



Environmental Migrants

What is the connection between migration and environmental degradation?

Although we often hear of the role that political, religious, and other forms of persecution have in the displacement of persons around the world, much less attention is generally paid to environmental degradation and climate change and how that also leads to displacement. Such environmentally-linked displacement can occur due to an immediate environmental event – like a hurricane or an earthquake – or could be due to slow onset environmental change, such as a drought or rising sea levels that inundate low-lying coastal regions. With climate change likely to get worse, we can expect to see more climate-related refugees and displacement of people.

According to the [Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre](#), in 2019 alone nearly 18 million people worldwide were displaced time of a natural disaster.¹ Experts at the [World Bank Group](#) anticipate that as many as 2 million people from Central America and Mexico will be internally displaced due to environmental causes by 2050, while the Latin American continent might experience displacement of up to 10 million people during this same time-frame.² Given the relatively few legal and international protections afforded to those displaced by environmental degradation, it is important that we examine how we can better respond to the protection needs of those impacted.

What does the Catholic Church say about environmental refugees?

The Catholic Church has been vocal about the need to care for creation and the Earth, our common home. The Church's concern about the effect that environmental degradation will have on human beings can be linked back to Saint Paul VI. In his Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), Saint Paul VI noted that “man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he [man] risks destroying it and becoming in turn the victim of this degradation.”³ Pope Benedict who, due to his work on environmental protection, has been referred to as the “[green pope](#),”⁴ emphasized the extent to which our ability to become fully human and thrive as persons is

directly linked to our relationship with the environment⁵, and expressed concern about the tragic situation confronting “[environmental refugees](#).”⁶ Pope Francis reiterated the importance of supporting individuals affected by climate change and environmental damage when he [lamented](#) the “tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever.”⁷

What are some policy solutions to this issue?

- (1) **Examine Root Causes of Climate Change and Environmental Degradation and Robustly Fund Efforts to Mitigate the Damage So That People Do Not Have to Migrate** – While it is difficult to determine when migration is a consequence of [climate change](#), it is nevertheless evident that environmental causes have a significant role in displacement.⁸ It is critical to devote resources and develop and implement strategies to help countries mitigate the effect of environmental-induced displacement, particularly as it affects the most vulnerable in their respective countries.
- (2) **Ensure Environmental Migrants Can Access Protection in Law** – Environmental migrants and those displaced due to environmental degradation do not have formal international recognition of their protection needs should they be forced migrate, and those left behind often remain at the mercy of their local governments for support. Recognition of these populations at the international level should be considered.

Additionally, the U.S. government should lead domestic efforts to implement a humanitarian protection system which would parallel the refugee resettlement program and allot a certain number of visas to individuals who are displaced due to environmental causes. Introduced in 2019 and sponsored by Senator Markey (D-MA) [S. 2565](#)⁹: *To establish a Global Climate Change Resilience Strategy, to authorize the admission of climate-displaced persons, and for other purposes*, is one such bill that looks to create a new humanitarian program that would provide visas that would resettle into the United States persons who are displaced due to environmental dislocation but would be separate from the resettlement program.

- (3) **Continue to Look for Legal Immediate Protection Pathways** – Governments should continue to promote legal and immediate pathways for those living abroad and in the region who are impacted by environmental degradation. In the United States context, [Temporary Protected Status \(sp\)](#) is a statutory protection that has been used in a bipartisan way to provide protection in the United States.

What can you do to help prevent environmental degradation and protect those displaced by such damage?

1. **Pray.** Take a moment and say a [prayer for creation](#).
2. **Educate yourself and your community.** Learn from experts such as the [Catholic Climate Covenant](#) which helps to guide the institutional Church’s response to climate change. Take an opportunity to familiarize yourself with their work on this issue.
3. **Reflect.** Read or reread [Laudato Si](#), Pope Francis’s encyclical, which emphasizes the need for us to protect our planet. Check out this discussion guide on [Laudato Si \(sp\)](#) for you to use.
4. **Advocate.** Learn about and encourage supporting governmental migration protection designations such as [Temporary Protected Status \(sp\)](#) for individuals who are stranded from their homes due to environmental disaster or displacement.
4. **Join the [Justice for Immigrants listserv](#).** Doing so will help you to keep up with developments in the field of climate change and migration.

Endnotes

- 1 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020*, Geneva, Switzerland, 2020, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/>
- 2 Kumari Rigaud, Kanta, Alex de Sherbinin, Bryan Jones, Jonas Bergmann, Viviane Clement, Kayly Ober, Jacob Schewe, Susana Adamo, Brent McCusker, Silke Heuser, and Amelia Midgley, 2018, “Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration,” Washington, DC: The World Bank,
1-4 <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/983921522304806221/pdf/124724-BRI-PUBLIC-NEWSERIES-Groundswell-note-PN3.pdf>
- 3 Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, *The Holy See*, May 14, 1971, #21, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html.
- 4 Mary Rezac, “Benedict XVI: The Green Pope,” *The National Catholic Register*, May 7, 2017, <https://www.catholicregister.org/faith/item/25095-benedict-xvi-the-green-pope>
- 5 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, *The Holy See*, June 29, 2009, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.
- 6 Pope Benedict XVI, 2010 World Day of Peace message, The Holy See, January 1, 2010, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html.
Two decades before Pope Benedict issued this message, Saint John Paul II released a message for the World Day of Peace that looked at the wide spread destruction of the environment that was taking place: Saint John Paul II, 1990 World Day of Peace message, The Holy See, January 1, 1990, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html
- 7 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, The Holy See, May 24, 2015, #25, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
- 8 Julian Spector, “What Will Become of the Climate-Change Refugees?” *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/12/climate-change-refugees-paris/418929/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA-48j9BRC-ARIsAMQu3WTT6xWVus18FNyFZyepKZENb_m3-KEW2CgeTw9SIEhSCGHPAKNo4ggaAvtOE-ALw_wcB
- 9 S. 2565, September 26, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2565?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22Climate+Displaced+Person%27s+Act+of+2019%22%5D%7D&s=1&r=1>