

THE EXPERIENCE OF LOSS AND GRIEF IN FORCED DISPLACEMENT & PLANNED RELOCATION IN THE PACIFIC

Katja Phutaraksa Neef¹

ABSTRACT

This paper, written in 2021, explores how loss and grief is experienced through forced displacement and planned relocation in the Pacific and the subsequent implications that Pacific peoples have faced after being ‘removed’ from their homelands and ‘moved’ to a foreign land. The loss of ecological culture, cultural heritage, and generational trauma experienced by Pacific communities raises the question of whether planned relocation and displacement threatens their right to life with dignity. Drawing on the case of forced relocation of Banabans during colonial times and cases of recent climate-related relocation of communities in Fiji, this paper emphasizes the need to consider the psychosocial impacts on Pacific communities and cultures as well as the less tangible and immeasurable ramifications of being ‘uprooted’. These case studies can inform current dialogues and planning of contemporary and future relocations of Pacific communities by raising questions of sovereignty, sense of belonging and participation and identifying ways to uphold Pacific Island people’s right to life with dignity, irrespective of whether they decide to move or to stay.

Keywords: Forced displacement, climate mobility, intangible loss, indigenous identities, planned relocation

INTRODUCTION

Human displacement is one of the major categories of loss examined in a systematic literature review conducted by Tschakert and colleagues (2019). The authors contend that human displacement is intimately connected to other intangible losses, including cultural heritage and identity, one’s sense of place, social fabric, emotional and mental wellbeing, indigenous knowledge, and human dignity (Tschakert *et al.* 2019). Many people in Pacific Island countries fear that relocating from their lands will lead to losses of their cultural heritage

and identity, including their language and ecological knowledge (Connell and Lutkehaus 2017; Edwards 2013). In his seminal essay ‘Our Sea of Islands,’ Hau’ofa (1994) laid the foundation for reimagining Oceania as a diverse and vast space where people and islands are connected through their genealogy, culture, and histories of movement. Despite their history of mobility, it is a most traumatic experience for Pacific Island people when they lose their attachment to place.

During a field visit to Fiji a few years ago, one of the elders told our group: ‘The land is us. It is our identity, our *vanua* and our culture. The land provides for us, so we should nurture it. If we do not nurture our land, it will not nurture us.’ This quote encapsulates the inseparability of land and people among Indigenous communities in the Pacific. Indigenous terms for land, such as *vanua* in Fiji and *enua* in Vanuatu, are synonymous with the term for placenta, which demonstrates the intimate connection between land and people (Teitia-Seath *et al.* 2020). This means that any separation of Pacific people from their land – whether forced and involuntary or planned and voluntary – is bound to result in severe ruptures and loss of identity (Campbell 2010). The potential linkages and impacts of separation from land and place are visualised in Figure 1.

In this paper, I explore various Pacific case studies which illustrate how loss of place affects communities and individuals when they are subjected to forced displacement and planned relocation. I start with the loss and grief of Banabans associated with their colonial-time forced relocation to Rabi Island in northern Fiji. I then discuss the intangible losses experienced in the context of climate-related planned relocation in Fiji. In the final case study, I explore the loss of place, sovereignty, and statehood that may be associated with Pacific atoll countries becoming uninhabitable in the future and what this means for mental health systems in host countries. In the last section, I will critically engage with these case studies and discuss implications for future work in this field.

FORCED RELOCATION FROM BANABA ISLAND IN TODAY’S KIRIBATI TO RABI ISLAND, FIJI

Banaba Island in today’s Kiribati is a 6 km² raised atoll island in the Central Pacific and was the site of unfettered and destructive phosphate mining by the British Phosphate Commission – jointly owned by the British, Australian, and New Zealand governments – from the early 1900s to the end of the 1970s (Teiawa 2015). During this period, the entire island was stripped of all its soil, leaving a barren and largely uninhabitable moonscape behind (Edwards 2013). Australia and New Zealand’s farming sectors would not be as productive and prosperous without the phosphate mined from Banaba, Nauru and other Pacific

