environment and to the rest of the world.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although environmental refugees are part of everyday vocabulary and have been debated in academia for decades, officially, they do not exist. This review will cover several literature fields (including refugees, environmental refugees, climate change, environmentalism, and racism) in an attempt to uncover why they are still such a problematic and unrecognized category, whether or not they are a useful category, and, if so, for what and to whom.

### Theoretical Framework: From Political Economy to Political Ecology

A political economy framework questions the unequal distribution of power and wealth between stakeholders in a given situation. It originates from the ideas proposed by Adam Smith in his 1776 *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, which argues that the self-interested actions of individuals in a capitalist system would advance the social welfare of a society better than state policy, as if they were guided by an 'invisible hand'. However, a feminist political economy perspective states that "[t]he growing wealth-poverty gap calls into question the assertion that an unfettered market economy driven by economic rationality is inherently efficient in increasing productivity and contributing to everyone's benefit in society" and furthermore recognizes that "[t]he causes of poverty are embedded in the intersection of different inequalities in social relations, such as racism, gender, homophobia, religious and cultural discrimination. At its core poverty is powerlessness" (Riley 2008: 2). A political economy framework allows one to question these concepts, processes, and interactions of power.

In cases of environmental refugees, a political economy framework questions the

facility with which certain capitalist stakeholders can, in their own self-interest, exploit and degrade the environment and, consequently, people's livelihoods. These capitalist stakeholders could refer to businesses and corporations that take advantage of the natural resources, lax labour and environmental laws, and economically poor populations in developing countries. It could also refer to the governments that stand to gain power, both politically and economically, from allowing those businesses in, or to wealthy individuals and industrialized nations whose lifestyles entail high degrees of consumerism. These stakeholders can use their influence to continue to derive more power and profit, which allows them to ignore, at least temporarily, the adverse effects of their actions on the environment and on less powerful stakeholders, or the economically and politically marginalized groups who depend on the environment for their livelihoods (those labelled as environmental refugees).

In these cases, there is still more at stake that needs to be considered: namely, the natural environment. The theoretical framework for this paper has therefore been expanded to include a political ecology framework, which has its roots in political economy but also questions the role of the environment in political and economic exchanges. Political ecology, as Ariel Salleh describes, is similar to political economy but also encompasses the concept of an ecological debt to be repaid in any capitalist interaction involving nature (2009: 4). Just as capitalism depends on the unpaid reproductive work of women, and on the exploitation of poor and racialized people and nations, it also depends on the environment and availability of natural resources (Salleh 2009: 7). While much is taken from nature, little is given back, and furthermore, protecting the natural environment for smaller stakeholders such as subsistence farmers,

is increasingly difficult in the face of greater political and economic power. In this sense, the environment is also a stakeholder, and its use and exploitation, as well its stability and potential to sustain livelihoods is central to the issue of environmental refugees.

Further stakeholders in environmental refugee cases are the activists and advocates implicated in each case through their support for refugee rights and for environmental protection and sustainability.

Although the term 'environmental refugee' draws these two groups - environmental and refugee protection groups - together, it has differing impacts on their agendas. There is a strong environmentalist discourse related to environmental refugees, which Richard Black draws attention to:

If academic and policy interest in the notion of environmental refugees is not overtly motivated by a desire to restrict asylum, the question remains as to why so much effort should have been spent in trying to separate environmental causes of migration from other political, economic or social causes, even to the point of trying to rewrite the definition of a refugee in international law. Arguably, the answer lies not in asylum literature or policy at all, but in environmentalist literature (2001: 12).

The environmentalist discourse, therefore, is an important one to look at in relation to environmental refugees. While some people in wealthier nations or individual circumstances are disputing the legitimacy of environmental refugees or claims about climate change, presumably for economic, nationalist, or lifestyle reasons, those advocating for the rights and recognition of environmental refugees are consistently also recommending environmentally sustainable shifts in consumption and lifestyles to mitigate the need for such a category in the first place (Conisbee & Simms 2003: 39; Lambert 2002; McNamara 2008: 50-51; Myers 1997: 177; Nash 1999: 237; Salehyan

2008: 322-333). For environmentalists, use of the term 'refugee' in conjunction with environmental disasters can add political power to the environmental protection movement.

In contrast, refugee protection agencies argue that attaching 'environmental' to 'refugee' does a disservice to their cause. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has consistently argued that environmental refugees should not fall within their jurisdiction (Conisbee & Simms 2003; McNamara 2007, 2008; Misquitta 2008). This may have to do with the fear of not having enough resources to cope with this potentially very large category, or the idea that those resources would be better spent elsewhere, or simply denial that environmental degradation is indeed a serious threat (Conisbee & Simms 2003: 26-7; McNamara 2007, 2008; PACE 2009: 13). In a series of interviews, Elizabeth McNamara demonstrates the resistant attitudes within the United Nations towards environmental refugees:

These people are certainly not refugees like political or religious refugees, they certainly are migrants, but most countries these days do not permit migrants who do not essentially contribute to the economic life of the country. You do not take in people because they can't make a living somewhere, so maybe there has to be a rethink of this whole concept before environmental refugees becomes a serious issue (McNamara 2007: 16).

In McNamara's other interviews, United Nations officials stated that they themselves were "straightforward", dealing with only specific "refugee situations" (2007: 18), that they had "their mandates" and would "stick to them" (2007: 18,20), that they had their "priorities" (2008: 37), that the situation would need to reach "crisis point before anyone does anything" (2008: 38), that "if it happens it happens" (2008: 38), and that creating an international instrument to address environmental refugees would be "a very, very foolish

way to go" (2008: 41). While the term 'environmental refugee' may be a politically powerful tool for some stakeholders, it is not perceived as such within UN refugee protection agencies.

Finally, as in any case of migration, forced or voluntary, the other major stakeholders are the nations who accept (or reject) migrants. Decisions on how to address migrants can have to do with national, racial, ethnic or cultural identity and nations have power to include/exclude based on these or other political and economic factors. Conversely, migrants themselves are relatively powerless to affect those decisions unless they are clearly recognized by international law (i.e. as refugees) or unless they can harness public, global support by, for instance, manipulating the political power of language to invoke concern for moral or ethical responsibilities (i.e. environmental refugees).

A basic push/pull theory can be applied to any migrant situation, as the decision to migrate is "based on which place they deem more favorable" (Reuveny 2008: 2). Applying the push/pull migration theory to refugee situations, possible push factors might include "war, persecution, discrimination, and lack of democracy", while pull factors may be "peace, family or brethren unification, preferential treatment, and democracy" (Reuveny 2008: 2). While refugees are generally understood to have not had a choice in their decision to migrate, environmental migrants can pose a challenge to this theory, occasionally fitting somewhere along a continuum between voluntary and forced migration (Bates 2002: 468; Hugo 1996: 106). In situations of gradual environmental degradation, residents are left with the choice of *when* to leave, giving them slightly more negotiation power than conventional refugees, but resulting in "an almost universal lack

of recognition as refugees" (Bates 2002: 473).

The lack of recognition for this reason, though, does not take into account that most environmentally-induced migration is indeed forced. When development projects and other capitalist endeavours are put ahead of a community's well-being and that of their environment, their lack of political and economic power is apparent. Regardless of what they stand to lose, either economically, politically, or environmentally, their lack of power is easily taken advantage of because of their socio-economic position, which is often related to race or ethnicity or some other marginalizing factor. Furthermore, the same factors that diminish their power to protect themselves from environmental degradation also make migration difficult, as they are often considered undesired or unskilled immigrants.

While policy-makers refuse to officially recognize this complex category, decades of academic debate from 1985 to the present have seen arguments for and against the recognition of environmental refugees coming from each of the various stakeholders. Globally, many people refuse to recognize their existence or predicament because doing so would implicitly mean that someone is responsible for them - either for generating environmental refugees or for taking care of them. Self-interested consumerism frequently requires the environmental degradation that leads to these refugees, while accommodating them entails a national economic burden as well as possible acceptance of environmental responsibility. Alan Nash, who feels that Canada should take a leading role in addressing environmental refugees, points to the responsibility that Canada, like other industrialized countries, bears in relation to climate change, and a history of controlling migration (for racist or economic reasons) that would be challenged by an

increase in asylum-seekers (Nash 1999: 235).

A large part of the reason people resist recognizing environmental refugees and environmental degradation is because of what is at stake for them. Recognition would entail costly responsibility. For instance, climate change, as Angela Williams points out, is a controversial issue, which I discuss in further detail later in this paper, with environmental, social, economic and political ramifications (2008: 517). Human-induced environmental degradation, such as industrial accidents or development projects, is fueled by capitalist production and consumption patterns (Timmons & Parks 2007). Recognizing responsibility for environmental problems would necessitate allotting more economic resources towards mitigating those problems, and few states are willing to do so (Boon & Tra 2007: 91). In the name of consumerism, profit and power, many people and environmental resources have been heavily exploited. Both the political economy and political ecology frameworks question the justice of this unequal distribution of power to control livelihoods and environments among all the various stakeholders as well as the unequal distribution of adverse effects.

### **Defining Refugees**

The internationally accepted definition of a refugee is set out in the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Article 1 defines a refugee as any person who,

...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former



habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR 2007: 16).

Following this definition, the Convention "lays down the basic minimum standards for the treatment of refugees" (UNHCR 2007: 5). These include, for instance, ensuring refugees' rights to freedom from discrimination, freedom to practice their religion, and rights to gainful employment and basic welfare; they also entail fair juridical and administrative expectations, including the right of host countries to refuse, detain or expel refugees under exceptional circumstances and rights to naturalization for refugees (UNHCR 2007: 18-38).

As Jessica Cooper points out, the definition as laid out in the Convention is unlikely to ever change due to enormous international resistance as well as the fact that for decades countries have built their legal frameworks regarding refugee admissions and acceptance around the 1951 definition (1998: 499-501). However, capturing what Cooper refers to as the 'spirit of the Convention' (1998: 528), the 1967 Protocol implies some necessary flexibility with the original definition:

Considering that the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, signed at Geneva on 28 July 1951, covers only those persons who have become refugees as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951,□

Considering that new refugee situations have arisen since the Convention was adopted and that the refugees concerned may therefore not fall within the scope of the Convention,□

Considering that it is desirable that equal status should be enjoyed by all refugees covered by the definition in the Convention, irrespective of the dateline of 1 January 1951, ... (UNHCR 2007: 53).

