



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research
Programme
Research Proposal**

Living in a drowning nation: An analysis of land's role on home

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Abstract

My research project addresses peoples' perceptions of home when faced with drowning land. I will be assessing how peoples' relationship with land is being impacted by interviewing people in Tuvalu and Fiji. I will be researching Tuvalu and Fiji's locals' understanding of home to see if there are any differences or similarities. These two neighboring Pacific island nations are both experiencing serious threats from sea level rise, but they have significantly different options to address this issue. Fiji is larger than Tuvalu in land mass and population, with more resources and a higher GDP. While people in Fiji are needing to relocate and move inland, people in Tuvalu are needing to move into the digital world. With projections to be completely submerged under water by 2100, Tuvalu faces a more emergent situation than its neighbor, Fiji, and it is in the process of becoming the world's first digital nation. My research will look at what locals' perceptions of the concept of home and their attachment to the land in the face of its disappearance. I will conduct interviews, collect qualitative data, and use coding to transform this information into numerical data that I can then analyze. This research will be helpful in understanding changes in peoples' relationship with the land and connection to place. It is particularly important with the projected continued loss of land from rising sea levels.

Introduction

I recently helped move my grandparents, ages 94 and 95, into an assisted living community after they lived in the same house for 63 years. Through this process, I thought a lot about what makes a home, and how a physical place contributes to the concept of home. My grandmother always kept a beautiful garden, and I brought a framed photo of her garden to hang up in their new room, but I know it is not the same. I then started thinking about those who are losing their homeland and will not be able to ever see it again. This can be due to a multitude of reasons, but I am curious about how the climate crisis is contributing to it. The climate crisis is threatening the safety of many peoples' homes and lives through tragic events, such as wildfires and floods.

As an Environmental Studies major and Urban Studies minor, I am interested in how digital nations could change humanity's relationship with the environment and understanding of home. In this research, I want to compare two neighboring Pacific island nations, Tuvalu and Fiji, that are facing threats to rising sea levels but have significantly different options for response. Fiji, being larger in land mass, population, and resources, is experiencing relocation that moves people inland. The people of Tuvalu will need to relocate to other land and stay in Tuvalu through a digital space. I will interview locals of Fiji and Tuvalu to evaluate their perceptions and understandings of home and connection to the land.

Research Objectives & Questions

The primary objective of my research is to assess how people in a nation that is becoming digital are viewing the concept of home and how their relationship with the land is or is not being impacted. To support this, I will address the following secondary objectives: what are Tuvaluans' perceptions of the concept of home and their attachment to the land in the face of losing all their

land? What factors, such as age and profession, contribute to different or similar perceptions? I will also use Fiji as a comparison, for it is a neighboring Pacific island nation also experiencing threats from rising sea levels but with different options to move forward.

Background

Small island nations, such as Tuvalu and Fiji, are facing extreme damage from rising sea levels caused by climate change, with high probabilities of their land completely disappearing (Ainge Roy, 2019). People are watching the ocean engulf the land that their ancestors, going back hundreds of years, have lived upon.

At COP27, in 2022, the Pacific island nation Tuvalu announced that it was becoming the “first digital nation” by creating a 3D scan of its islands. This is being done not only to project future changes in the land due to rising sea levels, but also as a means of keeping the nation alive for future generations, despite its impending drowning. This has raised issues of defining statehood and peoples’ attachment to place, both culturally and legally. In 2023, Tuvalu amended its constitution to legally redefine statehood as a status of sovereignty that exists despite the disappearance of the state’s land. Other nations are starting to legally recognize this and apply the same definition to protect their own legal rights and existence with the ever-increasing possibility of land disappearance (Rothe et al., 2024).

A friend of mine recently traveled to Tuvalu to help with this digital nation project and his work influenced my research direction.

Methodology

I will use a mixed methods research approach. I will collect qualitative data by interviewing Fiji and Tuvalu locals. This will require me to travel to Fiji and Tuvalu in order to have more access to perform these interviews and form a deeper understanding of their beliefs, ways of life, and what they are facing with changing land. I will be asking questions about their perception of home, their relationship with the environment, and the idea of digital nations. I will carefully prepare each question, taking into consideration the influence that wording can have on responses. In analyzing the data, I will create an appropriate method of coding to transform the qualitative data into numerical data. I will take into consideration demographics, such as age, gender, education level, spiritual belief, and profession.

Training/ Certifications Needed

I will not need training or certifications.

Research Location

I will be in Fiji and Tuvalu for the duration of my research.

Research Ethics Board

My research does require REB approval, as I will be interviewing people. I have started the process with my research advisor.

Timeline

Prior to the 6 weeks: Research Fiji and Tuvalu's histories, including environmental changes, spiritual beliefs, cultural beliefs, and government institutions. Organize travel logistics. Contact connections in Fiji and Tuvalu, and organize interviews.

Weeks 1-3: Conduct interviews and research in Fiji.

Weeks 4-6: Conduct interviews and research in Tuvalu.

Post the 6 weeks: Organize and analyze data, coming to conclusions and finishing my research project.

Potential Impact

My research will be impactful by being at the forefront of understanding humanity's perception of home without land. It addresses a possible new form of existence and identity that poses the following key questions: Can humanity's conception of home be separated from physical land? Will the formation of digital nations distance humanity from the environment? Will the presence of digital nations lead to action to protect the environment? These questions cannot be completely answered without studying the impacts of nations that have lost all of their land, which, despite being its projected future, will hopefully not be the result for Tuvalu or Fiji. However, such questions still hold importance and can start to be answered with research performed now. Starting this research is important for a world that has nations, in the face of the climate crisis, redefining their legal definitions of sovereignty to not be tied to land. Impacts that could be seen sooner include more awareness of the future consisting of digital nations. This could be measured in seeing further engagement and research in Fiji and Tuvalu's changing landscapes.

Budget

See submitted Excel file.

References

- Ainge Roy, E. (2019). 'One day we'll disappear': Tuvalu's sinking islands. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/may/16/one-day-disappear-tuvalu-sinking-islands-rising-seas-climate-change>
- Rothe, D., Boas, I., Farbotko, C., & Kitara, T. (2024). Digital Tuvalu: State sovereignty in a world of climate loss. *International Affairs*, 100(4), 1491–1509.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae060>