

# CONVERSATIONS WITH THE EARTH



INDIGENOUS VOICES  
ON CLIMATE CHANGE

## King Tide

Island residents didn't see it coming, but quick thinking saved most houses from the waves-for now

In the past, the Manus people living in the Manus Island region of Papua New Guinea read the skies to decide when they could fish or travel safely. Over the last decade, however, the seas have been rising, and scientists and islanders alike report that climate change is becoming evident in the form of chaotic and unseasonal winds, unpredictable rains, and intensified storms. "We can't reach our fishing grounds safely," resident John Semio (Manus) said. "We find it much more difficult to live now." And nothing in their history prepared the islanders for the unprecedented fury of the 2008 storm they call King Tide.



Photographer: Nicolas Villaume  
Captions: CWE  
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Manus Island, Papua New Guinea

Archaeologists say that Manus Island, located off the north coast of Papua New Guinea, just north of Australia, has been inhabited for more than 25,000 years. Manus boasts tremendous biological diversity and rich cultural traditions. "Life was good," said John Semio. "We used the wind, we could predict the weather, we knew when the rain was coming."



Posakei Pongap | Lawes village, Manus Island, Papua New Guinea

Thirty years ago, a grove of sago trees stood here, home to an abundant population of tree-dwelling opossums. Saltwater encroachment has since poisoned the trees' roots, and low tide now reveals a barren, cemetery-like landscape. "This place was beautiful, but no more," said community elder Posakei Pongap.



Muleu Kiteluwe | Pitilu Island, Papua New Guinea



Rosa Solomon (Manus) and children | Pitilu Island, Papua New Guinea

Solomon Pokayeh and Rosa Solomon lived in a traditional sago-leaf house with their six children. Solomon explains, "We ran. The waves went into the house. We tried to break it apart and bring it inland, but saw there was no hope. Now we're sleeping in the [borrowed] canvas there; it's not a good feeling."

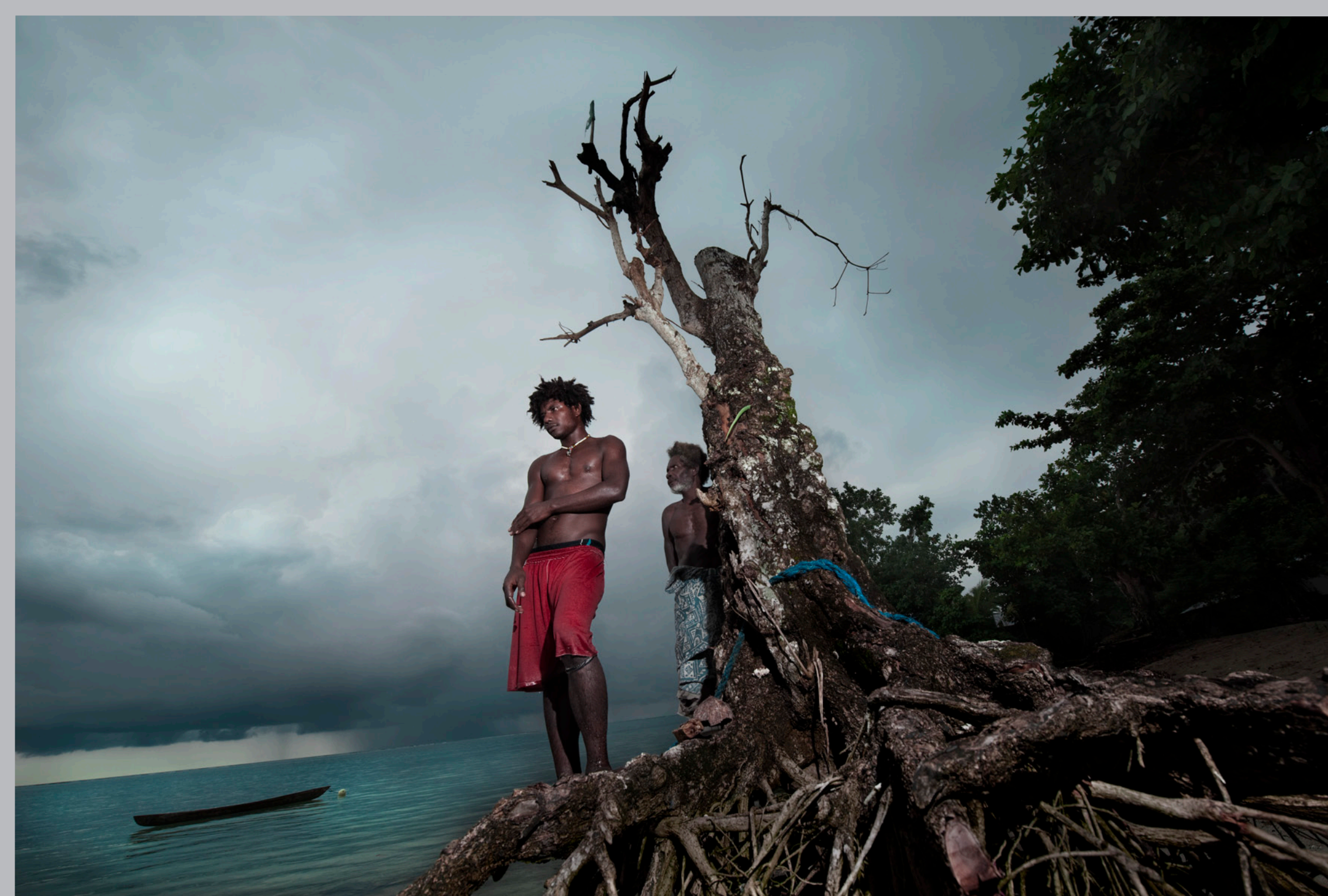


Amos Tapo | Pitilu Island, Papua New Guinea

During World War II, the Japanese occupied Pitilu Island until they were chased out by U.S. forces, who displaced the remaining residents, clear-cut the vegetation, and turned the island into a military base. Paved over and poisoned, the soil has yet to recover, depriving the islanders of traditional subsistence.