It specifies that these points should be taken into consideration when interpreting the Convention (UNHCR 2007: 53). While the Convention was written in a post-WWII

climate, and with specific groups of people in mind, the Protocol was added so that the original 1951 definition could be applied to any potential future refugee situation (UNHCR 2007: 6). It was meant to allow flexibility of the original definition, to allow for refugee protection for those displaced by events unforeseen at the time of writing. With the passage of time, though, the definition laid out in both the Convention and Protocol has once again become specifically and narrowly interpreted.

Canada, like most countries, has based its refugee law on the Convention definition. In the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) a person who qualifies as a refugee is someone who:

...by reason of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, (a) is outside each of their countries of nationality and is unable or, by reason of that fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of each of those countries; or (b) not having a country of nationality, is outside the country of their former habitual residence and is unable or, by reason of that fear, unwilling to return to that country (IRPA 2001: 47).

While this is evidently the same criteria as outlined in the Convention, the definition is still subject to individual interpretation by members of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). The IRB, for instance, has developed a series of guidelines to assist its members with interpretation and assessment of claims for refugee status. These include guidelines on child refugee claimants, women refugee claimants fearing gender-related persecution, and procedures with respect to vulnerable persons, to name a few (IRB 2006). The guidelines for gender-related persecution were adopted following strong public pressure from a growing white, middle-class feminist movement, and two specific refugee claim cases that garnered significant media attention (Razack 2006). After

Canada's adoption of these guidelines, several other countries around the world followed suit with their own versions (Macklin, 2003).

Along similar lines, an historic decision by the Supreme Court in the *Canada vs. Ward* case, led to another ground breaking initiative: the definition of 'particular social group' was broadened, in 1993, to include sexual orientation (Hurley 2007: 24; Supreme Court 1993). No guideline or formal legislation exists to support this definition. So while the basic legal tenets of what constitutes a refugee remain consistent with the Convention, individual variances and interpretations can and do exist, as the case in Canada proves.

Increasingly, groups and individuals are forced to flee such life-threatening situations as outlined in the Convention but do not cross an international border. These people are categorized as internally displaced, and are entitled to similar rights as refugees, but the governance of those rights and protections is not overseen by an international body (UNESCO 1998). Numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have grown steadily, prompting the United Nations to appoint a representative in 1992 "to study the causes and consequences of internal displacement", which culminated in the United Nations Economic and Social Council drafting the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in 1998, and leading many other organizations to "[broaden] their mandates or scope of activities to address [IDPs] more effectively" (UNESCO 1998: 2). Globally, there are more IDPs than refugees today, and although the Principles promote similar rights and protections as refugees for IDPs, because the governance of those rights is left up to individual nations, IDPs are increasingly subjugated and denied similar rights and treatment as refugees (El-Bushra & Fish 2004; Ferris 2008).

Regardless of official, legal definitions, the label 'refugee' is popularly applied to

anyone fleeing a threatening situation (Zetter 2007: 176). Misuse of the term generally has negative consequences or implications for forced migrants and refugees. Residents of New Orleans who were forced to flee the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, although officially IDPs or evacuees, were frequently referred to as refugees by the media (Masquelier 2006). Refugee discourse in this situation, like in many others, was highly racialized. The effect of this discourse was to further isolate an already vulnerable population: "[c]alling them refugees at a time when they more than ever needed to belong took away their citizenship, and by implication, their right to be part of the national order of things" (Masquelier 2006: 737).

In the case of New Orleans, the use of the term refugee created an atmosphere of exclusion, but it did not bring with it the rights and privileges of refugees. In the case of actual refugees, applying labels to designate sub-categories similarly attempts to exclude target groups from the rights and privileges of refugees (Zetter 2007). In his discussion of forming, transforming and politicizing refugee identities, Roger Zetter points out:

Pejorative labels are a particular feature of this new era: 'spontaneous asylum seekers' (with implications of fecklessness and presumably different from a planned asylum seeker), 'illegal asylum seekers', 'bogus asylum seekers', 'economic refugee/asylum seeker', 'illegal migrant', 'trafficked migrant', 'overstayers', 'failed asylum seeker' (note not failed refugee), 'undocumented asylum seeker/migrant' (2007: 184).

Similarly, labels such as "environmental refugees", 'tsunami refugees' and 'development refugees' offer novel prefixes" (2007: 176) but as with all invented sub-categories, serve mainly to fracture the label 'refugee' (2007: 181). Juxtaposed with 'genuine refugees' these other 'types' of refugees are often de-legitimized in the public eye (Zetter 2007: 181).

In the social and political climate of today's world, which is preoccupied with security and capitalist profit, this de-legitimization, and consequent exclusion, has strong elements of self-interest. The conflation of 'refugee' and 'economic migrant' has frequently and deliberately been used to serve national interests (Zetter 2007: 182). As 'economic migrants', individuals are excluded from state protection and potentially also excluded from immigration access, thus preventing both the financial burden of caring for a refugee and the perceived hardships brought on by immigrants (i.e. strain on the employment sector). Among other reasons cited to exclude refugees, "host nations are inevitably suspicious that unworthy persons are wrongfully trying to claim refugee status and reap the benefits their countries offer" (Cooper 1998: 501). By labelling refugees economic migrants (or otherwise), claims for asylum are de-legitimized and replaced with notions of immigrants coming to take advantage of a country's economic opportunities and generosity (Bauder 2008: 87). Although a majority of refugees are accommodated in developing countries, there is still a "myth that many citizens of the highly developed countries believe that their countries are the biggest hosts of the world's refugees" (Boon & Tra 2007: 92). Host nations are wary of the financial and environmental burdens (i.e. increased population pressures and competition for limited resources, especially in the developing world) as well as potential security risks that refugees might impose (Cooper 1998; Myers 1993; Zetter 2007). There is also an element of racial exclusion when refugees are othered and unwanted because they are seen as not belonging within the national identity (Zetter 2007: 180).

Labelling and defining refugees is an important, powerful and significant act that assigns rights and obligations. Following a discussion of the specific concept of

'environmental refugees' I will return to the concept of labelling discussed here as it applies to all refugees. A refugee is clearly and consistently defined by the United Nations Convention, other advocacy organizations, and individual nations, but when the term enters popular discourse, it is often misused, misinterpreted, and utilized to serve various stakeholder interests. In analyzing and understanding these various discourses on refugees, it is clearly important to question who is defining them, for what purpose, and what benefits they might reap from such definitions or interpretations.

### **Defining Environmental Refugees**

As suggested above, 'environmental refugee' is a constructed label with no real legal meaning - while it is a commonly used term, it is also highly contested. An abundance of literature on the topic creates, exemplifies, and attests to the confusion and inconsistency surrounding environmental refugees, from their definition and scope to their worthiness of protection. The term first appeared in the 1970s, "but entered bureaucratic discourse in 1985" (McAdam 2009: 6).

In a UN-sponsored report, El-Hinnawi outlined what would become the basis for future discussion of the concept (1985). He defines environmental refugees as:

...those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life (El Hinnawi 1985: 4).

Developing this definition, he offers three categories: (1) "those who have been temporarily displaced because of an environmental stress [such as] earthquakes or cyclones or an environmental accident"; (2) "those who have to be permanently displaced

and re-settled in a new area [because] of permanent changes, generally man-made [such as] huge dams"; and (3) those "who migrate from their original habitat, temporarily or permanently, to a new one within their own national boundaries, or abroad, in search of a better quality of life [because] the resource base in their original habitat has deteriorated to such a degree that it can no longer meet their basic needs" (El-Hinnawi 1985: 4-5).

While El-Hinnawi began the debate, Jodi Jacobson (1988) "moved the debate forward by identifying major types of 'unnatural disasters' and the associated displacement of people, namely floods, droughts, toxification, deforestation and rising sea levels" (Suhrke 1993: 6). Moreover, she "made no distinction between internally and internationally displaced persons" thus broadening the definition even further (Suhrke 1993: 6). Citing examples such as the 1986 nuclear explosion near Chernobyl which permanently displaced 10,000 people, and the 1988 flooding in Bangladesh, exacerbated by deforestation, which left 25 million people homeless, Jacobson asserted that people fleeing environmental degradation had become "the largest class of refugees in the world" (1988: 257). From a refugee protection and immigration standpoint, this broadened definition is problematic; nations will be unwilling to open their borders to such a wide array of people, especially if those people can receive adequate protection within their own borders. However, from an environmentalist standpoint, it might serve a stronger purpose of drawing attention to the persecutory nature of environmental destruction, which will be discussed in further detail later in this paper.

Norman Myers, also credited with laying the groundwork for the environmental refugee debate, defined them as "people who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their erstwhile homelands because of drought, soil erosion, desertification, and other

environmental problems" (1993: 752). With this contribution, the definition became even broader still, since within this framework Myers himself acknowledged that it would be "difficult to differentiate between refugees driven by environmental factors and those driven by economic problems" (1993: 752). This is highly problematic because, as mentioned above, the conflation of environmental refugees with economic migrants gives nations more reasons to exclude migrants from their borders.

The definitions laid out by El-Hinnawi, Jacobson, and Myers, are certainly not without criticism. Their categories are seen by many as being "so broad as to be useless" (Suhrke 1993: 7). By allowing such a wide array of people to be defined as environmental refugees, it does, in fact, weaken the definition of a refugee as someone who legitimately needs protection from a life-threatening situation. Some believe the acceptance of the link between environment and displacement was too uncritical or simplistic, for instance, the assumption that environmental degradation would inevitably lead to forced migration or conflict (Black 2001; Lonergan 1998; McNamara 2007; Salehyan 2008). Because situations producing forced migrants are invariably complex, defining environmental reasons as the sole cause of migration is problematic; since the environmental factor cannot reasonably be separated from social, economic or political factors, such arguments have been described as weak (Black 2001; Lonergan 1998; Suhrke 1993). But, like the UN definition of refugees, the original intent and meaning of environmental refugees will inevitably change as new situations and knowledge come to light. Based on the ever-changing literature, the definition can be seen as a work in progress, evolving to match current environmental situations and knowledge about refugees.

