

NW coastal nations at risk of climate change disruptions



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By Terri Hansen

Olympic Coast, Washington (News from Indian Country)

Environment and Science Writer

Hoh village falls victim to encroaching seas

Photo by Terri Hansen

Walter Ward sweeps an uneasy arm over a pebbled beach, backed by a tight wall of evergreens and strewn with logs tossed by passing storms. Ward grew up on this piece of northern Washington coast, in a thriving Hoh tribal village that was here forever, he says, worry lines punctuating his face. The houses used to be along the top of the hill, and all along the beaches.

Artifacts in the area date back 12,000 years. Today, all that's left of his childhood home are two vacant houses and a road nibbled away by an ever-encroaching ocean.

Ward points to the cemetery on an embankment just beyond the abandoned village that sits below their present day village. We buried them in the old way, so they could watch the ocean. What's going to happen if the waves reach them? Looters looking for beads and the regalia buried with them are a big concern for Ward, especially if the waves uncover them. We have no land to move them to.

Four Washington tribes inhabit low-lying land along the west coast of Olympic National Park. The Hoh, Quinalt, Quileute and Makah have coped with the threat of storms and tsunamis for thousands of years. Now, they may become some of the West's earliest victims of climate change, as rising sea levels and its other impacts endanger their villages, and their history.

The area is relatively vulnerable, says Patty Glick, global warming specialist and author of a recent National Wildlife Federation report, *Sea Level Rise and Coastal Habitats in the Pacific Northwest*. Tectonic rise, an uplifting of land along the coast makes it difficult for scientists to determine just how a rise will affect the region, says Glick, but higher wave action, wave force, and destructive storm surges will increase in the coming decade.

That means increasing possibilities of waves hurling the ever present logs onto coastal dwellings, or sweeping some unsuspecting person off into the surf. Destructive storms such as the hurricanes that roared through last December, and November 2006, are another early manifestation, and will become more frequent, says Glick.

Researchers with the University of Washington Climate Impacts Group predict a rise from either a low-probability to a high end of 14 inches by mid-century and 35 inches by 2100. Glick adds that scientific concern is growing that accelerating melt off of ice fields in Greenland and parts of Antarctica are making some of the higher-end estimates look more possible. She cites a recent study that suggests a 4 1/2 rise in sea levels by the end of this century.

Tribal members were seemingly unaware of the NWF study. Interest in this story was a wake up call to many. "If we lose the clam beds, well, that is who we are," says Larry Ralston, Quinalt chief of police. The cultural and subsistence significance of this is dramatic.

Ralston likens the peril to a slow moving tsunami. Tsunamis are another threat so unnerving many back their cars in for a quick escape. To cope with the looming climatic changes, the tribes need higher ground and to get it Olympic National Park has to return it, including designated wilderness. The proposal pits tribes against environmentalists, raising hackles among some wilderness preservation groups.

The situation is heartbreaking, says Bonnie Phillips, president of the local Olympic Forest Coalition. On the one hand you have the big supporters of national wilderness, then you have these tribes whose lands they were given are not going to work for them in the long term. It's not an either or solution, she says. Something this complicated really takes dialogue. I think it's appropriate for the environmental community to enter into that dialogue.



Quileute executive director James Jaime surveys

Quillayute River property.

Photo by Katie Kreuger

The 135-mile Olympic coastline is a National Marine Sanctuary, and the adjacent Olympic National Park is also a United Nations World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve. Ninety-five percent of Olympic is designated wilderness. It's a remote area of wilderness, rainforest, four Indian reservations, and 13,000 non-tribal residents.

The Quinault reservation at the park's southern end and the Makah at the northwest tip have land sufficient to absorb some impact from rising seas, but not so the tiny Quileute reservation, with just one square mile bounded by ocean, and park on the other three sides.

For 50 years, the Quileute have asked for park land to move their school, homes and other buildings out of the flood zone with no success. Two years ago, an 18-foot wave swept enormous tree trunks against the Quileute school, increasing the tribe's anxiety. The next summer the tribe began clearing some existing uphill land to move the school and playground, and build new homes.

In 2006 the Quileute played their trump card: Rialto Beach, 8 acres at the mouth of the Quillayute River that's one of the park's most exquisite tourist attractions. Rialto Beach was reserved for the tribe in 1881, but a 1910 storm shifted the river's northern boundary; the park later laid claim using a 1914 survey, and put in a parking lot and restroom. James Jaime, the tribe's executive director, announced the tribal council's intent to close the beach unless the park entered into good faith negotiations.

