



## **“We are all Marshallese”**

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The Marshall Islands have much to teach us about adapting to challenges like climate change. While they may be remote and unfamiliar to many Americans, the Marshall Islands includes over one thousand islands scattered across a vast region of Micronesia in the Pacific Ocean.

With an average elevation of only six feet above sea level, the Marshall Islands is one of the most low-lying spots on earth. The Marshallese have traditionally been great navigators and canoe-builders, essential skills for sailing great distances between island communities.

But centuries of colonization have impacted the Marshallese people and their traditions. Portuguese and Spanish explorers first claimed the atolls, then in 1885 Spain sold the Islands to Germany. After World War I, the Japan took control of Germany’s Pacific territories. With each wave of occupation many traditional practices were lost.

Then came the nuclear testing. The United States captured the Marshall Islands during World War II, and from 1946 to 1958 the U.S. detonated 67 atomic bombs around the Bikini and Enewetak atolls. Entire communities were forced to evacuate, and many families remain dislocated. While the Republic of the Marshall Islands gained sovereignty in 1979, it quickly signed a Compact of Free Association with the U.S., under which it gains military protection, access to live and work in the U.S., and economic benefit from U.S. military and commercial activity.

But the cost to Marshallese society has been a flood of Americanization. And environmental contamination and radiation sickness from the nuclear testing persist today. In a 1999 resolution “The Legacy of U.S. Atomic Testing in the Marshall Islands” the United Church of Christ called for an “official apology and full redress” to the Marshallese people. While the U.S. Government agreed to \$1.5 billion in assistance through 2023, it still has not apologized to the RMI.

Perhaps the most serious challenge to the Marshall Islands today is global warming. Like other low-lying islands, the Marshall Islands has contributed little to carbon pollution, but is among the most vulnerable to its effects. Its atolls will eventually disappear due to rising sea levels unless climate change is reversed. Recently Bikini leaders bought 283 acres of land in Hawaii as a last resort when their homeland becomes uninhabitable. And climate change is bringing the nuclear issue again to the foreground. The United Nations is warning that rising seawater threatens to damage a concrete facility in Enewetak holding nuclear waste, which could leak radioactive material into the ocean.

Some of the most prophetic voices calling attention to climate challenges are from the Pacific. For example Dr. Hilda Heine, the first woman President of the Marshall Islands, highlights the potential of Marshallese and other Pacific Islanders to take the lead on adaptation and sustainability strategies to stave off the effects of climate change. President Heine has declared “We are all Marshallese!” For not only are the Marshall Islands’ 55,000 residents threatened by rising sea levels, but another 800 million people living in coastal cities around the world are at similar risk, and by 2050 a billion people could become climate refugees.

Like the Marshall Plan that helped Europe rebuild after World War II, President Heine has called for a new climate Marshall Plan—a global strategy led by the experience of Pacific Islanders that demonstrates that those whose land and way of life are most at risk from climate change often have the skills and knowledge to develop resilience and the determination to survive. Perhaps the local knowledge of the Pacific will show us all how to navigate these troubled waters.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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