There are some who still try to debunk the concept of environmental refugees altogether. Black's *Environmental Refugees: Myth or Reality?* focuses, for the most part, on challenging the concept, or "myth" of environmental degradation as being connected to human activity or as leading to migration (2001). He focuses on "three categories of supposed 'environmental refugees': those fleeing 'desertification'; those displaced (or potentially displaced) by sea level rise; and victims of 'environmental conflict'" (2001: 1). Focusing on the Sahel and other areas experiencing desertification, for example, he asserts that a tradition of migration in these regions debunks not only the link between environmental degradation and human activity, but also the very notion that the environment is changing (Black 2001: 5). Like Black, Steve Lonergan also questions these categories (1998). Attempting to convey that environmental change is not a serious threat, he states that land degradation, including desertification, deforestation, salinization, and waterlogging, "is a gradual process, which allows for adaptation" (Lonergan 1998: 11). While this may be so, and in fact many nations and communities affected by climate change have adopted adaptive measures, this attitude is neither fair nor realistic. Nonetheless, even at the international level, as seen in McNamara's (2007, 2008) research on the attitudes of high-ranking officials, ambassadors and diplomats at the United Nations, adaptation, or expecting the poor to "bear the burden of environmental changes initiated by others", was the dominant discourse (2008: 40).

Presently, as previously mentioned, no one is officially an environmental refugee. But drawing on a wide array of definitions of who qualifies for this problematic category, there are approximately 25 to 50 million people who join the ranks of 'environmental refugees' every year (Acketoft 2008: 1; Boon & Tra 2007: 88; Cooper 1998: 485; Myers

2001: 609; Nash 1999: 228; PACE 2009: 3; Renaud et al. 2007: 17). Innumerable scholars have persuasively argued that they are a valid category of people, worthy of international concern and attention. While there are certainly too many variances in definitions to review in this paper, a brief overview of five types of environmental refugees follows. Each type entails different and unique environmental problems and consequences, some of which involve cross-border displacement, temporary or permanent displacement, and some of which are easier than others to attribute causality and blame.

The first type is development-induced displacement (DID), which is perhaps one of the most obvious and acute forms of human-induced environmental damage forcing migration. It is generally profit-driven degradation resulting from human control over nature, entailing, for example, dam or mining projects, oil extraction, land tenure reforms, or commercial logging, which provides economic gain for some, but at the expense of other, usually poor and marginalized, people's living space and livelihood (Cooper 1998; Hugo 2008; Vandergeest et al. 2007). In the case of the Sardar Sarovar dam project along the Narmada River in India, for example, which will benefit a few (i.e. by providing power to industries and cities, and promising water for irrigation to drought-stricken regions), over 60% of people adversely affected will be indigenous (Bose 2007: 190).

The Narmada dam project will consist of 30 large dams, 135 medium-size dams, and 3,000 minor dams (Bose 2007: 189; Garikipati 2005: 341; Robinson 2003: 10; Vandergeest et al. 2007: 11), and is planned to reach 138 meters high, displacing 200-320,000 people (Bose 2007: 190; Robinson 2003: 17). Dams in general have taken one of the largest tolls on the natural environment and the people living in it (Vandergeest et al.

2007: 6). Over 45,000 dams have been built in the past century, over half of them in China and India, displacing upwards of ten million people annually (Boon & Tra 2007: 89). The political powerlessness of marginalized stakeholders affected by dams is well-illustrated in the Narmada case. Those displaced by the dam were not consulted or involved in any level of planning for construction or resettlement:

the first sign that villagers had of plans [was] when strangers appeared, took measurements, and wrote numbers on stones. Only later did the villagers learn that these were surveyors and that the numbers indicated how many metres of water would submerge the land on which they lived (Vandergeest et al. 2007: 11).

Despite their initial lack of involvement, local people have been active in protesting the project for decades. Many villagers “have refused to leave their villages even as the waters rise to shoulder level and above” (Lambert 2002: 6). The project has been subject to heavy criticism, lawsuits, and in 1993, a withdrawal of World Bank support (Robinson 2003: 17). Still, the project continues and people are forced to migrate elsewhere, resulting in loss of livelihood, and economic, social, and political stability (Bose 2007; Robinson 2003: 17).

Resettlement following DID is often persecutory. As the contributing authors to *Development's Displacements* point out, DID is both violent and coercive (Vandergeest et al. 2007: 8). They “argue that violence and destruction have long been recognized as inherent to development” (Vandergeest et al. 2007: 8). Of the millions of people displaced by development “[m]any have effectively become refugees, not simply across borders but, in a majority of cases, within their own countries” (Vandergeest et al. 2007: 6). Some of the risks involved for certain stakeholders, as outlined by Michael Cernea, a

leading expert in DID, include landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, loss of access to common property and services, and social disarticulation (Cernea 2004: 15). Communities are fractured and economically restructured, dismantling networks and destroying traditional ways of life (Cernea 2000: 18-26; Garikipati 2005; Vandergeest et al. 2007: 7). Meanwhile, wealthy stakeholders stand to gain significant power and profit from the projects. Use of the term ‘refugee’ in cases of DID, regardless of whether or not political borders are crossed, puts emphasis on the persecutory nature of development projects, which are unquestionably anthropogenic, relatively easy to establish fault for, and which tend to target socially or economically marginalized groups.

The second type to be discussed are those displaced by climatic changes, which are most often gradual changes (desertification or sea level rise, for instance) but can be acute (such as increased frequency and severity of tropical storms and other extreme weather events). Whether climate change is natural or anthropogenic (or happening at all) is a contentious topic. However, there are millions of people who are being forcibly displaced or whose livelihoods are being destroyed by violent, changing weather patterns (IPCC II 2007; Myers 2001). This type will be discussed in further detail in the case study later in this paper.

The third type encompasses general environmental degradation, which can take the form of deforestation, desertification, erosion, salinization, pollution, toxification, or poor agricultural and land use practices. It might be linked to climate change or to deliberate human activity, but it is usually gradual, forcing migrants to decide not *whether* to leave but *when* to leave. Examples include the Sahel region of northern Africa, where severe

droughts in 1968-1973 and 1982-1984 resulted in millions of environmental refugees moving further south than usual, destroying the Sahara's protective border of vegetation, which in turn has degraded the land so severely that millions of people remain under constant threat of starvation and famine (Cooper 1998: 504-507; Hugo 1996: 115; Lopez 2007: 370; Myers 2001: 609; Warner et al. 2009: 9).

The effects of corporate deforestation in Haiti, combined with other political and economic factors, are another example of environmental degradation leading to high numbers of people fleeing the country every year (Myers 2001: 610; Suhrke 1993: 6). The ramifications of deforestation are many: soil erosion and consequent land degradation and loss of habitat; exposed shorelines which are more vulnerable to the effects of tropical storms (as compared to the Dominican Republic which shares the same small island); and unsustainable agricultural practices (Jacobson 1988: 257 Myers 2001: 610; Reuveny 2007: 664; Suhrke 1993: 7; Warner et al. 2008: 17). Although (like most refugees) the reasons for leaving Haiti are complex, according to Myers, "the predominant factor has been environmental" (2001: 610). Sadly, like many environmental refugees, their plight has not been recognized and Haitian 'boat people' risking their lives in flight have mostly been intercepted by the US Coast Guard and detained or sent back to Haiti (Mitchell 1994; Smith 2007: 619, 627).

Fourth is environmental disaster refugees. Disasters, whether natural or industrial, are unexpected and the effects are severe, forcing people to flee immediately but often only temporarily, until the disaster's effects are dealt with. These might be earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, or chemical spills or explosions. One of the most infamous examples of an industrial disaster was the 1986 nuclear explosion in Chernobyl.

Following the explosion, Soviet authorities remained silent and it was not until more than 24 hours later that "the first sign that anything had happened was detected by Sweden" (Cooper 1998: 514). Evacuation of the surrounding residents did not start until 40 hours later and "[w]ithin a month, thirty people had died from radiation poisoning [...] 237 people suffered from acute radiation sickness caused by direct exposure immediately following the explosion and over a hundred thousand people living within a 30 kilometer zone were exposed to dangerously high radiation levels" (Cooper 1998: 515). The explosion displaced over 100,000 people and to this day a 30 mile radius of the explosion remains uninhabitable (Keane 2004: 212).

Furthermore, as many authors have pointed out, 'natural' disasters are not entirely without connections to human activity (Bates 2002: 469; Boon & Tra 2007: 91; Jacobson 1988: 257). Not only are there more natural disasters than ever before due to the effects of climate change, but human activity (or inactivity) and land degradation can also exacerbate the effects of those disasters. Hurricane Katrina provides a recent and well-known example of such a disaster. Deforestation and urban expansion have "eliminated natural processes that could have ameliorated the impact of Katrina" (Reuveny 2008: 8). Furthermore, the lack of a hurricane protection infrastructure (in a poor and racialized space) significantly worsened the effects of the storm (Masquelier 2006; Reuveny 2008: 6). The storm devastated New Orleans, killing over 2,000 people and leaving about 100,000 more stranded and without aid for days (Chua et al. 2007; Masquelier 2006; Reuveny 2008: 6-7). Although the 1.5 million displaced people were popularly referred to as refugees, they received inadequate to minimal assistance (Masquelier 2006). Years later, 300-500,000 of these forced migrants are still not resettled, and possibly never will

be (Ivanov 2009: 18; Masquelier 2006; Renaud 2007: 22).

The fifth and final type of environmental refugee defined here is based on victims of environmental conflict, or conflicts in some way related to environmental resources or environmental changes, although this category seems rather contrived. In Salehyan's words, "claims of environmental determinism leading seamlessly from climate change to open warfare are suspect" (2008: 317). Although conflicts do tend to produce refugees, and there are often factors related to the environment in the midst of a conflict, attaching the prefix 'environmental' to 'refugee' in this case is unnecessary and reveals an underlying motivation to draw more attention to the 'environmental' aspect of forced migrants than to the 'refugee' aspect (see: Black 2001; Salehyan 2008). According to Malthusian theory (1798), "population growth would lead to resource scarcity, economic decline, starvation, malady, and conflict" (Reuveny 2008: 3). Returning to this theory, Homer-Dixon (1999) proposed that (1) "environmental scarcity leads to simple scarcity conflicts between States"; (2) "environmental scarcity causes large population movement, which in turn causes group-identity conflict"; and (3) "environmental scarcity causes economic deprivation and disrupts social institutions, leading to 'deprivation conflicts'" (Keane 2004: 219). Predicting or observing resource scarcities and resulting conflicts, has led many authors to use this to build a case for environmental conflict refugees, citing examples such as Haiti, the Sahel, or Guatemala (Conisbee & Simms 2003; Lambert 2002: 4; Lopez 2007; PACE 2009: para 9; Suhrke 1993; UNHCR 1993: 4; Warner et al. 2009: 10). However, these theories rely on a Social Darwinism perspective that does not take into account political and economic inequalities and realities. Also, as Idean Salehyan points out "[i]f climate change and resource scarcity lead to warfare, then the

lack of ingenuity and proper planning - at the local, national, and international levels - is to blame" (2008: 324).

