

Losing Ground: The Relocation of Shishmaref, Alaska, a Socio-cultural Study

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Shishmaref, Alaska – population 609 – faces increasing erosion and flooding linked to multiple factors, including anthropogenic climate change and development. Continuing erosion is forcing the inhabitants of Shishmaref to consider relocation to a safer site. A vote held in 2002 determined that a majority of Shishmaref residents accepted relocation as the preferred (arguably, the only viable) option for the future of their community. Government agencies, non-government agencies, and local populations all acknowledge that permanent habitation of the village is not possible in the foreseeable future. State and federal agencies, as well as local advocates and elected officials are in the process of negotiating strategies for relocation, which is proving to be both economically and bureaucratically challenging.

This research prospectus will outline an anthropological research project that seeks to understand the process of relocation planning from multiple perspectives. Using a mixed methodology approach that includes semi-directed interviews, discourse analysis, survey, and ethnography, this project will attempt to understand this potential disaster situation from the construction of vulnerability to the planning of risk mitigation and disaster prevention. Environmentally induced migration threatens to be a leading cause for migration and forced displacement in the near future. What happens with and to the residents of Shishmaref may well be a harbinger of what is to come for many people around the world.