

# Climate Change's Genocidal Implications

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Environmental Studies scholars and advocates for environmental sustainability have often struggled to explain why the level of public concern (and action) regarding critical ecological challenges is not as high as one might expect (or hope), given the severity of our global environmental predicament. As an environmental sociologist, I have studied the importance of framing these issues and how language matters a great deal with respect to the ability to capture people's imaginations and motivate them to act. Toward that end, I propose that we consider re-framing the grand challenge of anthropogenic climate change and disruption not only as an ecological crisis, but as a social crisis that has genocidal implications. How might one substantiate such a claim? First, let us consider the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. That Convention draws on multiple measures of evidence to define genocide, including, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, and killing members of the group.

The scholarly research on climate change reveals quite clearly that climate disruptions affect communities, nations, and regions of the globe very differently; with Indigenous peoples and global South nations hit the hardest-hence the term "climate injustice." Consider the fact that African societies are less responsible for climate disruption due to their lower per capita energy consumption and greenhouse gas generation. In fact, the European Union, United States, Canada, Australia, and Russia are responsible for nearly 70 percent of all global carbon emissions while sub-Saharan Africa is responsible for only 2 percent. And yet the impacts associated with climate change in Africa include reduced agricultural productivity as a result of rising temperatures, rising food insecurity, hunger, political conflict and war, and refugee crises. Similarly, climate change exacerbates the consequences of colonization that has affected Indigenous peoples in the United States for centuries. Specifically, erratic weather patterns and changing temperatures have disrupted Indigenous peoples' ability to maintain traditional ways of life, including subsistence fishing and hunting. The fact that Indigenous peoples in the U.S. have the highest rates of poverty in that nation and skyrocketing rates of mental and physical illness means that their vulnerability to climate-induced disasters and extreme weather events is heightened. These trends are amplified by the oil and gas industries-among the primary institutional drivers of anthropogenic climate change-that routinely target Indigenous communities for extractive development projects in violation of Native sovereignty in the U.S. and around the world. All of these practices contribute to *serious bodily and mental harm* to people in these communities, and to *loss of life* and livelihoods. And since the science of anthropogenic climate change is clear, the culpability and accountability for these effects is likewise gaining clarity.

Re-framing climate change as an environmental and social crisis with genocidal implications would, in my view, dramatically and positively impact the tone and urgency of the public discourse and policy making on this topic.

## Competing Interests

The author declare that there is no competing interests regarding the publication of this article.

## Publication History:

Received: November 19, 2019

Accepted: February 17, 2020

Published: February 19, 2020

## Keywords:

Climate change, Social crisis, Greenhouse, Genocidal implication

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**Citation:** Pellow DN (2020) Climate Change's Genocidal Implications. *Int J Earth Environ Sci* 5: 174. doi: <https://doi.org/10.15344/2456-351X/2020/174>

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