

GREAT DECISIONS

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HIGH SCHOOL

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TEACHERS:
CHECK OUT
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CLIMATE MIGRATION

**A PRESENT
DAY PROBLEM**

**PLANNING
AHEAD**

**SHOULD
WE WAIT?**

**EVERYONE
IS AFFECTED**



BY CAROLYN KISSANE



ON THE RUN

Ethan Swope/AP Images

A firefighter jumps over a fence while battling wildfires in Los Angeles, California, in early 2025. More than 17,000 homes were destroyed or damaged during the fires, and more than 200,000 people were displaced. By October 2025, about 70% of them were still unable to return.

Leaving your home for an unfamiliar land where you might be labeled an “alien,” “refugee,” or “foreigner” is rarely a voluntary decision. Often, it is a choice made under duress. When your forests light on fire, oceans spill over, and homes are burning or drowning, relocation becomes one of the few

alternatives to death or chronic insecurity. Under international law, there is no universally accepted definition of a “climate migrant” or “climate refugee.” This complicates efforts to collect data, allocate resources, and extend legal protections. But while no specific legal definition exists, climate migrants can broadly be

understood as [people who relocate temporarily or permanently due to negative environmental change](#).

IT'S ALREADY HAPPENING

Many people underestimate the impact of climate migration. It is often misunderstood as a future risk. It is also often seen as a

challenge limited to the world's poorest and most fragile regions. But this attitude is false and misleading. Climate migration is already occurring across continents, economic statuses, and degrees of political and social stability. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, as many as 143 million people could be **displaced** over the next three decades due to climate-related disruptions. Such disruptions include rising sea levels, drought, fire risk, and extreme temperatures. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that weather-related disasters already displace more than 20 million people each year.

Climate migration is shaped by how exposed a community is to climate change and how strong its systems are to deal with the impact. Some communities are hit harder by climate change than others, and some have more resources to cope. A society's wealth, political stability, and geographical position all make a big difference in whether people are forced to move.

GLOBAL IMPACTS

Three categories are commonly used to describe those affected by climate emergencies. Climate refugees are forced to cross borders. **Internally displaced persons** (IDPs) relocate within their own countries. Stateless migrants face the potential loss of citizenship when areas become uninhabitable. Each category exposes gaps in the laws that currently oversee how refugees and migrants are treated around

the world. For example, the 1951 Refugee Convention does not recognize climate-caused displacement as grounds for protection.

The absence of legal clarity has grave practical consequences. Without recognized status, climate migrants often fall outside formal protection programs, despite facing threats to basic human rights, including access to food, water, shelter, and other resources necessarily for survival. These governance gaps highlight the need to treat climate migration as a global challenge rather than a series of isolated humanitarian crises in different parts of the world.

Climate change makes problems that already exist even worse. The social, economic, and political stresses that affect different countries are all impacted by climate change. Yet its impacts are not uniform. The countries and societies most vulnerable to climate impacts are often the least responsible for

global **emissions**. Meanwhile, even those with greater resources may still face significant adaptation challenges.

In some contexts, migration is **anticipatory**. In other words, leaders are already expecting it and managing it through legal pathways. This can be seen below in the example of Tuvalu and Australia. In other situations, climate migration is **reactive**. This means it happens haphazardly as disasters make areas unlivable. It is chaotic and internal. Wealth and stability may shape how climate stress is absorbed, but they do not eliminate the pressures of displacement. We can see this by looking at three current situations around the world: Tuvalu's migration agreement with Australia, internal displacement in South Sudan, and climate stress within Oman. Together, these cases show that climate migration is not just a possibility for the far-off future. It is already a defining feature of the century we are living in.

THE DEBATE

IS IT BETTER FOR PEOPLE IN AT-RISK AREAS TO MOVE BEFORE DISASTER STRIKES?

YES

- ✓ Moving before disaster strikes will be a more organized process than doing it afterward.
- ✓ People living in these areas will likely need to relocate at some point anyway.
- ✓ It will become more and more expensive to keep these areas habitable as disasters become more common.

NO

- ✗ At-risk areas, such as coastal cities, are some of the most popular places to live.
- ✗ People should be finding ways to combat the effects of climate change instead of giving up and moving.
- ✗ People moving away from at-risk areas will disrupt the economy.



Alastair Grant/AP Images

About 11,000 people live in Tuvalu, the world's fourth-smallest country. Made up of low-lying, narrow islands, Tuvalu floods easily when waters are high, and much of its land could become uninhabitable within decades.

