



Adaptation privilege and Voluntary Buyouts: Perspectives on ethnocentrism in sea level rise relocation and retreat policies in the US



Elizabeth Marino

Oregon State University – Cascades, 1500 SW Chandler Ave, Bend, OR, 9770, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Voluntary buyouts
Adaptation
Sea level rise
Indigenous communities
White privilege

ABSTRACT

The coast is a highly populated environment that is under increasing risk because of sea level rise (SLR) and climate change. Social science predicts that social and political systems will habitually privilege certain communities and disadvantage others under conditions of risk and disaster. This paper tests that supposition on a particular disaster policy in the United States. Voluntary buyouts are a policy tool in the US that has the potential to help communities adapt to SLR. While buyouts have been resisted in the past, there is some indication that they are becoming more politically popular. Despite increased popularity, communities in Alaska who need to relocate because of repetitive flooding and sea level rise do not meet the basic requirements of the buyout program in a way that makes this policy applicable to their situation. We find that notions of the market, property, and individualism are ideological assumptions inherent to the buyout policies, which ultimately serve to disadvantage tribal communities as they attempt to relocate as an adaptation strategy to climate change. This analysis suggests that adaptation policies to climate change themselves, can limit the inventory of possibilities that some communities have to choose from, and re-trench inequity in the face of risk.

1. Introduction

The coast is a homeland for many people. Today, up to 1 billion people live near the sea (Hauer, 2017; Neumann et al., 2015), turning coastal zones into dynamic socio-ecological spaces in which communities establish cultural practices, infrastructure, economies, adaptation strategies, and unique human-ecological relationships with the ocean (Stocker and Kennedy, 2009). The lower-elevation coastal zone (LECZ), defined as “the contiguous area along the coast that is less than 10 m above sea level” (McGranahan et al., 2007), makes up less than 2 percent of the earth’s landmass, yet holds up to 10 percent of the human population (McGranahan et al., 2007). Most of the world’s megacities are located in the LECZ (Neumann et al., 2015). Between the years 1970–2000, there was a net-population growth in coastal zones, despite the presence of coastal hazards (De Sherbinin et al., 2012); and population growth within these areas is increasing more than in non-coastal areas, and is expected to continue to do so in the future (Neumann et al., 2015). In other words, the coast is sacred, the coast is special, and while most coastal residents are likely to remain safe from disasters (Tacoli, 2009: 519), the coast also poses unique risks to human populations.

Under conditions of extreme climate change, coastal communities may particularly experience risk associated with sea level rise (SLR). SLR refers to the rise in global ocean levels due primarily to ocean

expansion (Rahmstorf, 2007) and glacial melt (Rignot et al., 2011; DeConto and Pollard, 2016; Meier et al., 2007). Both phenomena are linked to anthropogenic climate change, the result of which creates new ecological norms for coastal communities to deal with and to which they must adapt. Sea level rise impacts are multifaceted and include submersion of coastal areas, increased erosion and groundwater intrusion (Nicholls and Cazenave, 2010), increased flooding, and greater storm surges, among others. Perhaps due to local experiences of change and risk, people who live closer to the ocean are more likely to believe in climate change, and more likely to support government efforts to reduce green house gas emissions (Milfont et al., 2014).

2. Reviewing vulnerability and adaptation: political “all the way through”

For human communities, SLR is primarily concerning on short and medium time frames because of an increased occurrence and/or a greater ferocity of natural hazards (storms, hurricanes, high water, erosion) (Temmerman et al., 2013), and the social consequences of these hazards, which social scientists understand as disasters (flooding, levee failure, lack of water, forced relocation). For several decades, social scientists have recognized that vulnerability to disaster, or the short and long-term suffering caused by disasters, is not predicated on proximity to the hazard, but rather on the socio-political and economic

E-mail address: Elizabeth.marino@osucascades.edu.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.01.002>

Received 10 October 2017; Accepted 17 January 2018
0959-3780/ © 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

situatedness of the individuals and communities into which a natural hazard enters (Oliver-Smith, 1996; Marino, 2015; Faas, 2016 as a review). The socially-constructed vulnerabilities of people and communities often run systematically along lines of class, ethnicity, gender, race, and political status; and thus we can understand inequitable disaster outcomes (and negative outcomes of disaster policy) to be a form of oppression. Three fundamental questions for social scientists engaged in analyses of climate change and SLR, therefore, are: a) whether or not this theory of vulnerability is accurate in predicting who is more likely to be exposed to climate change and sea level rise-related disasters; b) whether or not the social systems which create vulnerability continue unabated today; and c) whether or not adaptation policies relieve or exacerbate these inequities.

Research suggests that theories of vulnerability do predict who is more likely to be exposed to negative climate change outcomes and disasters linked to SLR (Lazrus, 2012; Ribot, 2010; Marino, 2012, 2015; Cozzetto et al., 2013). In cases where communities are already experiencing risk or disasters related to climate change, researchers have shown that there are particular colonial histories, economic disadvantages, and political constraints that exacerbate and help create these risks. Emerging research also suggests that the social systems which create vulnerability continue today (Martinich et al., 2013). Martinich and colleagues have demonstrated that, particularly along the Gulf Coast, for example, social and economic class predicts who is most likely to flood because these are the communities who have the least engineering protection against high water. This suggests that it is not merely historical systems of oppression, but also contemporary ones, that create inequities to disaster. The last question posited above, namely, “do current adaptation policies relieve or exacerbate these inequities” has been less explored in the literature (for an exception, see special issue Marino and Ribot, 2012; Eriksen et al., 2015).