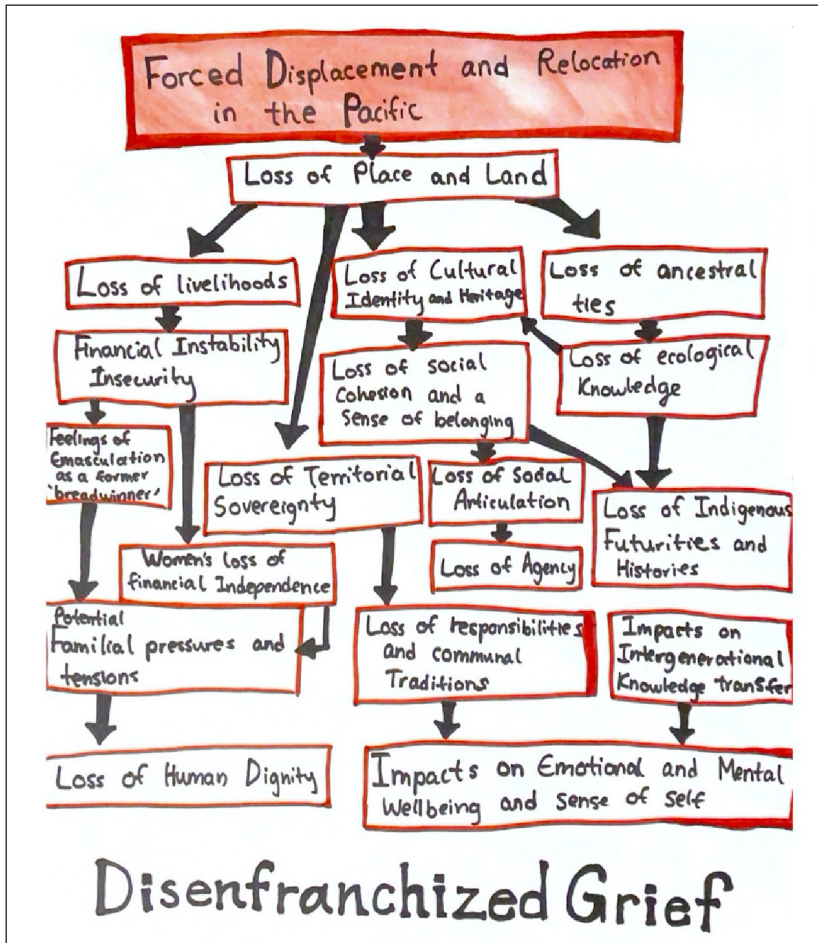


Figure 1. Tree diagram of the types of losses related to forced displacement, loss of place, and disenfranchised grief.

islands during colonial and postcolonial times (Christopher-Ikimotu 2021; Teiawa 2015). The Banabans are an Indigenous group with a distinct culture and one of the few ethnicities in the Pacific that had individual ownership of land (Kempf and Hermann 2005). This made it easier for the colonial mining company to dispossess individual landowners (Edwards 2013). The Japanese Empire invaded Banaba in 1942 and established a regime of terror on the island, relocated many Banabans to internment camps on other islands, and had killed nearly all remaining Banabans by the end of 1945 (Christopher-Ikimotu 2021).

After World War II, the exiled Banabans had the false hope to return to their homeland but were instead relocated by the British colonisers to Rabi Island in Fiji to enable continued phosphate mining operations on the island without being ‘disturbed’ by the local population (Teaiwa 2015). Occasional uprisings by the few remaining Banabans were quickly stifled by the colonial powers. Many of the relocated Banabans on Rabi Island were deeply traumatised, as most families had relatives that were murdered by the Japanese (Kempf and Hermann 2005). Their land on Banaba was destroyed by Western colonisers which handed the island over to newly independent Kiribati in 1979 in disregard of Banaba’s precolonial independent status (Teiawa 2015). Hence, the Banabans lost their territorial sovereignty to Kiribati (Christopher-Ikimotu 2021). To this day, Banabans in Fiji are regarded as second-class citizens without ownership rights to the land they occupy (Edwards 2013).