In exchange for returning Rialto Beach and access to the parking lot and trailhead on tribal lands that leads to Second Beach, the tribe is willing to settle for 750 acres of national park land, said Jaime from his home overlooking turbulent seas and impassable rocky headlands.

Over lunch, fresh elk and seagull eggs, he described the two parcels on the river's flood zone that the tribe believes it already owns but is unsuited for development. Of the remaining 275 high elevation acres of park land, only 200 acres are developable. Some is designated wilderness that will have buffer zones after a survey determines those specific areas. The school, homes and other buildings will be moved to the higher ground, and new homes built for their growing population.

Last June, former park superintendent Bill Laitner coordinated a first-ever meeting between the National Park Service and all the Olympic Peninsula tribes, aimed at developing an agreement how the tribes and the park

would work together on issues of concern to both the park and tribes.

Laitner has since retired and his position remains vacant. Every time they change administrations, we have to educate them, says Jaime, referring to the trust relationship that exists between tribal nations and the federal government.

The Quileute tribe does not agree that all the property, particularly those along the river, is owned by the park. The agreement simply clears up any claim to these areas and specifically identifies the tribe as the owner, says Jaime. The park has worked intensely the last two years, park spokeswoman Barb Maynes says, addressing longstanding issues between the northern boundary of the Quileute and the park.

Thirty percent of the Olympic coast is very highly vulnerable to future sea level rise, says Maynes, citing the parks newly released general management plan. Despite that recognition, its not yet a topic of discussion with the tribes. It doesnt mean were not concerned about rising sea levels. But our discussions have focused on the resolution of boundary disputes.

"But almost any rise is going to take our beach out, completely wipe it out, says Ward. Were not big like the other tribes weve got barely enough to survive. The tribe has 440 acres. The Hoh recently began formal negotiations for 20 acres of adjoining parkland. By next year the tribe will have land all the way up to the highway, Ward says, referring to the north-south coastal Highway 101, something the park has not confirmed. I cant give a lot of detail, says Maynes. These discussions are sensitive in that their privileged." Acquisition of adjoining land not in the park is also planned by the tribe.

U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Wash., whose district includes the Olympic Peninsula, is very concerned about moving the people to higher ground in the face of a tsunami threat and rising sea levels of the Pacific Ocean, says his chief of staff George Behan. Once the park reviews and approves the tribes version of the authorization bill, Dicks will introduce it to Congress.

Whichever way you cut it, its going to set a precedent, says Jaime.

Whichever way you cut it, its going to set a precedent, says Jaime. Never before has any wilderness been taken out of the park. In fact, wilderness has never been taken out of any national park. Congress has to approve any boundary change and the likelihood of that, Behan says is something none of us can answer.

But the thought of undoing wilderness designation doesn't sit well with many conservation groups. "Wilderness is for the permanent good for the whole people," says George Nickas, executive director of the national pro-preservation Wilderness Watch. While he agrees that the tribes situation is unfortunate he is firm on the issue about the taking of wilderness. "We have our constitution. We have bill of rights. We have our wilderness. These are ideals we have an obligation to pass on undiminished to future generations."

Whats poignant here, says NWFs Glick, is how our treatment of initially threatened populations portends for how we will deal with the impact nationwide, and refers to the enormous disproportionality on vulnerable populations, minorities, poor people, and developing countries, those most likely to face impacts soon and least likely to deal with them.

NWF advocates the establishment of a dedicated source of funding as part of national climate change policy, to help at risk communities cope with the changes wrought by a changing climate. Like some of the villages have already had to do in Alaska. That may well mean relocation, but we should also give the tribes a voice in support of meaningful action.

The Lieberman Warner climate bill, she points out, allocates 0.5 percent to the tribes. While the percentage of overall funds allocated to tribes is relatively small, that still means a fair amount of money: \$451 million in 2012 and progressively more each year, with \$884 million allocated by 2049.

Even Nickas seems to appreciate their needs. The physical impacts of climate change are bad. The social impacts are equally so. There's no where else to go now.

Ward captains the Hohs traditional canoe, spending countless hours surveying ocean currents and swells before taking his pullers out. And he worries. It's not like the old days when we could walk on the beach; now we get swells up to 25-30 feet high. The beach, it's dangerous.

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