This paper examines one SLR adaptation strategy currently gaining momentum in the United States – Voluntary Buyouts – to understand how policies designed to protect from or adapt to SLR, and other coastal flooding events, exacerbate or relieve inequities in disaster outcomes. The United States is in some sense an anomalous context for examining policies regarding SLR because only 53% of the citizenry believes in anthropogenic climate change (Leiserowitz et al., 2014); and the current administration has effectively refused to acknowledge climate change and SLR publically (Merica, 2017). However, disaster policies are reacting to SLR in discourses regarding repetitive flooding properties (Simon, 2017; Randolph, 2016); and federal agencies are making decisions regarding sea walls, beach nourishment, and other engineering solutions created to respond to flooding risks.

Specifically this paper responds to Eriksen, Nightingale and Eakin's conceptual claim that adaptation is political “all the way through” (2015). By tracing a particular (not theoretical or conceptual) adaptation policy to SLR, and by identifying the underlying ideological assumptions inherent in that policy, we can begin to identify the political scaffolding of inequity that creates vulnerabilities among certain groups today and into the future. In other words, this article takes as a starting point the idea that adaptation is political from conception through to execution, and seeks to identify the ideological assumptions and contestations about risk, recovery, and economic rationality inherent in adaptation policies. To do so is to analyze where and whether disparities in outcome are linked to disparities in the subjectivities and ideologies of adaptation policy creation itself.

3. The Voluntary Buyout process

In the United States, the most realistic, existent political mechanism to fund relocations or retreat from SLR is a suite of policies around hazard mitigation and disaster relief that are collectively referred to as Voluntary Buyouts, which is shortened here to the vernacular: buyouts. Buyouts allow a property owner to “sell” property to the government through a political process that typically requires state, local, and

federal participation. The process, as the name indicates, is voluntary and homeowners cannot be removed from their properties without consent. Following a buyout, the land acquired is converted into public green space and theoretically cannot be developed in the future.

Historically, buyouts have been an anomaly compared to other mechanisms of disaster relief and disaster spending. From 1993 to 2011 FEMA spent approximately \$2 billion dollars to buy back 37,707 high-risk properties (Polefka, 2013), mostly along the Mississippi River. This \$2 billion spent on buyouts pales in comparison to the \$108 billion in property damage following Hurricane Katrina (Knabb et al., 2006), for example, or the \$136 billion dollars reportedly spent on disaster relief from the years 2011–2013. Additionally, Liz Koslov notes that buyouts have also been rhetorically unpopular in the United States, especially with developers and politicians, who see developing waterfronts as key features of economic and social progress (Koslov, 2016: 375–379). This is true even when homeowners and neighborhood organizations petition for buyouts.

Since Hurricane Sandy, however, there has been increased attention to buyout processes, and indications that buyouts might be gaining in popularity. In New Jersey, the Hurricane Sandy Blue Acres Program spent \$300 million in federal monies to buy approximately 1300 repetitive flooding properties (State of New Jersey, 2017). The Blue Acres Program has also been recognized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as a National Best Practice (State of New Jersey, 2017), and may be looked to as a model, following the suite of hurricanes that hit the US Gulf Coast in 2017.

There is also evidence that buyouts are gaining popularity with decision-makers in Washington D.C. Perhaps surprisingly, buyouts have been relatively apolitical compared with other climate change legislation. For those people who “believe in climate change” buyouts are recognized as a mechanism for climate change adaptations and a response to SLR; but in June 2017 the finance house committee passed a bipartisan bill that, in part, encouraged buyouts (and other forms of mitigation) for over 150,000 properties in the United States that are subject to repetitive flooding. Justification for the bill noted that “FEMA estimates that while these properties comprise just one percent of those insured by the NFIP, they represent 25 to 30 percent of all flood claims” (Simpson, 2017). Notably, the bill requires that communities who have repetitive-flooding properties demonstrate hazard mitigation reforms, or run the risk of losing coverage by the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), a federally-run program in the US. The risk of losing flooding insurance can, arguably, be read as an incentive to accept buyouts. In another example of increased popularity, Harris County, the county that houses the city of Houston, Texas, called immediately for buyouts in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in 2017. Also in the aftermath of the storm, FEMA produced a report entitled, “Buyouts a Win–Win for Harris County and Residents” (FEMA, 2017).

For climate change researchers, the increased attention to buyouts offers great hope for a partial solution to SLR even in the political context of climate change denial. The concern, stemming from the social science literature on disaster, is that if suddenly these policies are deployed on a large scale – they may have the unintentional consequence of privileging some communities and individuals at risk, while ignoring others. In other words, does this adaptation policy re-entrench or relieve inequity?

4. Who's missing?: a critique of ethnocentrism and white privilege in adaptation policies

I have worked in and with the community of Shishmaref, Alaska for over 10 years (some years more than others), trying to understand, with the help of my colleagues and friends who live there, how and why climate change is affecting this community (Marino, 2012, 2015). Sometimes called the “poster child for climate change” in the popular press (Sheppard, 2014), Shishmaref and other communities in Alaska – notably, Newtok – have voted to relocate because advancing erosion

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7468957>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7468957>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)