Fourth National Climate Assessment, Vol II — Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States

Chapter 15 | Tribes and Indigenous Peoples

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Key Message #1

Indigenous Livelihoods and Economies at Risk

Climate change threatens Indigenous peoples’ livelihoods and economies, including agriculture, hunting and gathering, fishing, forestry, energy, recreation, and tourism enterprises. Indigenous peoples’ economies rely on, but face institutional barriers to, their self-determined management of water, land, other natural resources, and infrastructure that will be impacted increasingly by changes in climate.
Key Message #2

Physical, Mental, and Indigenous Values-Based Health at Risk

Indigenous health is based on interconnected social and ecological systems that are being disrupted by a changing climate. As these changes continue, the health of individuals and communities will be uniquely challenged by climate impacts to lands, waters, foods, and other plant and animal species. These impacts threaten sites, practices, and relationships with cultural, spiritual, or ceremonial importance that are foundational to Indigenous peoples’ cultural heritages, identities, and physical and mental health.
Key Message #3

Adaptation, Disaster Management, Displacement, and Community-Led Relocations

Many Indigenous peoples have been proactively identifying and addressing climate impacts; however, institutional barriers exist in the United States that severely limit their adaptive capacities. These barriers include limited access to traditional territory and resources and the limitations of existing policies, programs, and funding mechanisms in accounting for the unique conditions of Indigenous communities. Successful adaptation in Indigenous contexts relies on use of Indigenous knowledge, resilient and robust social systems and protocols, a commitment to principles of self-determination, and proactive efforts on the part of federal, state, and local governments to alleviate institutional barriers.
Fig. 15.1: Indigenous Peoples’ Climate Initiatives and Plans

Many Indigenous peoples are taking steps to adapt to climate change impacts. Search the online version of this map by activity type, region, and sector to find more information and links to each project: https://biamaps.doio.gov/nca/. To provide feedback and add new projects for inclusion in the database, see: https://www.bia.gov/bia/ots/tribal-resilience-program/nca/. Thus far, tribal entities in the Northwest have the highest concentration of climate activities (Ch. 24: Northwest). For other case studies of tribal adaptation activities, see both the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals’ Tribal Profiles and Tribal Case Studies within the U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit. Source: Bureau of Indian Affairs.
Communities’ economic potential and livelihoods rely on infrastructure and the essential services it delivers, and many tribes and Indigenous communities already face acute infrastructure challenges that make them highly vulnerable to climate impacts. Indigenous peoples along the coasts and in the islands, the Southwest, and Alaska have experienced the most extensive infrastructure-related impacts thus far (Ch. 8: Coastal; Ch. 20: U.S. Caribbean; Ch. 25: Southwest; Ch. 26: Alaska; Ch. 27: Hawai‘i & Pacific Islands). Source: USGCRP.
These photos show aerial views of (left) Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, and (right) Kivalina, Alaska. As projections of sea level rise and coastal inundation are realized, many impacted communities are confronting political, ecological, and existential questions about how to adapt. Photo credits: (left) Ronald Stine; (right) ShoreZone (CC BY 3.0).
Fig. 15.4: Community Planning

Some tribal communities at risk of displacement from climate change are actively planning whole-community relocation strategies. As part of the resettlement of the tribal community of Isle de Jean Charles, residents are working with the Lowlander Center (a local, nongovernmental organization), the State of Louisiana, and others to finalize a plan that reflects the physical, sociocultural, and economic needs of the community. *Photo credit: Louisiana Office of Community Development.*
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