

Posh Corps Podcast Ep. 17: Kiribati
By Alan Toth
Transcript

Narration: You're listening to the Posh Corps Podcast.

Last December, 196 nations reached a deal at the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Paris. They agreed to set a goal of limiting global temperature rise to less than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The agreement was hailed around the world as a landmark success, but for many island nations the agreement may have been too little too late. Many of these nations had been campaigning for a temperature limit of no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius. Representatives from island nations protested outside the convention in Paris.

The average global temperature has already increased an average of 1 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Many island nations are already experiencing the devastating effects of this increase.

One of these nations is the Republic of Kiribati. Kiribati is a Pacific island nation composed of 33 coral atoll islands. The total land area of the 33 islands of Kiribati is slightly larger than New York City. The islands are spread out over a vast area of the Pacific Ocean, about the size of the United States. Kiribati straddles the equator and the international date line.

Mike Roman is a cultural anthropologist. He wrote his PhD dissertation on the cultural effects of climate change on the people of Kiribati. Mike first experienced Kiribati as a Peace Corps volunteer from 2000 to 2002.

What was your first thought when they told you that you were going to Peace Corps in Kiribati?

Mike: "Where is it?" They gave you a little package of information, and on that package it said, "Pacifica," and it had little dots drawn on a map with an arrow pointing to those dots. I'm like, "Okay. I don't fish, I hate hot weather, and I'm severely prone to motion sickness. Did something go wrong?" I was an education volunteer and I worked in the primary schools.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about the I-Kiribati culture?

Mike: It's wonderful. They're the most kind people that you will ever meet. Family means more than money. Land means more than money. It's a different way of life than we have here, in the United States. Land in Kiribati belongs to your ancestors and your family. You live on the land that you're born on. When you die you go back to that land and you watch over future generations of your family. There's much more of a connection to land, which, when you

talk about climate change and the disappearance of land, that is a concept that I think nobody takes into account.

Narration: The people of Kiribati, known as I-Kiribati, are ethnically and culturally Micronesian. Christianity was introduced to Kiribati in the 19th century. Most I-Kiribati today are either Catholic or Protestant. During Mike's Peace Corps service, religion played a role in local skepticism regarding global warming.

Mike: They are a very Christian community. In the Bible God said, "Oh, no. I promise never to flood the earth again," to Noah, "and with that promise I will create the rainbow." In Kiribati you see rainbows every day. You're also contending with religion.

In 2000 I wrote a letter home to Mom and Dad and said something like, "Global warming could be a problem."

Narration: The following is from the letter that Mike wrote home to his parents:

"It's so pretty here, but scary too. I heard about this thing called global warming before I left home, and I just wonder if it's true. Being here sure makes it real to me, but I guess I trust the US Government. They wouldn't send us here if they thought it was a serious threat. I asked Mikaio what he thought about global warming. He assured me it was nothing serious. 'You know, Mike,' he said, 'They said Kiribati would go under the ocean in the 1980s, and look, we're still here, so don't worry. God promised Noah to never flood the earth again, so, see, no need to worry.'"

16 years later, Mike and his I-Kiribati friends and family have a very different outlook.

Interviewer: For your average I-Kiribati, how many of them do you think are starting to realize that this is actually going to happen?

Mike: It's a lot more, because things are getting worse faster.

Narration: One major problem with life on Kiribati is the water supply. Fresh water is becoming increasingly difficult to access.

Mike: The problem with the water situation is you get water from the well. The way that coral atolls are formed, coral atolls are porous. Salt water is heavier, it's more dense, than fresh water. What happens is the salt water will go into the coral atolls, it will be filtered by the coral, and then it will create a fresh water basin underneath the atoll. With the less dense water you can actually build a well, dig down and dip a bucket, get fresh water. With the rising seas, the salt water is actually, there's more of it so it pushes the fresh water up. With the

tides, king tides, washing over the land, the salt water goes into the wells. You have it coming from both ways.

Narration: The islands of Kiribati have a shallow water table and limited land area, so it's easy for human and animal waste to pollute the drinking water. In recent years, Kiribati has been inundated with extremely high tides known as king tides. The La Niña ocean cycle combined with rising sea levels has produced higher tides than ever before experienced in Kiribati and other Pacific Island nations. In 2015 king tides flooded several islands. Salt water inundated the wells, spoiling the drinking water. This extremely polluted water is becoming a serious problem for the I-Kiribati.

Mike: That's happening more frequently now. When salt water washes over the land, within 3 to 5 days you start seeing vegetation go. That creates more of a problem, because trees hold the land together. Without these natural vegetation apparatuses to hold the land together you get more erosion. With more erosion you lose more land.

Narration: In addition to king tides, weather patterns in the Pacific are shifting. Pacific Island nations like Kiribati and Fiji used to sit in the middle of a corridor of calm weather. Over the last few decades, typhoons and powerful storms have begun to strike these island nations more frequently. Cyclone Pam, which caused complete devastation in Vanuatu in 2015, also caused major damage in Kiribati.