ANTICIPATORY CLIMATE MIGRATION: AUSTRALIA AND TUVALU

Small island states sit at the extreme end of climate exposure. Tuvalu, a low-lying Pacific nation, faces existential threats from rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and saltwater intrusion. Scientists project that parts of Tuvalu may become uninhabitable within decades, raising questions not only about migration but also about **sovereignty** and statehood.

In 2023, Australia and Tuvalu signed the Falepili Union, an agreement that allows a certain number

of Tuvaluan citizens to migrate to Australia each year as climate impacts intensify. The Tuvaluans receive visas that allow them to stay in Australia for as long as they need to while receiving many of the same benefits as Australian citizens. This agreement represents one of the first formal recognitions of climate migration through a **bilateral framework**.

The Australia–Tuvalu agreement is anticipatory in nature. It acknowledges that climate migration is not a sudden event but a gradual process tied to worsening environmental conditions and that it requires planning, preparedness, and collaboration. While

the agreement does not resolve all legal questions surrounding climate refugees, it brings a shift toward planned mobility as a form of adaptation rather than failure. Tuvalu is not an exception. Rather, it is an early signal of how climate migration governance may evolve as exposure to the threat increases.

INTERNAL CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT: SOUTH SUDAN

In contrast to Tuvalu's cross-boundary and future-oriented approach, South Sudan presents a different picture. The situation here shows how climate migration can unfold mainly within the borders of a country under conditions of fragility. South Sudan is highly exposed to climate extremes, including frequent flooding and prolonged droughts, which interact with conflict, poverty, and weak state institutions.

Flooding along the Nile river has displaced millions internally in recent years, destroying homes, agricultural land, and **infrastructure**. Climate change acts as a **threat multiplier**, majorly increasing food insecurity, competition over common resources, and violence. Most of the displacement in South Sudan does not involve crossing international borders. Instead, people move within the country in search of jobs, homes, and safety.

South Sudan is an example of how climate migration does not always take shape as an international movement. Internal displacement can be just as destabilizing, particularly when the

government is not able to assist people in moving and finding new or temporary homes. South Sudan's experience highlights the importance of addressing climate adaptation and peacebuilding.

CLIMATE STRESS IN A WEALTHY STATE: OMAN

It's important to recognize that wealth and stability do not protect countries from climate migration pressures. Oman, a high-income and politically stable country, is increasingly affected by extreme heat, cyclones, and water scarcity. In recent years, severe storms such as Cyclone Shaheen in 2021 have caused widespread flooding, infrastructure damage, and temporary displacement.

Oman's experience challenges

THE DEBATE


SHOULD CLIMATE MIGRANTS RECEIVE LEGAL RESIDENCY STATUS IN NEW COUNTRIES?

YES

- ✓ Supporting climate migrants is the right thing to do.
- ✓ Climate migrants need to be able to find jobs and homes once they arrive.
- ✓ We need to prepare for long-term resettlement as certain countries become uninhabitable.

NO

- ✗ Nations with fewer climate issues aren't responsible for other countries' problems.
- ✗ There aren't enough homes and jobs to go around.
- ✗ Tax-paying citizens should not have to foot the bill for climate migration.



the idea that climate migration is limited to fragile or unstable countries. While displacement in Oman has largely been internal and temporary, climate stress is reshaping where people live, how

they construct buildings, and how the government operates. The country has invested heavily in adaptation measures. Oman is not "failing" in the face of climate change. Instead, it is adapting



During heavy rains, the waters of the Nile frequently spill into surrounding areas. These floods can displace thousands of people at a time, forcing them to gather their belongings and find new homes.



Oman News Agency via AP Images

Oman Air Force members survey the aftermath of Cyclone Shaheen in 2021. At least 14 people were killed and more than 1,000 homes were damaged in Oman during the storm.

under new climate realities. This case shows us that climate migration is more about exposure than poverty. Even wealthy states must contend with mobility pressures as climate impacts grow worse.

CLIMATE MIGRATION ACROSS CONTEXTS

Taken together, these three cases show the varied nature of climate migration outcomes. Tuvalu

represents a carefully planned and international migration under extreme exposure. South Sudan is a case of reactive internal displacement with conflict and limited capacity. Oman shows how climate stress affects even wealthy and stable states, producing internal mobility pressures.

Across all cases, climate change functions as an ongoing problem that will affect these and other nations for decades to come. Migration outcomes differ not because some societies are affected and others are not, but because they begin from different positions along the spectrum of needs and resources. This comparison reinforces the argument that climate migration is a global issue that will affect different groups depending on how governments choose to handle it.

