



# Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw

Chief Albert White Buffalo Naquin

100 Dennis St., Montegut, LA 70377  
Phone: 985-232-1286 Fax: 985-594-3725  
Email: whitebuffaloa@aim.com  
Website: www.isledejeancharles.com

## **Community Re-settlement in the Context of Climate Crises**

Presented by Démé Naquin

May 17, 2016

*U.S. House Natural Resources Committee Climate Refugee Crisis Forum*

### ***Introduction***

Hello. I'm Démé Naquin, a Tribal Nation Advisor and elder in the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw. Chief Albert Naquin is in New York City meeting with the Rockefeller Foundation and other recipients of the HUD Disaster Resilience Awards, so I will address the questions that Ms. Guerrero requested we discuss here.

### ***Why Re-settlement?***

Our tribe's ancestors fled to a fertile Island in Southeast Louisiana as they escaped the Indian relocation programs of the 1830s. They hid in coastal forests to avoid being forced to Oklahoma or killed. They were able to fish and work the land around our Island. They had farmland. They trapped food and raised livestock. My parents lived on the Island, and I grew up there.

Over the last sixty years we have lost 98% of our land due to coastal erosion, land subsidence, and powerful storms enhanced by sea-level rise. We have lost over 22,000 acres in this time. Our Island is disappearing fast.

I had to move to the mainland because the Island road floods so regularly. At times I could not get to work. There are children who missed school because the school bus could not make it to the Island. It happens even more often now. Just a month ago kids missed three days because of the flooding from strong south winds, which push the water up.

### ***Displaced community and mutual aid***

There were about 80 houses and 300 people living on the Island in 2002. By 2012, only 25 houses and 70 people remain. With every big storm more people leave. It gets harder to rebuild, emotionally and physically, with fewer tribal members there to offer mutual aid, like in the following picture of guys searching in a floodwater. There are also fewer people to support each other throughout the year, like at our Christmas parade where we give out toys to the children of the Tribe.

### ***Still at risk on the Island and off***

Our goal for tribal re-settlement is to make a safe community for the residents of the Island AND to reunite them with those who were already forced off the Island, like my family and me. This will revive the communal ties and will help displaced folks who continue to be at risk to coastal flooding. For example, this is a picture of my backyard last week and the bayou in front of our house flooded onto the main road too.

So in addition to those 25 families still on the Island, our plan includes the rest of our community who have recently been displaced from the Island.

The tribal community is family oriented, and the Island was a paradise. The Island was a paradise because of the tribal ways of life and the tribal community together as a whole, as one. We want to regain that closeness. Without coming together again our unique tribal identity will be lost.

### ***Role of culture and traditional knowledge in adaptation***

We want to integrate our communal ties, relationships to our environment, our everyday practices and rituals, and our history into the various pieces of our tribal re-settlement plan.

Our tribe feels that we will be better off if we return even more to our traditional ways of life. We were self-sustaining. We aim to maintain the knowledge and respect that we had for our coastal environment in our new home. We will bring native plants that were resilient, good for coastal mitigation, and those that we used for medicinal purposes, food preparation, and housing materials to our new home.

### ***Sharing knowledge and becoming teachers***

Our tribal resettlement is an incredible opportunity for transferring what we learn about climate adaptation to other communities, although this has gotten lost in much of the media coverage of our re-settlement plan. We see this as very important, as we see the need for a government mechanism that is responsive to the needs of local communities needing to resettle due to climate crises.

We can offer our own experiences as a proof of concept that can help in the formulation of policies and agency needs and best practices. Our experiences will provide a basis to inform the monitoring and transferability of the model for others and as a teaching field site for other communities adapting to coastal changes.

The elements of our tribal re-settlement that will be of particular interest to others include:

1. Resilient construction
2. Energy efficiency and independence

3. Land/water development
4. Health clinic available to the area's residents
5. Elder and child care
6. A farmers' market and community agriculture
7. Our community center with entrepreneurial and educational activities
8. Construction of community center to serve as a shelter during hurricanes
9. Maintenance of historical continuity and sense of home from old settlement to new
10. Community-level environmental remediation using traditional ecological knowledge

Refining these elements and learning from them for more cost-effective application in future communities has a price, which is why the amount awarded is higher than it would be to just move the Tribe. Critics haven't considered the ways in which the re-settlement will be an "incubator," for learning, similar to our state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (La. CPRA) efforts testing best practices for restoring the coast. We see this as very important and have already connected to Louisiana educators in order to involve Louisiana students and those from around the world.

### ***Lessons learned***

The biggest lesson we are learning now is not to hold our breath for a community-driven process of re-settlement. We do not yet know what HUD and the state of Louisiana have planned for our funds. It has been three and a half months (January, 2016) since we received the HUD resilience award for our plan. In the media (only two meetings have been held with us in attendance), Louisiana's Office of Community Development (La. OCD) keeps downsizing our plan, and we think they may turn our resilient tribal community re-settlement into some kind of public housing project. We thought we were finished with the treaties of the 1800s, and we hope and pray that this is not another 'treaty made, treaty broken.'

We have been planning to re-settle for almost 20 years with multiple setbacks. The grant applications are lengthy and difficult. All this planning takes energy, time, and money, which we do not have. We are working class people. We do not have a staff to advocate for re-settlement for us. The process needs to be more people-friendly.

Until there is an appropriate government policy, there is too much risk for communities. Although we have been awarded a grant, we still do not know whether we will re-settle the whole Isle de Jean Charles band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw. We are in limbo.

So there is this need for a policy framework or program that enables communities to re-settle together as a community due to climate crises. And that is why you all are here. So begin crafting a policy.... and we will help you.

For more information about the Isle de Jean Charles Tribal Nation, visit [www.isledejeancharles.com](http://www.isledejeancharles.com). For more information on the tribal re-settlement visit [www.coastalresettlement.org](http://www.coastalresettlement.org).

**PowerPoint Slides**

ISLE de JEAN CHARLES BAND of BILOXI-CHITIMACHA-CHOCTAW

*Community Re-settlement in the  
Context of Climate Crises*



Démé Naquin  
*Tribal Nation Advisor and Elder*



May 17, 2016  
U.S. House Natural Resources Committee  
Climate Refugee Crisis Forum

**Why re-settlement?**



**Why re-settlement?**



## Displaced community and mutual aid



## At risk on the Island *and* off



## Regaining closeness



## The role of our traditional knowledge



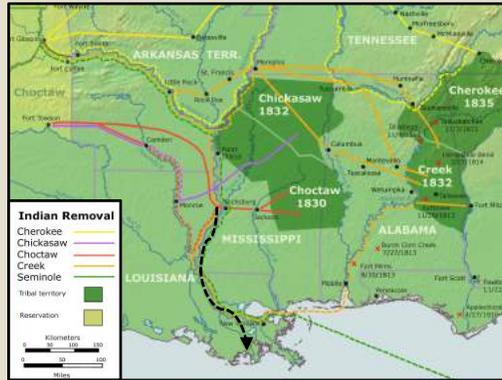
## Sharing knowledge and becoming teachers



## Our new community plan



# What lessons have we learned?



# Thank you!

