

Climate Refugees

Policy Position Statement

- Key messages:** Climate disruption will lead to mass-displacement, particularly for people on low-lying land such as Pacific and Indian Ocean Islands and major deltas. International legal recognition of refugee status for people displaced by climate disruption is needed to guide action to manage displacement of people over coming decades. Similarly, a treaty or migration plans are needed to facilitate these population movements (New Zealand are in discussions for developing a treaty).
- Key policy positions:**
1. Negotiation of a migration plan between Australia and Pacific Island nations experiencing the adverse effects of climate disruption.
 2. Australia to lead development of international legal recognition of refugee status for those displaced by climate disruption.
- Audience:** Federal, State and Territory Governments, policymakers and program managers, PHAA members, media.
- Responsibility:** PHAA Ecology and Environment Special Interest Group
- Date adopted:** 18 September 2019
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Climate Refugee Policy position statement

This policy should be read in conjunction with the Safe climate; [Ecologically Sustainable Human Society](#); [Ecologically Sustainable Diets](#) and [Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health](#) policy position statements.

PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Advanced planning for those who will be displaced by climate disruption, particularly for those of the Pacific Islands, is an urgent requirement.
2. Mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions and global warming must occur in parallel to adaptation and advocacy for a migration plan.
3. As a high greenhouse gas emission country, the Australian government has a moral obligation to assist those adversely affected by climate disruption.

PHAA notes the following evidence:

4. The consequences of climate disruption are an emerging public health issue.^{1,2}
5. Many countries, particularly Australia's neighbours the Pacific Island Nations, are at risk of the catastrophic effects of climate disruption including:³
 - a. The occurrence of ocean warming, coral bleaching and subsequent effects on aquaculture and food security.⁴⁻⁶
 - b. Direct effects of altered weather patterns such as increased frequency and severity of tropical cyclones, increasing temperatures, increased incidence of communicable and vector-borne diseases.^{4, 7-9}
 - c. Rising sea levels and subsequent coastal erosion, salinisation of freshwater aquifers and submersion.^{4, 5, 8}
6. Recent and current efforts to manage climate change have focussed on building resilience and adaptation for island nations rather than emissions reduction by large emitting nations.¹
7. Those who contribute the least to greenhouse gases are disproportionately affected by climate disruption.¹⁰ Arguably higher-emission countries have a moral obligation to assist those affected.
8. Loss of habitability and submersion could result in some Pacific Islander peoples becoming the first easily identifiable "climate refugees".^{11, 12}
9. By 2050, there will be an estimated 200 million people globally who are displaced due to climate disruption.¹³ This displacement is entirely forced migration.¹⁴
10. Australia's definition of a refugee; "*an individual who has left their home owing to fear of racial, religious, social or political persecution*" does not include those who are displaced as a result of climate disruption.¹⁴ Consequentially there is no legal refugee status nor current plan for those displaced by climate disruption.

11. The people of the Pacific Islands prefer planned migration to becoming refugees.¹⁵
12. The PHAA notes that the situation regarding classification and nomenclature of those displaced by climate disruption is complex and agreement on definitions likely to take significant time.
13. Implementing this policy would contribute towards the achievement of [UN Sustainable Development Goals 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing](#) and [10 – Reduced inequalities](#).

PHAA seeks the following actions:

14. Promotion of this definition of “climate refugees” as those displaced by the effects of climate disruption whereby, because of natural disasters and slowly progressing circumstances, the land they inhabit becomes no longer fit to support human habitation.
15. Australia leads development, in partnership with the Pacific Island states and neighbouring west Pacific countries, a migration plan or treaty for those who will be displaced because of climate disruption.
16. Australia continues, in line with the safe climate policy, to take measures to reduce carbon emissions and meet the requirements of the *Paris Agreement* under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2016).
17. Australia continues, in line with the refugee and asylum seeker health policy, to form partnerships and coalitions to promote the rights and health of all refugees.
18. Australia to advocate internationally for legal recognition of refugee status for those displaced by climate disruption.

PHAA resolves to:

19. Through the Ecology and Environment, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and International Health Special Interest Groups:
 - a. work with partner organisations, such as the World Federation of Public Health Associations, UNHCR and other organisations, to advocate a definition of “climate refugees” leading to legal recognition of “climate refugees” as refugees and therefore subject to international legal treaties and conventions.
 - b. advocate to governments for development of a treaty/migration plan for those displaced by climate disruption.
 - c. advocate to governments for safeguarding the rights and health of those displaced by climate change.

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References

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