Banaban scholars and activists have described the deep experience of grief and loss by their people. As Teresa Teiawa has written in her powerful essay about the Banabans’ loss of their land:

[I]f Banabans think of blood and land as one and the same, it follows then that in losing their land, they lost their blood. In losing their phosphate to agriculture, they have spilled their blood in different lands. Their essential roots on ocean island are now essentially routes to other places. (1998, 106)

Hele Christopher-Ikimotu, a Banaban youth worker for a Pasifika NGO in New Zealand, expressed his grief in a similar way: ‘My people’s blood and bones are on the land I live on now’ (2021).

Ironically, the phosphate from Banaba that has enriched the grasslands of Australia and New Zealand has since made a detrimental contribution to climate change via the methane generated by the two countries’ dairy, beef, and sheep industries. In turn, climate change has made countries in the Pacific more prone to fast-onset disasters, such as cyclones, and slow-onset impacts, such as sea-level rise, which pose major threats to these countries in terms of displacement risk, as discussed in the next two examples.

CLIMATE-RELATED PLANNED RELOCATION IN FIJI: EXPERIENCES OF INTANGIBLE LOSS

Several years ago, the Fijian Government estimated that hundreds of coastal villages in Fiji would require relocation in the future due to the impacts of climate

change (Leckie and Huggins 2016). More recently, it has been suggested that some 80 communities are in urgent need of relocation (Piggott-McKellar *et al.* 2019). In response to these risks, the Fijian Government published its Planned Relocation Guidelines in 2018 to assist affected villages in implementing co-ordinated community relocations within Fiji. While the guidelines emphasise voluntariness and community participation and frame planned relocation as a ‘solution-oriented measure’ (Government of the Republic of Fiji 2018, 7), there is no reference to the possible disruptions to livelihoods and sense of place that may occur as a result of relocating entire communities from ‘at-risk’ places in coastal areas. In addition, the guidelines only mention ‘losses’ in the context of disasters and hazards that communities are exposed to in their old locations, but make no mention of the various types of loss that can occur as a result of being relocated.

Until now, only a few I-Taukei (Indigenous) villages have been entirely or partially moved to new locations inland. One of them is the village of Vuni-dogoloa on Fiji’s second largest island Vanua Levu, which has been the focus of several empirical studies (*e.g.*, Bertana 2020; McMichael and Powell 2021; Piggott-McKellar *et al.* 2019). The village community was relocated around two kilometres inland because it faced frequent floods and was increasingly exposed to coastal erosion that threatened their land and village infrastructure (McMichael and Powell 2021). It was expected that tensions over land and the risk of disruption of villagers’ sense of place would be minimised by the fact that the village moved within its own land (McMichael and Powell 2021). However, although the new location is only a short walk away from the former coastal settlement, many villagers reported that they missed their connection to the ocean and to ancestral land (Piggott-McKellar *et al.* 2019; McMichael and Powell 2021). As the following quote from a female resident demonstrates, some villagers also reported a loss of agency as they could not participate in decision-making about the relocation: ‘We were not consulted. Only the clan was involved in the decision-making. We just went along with the decisions made by the others.’ (McMichael and Powell 2021, 11).

As Yates *et al.* (2021) have stated, even internal mobility can cause psychosocial trauma and major disruptions to cultural identity and livelihoods as people’s relationship with their land changes. Indeed, some villagers referred to the loss of control over their customary held resources:

We lost our rights to our natural resources, especially our qoliqoli [customary fishing grounds]. When we moved up here anyone can just come and use our fishing grounds, poachers, and there’s no con-

trol. When we were down there we had control of how our resources are used. (McMichael and Powell 2021, 6)

Additionally, the following quote demonstrates how relocated people need to honour their responsibilities as caretakers of ancestral spirits: 'Our forefathers were buried there, and my husband was buried there too. So I still feel that connection to there. I always go back to the burial ground' (McMichael and Powell 2021, 6; *cf.* Yates *et al.* 2021). Elderly residents expressed their concerns about losing their communal traditions as social cohesion has eroded following the relocation: 'Everything is lost. In the old village we shared food, we caught plenty of fish. We have a little bit lost that. People stop sharing' (McMichael and Powell 2021, 11).

