



The displacement of people due to rising sea levels is a near and present danger for island nations.

SARA PHILLIPS REPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS STACEY

# stranded

We live in an interesting time. Daily, we hear dire warnings of global food shortages, climate change and the end of cheap oil. You could be forgiven for becoming a little blasé about the latest end-is-nigh prophesy splashed across the front page of the country's newspapers. But what if these doom-sayers are right, and the end really is nigh?

The European Community has labelled a 2 degrees Celsius change in global temperatures enough to bring about "dangerous" climate change. According to Professor Jean Palutikof, Director of the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) housed at Griffith University, an increase of 1.4 degrees Celsius is inevitable even if we froze all our greenhouse gas emitting activities right now. The reality of course is that we won't and so temperatures are likely to be much higher.

When we hit a 2 degrees Celsius change, or even before, we're looking at a world gone topsy-turvy. Oceans lapping at seaside homes, bushfires, more droughts, cyclones popping up in odd places: all those nightmare scenarios that Al Gore and his slide show warned us about. The NCCARF is dedicated to developing plans for dealing with these kinds of scenarios.

Professor Palutikof says industry and individuals need to be looking at an 80 per cent cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 to prevent hitting the 2 degrees Celsius mark.

Can we do it? "I find it hard to visualise a world in which we have cut emissions by 80 per cent," Professor Palutikof says. "Somehow I don't get the feeling that politicians, policy makers have got their head around what will be needed to achieve those levels of cuts. I think they're all in denial."

Andrew Ash is the director of the CSIRO's Climate Change Adaptation Flagship program. His group works closely with the NCCARF but specialises in predicting how climate change will affect agriculture, ecosystems and urban areas (among other things). He lists the likely changes to Australia's climate as effects such as increased temperatures, more severe droughts, decreased rainfall, violent storms and sea level rise.

The IPCC, (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), a collaboration of around 2000 scientists from around the globe, has currently pegged oceans to increase by 18 to 59 centimetres by the end of this century. But many believe this estimate is conservative. James Hansen, a climate scientist with NASA, believes the IPCC has looked only at a linear increase in sea level rise, and posits that a non-linear reality is more likely. His well considered opinion is that we could be looking at a sea level rise of five metres in 100 years. If Hansen is right, most of the Gold Coast and large parts of Brisbane will be underwater by the time Griffith celebrates its centenary.

While this would undoubtedly be an unprecedented disaster, we don't need sea levels to rise by so much for people to be robbed of their homes. Mara Bun from non-government organisation Green Cross cites IPCC research that estimates a one metre sea level rise will displace 145 million people. "And the great bulk of those are in the Asia-Pacific region," she says. "For low-lying Pacific Island communities and delta communities that are low-lying and exposed to the effects of sea level rise, there is the potential that very serious displacement will occur and in some cases entire island states won't really be able to sustain livelihoods."

Australia, comparatively speaking, is protected from the worst of climate change. We have plenty of higher ground to retreat to and a strong economy that can finance the likely changes required. Andrew Ash says: "As a nation we've got the makings of the ability to cope with climate change a lot better than many other nations. We've got a pretty high standard of living and good governance, so we have a pretty high adaptive capacity."

Professor Palutikof agrees: "Countries that already have issues—poor governance, low adaptive capacity, not enough money, not enough educated people, poor governments, corrupt governments; they have an existing set of problems and when you add climate change to the mix, then these people are in real trouble."

The displaced people will inevitably turn to nations more able to cope with climate change than their own. But this is when things get tricky. As Mara Bun says: "We live in a country where one boatload of refugees played a pivotal role in the outcome of an election."

Millions of homeless islanders may not be welcomed with open arms on our shores. And to complicate matters, unless things change, legally they will have no standing. The current definition of a refugee, according to the UN, is: "A 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." This definition mentions only persecution, not what happens when a person's entire nation has been made uninhabitable, or has been completely wiped from the face of the Earth.

It creates visions of a situation in which boatloads of people arrive in Australia with no home to be deported to, but no status as refugees. In the face of this scenario, the Federal Government has pledged \$150 million over three years to assist our Pacific Island neighbours, and has recently announced the cessation of mandatory detention for refugees.