Mike: It wiped out the island that I worked on, Tamana. It destroyed so much of the main island, road infrastructure, houses. I had a friend who said something like, "I am not ashamed to tell the world that I'm homeless now because of climate change."

Narration: In addition to salt water infiltration, waterborne illness in Kiribati is increasing as well.

Lulu: Yes, the high tides are really visually dramatic and the big, crashing waves do destroy our roads and our sea walls and our homes, but I think the most pressing problem is drinking water. Everybody gets dysentery at some point.

Narration: Lulu DeBoer is a documentary filmmaker. Her mother is I-Kiribati. Her father is an American who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kiribati in the 1980s. Lulu was raised in the United States. She studied film at Stanford University. She traveled to Kiribati last year to meet her extended family and to shoot a documentary about Kiribati and climate change. At the time of this interview, Lulu had been living in Kiribati for almost a year.

Lulu: A lot of people think of Kiribati as a small island nation. If you switch your perspective a little bit, you could think of Kiribati as just a giant ocean nation.

Our coral reefs are just as important to us as the actual land itself. You can talk about land erosion and the roads going away and people's houses flooding. The other half of the story, which is just as important, is, "How's the reef doing? How are the fish doing? Is the coral bleaching? Will ocean acidification because of climate change just starve us out because it will kill our reefs?"

I think the most pressing issue right now is water and food security. You should not at all downplay the danger. Kiribati is in great danger. This is a very fragile island, a very fragile ecosystem. The big countries have a huge influence on us. We are very powerless to control these factors.

Narration: The rising seas may not completely flood Kiribati for another 50 years, but the polluted water supply and the loss of vegetation and arable land may render the islands uninhabitable within the next 5 to 10 years.

Mike: This is real. This is not something 100 years or 200 years from now. This is something that's happening right now. We don't even have 5 years to wait. That's how dire it is. Former president Anote Tong said, "Within 5 years we need to leave. We need to start migrating. Those who want to leave need to go." His plan was to have them go to Fiji.

Narration: In 2014, Kiribati achieved the unusual distinction of becoming the first nation to buy land on another nation for the purpose of possibly relocating the entire population because of the effects of climate change. The president of Kiribati at that time, President Anote Tong, secured the purchase of 20 square kilometers of land on the island of Vanua Levu in Fiji. The land purchase was intended to be used for agriculture, as farming in Kiribati has become increasingly difficult. President Tong indicated that he believed that the entire population of Kiribati, about 110,000 people, could live on the land purchase, if necessary.

Early reports claimed that this land was unsuitable for agriculture and that it was already inhabited by refugees from the Solomon Islands. Recently a delegation from the government of Kiribati traveled to Fiji to survey the land. The land and environment minister of Kiribati told the Fiji Times that the reports about squatters living on the land were not true. He made no mention of the viability of the land for agricultural purposes.

Mike: Yes, Kiribati does have on paper the land. Whether it's viable for crop production or for resettlement purposes is a question that remains.

Narration: The government of Fiji has previously promised that residents of Kiribati will be welcomed in Fiji should climate change force them from their homes. Preparing 20 square kilometers of land for habitation by over 100,000 people is a daunting task for a small island nation like Kiribati. Many I-Kiribati are

migrating to industrial nations like New Zealand, though this is particularly difficult for I-Kiribati to do legally.

In the 1900s, the British Empire annexed the I-Kiribati island of Banaba. By 1916, all the I-Kiribati islands were officially declared a British colony known as the Gilbert Islands. The British were mainly interested in mining the rich phosphate deposits from Banaba Island. Phosphates are chemicals used in fertilizer and detergent production. In 1979, when the phosphates on Banaba Island were exhausted, the British granted Kiribati independence.

Mike: It's a standalone nation. It's an independent nation today, which is also a problem because there's no tie to another nation to go to migrate to.

Narration: I-Kiribati have limited options for migration, but some are able to travel to New Zealand on limited work visas. Mike did interviews with many of these I-Kiribati migrants in New Zealand for his dissertation.

Mike: They were telling me they're going over on work visas, temporary work visas, which turn into permanent living conditions in New Zealand. They were saying, "Well, we were living in houses that had 3 bedrooms and 20 people." Massive overpopulation of a residence. The companies that they worked for paid for them to fly from Kiribati to New Zealand, paid for all their work visa fees and everything. They would work but they would get paid, because the money that they earned would go to pay back the airfare, to pay back the work visas, to pay back all these fees. They would work for a year or more without getting a paycheck, or maybe they'll get five dollars for a week of work. So, being taken advantage of, definitely a problem.

Narration: In addition to being exploited, many of the I-Kiribati who settle in New Zealand have no official status. When their work visas expire, they can simply be deported back to Kiribati. One of these I-Kiribati migrants was Ioane Teitiota. Teitiota was living in New Zealand on a work visa. In 2011, after inadvertently missing a visa extension deadline, Teitiota was arrested for overstaying his visa. A local lawyer took up Teitiota's case. Considering the dire situation of fresh water and erosion in Kiribati, Teitiota's lawyer appealed to the New Zealand authorities to grant Teitiota asylum status in New Zealand as a refugee.