This case study shows how various forms of intangible loss – loss of connection to place, ancestral linkages, and communal traditions – are easily ignored in planned relocation processes where there is solely a focus on avoiding tangible losses, such as reducing risk of physical harm. Decision-makers at the national level seem to ignore the considerable harm that even internal, short-distance relocation can have on people's sense of loss and grief. Such sense of loss is even greater when it comes to the existential threat that sea-level rise poses for low-lying atoll countries, as discussed in the following section.

FUTURE PLANNED RELOCATION FROM 'SINKING' ATOLL COUNTRIES IN THE PACIFIC

It has been predicted that several low-lying atoll countries in the Pacific, such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Nauru, will become submerged by rising sea levels or otherwise uninhabitable by the middle of this century (Campbell, 2010). This raises many questions including how current residents of these countries – and the younger generation in particular – see their future. Oakes (2019) found diverse views among his research participants in Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Nauru with regard to their future mobility decisions in the face of climatic changes, with many seeing no other option than to leave their islands despite recognising substantial socio-cultural losses associated with cross-border migration. The quotes below exemplify these anxieties about the loss of cultural identity, livelihoods, language, and social cohesion:

Our people will be scattered, and the survival of our unique culture, lifestyle and even our language, may be lost forever. (I-Kiribati quoted in Oakes 2019, 491)

Tuvalu is where I belong, my true identity and also it is where I was brought up and leaving will result in the loss of culture. (Tuvaluan quoted in Oakes 2019, 491)

However, many Pacific Island leaders and their citizens have vowed to stay on and fight for various reasons – human rights, sovereignty concerns, religious beliefs:

We are not going to go quietly. There are human rights issues; there are sovereign rights issues that need to be looked at carefully. (McNamara and Gibson 2009, 481)

Tokou is our God-given land. God has sent some climate change as a warning for us to notice, but he won't allow Tokou to go under water. We trust in God to save us. (McMichael and Katonivualiku 2020, 290)

There are important lessons to be learned from countries that have seen large numbers of their citizens migrate to safe havens such as Australia and New Zealand. For example, citizens of the raised atoll island country Niue emigrated to New Zealand following major climatic disasters, such as cyclones, as early as the 1960s when it was still one of its colonies (Lee and Francis 2009). As Barnett (2012) found, the gradual depopulation of Niue has had dire consequences on those left behind; apart from tangible losses, such as labour shortages, they felt a profound loss of cultural identity and national pride.

The existential risks faced by atoll countries raises important questions regarding sovereignty, citizenship, and national identity (Burkett 2011). For citizens of these countries who will be forced to resettle in such host countries as New Zealand or Australia, the relocation process is likely to cause an enormous sense of loss, grief, and trauma. Teitia-Seath *et al.* (2020) have argued that mental health services in these countries need to be well prepared to adequately support climate migrants. This requires a thorough understanding of the particular psychosocial impacts that future climate-forced migration will have on Pacific Island peoples.

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CASE STUDIES AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) have described ecological grief as a form of 'disenfranchised grief' (*cf.* Doka 2002) that is not openly acknowledged in the context of climate-related displacement. In the case of the relocation of the Banabans,

disenfranchised grief manifested itself in the loss of ancestral ties, social disarticulation, and loss of territorial sovereignty, all of which have been ignored by both the colonial power and the host country Fiji. In the case study of the planned relocation in Fiji, disenfranchised grief occurs among those whose wishes to remain in place despite the physical risks were ignored by the more powerful members of the community and by government agencies. Finally, disenfranchised grief is expected when climate migrants from the Pacific will be hosted by New Zealand and Australia, where Western mental health services may have little understanding of the real sense of loss and grief that is associated with abandoning their homelands.

The case studies outlined in this article cause me to reflect on how practitioners within the development aid and climate change space must be aware of the psychosocial aspects of grief and loss to create a holistic approach towards planned relocation strategies and policies. Project implementation and climate action often fail to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and those who are structurally affected the most by decision-making. Hence, what is required is that the social and emotional aspects of relocation are to be centred in the debate around planned relocation in connection with climate change and disaster risks. I believe it is crucial for researchers and development practitioners to review their policies and accompany the communities in the post-relocation phase, which until now has often been left open-ended or the books have been closed when the project lifespan ends.

