

The Plight of Indigenous Cultures and Climate Change

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Introduction

The threat of climate change increases with each passing day. Putting thought and money into new technologies to combat climate change has become a political staple in recent times. Campaigns driven by celebrities and social media urge people to donate money to save the whales and polar bears. Activists tell skeptics to think about their grandchildren's futures. "Don't you want them to have a planet to live on?" However, there is no need to wait for polar bears to become extinct or to worry about kids who will not be born for fifty years to see that the threats of climate change have already taken a toll on human life. While the modern world discovers new obstacles, indigenous populations have become all too familiar with its fatal effects.

Methodology

The research used in this paper comes from a variety of sources, including, journal articles, case studies, panel discussions, and news reports. While sources with quantitative data were used as the underlying foundation, the bulk of the data was formed from qualitative reports that reflect eyewitness accounts. In addition, personal experiences were used.

Analysis

The United States' Environmental Protection Agency defines climate change as "Any significant change in the measures of climate lasting for an extended period of time." This definition implies that climate change refers to any major change in

temperature, precipitation, or wind pattern that last for a defined period of time (US Environmental Protection Agency). Although skeptics claim that no apparent changes have occurred, the evidence provided is staggering.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, it has been estimated that the Earth's temperature has increased by 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit over the past century alone. The overall temperature of the Earth greatly influences the changes in precipitation and wind patterns (University Corporation for Atmospheric Research). This creates a higher vulnerability to droughts and natural disasters. Furthermore, climate change alters infection patterns, increases potable water scarcity, threatens food production, and raises the incidence of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, all due to changes in the ecosystem (Ford).

The reason behind the devastating plight of indigenous populations is simple. For indigenous populations, the ecosystem remains the foundation of their livelihoods. In addition, displacement due to bad land and natural disasters has forced populations to adapt to new environments with no educational support.

In Uganda, the Batwa pygmies have been forced to relocate from their natural, forested habitat to lands that pose a greater risk for malaria transmission. A report by the Bwindi Hospital in Uganda states that 37 percent of Batwa deaths are caused by malaria alone (Africa Portal). Unlike other populations in the southwest region of Uganda, the Batwa have not developed immunity, such as the sick cell trait, to malaria because they have previously thrived in areas where malaria did not pose a risk.

In Australia, climate change has contributed greatly to the increasing hardships of the Aborigines. Increased temperatures cause deadly wildfires in Aboriginal communities. Although wildfires increase the incidence of respiratory problems, their major risks come from the fact that Aborigines lack infrastructure. There is little to no access to roads, highways, and thus accessing a hospital is deemed complicated, if not impossible (Improving Emergency Management Outcomes for Indigenous Communities in Northern Australia).

In Brazil, Amazonian tribes have also seen the dire effects of climate change. Increased temperatures pose a risk of wildfires, drought, and displacement. The main source of nourishment for many tribes, particularly the Yamomami, is the Xingu River (Amazon Watch). Due to changes in current, temperature, and precipitation, the Xingu River fails to be a source of fish. A report from *The New York Times*, claims that the lack of protein has become so dire, that young, Yamomami children have resorted to eating ants (Rosenthal). In addition, the swampy environment has created a perfect breeding ground for many vector born bacteria.

However, perhaps the most representative indigenous population of the long fought battle against climate change is the Mapuche of Chile. The Mapuche have fought to maintain their culture for hundreds of years. Although colonization and urbanization have vastly deteriorated Mapuche land, they are one of few indigenous populations that have truly maintained and have fought for the preservation of their culture.

Climate change threatens the backbone of Mapuche society, which is traditional, herbal medicine. The Mapuche are renowned for their use of plants and herbs to cure illnesses that range from the common cold to sexual impotence. There are an estimated one hundred-thirty six plants and herbs used in Mapuche medicine, most of which are exclusive to select parts of Chile (Shallet). The increase in temperature removes moisture from soil and renders it difficult to cultivate (Biblioteca virtual de desarrollo sostenible y salud ambiental).

Although there has been a push to integrate traditional Mapuche medicine with Western medicine, the integration has led to Machis, or medicine women, working in traditional hospitals rather than traditional doctors working in Mapuche hospitals. Despite the rudimentary approach, those who have used Mapuche medicine indicate that it is indeed an effective form of treatment. Furthermore, the Mapuche's lack of motivation to integrate into Western cultures leads them to only use traditional, holistic remedies to treat illness. Yet with the decrease in plant cultivation, the Mapuche's efforts to maintain their cultures and traditions create a level of vulnerability that will prove to be unsustainable for them.

Conclusion

Climate change will remain a progressive world issue that must be addressed. The developed world needs to become aware that its atrocities are not a polar bear floating away on an iceberg, but rather a child eating an ant or a sick man not being treated due to lack of medicine. The plight of indigenous populations due

to climate change is a devastatingly underreported issue. As the developed world continues to create new technologies to preserve the earth, it is imperative that actions are taken to preserve and enhance the health and livelihood of indigenous populations.

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