

Water on Water: Kiribati in Crisis

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This photo essay considers the enormity of the impact of even small changes to indigenous practices intimately linked to a specific land and sea and the subsequent threats for the survival of the culture itself.

The Republic of Kiribati comprises Banaba (Ocean Island) to the west and Christmas Island and the Line Islands to the east, with Kiribati (the Gilbert Islands) and Rawaki (the Phoenix Islands) between them. Although the land area is only 800 square kilometres, the atolls are spread over approximately three million square kilometres of ocean. This group, comprising thirty-three coral atolls, lies along the equator about half way between Hawaii and Australia. Trade winds moderate a hot, humid, tropical marine climate.

The sixteen atolls that comprise the main island group of Kiribati, straddle the equator due north of New Zealand. The land, heartbreakingly threatened by ecologically offensive nations, rises a mere two metres above the sea. The atolls are tiny peaks of vast undersea mountains that rise through the depths of the Pacific Ocean. The reefs are the defence against relentless waves upon these precarious landfalls. There is nowhere, not even in the centre of the lagoon, that the incessant roar of the breakers is not heard. The sound of the sea is inescapable in Kiribati.

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~~Sea dominates life - this is a world of water. The nearest island is over the horizon, and a major land mass a thousand miles of endless ocean away. Only a narrow strip of land divides the ocean from the lagoon. The peaceful and gentle, the deep and strong, the inner and outer are in constant contrast.~~

These tiny ribbons of coral are the home of the I-Kiribati.

The cultural practices of the I-Kiribati are particular to the here and now - to the land and the sea and its resources. Subsistence life on an atoll is held in a fine balance between the limited resources, the ingenious use of traditional skills and the weather – an inter-relationship that is vulnerable to even the slightest environmental change.

Simply being wet and windy disrupts many fundamental subsistence practices that have been developed with the expectation of being able to dry things. Heavy rainfall and strong winds disturb the established patterns of copra production, the drying and preparation of pandanus for weaving mats, house building, fishing, the collection of toddy from the coconut tree, and the preparation of the vital sennit string. Cultural knowledge, carefully developed over time and in specific relation to the environment, integrates all aspects of life to maintain sustainable survival strategies.

No amount of additional technology and adaptation strategies will combat a rise in sea level or an increase in precipitation. There is nowhere for the I-Kiribati to go, there is no 'higher ground' to retreat to, there is no alternative source of potable water should the water lens shrink and there are no alternative food sources should the ecosystem of the reef break down. Although land is at risk, of much greater importance is the danger of losing a unique culture. The lives and communities on these tiny coral atolls are the human and personal face of the economic and political debates of Kyoto, Bali and beyond.

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