The majority of all of these types of environmental migrants resettle within their own national boundaries. Although the Convention definition does require cross-border movement, some authors have argued that this should not be necessary for environmental refugees (El-Hinnawi 1985; Jacobson 1988; Myers 2001). Agreeing with this proposed exception, Rafael Reuveny cleverly and creatively theorizes that:

Environmental problems rarely follow political lines. What is being crossed by migrants is the 'environmental border,' where the degradation stops or the disaster doesn't reach. This logic is in fact shared by all out-migrants. Political refugees must cross political borders, usually of a nation. Those fleeing ethnic violence must cross ethnic borders, which may not follow political boundaries... (Reuveny 2008: 2).

Regardless of where they settle and how it is defined, what is certain, is that environmental changes do lead to migration. How these migrants should be dealt with is still an issue up for debate.

### **'Environmental Refugees' and the Necessity of Recognition**

As climate change and other types of human-induced environmental degradation or disasters are becoming more common, and resulting in deadlier impacts to people and the environment, migration is becoming more frequently necessary. Terminology surrounding these migrants, as evidenced by the abundance of literature on the topic, is confusing. Proposed terms include 'ecomigrants', 'environmental migrants', 'environmentally displaced persons', 'internally displaced persons', or 'economic migrants' to name a few (Black 2001; Hugo 2008; Lambert 2002; PACE 2009; Williams



2008). Regardless of the term, they are recognized by many as a category worthy of international concern and protection.

Most of these terms are not meant to diminish the need for assistance or protection. Some authors feel (or concede) that the present Convention “cannot be reasonably interpreted to include environmentally-displaced persons” (Lopez 2007: 387). Others feel that the Convention should not be altered because it “would lead to a devaluation of the current protection for refugees” (Keane 2004: 215) or that the Convention is already fragile enough, given the current political climate which focuses on national security and keeping ‘outsiders’ out (McNamara 2008: 48; Zetter 2007: 180, 185). Others feel that, in light of their unique status, environmental refugees should be addressed with their own convention, set of treaties, environmental refugee status, or through bilateral agreements (Lambert 2002: 4; Misquitta 2008: 6; Williams 2008: 518). The focus here is on aspects of protection or compensation outside the current regime of international refugee rights.

Another camp of activists agree that ‘environmental refugees’ are not recognized under the Convention, but advocate that the Convention should be expanded or modified to include them (Boon & Tra 2007; Conisbee & Simms 2003; Myers 1993, 1997, 2001; Nash 1999). The 1951 Convention was amended with the 1967 Protocol because it was recognized that “the scope of the Convention is limited to persons who became refugees as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951” and that “[w]ith the passage of time and the emergence of new refugee situations, the need was increasingly felt to make provisions of the Convention applicable to such new refugees” (UNHCR 2007: 6). As Cooper argues, “[d]enying people refugee status because they fail to meet the narrow definitional requirements established forty-six years ago is inconsistent with the spirit of

the 1951 Refugee Convention” (1998: 528).

Proposed modifications or expansions might look something like what has already been done by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), for example (Cooper 1998: 496; PACE 2009: 19). The OAU’s 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems follows the United Nations Convention and Protocol very closely throughout. It quotes the Convention’s article 1 definition, but follows it with:

the term ‘refugee’ shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality (OAU 1969: article 1).

This addendum is meant to accommodate additional refugees not recognized in the present Convention, applying “the spirit of the Charter” in “the African context” (OAU 1969: 2). Environmental degradation, in this case, is recognized as a serious disturbance that does lead to refugee situations, and therefore, does need to be addressed.

Finally, some people will argue that the Convention does not need to be modified or expanded as it can already be interpreted to include environmental refugees. Cooper based this argument on the 1951 Convention, saying that environmental refugees fit every aspect of the definition, because “environmental degradation is a form of persecution” and “environmental refugees meet the ‘for reasons of’ requirement of the refugee definition, since they are persecuted for reasons of their membership in a social group of persons who are politically powerless to protect their environment” (Cooper 1998: 487).

Environmental changes and degradation do lead to necessary migration. As Molly

Conisbee and Andrew Simms put it, "a well-founded fear of starvation or drowning is a compelling reason to escape" (2003: 31). While the 'well-founded fear' aspect of fitting into the Convention definition is well-documented and difficult to deny, the 'being persecuted' aspect is slightly more problematic, as some people will deny that the environment can actually persecute (Black 2001; Lonergan 1998; McAdam 2009; McNamara 2007; Suhrke 1993). As it has been mentioned, though, what was once considered natural, is in fact influenced by human action (Bates 2002; Jacobson 1988; Suhrke 1993). Human ability to influence nature is becoming more commonly understood, making such actions deliberate and, therefore, persecutory when they adversely affect people's lives. Similarly, human inaction can also increase the impacts of natural or industrial disasters (Cooper 1998; Masquelier 2006; Reuveny 2008).

Furthermore, humans have the ability to control or change the environment, to a certain degree, through acts like deforestation or development projects. For instance, as Pablo Bose writes, dams "are, in a sense, monuments to the vision of industrialized development of recent centuries, symbolic manifestations of the struggle to 'subdue' nature" (Bose 2007: 188). Additionally, the environment has been used, deliberately and systematically, as a tool of persecution. Conisbee and Simms support this argument, saying that "[h]arm is intentional when a set of policies is pursued in full knowledge of its damaging consequences" (2003: 30). Environmental destruction, for instance, has factored into US and other national military strategy, including: deforestation techniques involving Agent Orange in Vietnam; the use of Agent Orange or other herbicides to destroy crops; the ignition of oil fields in Kuwait in the Gulf War; or the use of landmines in Salvadorian and Afghan fields to undermine agriculture (Bates 2002: 472; Flinton

2001: 3; Lambert 2002: 5; Lopez 2007: 374). In regards to an unequal global economic system where the majority of environmental destruction takes place in the developing world in the name of benefits that only a wealthy few can reap, Conisbee and Simms say that recognizing environmental degradation as a form of persecution "would also take in a global system that allows parts of the world the freedom to pollute and consume without having to pick up the tab" (2003: 30). From my theoretical perspective, the social and ecological debt needs to be repaid in some form, and the recognition of environmental refugees and environmental persecution could be a possible step in that direction.

While, the case has been put forward by scholars to recognize environmental degradation as a form of persecution, Cooper's argument to recognize environmental refugees as a particular social group in the 'for reasons of' clause is more unique. In each of her case studies, Cooper demonstrates how government and authority figures had the knowledge and power to ameliorate or avoid the situation causing migration, but in each case, they failed to act; a decision that was completely out of the hands of those affected. In the case of Chernobyl, government silence prevented residents from even knowing that they were in imminent danger (Cooper 1998). In the Sahel, environmental conditions made people completely dependent on aid and in no position to implement or lobby for better policies (Cooper 1998). Her final case study looking at global warming and sea level rise suggests that the governments of nations contributing the most to pollution and greenhouse gases are fully aware of the impacts they have and are in a position to change their policies, while the people who most feel the effects are from poorer, developing countries, and without the political power to intervene (Cooper 1998). In all three cases,

those impacted by the environmental change had membership in a particular social group of persons who were politically powerless (Cooper 1998: 487). Adriana Aguilar and Neil Popović agree with this argument, also stating that the “worst victims tend also to be those with the least political clout. They are often racial and ethnic minorities, the poor, women and children” (1994: 197). In the face of persecution, and without the political power to advocate their own rights, international recognition becomes even more necessary.

DID cases also present a strong case not only of environmental persecution but also persecution *for reasons of* race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political opinion, since the majority of economic development projects happen in the developing world, where people tend to have the least political power or ability to effectively prevent the degradation to their environment or demand fair compensation (Cooper 1998; Hugo 2008; Vandergeest et al. 2007). Within so-called developed countries, like the United States, “it is the working class - and especially poorer people of color and the most politically oppressed segments of America’s underclass - who are being *selectively victimized* to the greatest extent by corporate environmental abuses” (Faber 2008: 16). Infliction of environmental abuse (or persecution) relates to reasons of ethno-racial and socio-economic status, because racially and economically marginalized communities are less likely to be in a position to protect their rights and environment.

Cooper’s argument was put forth over a decade ago, but as several authors have pointed out, few changes have been made and the debate does not appear to have been constructive (Lopez 2007; McNamara 2007, 2008; Williams 2008). As McNamara observed, much of the literature to date has focused on “‘documenting the problem’ as a

basis for advocating the case for protection” but since no policy has resulted, she focuses her research on “the varying ways in which United Nations agencies have portrayed and understood environmental refugees” (McNamara 2007: 13). With this understanding, her hope is that discussions might become more relevant on a practical level, targeting policy-makers, and resulting in changes (McNamara 2007: 14). While the debate continues, occasionally unproductively, the majority of scholars do agree that environmental refugees need to be recognized in some capacity.

Returning to the concept of labels put forth by Zetter (2007), attaching prefixes such as ‘environmental’ to the category of ‘refugee’, may not be a useful strategy for achieving the goal of protection. As Zetter argues, identifying different types of refugees serves to fracture and de-legitimize all refugees (2007: 181). In the case of environmental refugees, it has been argued that the term’s “popularity is due to the fact that it allows governments to deny applicants refugee status” (Keane 2004: 218). This idea is echoed by Black, who felt that the seductiveness of the label was related to governments’ ability to exclude asylum-seekers (2001: 11). As Zetter puts it, “[i]nstitutionalizing public disquiet in an array of new, complicated and exclusionary sub-labels of ‘refugee’, conceals and legitimizes the political objective of regulating claims as no more than a bureaucratic process” (Zetter 2007: 185). As McNamara suggests, the environmental refugee debate needs to take a new direction (2007: 14). Instead of advocating for the rights and protection of specific groups, such as environmental refugees, it might be more constructive to heed Zetter’s advice and focus on “de-labelling” refugees (Zetter 2007: 190).

In fact, the need for a sub-label often creates confusion in categorization. As it has

been suggested, the prefix 'environmental' is unhelpful because environmental factors cannot often be separated from economic or political factors (Black 2001: 10-11; Flintan 2001; Keane 2004: 221; McNamara 2007: 14; Reuveny 2008: 8). Furthermore, the social treatment they encounter as refugees is indistinguishable from other refugees. Like political refugees, if "[r]elief and protection is not delivered [...] refugees die or are pushed back across the border" but "[o]nce uprooted, however, environmental refugees like most other refugees found that displacement meant dependency and marginalization" (Suhrke 1993: 34).