Teitiota's case drew media attention from around the world. He became known as the world's first climate refugee. Unfortunately, the minor celebrity status didn't help. The New Zealand courts ruled against Teitiota because the United Nations convention relating to the status of refugees does not list climate change as a condition for refugee status. Teitiota was deported to Kiribati in 2015. His case may have set a worrisome legal precedent, indicating that those people displaced by climate change have no official status or protections under international law. Though Kiribati may be the first

nation to confront this issue, the problem will likely affect many island nations.

Mike: If I'm looking at this map that's behind you, I see the Maldives, I see Tokelau, I see Tuvalu, I see Kiribati, I see Marshall Islands, I see the Seychelles. I see 6 nations. I've done the math, and it adds up to over 500,000 people. It's a large amount of humanity. The world needs to put people before profit, I think, because the profit is making all of this happen. The money is driving the changes.

Obama promised something like ... I don't remember the exact number, but it was a significant amount of money to the Pacific Islands that were facing climate change...

Narration: During the Climate Convention in Paris, President Obama promised that the United States would commit \$3 billion to the United Nations Green Climate Fund. The Green Climate Fund was created in 2009 to provide developing nations with money to fund projects that will mitigate the effects of climate change. The former president of Kiribati, Anote Tong, has said that these funds are almost impossible to access. The following is from President Tong's speech at the London School of Economics.

President Tong: From my experience over the last more than 10 years, the international community has been very, very slow in coming forward. The reality also is we cannot get access to the Green Climate Fund, because we don't have accreditation. What frustrates me is that I'm sure I have contributed to the formation of this fund because of my advocacy over the years, yet we cannot get at it. We cannot access it because we don't have accreditation because we don't have the capacity. We have the vulnerability but not the capacity.

Narration: President Tong's assertion that the Green Climate Fund is difficult to access has been affirmed by the leaders of numerous developing nations. The accreditation process to access the funding can take years and the bureaucratic requirements are often beyond the means of small developing nations. President Tong believes the money itself will not solve the problem faced by Kiribati. President Tong advocates for a concept he refers to as migration with dignity. Mike Roman agrees.

Mike: Money, I see it as not the answer. Because, sure, we might get a new road, but you're still keeping us in the islands. You're not letting us come over and start a new life or have opportunities. I think that's what the US needs to do. They need to. As much anti-immigration rhetoric as you hear on the campaign trails from some certain individuals, it's going to have to happen, because I don't think human beings can live seeing the kind of disaster that will soon come to other human beings, at least I hope not.

Narration: Perhaps President Tong's vision of migration with dignity will come to pass and the people of Kiribati will be allowed to migrate easily to other nations. Perhaps the international community and the United Nations will continue to ignore the problems faced by Pacific Island nations and the people of Kiribati will become stateless refugees spread across the Pacific. Whatever the outcome, the frightening possibility is that I-Kiribati culture could be lost as people migrate.

Despite being American, Mike Roman felt a deep connection with the country and its people.

Interviewer: You mention a lot, when you talk about Kiribati, you say, "We." It seems like you see yourself more as somebody who belongs on Kiribati, not necessarily somebody who belongs in the United States.

Mike: I think that has to do with just my number 1 love for the country and my connection to the country, my family. In Kiribati Peace Corps you get hooked up with a family, your host family. Even though they're not biological family, I went through a lot with them. I grew up with them. From age 20 they knew me. That's why I say, "my family." I have this connection to them.

Lulu: It strengthens my tie to my family in a way that I never had before. Before I came to Kiribati, I would get Facebook messages from people. They would say, "Hi. I'm your cousin from so-and-so and so-and-so." I'd be like, "Okay. That's nice, but it's not really relevant to me. I have no idea who you are." Now that I'm here and now that I appreciate how much you depend on your family, not just for your social connections but also for resources, and these resources do keep you alive. All of those second cousins, aunties, those connections became way more important to me.

I think having that sense of this extended family, that will take you in and love you unconditionally, gives you this system of sharing that I think we really lack in the Western world, because in the West we just are taught to be individual and self-sufficient all the time and not to depend on other people. Now that I've been here and I have a more Islander perspective, I realize that's such a silly thought.

Narration: Lulu's film is called "Millennium Island." She's still in Kiribati. She's hoping to raise the funds she needs to finish production. The US Peace Corps ceased operations in Kiribati in 2008, but Mike Roman is still working with other Peace Corps volunteers who served in Kiribati. They've started a project called Kiribati Keepers which hopes to provide disaster relief and relocation assistance to Kiribati citizens whose homes have been destroyed by cyclones, king tides, and sea water invasion. Mike also started a Facebook group called Humans of Kiribati, aimed at raising awareness.

Mike: Raising awareness is number 1. The more people that know about us the better.

Narration: Thanks for listening to the Posh Corps Podcast.