

# **Environmental migration from small island states: why islanders should not be seen as ‘canaries in the coalmine’**



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# Small island states as canaries in the coalmine

Dominant discourses on climate change and small island states are usually rooted in a **deterministic** perspective:

- Islanders are portrayed as refugees in the making
- Migration is presented as unavoidable
- Migrants are viewed as expiatory victims of climate change
- Territories seem doomed by sea-level rise

➤ Small island states are used to alert us about the dangers of climate change.



# Two questions

Climate science tells us that small island states are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (IPCC 2007). And the fact that people migrate because of environmental factors cannot be denied (EACH-FOR 2009).

1. But does the 'canaries in the coalmine' rhetoric match the empirical reality?

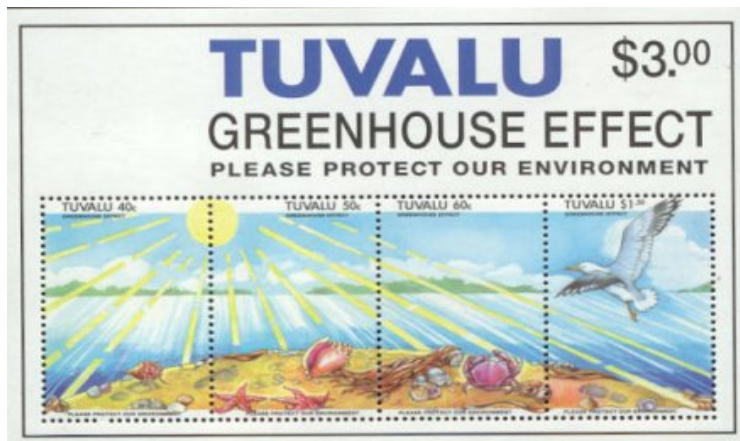
2. And what good does it do to islanders?



# Tuvalu as a case-study

Tuvalu is probably the most symbolic canary in the coalmine of climate change.

- Yet the people who move from Tuvalu to New Zealand do so for a variety of reasons (Mortreux and Barnett 2008)
- They certainly do not consider themselves as disempowered victims (Gemenne and Shen 2010)
- A deterministic perspective fails to capture the complex realities of the migration process



Thus it appears that the empirical reality doesn't match the 'canaries in the coalmine' discourse, at least in the most talked-about case.

So whose policy agenda is it?

# A discourse that might do more harm than good?

- Canaries' rhetorics are very self-centred  
'Look at them to see what might happen to us'
- It gives the impression that no adaptation is possible in SIDS  
Current adaptation strategies might get discredited if the country appears doomed
- People themselves might feel disempowered  
It might well lessen their adaptive capacity



In the global warming coalmine, citizens of small island states should be considered not as canaries, but as the miners themselves