Why then, if so-called 'environmental' refugees are treated similarly and very often fit the criteria for 'refugees', is the term 'environmental refugee' so popular? Especially when using the term does not particularly help the people affected, the question of why it is used becomes even more important. In certain circumstances, it does stretch the definition of 'refugee', for instance with DID where forced migrants do not normally cross political borders, or with climate change where the persecutory nature of the environmental degradation is in question. Within and outside of such circumstances, use of the term is worthy of investigation.

## METHODOLOGY

There are many types of environmental refugees and diverse examples within each type. However, in the interest of conducting an in-depth analysis, this research paper focuses on only one of these examples. While focusing on one case does have its limitations, since it cannot possibly represent all situations or types of environmental refugees and reactions to each case will vary, it is beneficial because it allows adequate

attention to be paid to the details of the case within the scope of this paper. Similarities between it and other cases of environmental persecution and migration can be drawn upon either for further research or in combination with arguments for a broader understanding of environmental refugees (or just refugees), thus resulting in better international protection for those who need it most. Therefore, to further address my research questions, I conduct a discourse analysis of the media surrounding prospective environmental refugees in the Pacific island state of Tuvalu.

The environmental degradation and ensuing migration from Tuvalu, which I describe in more detail in the case study, are among the reasons it was chosen as a site for study for this paper. The situation facing the people of Tuvalu fits the criteria set out by the scholars reviewed above for 'environmental refugees' (Boon & Tra 2007; Conisbee & Simms 2003; Cooper 1998; El-Hinnawi 1985; Jacobson 1988; Lambert 2002; McNamara 2007; McNamara & Gibson 2009; Myers 1993, 1997, 2001; Nash 1999; Reuveny 2007). First, there is a clear link between changing environmental factors and people's decisions to flee (see personal interviews in: Gemenne & Shen 2009; McNamara 2008; McNamara & Gibson 2009; Mortreux & Barnett 2009). Although this is true of many examples, even if the link is occasionally conflated with other socio-economic factors, Tuvalu's case for environmentally-induced migration is clear.

A review, as seen above, of the relevant literature on environmental refugees and related issues was conducted. This is followed by a more specific review of the literature surrounding climate change and the case in Tuvalu before moving on to a media discourse analysis of environmental refugees in Tuvalu.

A discourse analysis of the media surrounding this specific issue is used to further

analyze the problematic nature of the term 'environmental refugee' and to answer questions of why that is so, whether it is useful, and if so, how and to whom. By observing and understanding the way language is used to describe a topic - in this case, environmental refugees and claims of anthropogenic climate change in Tuvalu - one can see how, and for what purpose, it is constructed. According to Foucauldian theory, "discourses help to produce the very categories, facts and objects that they claim to describe" (Tonkiss 2004: 373). Like Zetter describes, refugee discourse and the way language is used to describe and label refugees, shapes perceptions of their legitimacy, as well as the legitimacy of the right of nations to exclude them from protected status (2007). This study looks at language as "not simply a neutral medium for communicating information or reporting on events, but a domain in which people's knowledge of the social world is actively shaped" (Tonkiss 2004: 373) thereby concluding how and why the term environmental refugees is useful from a political economy perspective.

A discourse analysis is useful and consistent with both a political economy and political ecology theoretical orientation because it can deconstruct the ways in which 'environmental refugees' are perceived by various stakeholders, as represented in the media, to suit their agendas. This is important because media hold significant influence over public opinion (McCombs 2004). It can also shed light on how environmental refugees are perceived by the public, which furthers the understanding of how and why the term may or may not be useful.

Because environmental refugees are of international concern, I have chosen four countries, in addition to Tuvalu, to provide a variety of international perspectives on what 'environmental refugee' means to various stakeholders represented in the print media.

Australia and New Zealand were chosen for their proximity to Tuvalu and as the prime immigration destinations for fleeing Tuvaluans. The United States was chosen because, along with Australia, it was the intended target of Tuvalu's threatened legal action against two of the world's worst polluters who had also refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. And finally Canada was chosen to provide a sample of opinions on an international issue, but as a country that was not directly implicated in the matter, either through the lawsuit or the immediate threat of immigration.

I focus on relevant articles from two major newspapers in each country. These include, from Australia, *The Australian (TA)* and *The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, from New Zealand, *The New Zealand Herald (NZH)* and *The Dominion Post (DP)*, from the United States, *The New York Times (NYT)* and *The Washington Times (WT)*, and from Canada, *The Globe and Mail (GM)* and *The National Post (NP)*. From Tuvalu, I look at articles published by *Tuvalu Media Corporation (TMC)*, which draws on various news sources from around the world to post on their website.

An initial search of several newspapers from each country led me to narrow the focus down to two each. Reasoning for this was largely based on feasibility due to time and space constraints. It was also based on topic coverage; some papers, such as US-based finance and business-oriented *The Wall Street Journal*, or Canadian city-based *The Toronto Star*, provided only minimal coverage. Finally the decision to narrow the focus to two papers per country was based on whether the papers had a wide enough readership to merit inclusion in the study. In Tuvalu, there is only one media corporation, which provides online news and radio broadcasting. For reasons of practicality, I focus on their online news.

Furthermore, this study focuses only on English-language media in all countries. While this does present limitations as it does not capture a truly international perspective, its advantages are numerous. For the purpose of this study, I was interested in opinions generated in the industrialized, mostly English-speaking world because, from a political ecology perspective, it is there that people should be taking some form of responsibility both for environmental destruction and environmental refugees, and from a political economy perspective, it is there that people have the most power to make changes that would recognize, protect, and prevent environmental refugees.

Each newspaper chosen, with the exception of *TMC* which was small enough to browse, has a search engine which was used to find relevant articles. Newspaper archives (some of which required a subscription) were searched using the terms 'Tuvalu' with 'climate change', 'global warming', 'im/migration', 'economic migrants', 'environmental refugees', 'refugees', 'lawsuit', and 'legal action'. Dates for articles and websites range from 2002, when the lawsuit was first proposed, because it represents a significant turning point in the quest for recognition of Tuvaluans as environmental refugees, to the summer of 2009, since, although the lawsuit did not materialize, the government and people of Tuvalu have not given up their struggle for recognition. Each article was then quickly scanned for relevance and recorded in a bibliographic database.

These relevant articles were then read more thoroughly and illustrative quotes were recorded, sorted and coded. Aware of my own expectations based on my literature review, I did not choose quotes with bias either for or against environmental refugees or any particular agenda (i.e. environmentalist, capitalist, nationalist), but only quotes that demonstrated or summarized an opinion related to environmental refugees. With

attention to the specific newspaper source, year, and country of origin, coding and sorting of quotations was based on the following agendas: pro-environmentalist (PE); anti-environmentalist or climate change deniers (AE); pro-refugee or environmental refugee (PF); anti-refugee or environmental refugee (AF); anti-immigration (AM); sympathetic to Tuvalu (ST); blaming Tuvalu (BT); and other (O). Each category was further divided, if necessary, into sub-groups based on whether the reasoning for the opinion was rooted in capitalist (C) or in racist or race-related (R) reasons. Based on these groupings, I then chose a few particularly illustrative quotes to represent the overall opinion in that category to include in the case study. From a political economy and ecology perspective, I used a discourse analysis method to analyze the meanings and implications of these opinions for the environment and environmental refugees.

## CASE STUDY: TUVALU

### Climate Change

Certain environmental disasters, such as hurricanes, industrial accidents, or development projects that displace populations, are largely undeniable when they occur. Climate change, however, including increases in ecological disasters, droughts, storms, and sea level rise, is a more contentious issue. Although scientific and anecdotal evidence continue to build, there are still a sizeable number of people who refute the concept of climate change.

The Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a scientific body composed of thousands of scientists from hundreds of countries around the world, asserts that climate change is real and must be treated seriously (Nobel

Foundation 2009). The IPCC's research looks at the human and natural origins of greenhouse gases as well as the effects of those gases on the climate (IPCC I 2007: 21-24). Their work includes comparative analyses of climatic changes and greenhouse gas levels from glacial-interglacial ice core data covering the past 650,000 years, and essentially concludes that human-induced greenhouse gases do have a significant and detrimental effect on our climate (IPCC I 2007: 24-25).

However, questioning why there are attempts to shift the burden of responsibility for climate change or debunk the concept altogether yields a variety of answers, and most often related to self-interest. While establishing legal recognition of environmental refugees may be beneficial to environmental migrants, countries wishing to restrict access to immigration, due to population pressures and xenophobic fears of the 'Other', are less anxious for such an action (McNamara 2007: 21; Reuveny 2008: 10; Zetter 2007: 180). The Australian government, for instance, has insisted that "there was no evidence to suggest Pacific island populations were in any imminent danger of being displaced by rising sea levels" (Williams 2008: 515). Similarly, the United Nations, which presumably does care about people affected by climate change, is limited by financial resources and by the international community as a whole. As one UN diplomat stated, "We have to think of donor countries' priorities" (McNamara 2008: 37).

Most important, denying climate change mitigates any need to take responsibility. Those charged with the worst contributions to global pollution, greenhouse gases, and climate change, are among the wealthiest and most powerful nations or individuals (Baum 2008; Boon & Tra 2007: 91; Conisbee & Simms 2003: 38; IPCC I & II 2007; Lambert 2002: 12; Nash 1999). They are also, therefore, the ones with the most to lose by

taking environmentalist recommendations seriously. The United States' failure to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, for example, was based on its desire for continued economic advancement and industrial production (Boon & Tra 2007: 93). Adopting more environmentalist practices would mean that everything from individual consumption patterns to 'offshore' emissions would need to be altered (Nash 1999: 233; Roberts & Parks 2007). The discourse of denial is fueled by the likelihood that climate change is accelerated by human activity and that dealing with it would be costly.

In fact, denial of this is so strong that promoting similar economic growth in developing countries affected by climate change has been proposed as a solution. For example, Reuveny suggests stimulating "economic growth in LDCs [less developed countries] in order to reduce their dependence on the environment and enable investment in development and enforcement of environmental regulations and cleanup plans" (2008: 10). This does not take into account the fact *everyone* depends on a healthy environment (IPCC I 2007: 393-419; Kalkstein & Smoyer 1993; Salleh 2009). Nor does it acknowledge that the planet simply does not have enough resources for everyone to consume at the current rate of industrialized countries (Salleh 2009:16-17). Other misguided solutions include population control and reduction in developing countries (Hugo 2008: 41; Reuveny 2008: 10). Again, this sidesteps the issue of over-consumption in industrialized countries by misplacing the onus of responsibility on (albeit large) populations of people who are much less responsible for climate change. Overall, the obsession with profit over environmental sustainability has altered people's perceptions of climate change and who should actually be taking responsibility for it.

