

The Register-Guard

Climate change is genocide for island nations

By Scott Slovic and Paul Slovic

July 31, 2016

The Internet is abuzz with reports of climate denial emanating from the recent Republican National Convention, where the party's new platform disavows everything from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to last year's historic agreement signed in Paris.

No surprises there. What is surprising is that even Americans and others who acknowledge the seriousness of global climate change live as if our actions have no effect on the world. Yet entire civilizations are in peril — because of us.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, who died recently at the age of 87, famously referred to efforts to diminish the importance of the 1915 Armenian genocide as a “double killing” — the erasure of the memory of the event being tantamount to the actual murders. Just as forgetting is a form of genocide denial, a failure to recognize the climate-induced devastation that today threatens to erase entire island cultures constitutes denial of an ongoing genocidal process.

Displacement caused by climate change has been linked to genocide before. Tony de Brum, foreign minister of the Marshall Islands, stated in May 2015 that “displacement of populations and destruction of cultural language and tradition is equivalent in our minds to genocide.”

This time there are no emaciated bodies, no transport trains, no SS troops — only storm surges, withering droughts and the absence of fish, among other subtly devastating ecological changes that are making islands around the world uninhabitable.

The May issue of the journal *Environmental Research Letters* confirmed the loss of five Pacific islands resulting from rising sea levels and erosion, and further noted the destruction of entire

villages and forced relocation of people on six other islands. One of the threatened nations is the Solomon Islands, which is considering evacuation plans for its population of 640,000.

Social scientists have determined that societies find risk unacceptable when a hazard is unfamiliar, exposure to harm is involuntary, the risk is not under one's control, the threat evokes feelings of dread, the outcomes are catastrophic, and the benefits associated with the harmful activity are not fairly distributed among those who bear the risks. Each of these conditions pertains to the imminent disappearance of island civilizations, and points to the inherent injustice in the threats posed to island cultures by the actions of those living on the planet's continents.

Recognizing the displacement of island inhabitants as genocide may inspire new policies for fossil fuel use in nations that have resisted change.

Consider Dr. Seuss's 1954 book "Horton Hears a Who." An elephant named Horton hears "a small noise" and realizes that there might be tiny creatures on a speck of dust wafting across the pool where he's frolicking, threatened with extermination by his playful splashing. After much shouting, these creatures, called "Whos," make themselves heard. Horton and the other animals, having never intended to cause the Who any harm, redouble their vigilance in "protecting" this species of tiny, vulnerable beings.

Dr. Seuss's elephant nearly commits inadvertent genocide, wiping out an entire "group" without even knowing the Who existed.

We typically recognize genocide as a terrible crime, perpetrated by evil people and their supporters through violence. But what if the perpetrators, like Horton, are truly unaware of the destruction they're causing inadvertently through their lifestyle? The concept of genocide needs to be extended to cover what's actually happening in the world today: "serious bodily or mental harm" (to quote from the Genocide Convention) caused "to members of the group" by people who do not intend any harm.

Legal scholar Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term "genocide" in 1943, wrote that genocide "does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation," but could include "the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal

security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups.” Lemkin clearly imagined “genocide” to encompass more than physical harm.

The realization that exposure to secondhand cigarette smoke imposes involuntary, noncontrollable, inequitable (and hence unacceptable) risk on vulnerable nonsmokers has led to aggressive policies and laws intended to prevent the spread of smoking-related diseases. This is ethically and psychologically analogous to the context of climate justice. Comparably aggressive actions are needed now to prevent the devastation — yes, the genocide — of island societies throughout the world.

Just as Dr. Seuss’s Horton was mortified to realize the threat he unintentionally posed to the innocent Whos and quickly changed his behavior when he became aware of these creatures and their plight, most of us would feel aghast if we appreciated the genocidal threat our malice-free lives pose to others.

Scott Slovic is a professor of literature and environment and chairman of the English Department at the University of Idaho. Paul Slovic is a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon and president of Decision Research. They are co-editors of “Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data” (Oregon State University Press, 2015).