Louisiana Tribe Officially Becomes America's First Climate Refugees

When storms threaten the Gulf, Edison Dardar lashes down anything loose on his property, boards up his windows and drives with his wife 45 minutes to Houma, which stands on higher ground. (Image by Kathleen Flynn)
French-speaking Indians who live deep in Louisiana bayou, some 50 miles south of New Orleans, became the United States’ first official climate refugees last week when the federal government awarded them $48 million to relocate.

The Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe has inhabited Isle de Jean Charles for centuries, but because of a slow-moving disaster caused by sinking land, climate change and oil exploration, they've all but lost the land they call home. With more than 1,900 square miles of land vanishing in the past 80 years – equivalent to the size of a football field lost every 45 minutes – the tribe members who live in Isle de Jean Charles have to find a new place to live.

A weather.com special report published last year called Losing Louisiana chronicled the tribe’s plight.

“It kills me to see what has happened,” Isle de Jean Charles resident Regee Dupre told weather.com. “In my lifetime, I have witnessed a thriving community and culture reduced to a small community on life support.”

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The funding will allow the tribe to settle on higher ground, Indian Country Today reported. Since the 1950s, their land has shrunk from 11 miles long and five miles wide to two miles long and a quarter-mile wide as rising seas have swallowed up the Louisiana bayou.

A previous attempt by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to relocate the tribe was rejected in 2002, Indian Country Today also reported. But this time, the group got an offer they couldn't refuse, and the dire nature of their disappearing land left them with few options.

“I'm very, very pumped,” Chief Albert Naquin told Indian Country Today. “I'm very, very excited. I've been working on this for 13 years. I've taken some pretty big hits for doing that, and not just locally.”

This likely won't be the last group relocated by climate change in America. A group in Washington and two groups in Alaska are either in the process of relocating or will likely start discussing it soon.

(MORE ON WEATHER.COM: Losing Louisiana's Islands

Chandeleur Islands Battered By Katrina

NASA images of the Chandeleur Islands before (left) and after (right) taking a hit from Hurricane Katrina, in 2005.
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