

Climate change is forcing Australians to weigh up relocating

February 17 2024, by Justine Dandy and Zoe Leviston



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[Big environmental changes](#) mean ever more Australians will confront the tough choice of whether to move home or risk staying put.

Communities in the tropical north are [losing residents](#) as these regions become hotter and more humid. [Repeated floods](#) have communities along the east coast questioning their future. Others face rising bushfire

risks that force them to weigh up the [difficult decision](#) to move home.

However, the [decision-making process](#) and relocation opportunities are not the same for everyone. Factors such as socio-economic disadvantage and how we are attached to a place influence decisions to move or stay, where people go and how they experience their new location.

Our research, working with other researchers at Edith Cowan University's [Center for People, Place & Planet](#) and Curtin University, seeks to document when and why people stay or go, and what this means for places and communities. In particular, our research suggests *who* is more likely to go may leave those who remain even more vulnerable.

We've been slow to adapt to increasing impacts

Climate change is global in scale and [has compounding effects](#). It is increasing the frequency and intensity of disasters and [extreme weather events](#) such as heat waves, fires, storms and floods. It is also accelerating environmental changes such as soil erosion, salinization of waterways, loss of biodiversity, and land and water degradation.

Both sudden disruptions and gradual pervasive decline [have impacts](#) on the places where we live, work and play. So far, there has been [little effective government action](#) to improve [climate change adaptation in Australia](#).

As we have seen in recent times in [Lismore](#), New South Wales, and [northern Victoria](#), for example, living in some flood-prone locations will become [unaffordable due to insurance costs](#) or simply uninsurable.

In other locations, different reasons will force residents to leave. It might be because environmental change threatens their livelihoods, or they can't tolerate new conditions such as more long heat waves or less

reliable freshwater supplies. Others might not be able to endure the threat of another disaster.

In sum, living in the place they called home will not be sustainable.

What factors affect the decision to stay or go?

Not everyone can relocate to cooler or safer places. Systemic inequalities mean some people are more at risk from environmental change and have [less capacity](#) to respond than others. These [vulnerable people](#) include children (both [before and after birth](#)), women, [older people](#), people on low incomes and/or with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other cultural and/or linguistic minorities.

In addition, housing is more affordable in areas that are hotter or flood-prone. This makes it more likely to be owned or rented by people with fewer financial resources, compounding their disadvantage.

For First Nations peoples and communities, connections to and responsibilities for places (Country) are intimately intertwined with identity. For them, the [impacts of climate change](#), colonization and resettlement interact, further complicating the question of relocation.

[Place attachment](#)—the emotional bond between people and their environment—might suppress the urge to move. But environmental change might fundamentally alter the characteristics that make a place unique. What we once loved and enjoyed [has then disappeared](#).

This sort of change [impacts human health](#) and results in feelings of [loss and grief](#). It can prompt people to decide to leave.

So who stays and who leaves?

In our [research](#), we found that when residents imagined the loss of what they valued about Perth's environment this significantly increased their intentions to move away and significantly decreased place attachment. They nominated bushland, beaches, fauna and flora, and the climate/weather as characteristics they valued and feared changing or losing as climate change progressed. One study participant wrote:

"It would be hotter and much more unpleasant in summer. I would miss the trees, plants and birds. I would hate living in a concrete jungle without the green spaces we have here. I would miss being able to cycle or walk to the local lakes to connect to nature and feel peaceful."

But [social factors](#) matter too. We found people who valued characteristics of Perth such as social relationships and lifestyle were more likely to stay as they tended to have less reduction in their place attachment.

We also found place attachment was associated with people acting to protect that place, such as protesting environmentally destructive policies. Yet people who were more likely to take such actions were also [more likely to leave](#).

This could make the remaining community more vulnerable to further unwanted change. That's because those who can afford to relocate are usually the ones with the resources—psychological, social, political and financial—to take action to protect their homes, neighborhoods and cities.

Proper planning for adaptation is long overdue

Climate change impacts everyone. It causes significant economic and non-economic losses for both individuals and communities.

Many locations are becoming unliveable. A changing climate and [inappropriately built or located housing](#) interact to create conditions where some people can or should no longer stay.

Some will be prompted or forced to move, but not everyone has that capacity. Furthermore, relocation pressures have environmental, infrastructure and social [consequences for the places to which they move](#)

The housing crisis in Australia adds to resource constraints and their impacts for individuals and communities. Relocating can also disrupt psychological, emotional, social and cultural connections that are crucial for people's well-being.

We need co-ordinated, well-governed, long-term planning for people to move in the face of environmental change to ensure equitable and positive transitions for individuals and communities.

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