"By the time we came back, there was nothing left," says Amos Tapo, 82, one of the oldest Manus men on the island. "The Japanese and Americans and Australians just destroyed all our land, and they are gone. It was not my war. And now [the same countries] should be responsible for helping me in this time of climate change. I am not the cause of what's going on. I am an innocent man."

In Manus Province, December is a time of stormy weather. But nothing—neither in living memory nor folklore—resembled the storm that began December 9, 2008. For four days, King Tide scoured shorelines into the sea; wiped out fish, turtle, and crocodile habitats; and left a wake of human trauma. On Pitilu Island, it destroyed homes and forced families to relocate. "We were very sad to leave this place," said Hannah Muleu. "The whole family lived next door to each other before December, and now we're split apart. We feel it's not safe on this island anymore."



Manus youth, Ahus Island, Papua New Guinea



Pitilu Island, Papua New Guinea

Moved by the trauma of the big storm and the uncertainty that followed, Ahus Island leaders are negotiating an island-wide relocation to the mainland. This plan was first initiated because of rising sea levels, but it gained support after the King Tide, especially among the younger generation.

The idea of relocating is painful for many. John Pondros (Manus) said simply, "I won't go. Maybe it's God's plan to destroy the land. But this is my home, and this is the home of my great-grandfather. I will move my children. Maybe my grandchildren will visit me. But for me, I will die here on the island."

Despite a number of challenges, the people of Manus Province, Papua New Guinea, continue to live by the sea. They use homemade canoes, weave elaborate nets and baskets, and practice ever-evolving trapping methods. They eat and trade seafood. That they are attuned to the rhythms of the South Pacific has left them all the more vulnerable to climate change. But the people of Manus Province are harbingers for the human family everywhere, including those living in the industrial world.



Mary Nating | Pitilu Island, Papua New Guinea

Mary Nating helped evacuate and relocate several homes after the King Tide struck Pitilu Island. "This is the first time my old mother witnessed something like this. It was sad. Mothers and babies running all over the place, crying. Like me—the wave broke right in front of me on the beach. It came right into my building. I cried, Where will I go next? We couldn't sleep at night, knowing that if this storm continued, maybe we're going to lose our lives."



John Pondrein | Pitilu Island, Papua New Guinea

"My name is John Pondrein. I am a counselor of this island. It's in Manus Province, PNG [Papua New Guinea].

For those of you who don't know where PNG is, it's in the Pacific Ocean. One of the Pacific Island countries. We have a big problem on this island. Normally from our ancestors before this island, we migrated from this main island, to Manus Island, to this little island. We lived on this island many, many years ago, I don't know how many generations past.

The way of survival on this little island, we live on the sea. Which is now a big problem on our island. We feed on the sea. We catch fish, sell whatever is in the sea in order to sustain our living. We take those foodstuffs from the sea, we paddle down to this main island to exchange garden foods. Now because of this climate-change issue, now there is a problem we have in this community: our sea has changed not like before.

Before when we go to the sea, it's very easy to catch a fish. But nowadays, it's very, very hard. Also, big waves, maybe King Tidal waves, we don't know. It hurts our resources very badly. Now you can see those big trees lying down, they were hit by King Tides. Our island shape is forming differently most of the time [now]. When the big sea, when King Tides or tidal waves hit us, we can see sand on the beach moving from one end of the island to the other end. [It's happening] mainly in the sea, like in the fish-building place. It's all filled up with white sands. That makes the sea very, very difficult for us. So we know that you bigger countries are doing the damage to our little islands. So I'm appealing to you, please, we need assistance from you.

We want to build our island back, how? We need money. We know that climate-change issue is here to stay. Where will we go? Can you help us? Please build up a sea wall. We want our seafloor built up with, I don't know what. But the problem here is who can help us? So if you bigger countries are doing the damage, please help us in assistance. We want to minimize it a little bit, build up a fence or a wall around the island. Can you help us?

Secondly, when disaster strikes, the first thing we face is problems with water and food. Water now is a big problem. We have already received the message that by 2011, 2012, we'll be facing El Niño, maybe there will be a dry spell for almost a year and we'll need water. Now we have 50,000 liters water [stored] on the ground, can you give us some tanks or some sort of thing? We need water to get ready for 2011 and 2012, for the El Niño season. That is a message we have received already. Now I'm struggling very hard to find some water tanks. Which at the moment I have 50,000 [liters] on the ground, which is not enough. We cannot get another 50,000 liters. Please bigger countries: it's you give me all your problems. Can you assist me and my little island?"