While some individuals and scientists insist that climate change is not influenced by

human activity (CBC 2005), it is largely believed to be anthropogenic (Boon & Tra 2007; IPCC I 2007; Conisbee & Simms 2003: 23; Nash 1999: 230). In 2002, the Prime Minister of Tuvalu threatened to take legal action against the United States and Australia for that very reason (Conisbee & Simms 2003: 14; Lambert 2002: 11; Renaud 2007: 20). According to an individual in Tuvalu: "The international community needs to do something to help us. We're not responsible for climate change, so our country cannot disappear. The other countries need to fix this problem" (Warner et al. 2009: 17).

Regardless of whether climate change is natural or anthropogenic, it is happening and impacting people. In the south Pacific, for instance, it is "the primary threat to the survival and sustainability of their homelands" (McNamara 2008: 43). Pacific ambassadors are speaking up in the United Nations to draw attention to their disappearing countries' plights, but remain frustrated "over the international community's general denial of the seriousness of the impacts of climate change on these states" (McNamara 2008: 44). While many of the UN ambassadors interviewed by McNamara did not consider climate change to be a pressing issue, the attitude in the south Pacific is very different. According to one:

Climate change is already happening. ... there are serious water problems, because freshwater from the ground is being polluted by the intrusion of seawater... We are talking about a series of bad effects that are really affecting the security of the people - food security, water security and livelihood (McNamara 2008: 43)

More and more, these are no longer predictions, but real life scenarios, giving credence to earlier discussions of global warming and environmentally-induced migration.

Low-lying areas in developing countries are being disproportionately impacted by

rising sea levels with soil salinization, coastal erosion, damaged crops and drinking water, and prolonged saltwater flooding (Boon & Tra 2007: 92; Gemenne 2008; Gemenne & Shen 2009; IPCC II 2007; Ivanov 2009: 14; Lambert 2002: 4, 11; Reuveny 2008: 5; Warner et al. 2009: 18 Williams 2008: 505). In the past century, "sea level rose about 20 cm due to global warming-induced ice-pole melting" (Reuveny 2008: 8) and this rise is expected to continue (IPCC II 2007: 12). Adaptations to sea level rise, as seen with the Thames Barrier in London, England, dikes in Amsterdam, Netherlands, or other innovations elsewhere in Europe that account for a possible one meter sea level rise, are complex and expensive, thus available to industrialized nations only (IPCC II 13-17; Tol et al. 2008: 433). Reuveny writes that "LDCs are less able to adapt to climate change than DCs [developed countries] since they are poorer, less advanced technologically, and most importantly, are highly agricultural, hence depend much more crucially on the environment for livelihoods than DCs" (2008: 9). The shortsightedness of this observation is striking; not only are industrialized countries dependent on agricultural imports from these areas, but the long-term environmental and human health impacts resulting from loss of habitat, trees, and air quality will be worldwide (see: IPCC I 2007: 393-419; Kalkstein & Smoyer 1993). Climate change, whether natural or anthropogenic, is an issue that affects us all.

## **Tuvalu**

Tuvalu is a small, independent island nation located about halfway between Australia and Hawaii. Geographic factors, for instance that the nation is made up of nine coral atolls totaling only twenty-six square kilometers that rise no higher than five meters



above sea level, make it highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. These include increasing extreme weather events, king tides, soil salinization, and above all, sea level rise (Connisbee & Simms 2003: 14; Gemenne & Shen 2009; Lambert 2002: 11; McNamara 2008: 33; Mortreux & Barnett 2009: 105; Warner et al. 2009: 18; Williams 2008: 515-6). In fact, Tuvalu is projected to be one of the first nations to completely disappear under the sea, becoming uninhabitable by 2050 (Conisbee & Simms 2003: 2; Gemenne 2008: 161; Ivanov 2009:12; Lopez 2007: 372; McNamara 2008; Williams 2008: 515). Tuvalu also suffers other forms of land degradation from population pressures and a poor waste disposal system which is aggravated by an increasing reliance on foreign imports due to the inability to harvest food in saltwater-soaked soil (Gemenne 2008: 160; Gemenne & Shen 2009: 9).

As one Pacific ambassador puts it, "We always feared that this was going to happen and now it is... Countries like Tuvalu and the Maldives are being threatened, seriously threatened by rising sea levels" (McNamara 2008: 44). For instance, king tides, which "come directly from beneath the ground, and penetrate it from below [...] used to occur once in every five or six years; they have now become annual, triggering the fears of some that they might eventually become permanent" (Gemenne & Shen 2009: 8). Additionally, increased cyclones and hurricanes are evidence of a rising temperature, as they are generated only when the ocean's surface temperature reaches 27° C, and "[s]everal times during recent years the islands have been hit by severe hurricanes even though the most northern part of the island group lies outside the 'hurricane belt'" (Gemenne & Shen 2009: 8-9).

Due to the increasing severity of these environmental factors and fear of what the

future holds, environmentally or economically, a small number of Tuvaluans have already begun migrating, as qualified immigrants, mostly to Fiji and New Zealand (Gemenne 2008; Gemenne & Shen 2009; Mortreux & Barnett 2009: 108; Williams 2008: 515). Furthermore, the Tuvaluan government has taken concrete actions, albeit not always successful ones, to ensure its population will have somewhere to go when the environmental degradation becomes too great (see media accounts and Conisbee & Simms 2003: 14; Gupta 2007; Gemenne 2008; Gemenne & Shen 2009; Lambert 2002: 11; McNamara 2008: 45; Mortreux & Barnett 2009: 108; Renaud 2007: 20; Williams 2008: 515). For example, their government's actions have put their situation into the international spotlight: first by making their tiny country more visible through seeking membership in the United Nations in 2000 and using that as a stage to voice their plight (McNamara 2008: 45), and next by threatening a lawsuit against the US and Australia in 2002 (Conisbee & Simms 2003: 14; Gupta 2007; Lambert 2002: 11; Renaud 2007: 20). Although Tuvaluans have been aware of the effects of climate change and active in attempting to secure their future for some time, the time frame for this case study will be defined by the threatened lawsuit, because it was significant marker of their case, to the present, because their outspokenness at the United Nations and on the international stage have not slowed since.

Tuvalu's case presents and challenges many of the difficulties in addressing the increasingly frequent phenomenon of 'environmental refugees'. For one, migration drivers are complex, ranging from environmental to economic. Most individuals' decisions to leave Tuvalu have been because of the fear of environmental changes as well as the lack of economic opportunity found elsewhere (Gemenne & Shen 2009: 27;

McNamara & Gibson 2009; Mortreux & Barnett 2009: 111; Warner 2009: 16). Like most situations of environmental migration, the environment cannot be fully separated from the political or economic. However, environmental reasons for leaving Tuvalu are much more evident than in other similar situations.

For instance, in Bangladesh, where much of the country is threatened by climate change and sea level rise, political and economic tensions also riddle the country. The country suffers frequent flooding, cyclones, and storm surges, resulting in the displacement of about 500,000 people each year as well as thousands of deaths, crop and land losses, and soil and land degradation (Poncelet 2009; Warner et al. 2009: 13). Small islands in the Bay of Bengal, home to approximately four million people, are being covered by the rising sea, as is the coastal region of the mainland, and people are being forced to migrate north, aggravating political, ethnic, and religious tensions as they move (Podesta & Ogden 2007: 117). For most though, migration is simply not an option. According to a Bangladeshi fisherman: "We can't do anything else, which is why we think twice about migrating from here. We know the end is coming, but what work will we find to feed our families elsewhere?" (Warner et al. 2009: 13).

Like Bangladeshis, many people in Tuvalu are reluctant to relocate, in part because they have nowhere to go (Gemenne 2008: 155). Australia has refused to respond to any of Tuvalu's pleas for asylum, while New Zealand has extended an established migration scheme (i.e. unrelated to climate change) to allow 75 Tuvaluans per year to enter the country through the Pacific Access Category (PAC), providing they meet such criteria as having an employment offer and English language skills (Gemenne 2008: 162; Lopez 2007: 372; McAdam 2009: 30; Rebert 2006: 18; Warner 2009: 16; Williams 2008: 515).

Reluctance to leave is also related to the "fear that their cultural heritage might be lost" (Gemenne 2008: 161), as well as the religious belief in the Noah's Ark story and God's promise not to flood the earth again (Gemenne & Shen 2009: 14; McAdam 2009: 25; Mortreux & Barnett 2009: 109). Overall, most Tuvaluans are very resistant to the idea of migration and do not want to leave their home (Mortreux & Barnett 2009: 111). Any sea level rise-induced migration, therefore, should be considered forced.

Unlike many other environmentally-induced migration situations, Tuvaluans will necessarily need to cross international borders, given their geographic position, giving them more reason to be considered under the existing Convention for refugees. In cases of DID, such as the Narmada dam in India or the Three Gorges dam in China, or in cases of environmental disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans or the nuclear explosion in Chernobyl, migration occurs within national borders, where it is assumed that their own government will care for them.

However, unlike those disasters, sea level rise is gradual, leaving ample time to negotiate migration, and consequently, less leverage as refugees. However, given the socio-economic barriers to migration, and the fact that Tuvaluans, like most people affected by these gradual climatic changes are poor, many would-be environmental migrants 'choose' to stay where they are. Few Tuvaluans have had the opportunity or resources to migrate.

Furthermore, as the evidence of climate change and the case in Tuvalu should demonstrate, dismissing or ignoring these types of scenarios could have serious implications. In Tuvalu especially, waiting for gradual degradation to escalate into an emergency situation lacks foresight and amounts to persecution; because of their remote

geographic location in the middle of the Pacific, any type of emergency evacuation would be utterly impossible (Gemenne & Shen 2009: 21).

### **Environmental Refugees and Tuvalu in the Media**

A newspaper search based on the terms set out in my methodology originally yielded 114 relevant results. I further narrowed this down to 42 articles that dealt specifically with the concept of Tuvaluans as refugees or migrants due to climatic changes. Each of these articles touched on a variety of themes including global warming or climate change, debunking environmentalist theories, economics, lifestyle, national composition, general immigration, fears of the 'Other', blame and guilt. According to the coding set out in my methodology, the following is a representation of the various discourses found in all the articles. All emphases in quotations are my own.

