

Wishful sinking: Disappearing islands, climate refugees and cosmopolitan experimentation

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Abstract: *Disappearing islands and climate refugees have become signifiers of the scale and urgency of uneven impacts of climate change. This paper offers a critical account of how sea level rise debates reverberate around Western mythologies of island laboratories. I argue that representations of low-lying Oceania islands as experimental spaces burden these sites with providing proof of a global climate change crisis. The emergence of Tuvalu as a climate change ‘canary’ has inscribed its islands as a location where developed world anxieties about global climate change are articulated. As Tuvalu islands and Tuvaluan bodies become sites to concretize climate science’s statistical abstractions, they can enforce an eco-colonial gaze on Tuvalu and its inhabitants. Expressions of ‘wishful sinking’ create a problematic moral geography in some prominent environmentalist narratives: only after they disappear are the islands useful as an absolute truth of the urgency of climate change, and thus a prompt to save the rest of the planet.*

Keywords: *climate canary, climate refugee, disappearing islands, island laboratory, Tuvalu*





Challenges of ethical representation in climate change narratives

Disappearing islands as symbols: Critiques the portrayal of islands like Tuvalu as markers of the climate crisis, perpetuating an 'eco-colonial' gaze.

'Climate canary' narrative: Tuvalu is used as a metaphorical 'canary in the coal mine' to emphasise global climate urgency.

Problematic moral geography: Narratives of 'wishful sinking' neglect the agency and sovereignty of island communities.

Island laboratory concept: Islands are framed as sites for global climate experiments, reinforcing hierarchical portrayals.

Exploitation of vulnerability: Media and researchers oversimplify Tuvaluans' experiences, reducing them to passive victims or heroes.

Selective attention: Dramatic climate impact stories overshadow systemic solutions and Tuvaluans' lived realities.





THE
L I F E
AND
STRANGE SURPRIZING
ADVENTURES
OF
ROBINSON CRUSOE,
OF *TORK,* MARINER:
Who lived Eight and Twenty Years,
all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the
Coast of *AMERICA,* near the Mouth of
the Great River of *ORONOQUE;*
Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, where-
in all the Men perished but himself.
WITH
An Account how he was at last strangely deli-
ver'd by *PYRATES.*
Written by Himself.
L O N D O N:
Printed for *W. TAYLOR* at the *Ship* in *Pater-Noster-*
Row. **MDCCLXIX.**

Robinson Crusoe and colonial representations

“The island Crusoe discovers is anything he wants it to be... In the seemingly uncomplicated, simplified geography and economy of the island, Crusoe's outlook seems more convincing than it might have done in a more textured setting, with other people, commodity markets and landlords, for example... In this uncomplicated, unknown and initially unpopulated island he is given the opportunity to make a new world” (Phillips 1997: 30-33)

IPCC Sixth Assessment Report

"We are paying with our lives for the carbon someone else emitted," said Mohamed Nasheed, a former Maldives president who represents almost 50 countries that are vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

The Maldives is the world's lowest-lying country and Mr Nasheed said the projections by UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) would be "devastating" for the nation, putting it on the "edge of extinction".

BBC News, 9th August 2021



11. The Maldives

Pristine beaches, stunning snorkelling spots and five-star resorts lure droves of visitors to the Maldives every year. But the future doesn't look bright for the world's lowest lying country. The UN Environmental Programme has predicted that the Maldives could become the first nation to be lost to the ocean – potentially by the end of the twenty-first century – if sea levels continue to rise at their current rate.





Beach close
FOR
RENOVATION

The Maldives is threatened by rising seas – but coastal development is causing even more pressing environmental issues

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Contestation over an island imaginary landscape: The management and maintenance of touristic nature

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how maintaining high-end tourism in luxury resorts requires recreating a tourist imaginary of pristine, isolated and unpeopled island landscapes, thus necessitating the ceaseless manipulation and management of space. This runs contrary to the belief that tourism industries are exerting an increasingly benign influence on local environments following the emergence of ‘sustainable tourism’ in recent decades. Rather than preventing further destruction of the ‘natural’ world, or fostering the reproduction of ‘natural’ processes, this article argues that the tourist sector actively seeks to alter and manage local environments so as to ensure their continuing attractiveness to the high-paying tourists that seek out idyllic destinations. Additionally, by drawing on an example of tourism development, environmental change and local conflict in the Maldives, it shows how interventions by tourism managers can result in conflict with local people who, possessing different imaginaries, interests and priorities, may have their own, often long-established, uses of the environment undermined in the process. The article concludes that the growing diversity and increasing environmental awareness of tourists is currently producing a range of complexities and ambiguities that preclude any easy and straightforward environmental response by the sector, and ultimately might destabilise the Western-based tourist imaginary itself.

