

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

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 across Washington State face similar scenarios to their land and livelihood due to rising seas and decreasing snowpack and 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 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 edging its way into social consciousness, frames climate change as an ethical and social justice issue, rather than a scientific or political one. Climate justice focuses on the disproportional impact of climate change on ethnic minorities, people of color, and low-income communities. These marginalized groups 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, people who rent or own mobile homes often do not have the financial resources to rebuild and get 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.” Nearly every world religion stresses our moral responsibility to care for ‘the least of these’—a burden falls on those most responsible for its consequences. (The United States ranks second highest in carbon emissions.)

[Washington Women for Climate Action Now](#) is taking on this burden by fighting for a healthy environment for all, regardless of race, nationality, income, gender, or age. By mobilizing women to take action across all levels of government, WWCAN brings relief to diverse communities fighting carbon pollution and a warming planet.