I have had experience with witnessing disaster-induced relocation in Fiji and Vanuatu and have seen how it does not only affect the safety of the communities but how there is a protracted loss and grieving process that is attached to the loss of sacred and ancestral lands where their families are buried. As Yates *et al.* have found based on a review of the psychosocial impacts of climate-related migration, 'shifts in the land-person relationship are associated with collective experiences of stress, anxiety, nostalgia, loss, sadness, heartbreak, or a sense of being "robbed" of their identity' (2021, 7). Having witnessed the impacts of the loss of land, homes, and stability myself, I contend that governments and decision-makers must empower communities and provide services that cater to their holistic needs which are not confined to physical and protective needs. I look forward to incorporating my social sciences knowledge and my knowledge of the 'science of loss' (Barnett *et al.* 2016, 976) within the climate action space which focuses on the human dimension of disasters, climate relocation, and adaptation which requires acute knowledge and understanding of psychosocial and emotional aspects of being uprooted from ancestral lands, whether the relocation occurs within people's customary land (as in the

case of planned relocation in Fiji) or whether it involves transborder movements (as in the case of forced relocation of the Banabans and future climate migrants in the Pacific).

We need to listen to and respect the way Pacific communities, organisations, and governments articulate their respective development priorities and how they experience loss and grief when moving from their homelands. As Tschakert *et al.* have aptly stated, there are ‘a thousand ways to experience loss’ (2019, 58). Hence, when working with displaced people, we need to commit ourselves to long-term relationships with them and work alongside and support them when asked. In supporting climate-related migration processes in the Pacific, New Zealand’s development assistance programme needs to be responsive, culturally informed, and committed. For government agencies and non-governmental organisations that are involved in planned relocation, active listening and understanding the impacts that decisions may have on the most vulnerable people are required before any action is taken. There is a need to be able to identify the coping mechanisms and issues associated with ecological loss and grief which are multi-scalar phenomena that are often dismissed as a secondary concern. Where only safety from physical harm is prioritised and relocation is seen as the only viable solution provided, the collateral damage of the move in terms of the loss and grief associated with place detachment is neglected and deeply emotional impacts are discounted.

NOTE

- 1 Katja Phutaraksa Neef is currently completing her BA Honours in Geography with a regional focus on Asia and the Pacific. She grew up in Thailand and Japan and has participated in field research and workshops in Fiji, Vanuatu, Thailand, Cambodia, Tanzania, Peru, Indonesia, and West Papua. Her research and advocacy interests include issues concerning land governance and dispossession, refugee rights, social inclusion, Indigenous rights, forced migration, and climate justice.

REFERENCES

- Barnett, Jonathon. 2012. ‘On the Risks of Engineering Mobility to Reduce Vulnerability to Climate Change: Insights From a Small Island State.’ *Climate Change and Human Mobility: Challenges to the Social Sciences*, 169–189. Edited by Kirsten Hastrup and Karen Fog Olwig. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139235815.012>
- Barnett, Jonathon, Petra Tschakert, Lesley Head, and W. Neil Adger. 2016. ‘A Science

of Loss.' *Nature Climate Change* 6(11):976–978.

Bertana, Amanda. 2020. 'The Role of Power in Community Participation: Relocation as Climate Change Adaptation in Fiji.' *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38(5):902–919. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2399654420909394>

Burkett, Maxine. 2011. 'The Nation Ex-Situ: On Climate Change, Deterritorialized Nationhood and the Post-Climate Era.' *Climate Law* 2(3):345–374. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/cl-2011-040>

Campbell, John.R. 2010. 'Climate-Induced Community Relocation in the Pacific: The Meaning and Importance of Land. In *Climate Change and Displacement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 57–80. Edited by Jane McAdam. Oxford and Portland: Bloomsbury Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472565211.ch-004>

Christopher-Ikimotu, Hele. 2021. Banaba Island: The Land That Died so Others Could Live. *Radio New Zealand*, 13 July. Retrieved from <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/on-theinside/446833/banaba-island-the-land-that-died-so-others-could-live>

Connell, John, and Nancy Lutkehaus. 2017. 'Environmental Refugees? A Tale of Two Resettlement Projects in Coastal Papua New Guinea.' *Australian Geographer* 48(1):79–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2016.1267603>

Cunsolo, Ashlee, and Neville R. Ellis. 2018. 'Ecological Grief as a Mental Health Response to Climate Change-Related Loss.' *Nature Climate Change* 8(4):275–281. <https://doi.org/10.3390%2Fijerph18020734>

Doka, Kenneth J., ed. 2002. 'Introduction.' In *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice*, 5–22. Champaign: Research Press.