Fairbourne, West Wales

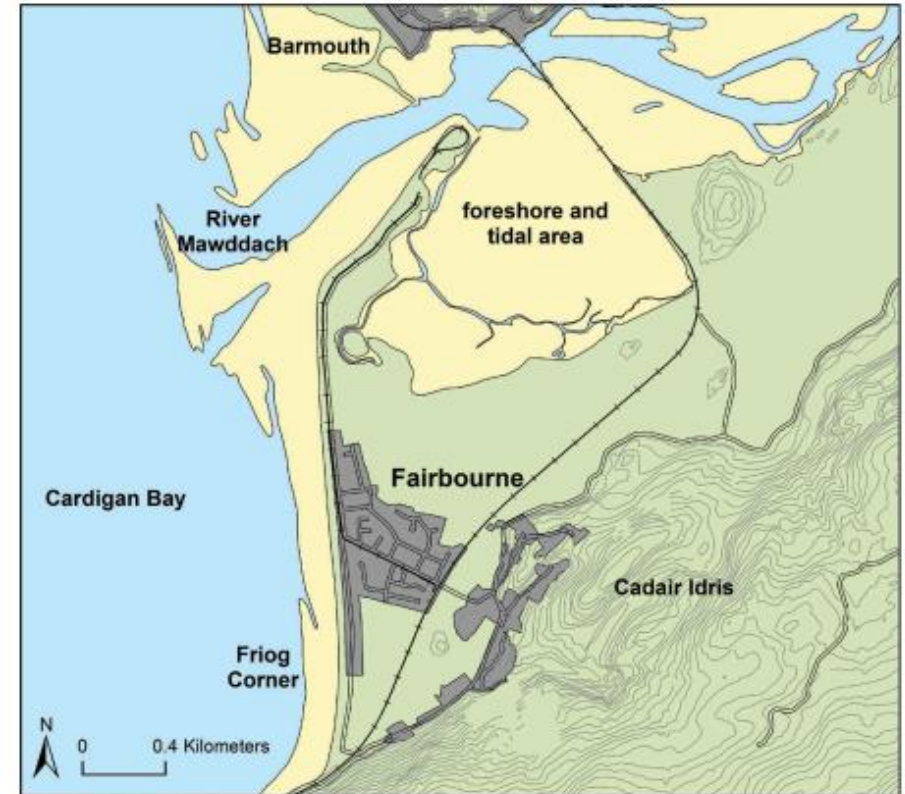
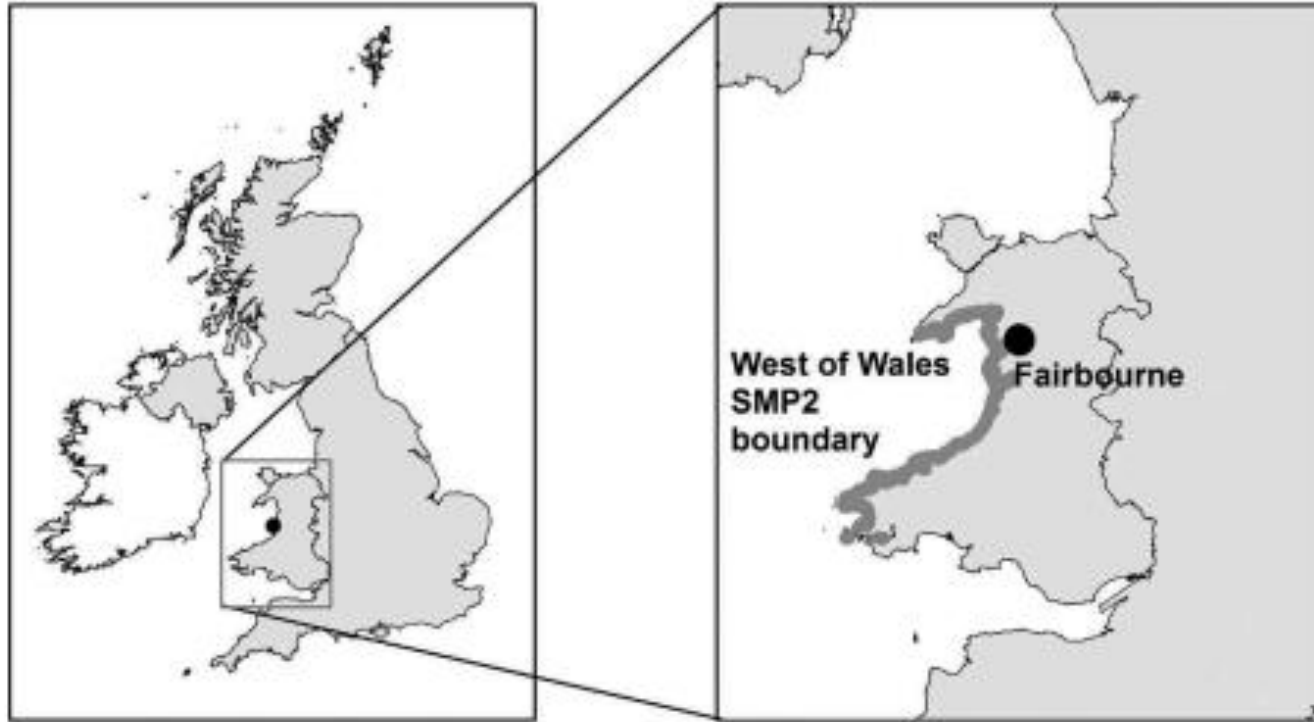


Figure 1. Fairbourne location map.



