

The Harsh Reality of Climate Change for ‘The Least of These’

By Debbie King

When Americans were asked if climate change affected them personally, more than half said no. Yet the Taholah tribe at the mouth of the Quinault River would beg to differ. Rising sea levels and warming, acidic waters hostile to salmon are forcing the tribe to move to higher ground at a cost of \$60 million. Indigenous tribes scattered across Washington State face similar scenarios as their close interaction with nature puts their livelihood at risk from decreasing snowpacks and melting glaciers.

Across the globe off the coast of Africa, oxygen-depleted dead zones created by warming and acidic waters threaten fish production for the two-thirds of nations who largely depend on fish for their primary source of animal protein. Twenty percent of the world’s fish supply comes from countries most vulnerable to climate change.

In the fields, rising carbon-dioxide levels and warming temperatures are depleting the protein yields of wheat, corn and other staple crops and robbing them of essential nutrients. Droughts in developing countries are turning fertile soil into desert wastelands—400 farmers in India took their lives in the first quarter of 2016 when their land could no longer support crops.

Climate justice, a movement rapidly edging its way into social consciousness, frames climate change as an ethical and social justice issue, rather than just a scientific or political one. Climate justice focuses on the disproportionate impact of climate change on ethnic minorities, people of color, and other marginalized communities who do not have the economic or political power to adapt to the physical and mental realities of climate change. In other words, climate justice points out the clear disparity between the haves and have-nots.

Closer to home, Houston residents who live in low-income areas that lack the infrastructure to withstand extreme flooding were devastated the most by Hurricane Harvey. Puerto Rico is heading toward a major mental health crisis, with 32 reported suicides since Hurricane Maria

devastated the island. In California, renters and mobile-home owners without the financial resources to rebuild face greater challenges getting back on their feet after devastating wildfires.

In his Encyclical on climate change, Pope Francis declared, “the gravest of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest.” But it is not just the Pope speaking out for underprivileged communities that cannot speak for themselves. Nearly every world religion stresses our moral responsibility to care for ‘the least of these.’ In the case of climate change, that burden falls on those most responsible for its consequences. (The United States ranks second highest in carbon emissions.)

Several local organizations are at the forefront of fighting for climate justice. The diverse women of [WA Women for Climate Action Now](#) fight for a healthy environment for all, regardless of race, nationality, income, gender, or age by providing them giving them a voice in decision-making processes and providing them with the economic means to adapt to a warming climate.

[NAACP'S Environmental and Climate Justice Program](#) and [Front and Centered](#) focus on low-income communities, people of color, and indigenous people most impacted by pollution and climate change. Both organizations foster community building and strive to enact policy changes to create sustainable and health communities for all.