

Climate WATCH

SAVE THE PLANET

A Fiji Sun Investigative Project



Viseisei Village headman Anare Tuidraki at the Vunayawa Cemetery and points to where some graves were situated but have been destroyed, all caused by climate change.
Photo: Nicolette Chambers

RISING WATERS

Viseisei Village burial ground under siege by rise in sea level



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During king tide and severe weather conditions, sea water slowly invades a burial ground in the chiefly Viseisei Village, Lautoka.

According to the Pacific Marine Climate Change Report Card 2018, the rise in sea level is a result of the increase in the level of the world's ocean from the effects of global warming.

The same report funded by the UK Government's Commonwealth Marine Economies Programme has predicted that things will get worse.

"In the Pacific, the rate of sea-level rise is projected to be higher than in other parts of the world. Projections suggest that sea level in the Pacific island region will rise by 40 to 80 centimetres by the end of this century.

"Some models project sea-level rise of more than one metre due to continued ice melt, if emissions do not stabilise soon. Even a small increase in sea level will make many low lying islands uninhabitable," the report said.

Viseisei Village Turaga Ni Koro (headman), Anare Tuidraki said the village has three burial sites.

The site affected by the rise in sea level is 'Vunayawa Cemetery.'

There are two yavusa (tribes) in Viseisei Village - Natububere and Sabutoyatoya.

The second burial site is located near the roadside. Those of the Yavusa Natububere rest there.

The third and most sacred burial site is located in the heart of

Viseisei Village. Chiefs who've held the title of Tui Vuda rest here.

Mr Tuidraki has been the headman of Viseisei Village for the past nine years.

He has witnessed how sea water has slowly seeped into the village base and already reached Vunayawa Cemetery.

He said there are 160 households in Viseisei Village with more than 800 villagers.

"All the talk about climate change happening, things are really changing," he said.

"Sometimes when we experience bad weather or when we have high tide, the water comes right up to the grave site."

At least three burial sites were washed away in the 1970's, Mr Tuidraki said.

"Most of the graves were not cemented and were destroyed."

Since the invasion of water into the Vunayawa Cemetery, about six families who lived near the area have since relocated to other parts of the village. Their homes were affected by sea water invasion, he said.

For now, villagers wait on the Government to build a seawall.

Viseisei village is one of 19 communities included in the Ministry of Waterways and Environment 2020/2021 financial year construction of seawalls project.

This is to ensure coastal protection of communities around Fiji.

"We thank the Government for listening to our plea for a seawall and now we will just wait. The only thing we have to do is to provide stones and soil," Mr Tuidraki said.

"The seawall is expected to be built from the Vunayawa Cemetery area to Waitaci which are all part

of Viseisei Village."

Viseisei village is part of the district of Vuda in the province of Ba.

There are five villages in the district - Viseisei, Lauwaki, Lomolomo, Abaca and Namara village.

Similar scenarios have been experienced in other parts of Fiji.

In Navua, the Dunn ancestry burial grounds were inundated with water when there was high tide.

A Fiji Sun report in 2017 said climate scientists from Germany and South Africa who visited the area pointed to climate change as the cause of sea level rise.

The disappearance of fish from the Dunn fishing ground and the disappearing of land are consequences of climate change.

The Pacific Marine Climate Change Report Card 2018 also highlighted that the recent rise in sea level means that extreme

sea level events that are usually caused by tropical storms and cyclones are becoming more severe and frequent.

Sea-level rise is a major consequence of global warming, the report said.

Sea-level rise is caused by a combination of thermal expansion of the ocean (because of warming), and an increase in run-off from the melting of continental glaciers (which adds water to the oceans).

The report said the amount of change experienced on Pacific islands can also be affected by vertical land movements or the effects of trade winds, which can locally act to either increase or decrease the effects of the rise in global mean sea level.

Edited by Rosi Doviverata

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