'This is a wake-up call': the villagers who could be Britain's first climate refugees



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DROWNED OUT

A sleepy seaside village in Wales could be the first in the UK to be wiped out by the ocean. Sea defences in Fairbourne are due to stop being maintained in the 2050s.



Imagining laboratory status

- “A climate change spectacle, where the predicted effects of sea level rise are miniaturised in space and brought forward in time” (Farbotko, 2010)
- “*Do not switch off, because what is happening in Fairbourne will be happening in other communities around the United Kingdom and around Wales in the years to come... Fairbourne is what a climate change emergency looks like. It is slow, but it is happening, and we have little response to it*” (Saville-Roberts, Hansard, 1.5.19)
- “The Village Beyond Climate Change”



Fairbourne Coastal Risk Management Learning Project

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Welcome to the Fairbourne Facing Change Newsletter

Here is an outline of what has been achieved so far....

- Core group and work groups established.
- Interest and support of a Member of the European Parliament (MEP).
- Contacted Senior Politicians to raise awareness of our position.
- Established a Community Bank Account to accept donations and cash contributions to fund the campaign.
- Established that the Shoreline Management Plan 2 (SMP2) is not a statutory document but is a "live" document that is open to discussion, and input from the local community is actively encouraged.
- Invited to join Fairbourne Multi-Agency Project Board meetings. We determined that, at this point we would only attend as observers with speaking rights. This has been accepted.



A positive and productive meeting between Kay Swinburne MEP and FFC representatives was held on Thursday 20th March.

How have you been affected by recent events? Let us know!

We need written evidence from you if you have been directly affected by the recent BBC television and other media coverage of Fairbourne. For example.....

- Has your property been devalued, or have your insurance premiums increased?
- Have you cancelled a building project?
- Has the sale of your property fallen through?
- Have you been refused a mortgage?
- Are you a business owner or are you self employed and you have lost work?
- Has your physical or mental health been affected?

See the 'Contact Us' details on page 3 of this newsletter.

Singled out?

- If the village is eventually washed away, then *"it'll be in 100–200 years and by then Lincolnshire, London, the Somerset Flats will have gone first"*.
- Fairbourne has been *"picked out"* and *"experimented upon"*, treated like it is in a *"petri-dish"* or like the *"guinea pig"* of coastal village decommissions".
- Highlights politics of (Welsh and English) identity and representation



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Political Geography

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Full Length Article

Climate change imaginaries: Representing and contesting sea level rise in Fairbourne, North Wales

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ABSTRACT

Geographical imaginaries – as discourses that are both representationally and performatively constituted – are vitally implicated in the making of the world and therefore profoundly political. In this paper we introduce the notion of the ‘sea level rise imaginary’ (SLRI) to explore the implications of these insights for how rising seas caused by climate change are being understood and acted upon in the UK. Drawing on empirical research undertaken in Fairbourne, a coastal village in North Wales that has become emblematic of sea level rise-induced population displacement, we consider the imaginary’s intersecting spatial, temporal and dramatic components. The findings, based on interviews, official documents and media reports, show how Fairbourne’s dominant, external SLRI, a primarily future-oriented discourse, is materialising in the present day via a series of institutional, economic and behavioural effects. However, it is also subject to political contestation and resistance by Fairbourne’s residents who put forward their own alternative SLRI – one in which the imagining of the village as an example of the local consequences of global climate change is countered by the situated representations and performances of community actors. In the end, the paper highlights the need for improved dialogue across contested SLRIs so that diverse perspectives are more effectively considered when anticipating and responding to climate change. This is potentially one way to minimise the present-day harms resulting from the projected effects of sea level rise and to imagine more open-ended, hopeful futures for affected coastal communities.

Questions raised

- Ethical representation: How can researchers avoid reductive or paternalistic portrayals of affected communities?
- Local agency: How can research centre the voices and sovereignty of those most impacted by climate change?
- Power dynamics: What are the implications of framing vulnerable regions as 'laboratories' for global climate research?
- Global vs. local priorities: Are global narratives overshadowing the specific needs of local populations?
- Impact of media narratives: How do sensationalised portrayals shape public understanding and policy-making?

