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These Native Americans Might Be the Country's First Climate Change Refugees



By Matt Smith (/contributor/matt-smith)

February 27, 2016 | 9:25 am

VICE News is closely tracking global environmental change. *Check out the Tipping Point blog here* (<https://news.vice.com/topic/tipping-point>).

Sometime in the next few years, the remaining two dozen or so families of Louisiana's Isle de Jean Charles will pack up their stuff and leave for good.

They'll leave behind homes that some of the Native American residents have lived in for generations, and they'll watch from afar as what's left of the island gets swallowed by the surrounding waters.

"All of our history, all of our ancestral line — that's where our people are buried. That's where our family members were born," island native Chantel Coverdelle said. "They were raised there, and they raised their kids and grandkids. We've been there forever."

The Isle de Jean Charles band of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe has lived on the island since the 1820s. Nearly all still speak Cajun French at home, said Coverdelle, the community's tribal secretary. But as the marshes of southeastern Louisiana shrivel and settle into a rising sea, the island has been eaten away to a bare stub of what it was in the mid-1950s. Once 11 miles long, it's barely two miles long and a quarter of a mile wide today — a roughly 98 percent loss of land area.

And so by 2019, if current plans hold, the people of Isle de Jean Charles are likely to be the first community displaced wholesale by the slow-motion ecological disaster inflicted on southeastern Louisiana over the last century.

"We're trying to be hopeful that we can pull together enough resources to get this accomplished quickly, for the safety of our people," Coverdelle said.

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The wetlands below New Orleans have been shrinking since the early 20th century, when the levees that protect cities up the Mississippi River corralled the floods that once refreshed the land with fresh sediment. Oil companies and government agencies dredged thousands of miles of canals through the wetlands, funneling salt water into the marshes, killing native plants whose roots held the soil in place.

Nearly 1,900 square miles of coastal Louisiana disappeared underwater between 1932 and 2010, according to the US Geological Survey. The area is losing more than 16 square miles a year — the equivalent of a football field every hour — and as if that weren't bad enough, the rise of sea levels

in a warming world is expected to compound the problem.


"Not only are we losing land that provides a valuable buffer, we are gaining elevation of water, and the land we do have is subsiding," said Corey Miller, the community engagement manager for the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana.

Isle de Jean Charles's tribal leaders have been trying to find a new home for more than a decade. Their project has now drawn the support of the White House, which in January pledged \$48 million to help the remaining households move to "a resilient and historically significant community."

The hope is to find someplace within the surrounding Terrebonne Parish and resettle there by 2019, Coverdelle said. But no proposals have been put together, and no site has been acquired, she said. The money the White House pledged in January won't cover the full cost, but "it will give us a great start," she added.

Many of the island's families have already relocated on their own. Coverdelle and her parents moved to nearby Houma after Hurricane Danny destroyed their own home in the 1990s — but her grandparents still live on the island, and she and her family visited every weekend as she grew up. Many other families have resettled in Houma as well.

"It's very saddening to me, personally," Coverdelle said. "But it's sad not just for us, but for all the other communities that are facing this. There are lots of other communities facing the same issue, and it's very disheartening to see."

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After Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana developed an extensive master plan aimed at restoring its wetlands, which serve as a natural buffer against storm surges. That includes controlled releases of water from the Mississippi River in hopes of spreading fresh sediment on the sinking land, while rebuilding and extending levees to protect other portions of the coast.

More than 1,000 projects are aimed at restoring marshes, or building new ones, Miller said. South of New Orleans, new cypress trees are being planted several times a year in fresh earth delivered by the river diversions.

But the world's oceans rose faster in the past 100 years than they did in nearly all the preceding 3,000, and they could go up another two feet or more this century, scientists from Rutgers University and several other institutions reported this week. And an analysis by the Princeton-based research consortium Climate Central concluded that most of the increase in coastal flooding can be laid at the foot of human-caused climate change.

For communities like Isle de Jean Charles and several others that lie outside the planned levees, the emphasis is on "non-structural" protections, Miller said. Sometimes that means raising homes above projected floods, or buying flood insurance — and sometimes, it means families decide to move.

"It's never an easy conversation," Miller said. "You're talking about people's livelihoods, generations of culture. Coastal Louisiana is very much a place-based, community-based culture and environment. Most people do not want to leave. People live in these places for very attached reasons." In some cases, he said, older residents may stay, while their children move to higher elevations.

Some accounts have described the people of Isle de Jean Charles as America's first "climate refugees." But Coverdelle calls that too harsh. She prefers to think of it as adaptation.

"If your land is eroded away, you have to adapt to it," she said. "You're not being a refugee, you're just adapting to the changes."

Besides, she added, "this isn't the first time a native community has had to move, for whatever reason."

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Your claim is purely political.

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No

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