LOOKING FORWARD

Climate migration is not something that will only happen a few times, in certain places. It is a defining feature of the climate century. From small island countries in danger of being wiped off the map to fragile governments grappling with internal displacement and wealthy states adapting to new climate extremes, no society is immune. Existing laws and program are not enough to address this reality. Without global change, today's climate migration will pale in comparison to what lies ahead. Countless millions of people will be left without adequate protection. Climate migration is already here. How societies respond will shape the future of human geography.

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE US DO MORE TO GUARD AGAINST CLIMATE DISASTERS?

YES

- ✓ Updating buildings and other infrastructure to make it damage-resistant will protect people from being displaced.
- ✓ We have the necessary technology to make these changes.
- ✓ It's better to be prepared than caught off guard.

NO

- ✗ Building or improving our current infrastructure would be very expensive.
- ✗ We can't predict which kinds of disasters will cause the biggest problems.
- ✗ It's not fair to people unaffected by disasters for tax dollars to be spent on those who are.

Credit

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Addressing climate change and climate migrants can be hard, even for the big decision-makers. But here are some direct and indirect steps you can take.

- **Talk about it.** Keeping climate migrants out of the shadows is important. This issue affects more people than we realize, and it will likely be a

serious topic in the future. Local [World Affairs Councils](#) engage on these issues and more.

- **Protest** when you think laws are unfair. Nonviolent protests are an American tradition and one of the most common ways to make your voice heard.
- **Research** your own carbon footprint: Explore the University of California, Berkeley's

[CoolClimate Calculator](#), which helps you calculate your own carbon footprint—and the potential impact of lifestyle changes.

- **Vote**, when you are old enough! With few exceptions, you can't vote until you're 18, but in many states you can [register](#) at 16 or 17, and you'll be all set when 18 rolls around.

CLIMATE TRAILBLAZERS



Connect4Climate/Flickr

Grace Malie

Climate change has shaped Grace Malie's life from a young age. Growing up in Tuvalu, she witnessed rising sea levels slowly encroach on the beaches where she played and, over time, into the homes of her relatives. Listening to elders speak about the possible loss of their land, culture, and identity made the climate crisis a personal and unsettling reality.

Malie began speaking publicly about climate change at just eight years old, sharing her experiences at a local open-air climate event. As she grew older, her advocacy expanded to international platforms,

where she has represented Tuvaluan youth and highlighted the threats sea-level rise poses to small island nations. As a Rising Nations Youth Delegate, she brings the lived experiences of her community into global climate discussions.

Today, Malie continues to advocate for stronger political commitment to address sea-level rise and protect island nations like Tuvalu. She speaks not only for her own generation, but for future ones, emphasizing the need to safeguard the place she calls home.

Nyombi Morris

Climate change has displaced Nyombi Morris, 24, and his family more than once. When a flash flood destroyed Morris's family farm in [Uganda in 2008](#), he and his family were forced to migrate. Then the family was forced to move again because of urban flooding in Kampala, Uganda. Because the devastating

flooding had been exacerbated by [illegal mining and global climate change](#), Morris became a climate activist. In 2020, he founded Earth Volunteers, a nonprofit organization that has planted 48,000 trees and pushes for a climate curriculum to end climate ignorance. He was awarded the 2022 Earth Champion Award by the UN Environment Programme. Morris is still unable to return to the village where he grew up. But as a climate migrant, he has used his experience to advocate for climate solutions across [Africa](#), [North America](#) and the world.



Courtesy: Civicus



WHO BELONGS WHERE?

1. What point do you think this cartoon is trying to make? Do you agree or disagree?
2. How are people fleeing disaster within their own countries different from those fleeing across borders?
3. What role should the government play in assisting US citizens displaced from their home due to climate disaster?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. Do you think the US government would welcome climate refugees from neighboring countries? Why or why not?
2. What, if anything, do you think the US government should be doing differently to address climate issues?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Have you or someone you know ever been forced to leave home because of a natural disaster? What was this experience like?

KEY WORDS & TERMS

anticipatory	migrant
bilateral framework	reactive
displaced	refugee
emissions	sovereignty
infrastructure	threat multiplier
internally displaced persons	



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GREAT DECISIONS CLIMATE MIGRATION

Executive Editor: Eliza Edell McClelland

Managing Editor: Josh Gregory

Design: Kathleen Petelinsek, The Design Lab

Photo Editor: Erin Paxinos

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