

The islands of Tuvalu, scattered over 500,000 square miles of equatorial ocean midway between Hawaii and Australia, appear so wispy and are so low-lying, no more than 15 feet above sea level, that it's easy to visualize the waves just washing over them. ... Tuvalu's leaders have been making [dire pronouncements] for more than a decade. The planet's fourth-smallest nation, they say, faces extinction because of climate change. Rising seas and deadly storms have reportedly started to swamp the islands, and fears are growing that Tuvalu will be uninhabitable or may vanish entirely within a few decades. Prime Minister Saufatu Sapou'aga told the United Nations last year that the global-warming threat is no different from "a slow and insidious form of terrorism against us." ...

In fact, Tuvalu threatened in 2002 to sue the United States and Australia for excessive carbon dioxide emissions. Meanwhile, some Tuvaluans are getting ready to abandon their homeland. "Islanders Consider Exodus as Sea Level Rises," the British newspaper *The Guardian* reported last year.

A new Atlantis? Maybe. But not all scientists agree that Tuvalu's future is underwater. Some critics have branded island leaders as opportunists angling for foreign handouts and special recognition for would-be "environmental refugees" who, they say, are exploiting the crisis to gain entry to New Zealand and Australia. Others have even said that people and organizations sympathetic to Tuvalu are "eco-imperialists" intent on imposing their alarmist environmental views on the rest of the world. ...

"The rest of the world should act immediately and together to cut down on its use of greenhouse gases," says Paani Laupepa, an assistant secretary in Tuvalu's Department of Foreign Affairs, headquartered on the second floor of a private home in Funafuti. By "rest of the world," Laupepa mostly means the United States and Australia, the world's largest overall and highest per capita producers, respectively, of greenhouse gases — and the only developed countries that declined to ratify the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which calls for gradually reducing emissions of those gases. (U.S. officials say the protocol doesn't cover developing countries, sets arbitrary emission-reduction targets and would harm the economy.) "The United States, with a small percentage of the world's people, uses 25 percent of the world's resources," Laupepa goes on. "You Americans have a good lifestyle, all the conveniences, three or four cars per family. You need to appreciate the impact that has on our lives here."

-Leslie Allen, "Will Tuvalu Disappear Beneath the Sea? Global Warming Threatens to Swamp a Small Island Nation" (August 2004) excerpt