Edwards, Julia. 2013. 'Phosphate and Forced Relocation: An Assessment of the Resettlement of the Banabans to Northern Fiji in 1945.' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41(5):783–803. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2013.814252>

Government of the Republic of Fiji. 2018. *Planned Relocation Guidelines: A Framework to Undertake Climate Change Related Relocation*. Suva: Ministry of the Economy.

- Hau'ofa, Epeli. 1994. 'Our Sea of Islands.' *The Contemporary Pacific* 6(1):148–161.
- Kempf, Wolfgang, and Elfriede Hermann. 2005. 'Reconfigurations of Place and Ethnicity: Positionings, Performances, and Politics of Relocated Banabans in Fiji.' *Oceania* 75: 368–386. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1834-4461.2005.tb02897.x>
- Leckie, Scott, and Chris Huggins. 2016. *Repairing Domestic Climate Displacement: The Peninsula Principles*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lee, Helen, and Steve Tupai Francis. 2009. *Migration and Transnationalism: Pacific Perspectives*. Acton, A.C.T.: ANU E Press.
- McMichael, Celia, and Manasa Katonivualiku. 2020. 'Thick Temporalities of Planned Relocation in Fiji.' *Geoforum* 108: 286–294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.06.012>
- McMichael, Celia, and Teresia Powell. 2021. 'Planned Relocation and Health: A Case Study from Fiji.' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18: Art. 4355. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18084355>
- McNamara, Karen Elizabeth, and Chris Gibson. 2009. "We Do Not Want to Leave Our Land": Pacific Ambassadors at the United Nations Resist the Category of "climate refugees." *Geoforum* 40: 475–483. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2009.03.006>
- Oakes, Robert. 2019. Culture, climate change and mobility decisions in Pacific Small Island Developing States. *Population and Environment*, 40(4): 480–503. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11111-019-00321-w>
- Piggott-McKellar, Anna E., Karen E. McNamara, Patrick D. Nunn, and Seci T. Se-kinini. 2019. 'Moving People in a Changing Climate: Lessons From Two Case Studies in Fiji.' *Social Sciences* 8(5):133. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8050133>
- Teaiwa, Teresia K. 1998. 'Yaqona/Yagoqu: Routes and Roots of a Displaced Native.' *UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing* 4(1):106.
- Teaiwa, Katerina. 2015. 'Ruining Pacific Islands: Australia's Phosphate Imperialism.' *Australian Historical Studies* 46(3): 374–391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2015.1082609>
- Tiatia-Seath, Jemaima, Trish Tupou, and Ian Fookes. 2020. 'Climate Change, Mental

Health, and Wellbeing for Pacific Peoples: A Literature Review.' *The Contemporary Pacific* 32(2): 399–430. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2020.0035>

Tschakert, Petra, Jon Barnett, Neville Ellis, Carmen Lawrence, Nancy Tuana, Mark New, Carmen Elrick-Barr, Ram Pandit, and David Pannell. 2017. 'Climate Change and Loss, as if People Mattered: Values, Places, and Experiences.' *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 8(5):e476. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.476>

Tschakert, Petra, Neville R. Ellis, Christopher Anderson, A Kelly, and James Obeng. 2019. 'One Thousand Ways to Experience Loss: A Systematic Analysis of Climate-Related Intangible Harm from Around the World.' *Global Environmental Change* 55: 58–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.11.006>

Yates, Olivia, Sam Manuela, Andreas Neef, and Shiloh Groot. 2021. 'Reshaping Ties to Land: A Systematic Review of the Psychosocial and Cultural Impacts of Pacific Climate-Related Mobility.' *Climate and Development* 14(3): 250–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2021.1911775>