Articles presenting a pro-environmentalist agenda while discussing environmental refugees or migrants were, by far, the most numerous. However, they took a wide variety of approaches in conveying their environmentalist stance. Some adopted a blame discourse, pinning fault for climate change and pollution-related environmental degradation on industrialized countries, for example, with a tongue-in-cheek argument, "my country is worried about maintaining its economic status and prosperity, that our coal is important because it powers China's factories and they produce consumer goods for Americans [and that] it is prudent that Australia moves slowly" [SMH] (Tanveer 2009), or more serious claims, attributing "the environmental degradation, deforestation and loss of wildlife and arable land [to the] seemingly *inexorable need of the rich* to experience ever-increasing levels of conspicuous consumption" [TA] (Doherty 2007).

A related guilt discourse also appeared frequently, attempting to use people's guilt for being responsible for climate change or environmental degradation to push them into environmentalist action. For example, "One of the paradoxes of global warming is that developing countries, which were not responsible for most of the greenhouse gas emissions that are changing the climate and did not reap the benefits of industrialization, will bear the brunt of the consequences" [NYT] (Byrayan & Rajan 2005), and "I find it astonishing that the U.S. still refuses to adopt serious measures to curb greenhouse gases" [NYT] (Kristof 2006). Similarly, a guilt or pity (for others' plight) discourse was used to draw attention to the moral or ethical responsibility of industrialized countries to use their unequal share of wealth and power to help their less fortunate counterparts. For instance, "As the wealthiest country in the Pacific, Australia can lead the global community on this humanitarian issue" [TMC] ("Tuvalu Refugees" 2008), or "The Howard Government may prefer the ostrich approach to climate change, of keeping its head stuck in the ground, but Pacific island countries don't have that option" [TMC] ("Australia's Labor" 2006).

Beyond guilt and blame, environmentalist discourse also took on elements of fear and self-interest. For example, the fear that climate change could also affect industrialized countries was expressed through comments such as "alarm bells were rung as Australia experienced its hottest year on record" [DP & SMH] (Banham & Richard "Call an Island" 2006), or the fear that it is better to be safe than sorry: "Granted, there is considerable uncertainty about the scale of the damage we are inflicting on the earth. But that's no reason to play Russian roulette with our biosphere" [NYT] (Kristof 2006). Some articles played on concerns about international reputation: "The Australian

Government, which has twice refused requests from Tuvalu to resettle its population, could risk isolation in the region" [DP & SMH] (Banham & Richard "Call an Island" 2006). And finally on a self-interested fear of what industrialized countries stand to lose, even if climate change only affects 'other' parts of the world, namely, their vacation spots, with "their boundless vistas of turquoise water framed by swaying coconut palms..." [NYT] (MacFarquhar 2009).

Finally, the environmentalist agenda occasionally took on a matter-of-fact tone, presenting evidence of climate change and simply stating that something needs to be done. For example, "Tackling climate change requires that we modify some of our behaviour patterns, but so what?" [TA] (Doherty 2007).

These were followed, in terms of volume, by articles presenting arguments against climate change or environmentalism, as well as articles presenting anti-immigration attitudes. Those writing against environmentalist ideas did so using discourses of self-interest, denial or matter-of-fact tones, and ridicule. Self-interest in this case, was usually about preserving lifestyles, as adopting environmentalist agendas would entail significant and costly changes. Statements such as "We'll be *compelled to allocate extraordinary levels of aid* as our neighbours struggle with the physical and socioeconomic effects [of climate change]" [SMH] (Wilkie 2006), reflected a sense of entitlement to unearned privileges.

Related to this was the denial of the seriousness of climate change, which was a popular discourse. For example, "With such limited resources, the alarmism of western environmentalists will do nothing to help Tuvaluans. Only the scientific facts will" [TMC] (Baliunas & Soon 2002), or according to the Australian government, "There was

no evidence to suggest Pacific islands populations were in any imminent danger of being displaced by rising sea levels" [SMH & TMC] (Banham "Ministers Unmoved" 2006). Matter-of-fact tones were frequently used to convey this agenda: "The moral of the story, as Plimer says, is that 'a rise in sea level produces coral atolls. It does not destroy them. Darwin showed this in 1842. [...] Why has this been ignored by the catastrophists?'" [TA] (Pearson 2006).

Another frequently employed method of debunking environmentalist theories was to use ridicule. Following several paragraphs documenting environmentalist Lester Brown's poor judgement he is quoted as saying "My sense is sea-level rise is a reasonably well-established trend" [TMC] (Baliunas & Soon 2002). This is followed by the authors' commentary: "Well, rather than rely on Brown's 'sense' of sea level rise, let's check the instruments [which] show that Tuvalu has suffered, at worst, no sea level rise. So much for Brown's sense of sea level trends for Tuvalu" [TMC] (Baliunas & Soon 2002). Similarly, journalists employ ridiculing adjectives to attempt to debunk environmentalist theories. For example, "Greenhouse gas sceptics have [...] been turned into deniers, the *moral equivalent of anti-Semites*, along with David Irving and the *pseudo-historians* who say the Holocaust never happened", and "Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell is a *born-again believer* in the greenhouse crisis, or 'cooking the planet'", as well as referring to scientific research "as a *left-wing beat-up* propelled by *mad greenies* and *anxious scientists*" [TA] (Pearson 2006). Finally, referring to Tuvalu's proposed legal suit, in an article entitled "*Tuvalunacy*: Island lawsuit may force Bush to reject Kyoto", it was asserted that "Specifically, even before a court ruled by *loopy Europeans*, the *Toovies*' complaint poses greater danger to the eco-fear industry than to

Australia because it will reveal the *mythical scientific 'consensus'* as a small vocal minority of *calamity groupies* enamoured of unlimited 'relevance' (funding)" [WT] (Horner 2002).

Anti-immigration attitudes, in general, came up frequently in articles discussing environmentally-induced migration from Tuvalu. These attitudes had little to do with environmental factors and were more related to unwanted migrants. Headlines such as "Pacific Migrants 'Drain on Economy'" [DP] (Ling 2008) and "Let Unskilled Workers In, Australia Told" [SMH] (Banham "Unskilled Workers" 2006), conveyed this attitude. These capitalist or economically-motivated attitudes against allowing Tuvaluans into industrialized countries were further expressed in discussions on PAC, which New Zealand has been accused of not honouring: "Immigration Minister Paul Swain [...] said there would always be 'huge tension' in such immigration schemes, where countries like New Zealand wanted the best migrants while poorer countries like Tuvalu would not want to give up their best people" [TMC] ("Tuvalu Premier" 2004).

Even more than economics, race-related reasons were behind many voices discouraging immigration. These comments took many forms, for instance, in a story covering a "call for the National Party to rethink its race policies in view of the projected '*browning*' of the population" [NZH] (Collins 2005). This included details on a "discussion paper in 2002 proposing to scrap *special immigration quotas* for people from Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu and Kiribati" [NZH] (Collins 2005). Likewise, other stories reported on "Pacific Islanders' crime rates, poor education and low employment [which] are creating an *underclass* and a *drain on the economy*" [DP] (Ling 2008). Other voices managed to connect racial exclusion to an environmentalist agenda, saying that

"Accepting climate refugees from Pacific nations affected by rising sea levels was 'policy on the run' that would add to Australia's already high greenhouse emissions" and that "Australia was the last place in the world that should take in climate refugees given its high per capita emission rate" [TA] (Hodge "No Room" 2006).

While these are themes appearing in articles about environmental refugees, and it is therefore important to look at them, it is equally important to examine how the term itself is used in the articles. Overall, 'environmental refugees' received slightly more negative press than supportive press. Some voices felt the term 'environmental refugee' was "inappropriate" [DP] (Easton 2007) or "absurd" [SMH & TMC] (Banham "Ministers Unmoved" 2006). Furthermore, "This distinction between the obligation owed toward a refugee in contrast to other people who are in trouble - even desperate trouble - is why the terminology matters" [WT] (Stefanova 2009).

Economically motivated concerns about environmental refugees were numerous. For example, "New Zealand could *expect more demands* to be placed on its aid programme" [DP] (Easton 2007). References were made to Australia's "*endless obligations* to a new class of mendicants" [TA] (Pearson 2006). Providing assistance was branded as "daylight madness. Our island neighbours may well have claims on our foreign aid, but as a matter of charity rather than any sort of entitlement" [TA] (Pearson 2006).

These represent more technical or capitalist reasons for excluding or debunking environmental refugees, while the following examples are more closely tied to race and racism: "Australia has been warned it may face a *flood* of environmental refugees within a decade" [TA] (Lewis 2006); and "There are areas (such as Bangladesh), also at risk with

much larger populations, [...] I see no reason why a country such as Australia couldn't take small populations (of climate refugees) but you have to be *careful you don't open the doors* for everybody" [TA] (Hodge "No Room" 2006).

Articles promoting a positive reception to environmental refugees, many of which were published by TMC, included statements such as, "The National Council of Women is concerned the government is being advised against allowing environmental refugees into the country" [TMC] ("Backing Environmental" 2007); "A number of people from Tuvalu have already emigrated to avoid being drowned by rising sea levels" [NP] (Taylor 2002); "Several islands have been lost to the sea in the past decade and there has been widespread shoreline erosion and salt contamination of areas used to grow the staple root crop pulaka" [TMC] (Crouch 2008); and "A rapidly warming planet may soon create a new class of refugees -- those fleeing climate change in their homelands" [TMC] (Macan-Markar 2008). Playing on guilt and reputation, one article's response to the government's refusal to accept environmental refugees was to say, "More opportunities to recast ourselves as a responsible member of the international community are slipping through our fingers" [SMH] (Wilkie 2006). Similarly, "One option for dealing with this is to tighten our borders and inure ourselves to the exiles' cries for help. A more sensible, and just, approach is [...] to grant entry" [NYT] (Byrayan & Rajan 2005).

