

Study examines impact of climate change on Louisiana's Houma tribe

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Social work professor Shanondora Billiot conducted a case study of the United Houma Nation's experiences with climate change and tribe members' receptivity to formal activities aimed at helping them adapt. Credit: Fred Zwicky

While Indigenous populations such as the Houma tribe on Louisiana's

Gulf Coast are especially vulnerable to environmental change, mistrust fomented by the tribe's history with overt discrimination, forcible relocation and institutional racism complicates efforts to help them adapt to it, new research suggests.

Shanondora Billiot, a professor of social work at the University of Illinois and a member of the United Houma Nation tribe, conducted a [case study](#) that examined the [impact of climate change](#) on the tribe of about 17,000 people in southeastern Louisiana.

Billiot's study, based on her doctoral research in social work at Washington University in St. Louis, included interviews with 160 tribe members living in Terrebonne Parish. Inhabiting a region that is covered by 90% water and marshland, the Houma are especially vulnerable to rising sea levels, erosion and other environmental changes. Many Houma who live there earn their livelihoods through fishing, shrimping, trapping and other subsistence activities, according to the study.

About 25 of these Houma families live on Isle de Jean Charles, a rapidly shrinking strip of land in the bayou that has become a flashpoint in strained state government-tribal relations and climate change-adaptation initiatives.

Over the last 60 years, Isle de Jean Charles' landmass, which once encompassed 22,000 acres, has been steadily whittled away by erosion and saltwater incursion. Currently, "the island," as Billiot said locals call it, encompasses just 320 acres.

Most tribe members can trace their ancestry to the tiny island, she said. And some of the Houma who still live there refuse to leave, even though state officials say the sinking island will be uninhabitable within a few decades.

Houma tribal leaders objected in November 2015 when Louisiana officials announced a \$48 million, federally funded resettlement project that involves moving the island's remaining inhabitants, including the Houma and those who identify with other tribes, to a newly constructed community 40 miles north.

Houma tribal leaders say the [government officials](#) failed to coordinate these relocation plans with them, stirring up disturbing memories of past government resettlement programs that displaced tribal ancestors, Billiot said.

"For the United Houma Nation, this is not the first time a government has tried to remove them," Billiot said. "The governments of France, Spain and the U.S. all developed laws to remove Houma people from their lands; the Louisiana government is just the latest effort."

Likewise, Billiot said, tribe members' experiences with institutional discrimination – such as Jim Crow laws that barred them from [public schools](#) until 1963, nearly a decade after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling desegregated public schools – cause some Houma to shy away from participating in climate change-adaptation activities, such as attending and speaking at town hall meetings about coastal erosion.

While other tribal members said that experiencing significant amounts of discrimination motivated them to participate in such activities, that was only in situations where they felt accepted, Billiot found.

Environmental changes have diminished the Houma's harvests of roots and plants used in traditional medicines. In turn, the reduced harvest drives people out of the community, reducing the amount of social support that is available, negatively affecting [tribe members'](#) health and limiting opportunities to pass cultural knowledge down to younger generations, Billiot wrote.

At the tribal level, efforts to contend with climate change are hindered by the federal government's refusal to recognize the United Houma Nation as a sovereign tribal nation, denying the tribe the autonomy and legal authority to develop its own policies to protect its lands from environmental and human threats, Billiot wrote.

In the absence of federal policies, several federally recognized tribal governments are following [state officials'](#) leads and developing their own environmental programs.

"Many indigenous communities are documenting their observations and experiences of [environmental changes](#), stating their beliefs on the anthropogenic causes of these changes, and attempting to organize their communities to adapt to the new reality of their physical vulnerability," Billiot said. "However, to make systemic changes within tribal communities, social change agents must recognize and empower the community's voice in developing policies and adaptations regarding lands adjacent to and inside of tribal lands."

Incorporating each [tribe's](#) traditional environmental methods and tools into adaptation strategies will enable them to build resilience while avoiding "further subjugation" by public policies that fail to recognize their cultural differences, Billiot recommended in a study published recently in the journal *Public Health*.

Billiot also wrote a chapter in the new book "[People and Climate Change: Vulnerability, Adaptation and Social Justice](#)" (Oxford University Press, 2019), based on her research at Washington University.

More information: S. Billiot et al. Conceptual interdisciplinary model of exposure to environmental changes to address indigenous health and well-being, *Public Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.puhe.2018.08.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.08.011)

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