

Climate change in Hawaii and U.S. tropical islands

By U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.31.17

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A sea turtle is seen swimming above a reef near the Hawaiian islands. Climate change has major impacts on ocean ecosystems and communities living on islands. Photo: Pixabay/public domain.

Overview

The United States controls dozens of islands. These include Puerto Rico. This island is in the Caribbean Sea. Hawaii is an island state in the Pacific Ocean. Many people picture these as places with bright sun. They have beautiful beaches. However, they face big risks from climate change.



Climate change is a change in Earth's overall climate.

This means a change in Earth's average temperature. Or it could be a change in Earth's overall rain or snow.

The risk includes rising temperatures and higher sea levels. Weather patterns are also changing. Islands face big risks because they are small. Some are also not very high above the sea.

Rising Temperatures And Sea Levels

Temperatures are rising on these islands. They are also seeing higher sea levels. In Hawaii, temperatures may rise by up to 3.5 degrees Fahrenheit by the year 2050. Puerto Rico may warm by as much as 5 degrees F by 2100. Higher temperatures are causing sea levels to rise. Higher seas can eat away at island coastlines.

Water And Communities

Scientists expect weather patterns to change. For example, some islands may get less rain. That means less drinking water. There will be less water for farm crops. Some islands, though, may see bigger storms. These can cause flooding.

Island towns are at risk because of these changes. Most islanders live near the coasts. The rising ocean may force people to move.



Climate change could also keep visitors from visiting. Tourism is important business on many islands. Rising seas could wreck beaches. It may damage businesses. Such changes could keep away tourists.

Plants And Animals

Islands are home to many special animals and plants. Tourists may come to see them. However, climate change is putting such natural places in danger.

Coral reefs are one such a place. Reefs provide ocean homes for fish and other sea life. They also protect the shore during storms. Many islanders depend on reefs for food and work. As the oceans warm, coral is dying and reefs are shrinking. Fish populations are likely to drop.



Rising sea levels are also affecting island plants and animals. For example, mangrove forests are disappearing on some Pacific islands. These trees help protect the shore from damage. Without healthy habitats, some animals will have no place to live.

Climate change is changing the world. Scientists are studying how it will affect us. Islands may face the biggest changes of all.



Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph in the section "Overview" that BEST explains why islands may be in danger from climate change.

- 2 Read the section "Rising Temperatures And Sea Levels."
Which question is answered in this section?
 - (A) Who studies rising sea levels on different islands?
 - (B) How much are temperatures rising on some islands?
 - (C) What can people do to stop sea levels from rising?
 - (D) Why are some islands' temperatures rising more than others?

- 3 Which of the following options states a MAIN idea of the entire article?
 - (A) Many tourists visit islands because they enjoy beaches.
 - (B) Climate change may cause more parts of Earth to have more snow.
 - (C) Many islands have coral reefs that provide homes for sea animals.
 - (D) Climate change may cause islands to have many problems.

- 4 What is the MAIN idea of the section "Plants And Animals"?
 - (A) Plants and animals that are important to islands are in danger of losing their homes.
 - (B) Plants and animals that are beautiful are popular with people who visit islands.
 - (C) Islands are working very hard to protect their plants and animals.
 - (D) Islands are becoming the safest places for plants and animals to live.