Lastly, some discourse focused specifically on Tuvalu, whether it was sympathetic to their unique situation or accusatory. Sympathy was expressed by stating, for example, "The sentiment among Pacific Islanders suggests that they do not want to abandon their homelands or be absorbed into cultures where indigenous people already struggle from acceptance" [NYT] (MacFarquhar 2009), or by giving voice to individual

Tuvaluans saying, for example, "If we lose our land we risk losing our identity" [TMC] (Crouch 2008). Meanwhile, other voices assigned blame for Tuvalu's situation to Tuvaluans themselves, saying "It is likely that the beach erosion and building on the island caused the sea flooding of areas over the last decade. And that is a true environmental concern. But it is a local, man-made problem that will not be solved with massive cuts in carbon dioxide emission" [TMC] (Baliunas & Soon 2002), thereby alleviating themselves of any responsibility. Others used Tuvalu's situation to boost their own self-image, for example, in the article "Aussies Help Stop Pacific Islands Going to Waste", it asserted that although Tuvaluans were to blame, Australians had "the expertise to help" [TA] (Hodge "Aussies Help" 2005).

## ANALYSIS

As seen in the discourse above, as well as in the literature reviews, the term environmental refugee has many different meanings and usages depending on who is using it and how the language is manipulated. Situations surrounding any case of environmental refugees are fraught with inequalities. While reasons for wanting to deny status to environmental refugees are numerous and tend to be backed by powerful stakeholders, reasons for wanting to acknowledge them are connected to environmentalist and humanitarian agendas, which, in the current political economy, do not have significant political or economic support.

Environmentalists are the stakeholders who tend to employ the term 'environmental refugee' most frequently. They use it as a political tool to further their cause, despite its lack of official recognition or usefulness for the 'refugees' themselves. As Zetter argues,

the act of labelling someone a refugee has the strengths of “forming, transforming and politicizing an identity” (2007: 174). Jane McAdam further argues that “the term seems to have been claimed as a politically powerful advocacy tool” (2009: 6). Within the pro-environmentalist discourse seen in the media, some of the methods of utilizing the perceived political leverage derived from the term ‘environmental refugee’ were questionably useful. Applying the label ‘refugee’ insinuates that persecution is taking place, and consequently lays blame. However, this blame is not often well-received and pushes people into a defensive state, which is demonstrated in much of the anti-environmentalist discourse in the media, for example, through the use of ridicule or through the sense of entitlement to unearned power and wealth as well to consumeristic lifestyles that exploit an unequal share of the earth’s resources.

It was self-interested lifestyles and activities that led to this degree of environmental degradation in the first place. Businesses and corporations that exploit the environment for their immediate profit, governments that allow them to do so in the name of power, and consumerist demands in the industrialized world for an increasingly elevated ‘quality of life’ that depends on environmentally destructive production and consumption practices, all play a role in environmental degradation throughout the world.

Meanwhile, countries like Tuvalu and the Maldives or Bangladesh are disappearing under a warming, rising sea. In other pockets of the world, processes like desertification and deforestation are claiming lives and livelihoods as well as the natural environment. Development projects are displacing large numbers of people and the ensuing resettlement that ‘experts’ believe justify the means is destroying their previous ways of life and livelihoods. Left out of consultation, planning and decision-making regarding

their homeland, and with the loss of their natural environment, these people are becoming even more powerless and more dependent on foreign aid as they are pushed into the bottom rungs of capitalist systems. Elsewhere in the world, toxic dumping and industrial activity are polluting the air, ground, and water for nearby communities in developing countries and taking a serious toll on people’s health, including reproductive health (Pellow 2007: 152).

Can it be pure coincidence that this is happening almost exclusively in poor, racialized areas of the world? If one looks at industrialized nations, the answer is clearly no. Indigenous communities in Canada, who lack access to resources, decision-making power and wealth, also lack access to clean water and proper sanitation, and are frequently victims of environmental racism. For example, the Kashechewan First Nations reserve near James Bay, one of *several* Ontario reserves identified with unsafe drinking water, had been under a boil water advisory for two years and the government had been well-aware of major water treatment risks, before the community had to be evacuated due to E. coli contamination in 2005 (Gosine & Teelucksingh 2008: 38). In the US, Hurricane Katrina affected mostly poor and racialized people, whose community had been established on land below sea level and vulnerable to environmental disaster, and who were unable to afford adequate protective measures against extreme weather, from levees to control the river to cars in which to flee (Bourne 2007; Reuveny 2008: 7-8). Given the situation, an otherwise preventable environmental disaster in New Orleans was foreseeable (Bourne 2007; Masquelier 2006: 736; Reuveny 2008: 7-8; Sharkey 2007). Furthermore, the delayed and inadequate response following the environmental disaster has been attributed by many to race and racism (Masquelier 2006; Reuveny 2008: 7-8;

Sharkey 2007). Examples of environmental racism such as these abound throughout the industrialized world (for example, see: Faber 2007; Gosine & Teelucksingh 2008).

Similar trends exist in the developing world, some of which were documented in this paper's literature review. The evolution of the colonial world and the quest for power has led to innumerable inequalities and injustices and it is not a coincidence that it is in poor, racialized areas that people lack access to power and control over their environment. Pushed into positions of little socio-economic power, they can neither afford to adapt nor leave. Because, throughout the world, this is due to the self-interested and deliberate actions of more powerful stakeholders, it amounts to persecution.

It is also likely only to be self-interest that will prompt changes to current patterns. Some of the environmentalist discourse in the media picked up on this idea, playing on concerns about international reputation or on fears that 'if it can happen to them it can happen to us' and that we only have one earth to experiment with. Whereas other environmentalist discourses were disputed, rejected, or ridiculed, these discourses received no such negative response.

Negative responses to environmentalist discourse were purely self-interested, arising from a capitalist desire to maintain present lifestyles or from a racist desire to exclude the 'Other' from national interests/identity and to blame the 'Other' for the socio-economic and environmental problems within their countries as well as in industrialized countries if they had immigrated there. Blaming Pacific island immigrants for their poor socio-economic standing in New Zealand or Australia, for example, stating "They have the highest unemployment in every age group, are less likely to start businesses and have lower rates of self-employment [...] are over-represented in crime

statistics and have higher rates of convictions and prosecutions. They are also more likely to be victims of violent crime" (Ling 2008). These comments do not consider any of the historical or social processes that led to such a situation, including colonialism, neo-colonialism, racial profiling, and systemic discrimination. It indicates that migrants are receiving poor reception and settlement services and facing numerous racial barriers to integration. While New Zealanders are concerned about "high fertility and current immigration levels [leading to] a significant population that can contribute little to economic growth" (Ling 2008), migrants are more concerned about their ability to survive in a new culture and about the loss of their homeland (Gemenne 2008: 161; Mortreux & Barnett 2009: 108).

The self-interest of preserving lifestyles and national interests and of rejecting environmental refugees as worthy migrants all require the denial of climate change and the severity of other types of environmental degradation. The denial discourse was strong in media accounts of environmental refugees, as were diversionary tactics, such as misplacing blame on migrants or focusing on the 'excessive demands' industrialized countries were facing in providing assistance or asylum.

Until those in power can see the plight of environmental refugees as connected to their own lives, or have some self-interested reason to comply with the demands or desires of powerless stakeholders (from people to the environment), the global capitalist system that exploits these inequalities and runs the world today is unlikely to change. Sadly, the threat of environmental persecution in the industrialized world is perhaps still too far off to instill fear. Worse still, by the time it is an imminent danger, it will almost certainly be too late.



On a positive note, though, media support for climate change concerns and environmentalist voices is growing. Each paper showed an evolution from earlier denial of climate change to acceptance that it was indeed happening, voicing related environmentalist concerns and recommendations. Climate change, along with other types of environmental degradation, is already seriously impacting many parts of the developing world and resulting in cases of forced migration. With the media's influence on public opinion and their growing support for the cause, hopefully the time will be soon that the greater public will embrace environmentalism, not just for the environmental refugees or for the 'Other' who suffers more environmental persecution, but for themselves and the future of everyone's planet.

## CONCLUSION

Environmental refugees pose a unique challenge to immigration law and policy. With so many different stakeholders advocating for and against their recognition, it comes down to political and economic, as well as ecological power. The inequalities inherent in the current global system mean that the politically and economically powerful have more influence, regardless of the human or environmental cost. The ability to protect one's interests or the environment is compromised by powerful stakeholders' greed and lack of foresight. The refusal or inability to recognize environmental refugees is related to the same problem (the desire to achieve or maintain wealth). But as Nash, writing from a Canadian perspective, points out, "[t]heir current plight is intimately connected with our future predicament" (1999: 237).

Their 'current plight' could be anything from DID, to natural or anthropogenic

disasters, to gradual degradation and climate change. The case in Tuvalu exemplifies one of the many potential deadly impacts of climate change. Sea level rise has led to erosion, land loss, soil salinization, loss of crops and fresh water, and it is only predicted to become worse. Tuvalu is already well along the way to becoming the first nation to be completely uninhabitable due to climate change and sea level rise. In addition, even larger numbers of people are being displaced in low-lying areas of other nations, like Bangladesh.

From an immigration and settlement perspective, the stability of the environment should be considered relevant. As cases of environmental refugees reveal, when the environment is degraded, migration (frequently forced) ensues. Neither the migrants nor the potential host countries tend to welcome this migration. Thus the stability of the environment is important in avoiding political or economic tensions arising from such unwanted migration.

The resistance of nations to accept environmental refugees, combined with the need of places like Tuvalu to have somewhere to go, demonstrates the urgency of recognizing this category of people in policy. Presently, this resistance to accepting environmental refugees is facilitated by the lack of policy or legal definition. As it was shown in the literature review and the discourse analysis, resistance is often based on race or racialized assumptions about the 'Other'. Meanwhile, 'environmental refugees' are suffering persecution with little recognition or recourse.

Since environmental refugees are not officially recognized, their migration is made extremely difficult. They hold little power to persuade nations to offer them protection or to avoid environmentally detrimental practices in the first place. Recognizing

environmental refugees (i.e. as *refugees*, and environmental degradation as a tool of persecution) could reverse some of the power dynamic by adding a persecutory stigma to environmental degradation. This would give more political sway to minor stakeholders and place more emphasis on protecting the environment, resulting in better environmental practices and better treatment of environmental refugees.

Environmental protection and environmentally sustainable practices are beneficial to everyone. The unfortunate reality is that this would involve significant shifts in lifestyle, especially in the industrialized world. As much of the media discourse demonstrated, many people are unwilling to make these types of changes, or are unable to even recognize the benefits in doing so.

Localized degradation, from development projects to toxic dumping to the loss of one tiny nation state under a rising sea, has chain reactions and far-reaching implications for the whole world. While political power and financial wealth will allow some people to adapt and avoid environmental dangers temporarily, this is a very short-sighted solution. The world's environment is changing, largely due to human activity, and it is time that people begin to change with it.

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