But some nations are not waiting for the Australian Government to come to their rescue; one at least is acting already.

When you think of tropical islands you're probably imagining Kiribati. A collection of 33 coral atolls sprinkled about the equator in the Pacific Ocean, only one is more than two metres above sea level. The far-flung nation has all the white sands and waving coconut trees you could want. But the wide smiles of the friendly locals hide the distressing fact that this island nation will be one of the first to go under if sea level rises are as predicted.

"We have to find the next highest spot. At the moment there's only the coconut trees," the president of Kiribati, Anote Tong, told *ABC Radio* recently. And so the plan is to prepare the 110,000 citizens for a potential move to nations that have more to offer than treetops. But Anote Tong does not want his people to arrive crowded into leaking boats as the last of the islands sinks beneath the waves; he wants his people to be attractive, sought after migrants. "I think it is important that

if our people were to relocate, they should do so as trained, skilled people rather than people coming ... and adding to the problems, their own problems and to the national problems," he said.

Through the Australian Government agency AusAID, a first cohort of 25 Kiribatis took up scholarships through Griffith University at the Metropolitan South Institute of TAFE in 2007, studying nursing or social work. A second group has recently arrived.

Student coordinator Dr Cosette Monk said the students, mostly in their 20s, are performing exceptionally well. "They are showing a great lot of potential in their nursing skills and I'm very happy with that." Dr Monk believes the program is an excellent initiative. "I think the President is a man of great foresight and he wants a good future for his people. That's why he's requested the youth of Kiribati get all the advantages that they could get. He can see that his own country can't look after them or give them the education they need to progress." Dr Monk is confident that the program will soon be adopted by other universities around Australia and overseas. "We're looking at it and refining the program and I think replication is going to be one of the positives from this program."

Similarly, Green Cross is not waiting for the government. "The first step is to have a focal point for debate that is very informed and highly democratic, because ordinary people are actually ahead of their government when it comes to thinking about how climate change is impacting on our community," says Mara Bun.

Accordingly, Green Cross, in partnership with other non-government organisations, Griffith University and other academic institutes, has instigated the National People's Assembly. It is based on a Scandinavian system, in which ordinary people are given information and resources by a steering committee of experts. The ordinary folk then come up with solutions, ideas are then debated and deliberated, with final recommendations being presented to the federal government. The Green Cross forum was conducted at the end of August (see sidebar).

So while the newspapers blare the end of days, there are those who have seen the future and are quietly preparing for its inevitable passage. ▣

*Sara Phillips is a science journalist and editor of G Magazine, a guide for eco-living.*

# Green Cross

## The People's Assembly: the verdict

Professor Jan McDonald from Griffith University was part of the expert panel at the Green Cross People's Assembly. She reports on the six themes that make up the Panel's recommendations.

1. *Mitigation:* The Government should apply revenue from an Emissions Trading Scheme to help those adversely affected by price rises and to establish an Innovation Fund for renewable energy and efficiency technologies. It should introduce an emissions/carbon labelling scheme on consumer goods and tax incentives for renewables and low-emissions research and development.
2. *Adaptation:* Australia should help build the natural adaptive capacity of communities in the Pacific Islands, working with women, youth, churches, and other civil society organisations.
3. *Governance Arrangement:* A Climate Change Commission should be established to drive the transition to a low-emissions future and facilitate adaptation in the region.
4. *Preparing for Displacement:* More resources and flexible visa options are needed to enable resettlement and community integration for future climate migrants. Coordinated disaster response and insurance schemes can support post-disaster recovery of vulnerable Asia-Pacific communities.
5. *Youth:* Support is needed for existing national and regional youth networks to encourage the engagement and education of young people in climate impacts and adaptation.
6. *Torres Strait Islands:* Inter-agency planning is needed to address preparedness, adaptation and emergency response in Torres Strait Islands.

The full Report and Recommendations can be found at [www.greencrossaustralia.org](http://www.greencrossaustralia.org)