



## Understanding the role of environmental and social conditions on the migration of Marshallese Islanders

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*High tides on October 9, 2014 cause flooding in Majuro - Credit: Kathy Kijiner.*

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is a nation of widely dispersed, low-lying coral atolls and islands, with over 100 square miles of land area scattered across 750,000 square miles of ocean. Average elevation for the RMI is approximately 7 feet above mean sea level, but many islands and atolls are much lower. As climate change causes sea level to rise and weather patterns to shift, the Marshall Islands are increasingly having to contend with flooding and drought that damages agriculture, homes, and infrastructure. Residents are increasingly making the difficult choice to leave their home islands in the hope of a more stable future, moving within the country to larger islands or to the United States where the Compact of Free Association allows them to live and work without a visa. Factors triggering human migration are complex and often intertwined, making it difficult to pinpoint and address specific causes. Our work investigates the multi-causal nature of Marshallese migration to better understand the extent to which climate stressors and their impacts are driving migration.

Preliminary results show that there is widespread migration both within the RMI and to the US. We surveyed Marshallese Islanders on three islands in the RMI as well as in Hawai'i, and most respondents agreed they were concerned about the effects of climate change. Many RMI respondents felt that their islands were not well-prepared for those effects, but at the same time were optimistic that government intervention would allow

life to continue much as usual, and they would be able to stay on their islands. Migrants interviewed in Hawai'i were more pessimistic about the effects of climate change on the RMI both currently and in the future. Both groups agreed that the proximate drivers for migration are better access to healthcare, education, and jobs, but the response group in Hawai'i indicated that environmental factors also drove their decision to leave RMI or to remain in the US (Hawai'i and mainland locations).



*Migration within and from the Marshall Islands is widespread.*

Nearly a third of the Marshallese population currently resides in the US, and this diaspora is predicted to continue to grow as climate change increasingly affects the islands. A better understanding of the factors influencing migration choices is important for decisionmakers in the both the US and RMI, to better inform policies and services to meet anticipated migration levels and needs in the US, and to integrate this information into RMI governmental resilience and economic planning.

## Quick Summary

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- The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is a small island nation that is being increasingly affected by sea level rise, drought, and saltwater inundation. Increasing numbers of Marshallese are migrating to larger or more populated islands or to the United States. It is important to understand how stressors may be driving migration in order to better support migrant populations.
- Survey respondents in both the RMI and the US acknowledge that environmental change is affecting the Marshalls. Health care, jobs, and education were primary drivers of migration, but RMI respondents living subsistence lifestyles were more likely to identify climate-related environmental degradation as a reason for their move. US respondents were more likely to agree that environmental factors are also involved, both directly through sea level rise and indirectly through effects on food systems and economies.
- By understanding the complex factors driving migration within the RMI and to the US, we can better anticipate future migration levels and patterns that could help inform policies and services that support positive outcomes of migration, both for the individuals who are moving and their source and destination communities.



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