

Coronavirus News Center

COMMENTARY

For Indigenous communities, climate crisis could prove calamitous

Drought, fires, and pandemics lead to anxiety, depression, trauma

Publish date: May 13, 2020

By [Alan Rosen, AO, MBBS](#)

Clinical Psychiatry News

Kind wishes and donations worldwide came to help Australian communities and wildlife affected by the extreme drought and uncontrollable bushfires. Indeed, Australians have become a warning beacon for the planet to recognize how factors associated with global warming can morph rapidly into runaway national emergencies.

Little attention, however, has addressed the extreme vulnerability of Australia's First Nations people, the [Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/face-facts-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples>](https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/face-facts-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples) communities, to the climate crisis. U.N. reports conclude that "Indigenous people with close emotional and ancestral ties to the land are also likely to be disproportionately affected by environmental change and extreme weather events."¹

In fact, Indigenous peoples, whether living traditionally or assimilated, are among the first to be adversely affected by climate change. This is because, in part, of extreme poverty, inadequate housing, unemployment and other social determinants, transgenerational cultural losses of life and culture, dislocations, traumatic experiences of child removal, overrepresentation in the prison system, and chronic diseases already leading to dramatic disparities in life expectancy and other health outcomes.

Research confirms that rural and remote Aboriginal communities will be Australia's first mass climate refugees. "Without action to stop climate change, people will be forced to leave their country and leave behind much of what makes them Aboriginal."² This is because of hotter temperatures, poorly built and unstable homes more vulnerable to heat, and longer and drier droughts. Their communities, in fire-prone townships, are running out of water. Abject poverty severely limits their options, aggravated by government inaction because of ideological climate change denialism. And now we have the overlay of COVID-19 threatening these communities.³

Human pandemics are potentially more likely to occur with climate change. Pandemics also are more apt to be associated with population growth, human settlement encroaching on forests, increasing wild animal or intermediary vector contact, and growth in global travel.

Subsequently, our Indigenous communities have had the most to lose if COVID-19 is let loose in their midst. Spatial separation is difficult in overcrowded, multigenerational households. It is hard to keep your hands washed with soap where reliable water supply is sometimes only communal. Their health workers' access to protective and lifesaving ICU equipment and expertise may be extremely limited or erratic.



Dr. Alan Rosen

Much of the population is classified as highly vulnerable to COVID-19 because of chronic health disorders (for example, cardiovascular, respiratory, and renal issues; diabetes, and suicidality) and preexisting much shorter life expectancies. Their health workers' access to protective and lifesaving ICU equipment and expertise is extremely limited. There are fears that, if COVID-19 gains a foothold, they may lose a whole generation of revered elders, who often are also the last fluent tribal language speakers and carriers of life-enhancing cultural stories, traditions, and rites. More urban-living Indigenous families may yet have a rough time avoiding these ravages.

In Australia, COVID-19 has been largely held at bay so far by state and territory governments that have closed borders, restricted nonessential travel, and discouraged or excluded outsiders from visiting remote Indigenous communities wherever possible. There have been complaints that such restrictions occasionally had been applied in these communities in a heavy-handed way by police and other authorities, and may be resisted if enforced unilaterally. They will work only if applied with cultural sensitivity, full Indigenous community consultation, and collaboration. So far, COVID-19 infection rates have been kept very low, with no Indigenous deaths. In Brazil, by contrast, infections and deaths are more than double the national average, itinerant missionaries have only just been excluded from Amazonian tribal lands so far by independent judicial intervention, while loggers and miners come and go freely, as sources of contagion.⁴ Some [Indigenous peoples in the United States](https://www.iwgia.org/en/usa.html) <<https://www.iwgia.org/en/usa.html>> have experienced among the highest COVID-19 infection and death rates in the country (for example, the Navajo Nation in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah), amounting to catastrophic loss and grief.

RELATED

[Climate changes are leading to 'eco-anxiety,' trauma](#)

"Black Lives Matter" marches protesting the filmed police killing of George Floyd in the USA have spread worldwide, in the wake of ultra-high rates of police brutality and killings with impunity of non-white individuals.

Many Australians, including considerable numbers of Indigenous people, marched here in sympathy, despite their infective risk and vulnerabilities. They were also protesting the excessive rates of Aboriginal imprisonment, deaths in custody, and police killings without consequences. Both internationally and here, there was an apparent sense of release of pent-up anger and frustrations at both these injustices and the extra susceptibility of poor and non-white people to severe illness, death and dire economic consequences because of the pandemic. It is a deceptive myth that "we are all in this together." So it is encouraging that there is also forming a widespread sense of collective purpose and determination to get governments to address these iniquities and inequities at last.*

I have worked as a community psychiatrist in Barkinje Aboriginal tribal lands of the Far West region of New South Wales (NSW) regularly for 35 years, much of this time while also leading Royal North Shore University General Hospital & Community Mental Health Services in Sydney. Barkinje translates as "River People," but local media mainly talk about the impact of prolonged drought on farmers and ranchers, who certainly are deeply affected by it. However, the media rarely mention the calamitous impacts on Aboriginal communities. The drought effects are exacerbated by multinational corporate irrigators that divert and allegedly steal river water with tacit encouragement from ostensibly responsible government ministers. The rivers dry up into algal ponds with millions of bloated, rotting dead fish, and entire communities' water supplies fail.

Researchers have reported on the mental health impacts of prolonged drought and diversion of river water on rural and remote indigenous communities throughout the state of NSW.⁵ We have heard Barkinje and neighboring Wiradjuri people say, "if the land is sick, we are sick," and, "if the river dries up, there's nowhere to meet." Fishing, a popular recreational activity and source of nutrition is now denied to these communities. Unlike farmers, they receive no governmental exceptional circumstance compensation payments during droughts. Instead, they lose their farming jobs, so there is no disposable income and loss of capacity to travel to connect to their extended kinship system and cultural roots (e.g., for funerals or football matches) in other remote townships. Such droughts exacerbate wildfires, loss of fish and birdlife, some of which are sacred spiritual totems; drying of traditional "lifeblood" rivers, decimating precious ancient red-river gumtrees that line the shores; and irreversible damage to other sacred sites (e.g., melting ancient rock art).

So, loss of sustainable food sources, meaningful livelihood, and cultural and leisure pursuits could create an existential threat to Aboriginal identity. However, rural Indigenous communities also told us "whatever you do to us, we will survive and persist, as we have done in the past."⁶ This is comparable with the tenacity and resilience of other ancient cultures that have suffered genocidal persecution

and discrimination in the past, and have stubbornly regrown and persisted and regrown into the future.

They yearn to care for their lands, rivers, and seas of their traditions and upbringing, whether as “saltwater” coastal or “freshwater” inland peoples. They value their extended families, honor their elders and their collective wisdom, while also living in “two worlds.” They often encourage their children to get educated and pursue individualistic aspirations to help their communities by training as tradespeople and professionals who may be better trusted to look after their own. As [Charles Perkins](http://charles-perkins.yolasite.com/) <<http://charles-perkins.yolasite.com/>> , a most celebrated Aboriginal role model for living in both worlds, famously said: “We know we can’t live in the past, but the past lives in us.”

As anxiety and depression, psychological trauma, drug and alcohol misuse, family and communal violence, ecological grief, and suicidal vulnerability are precipitated or exacerbated by the stress of extreme environmental adversity, significant investment in ameliorating these harms is essential, not just for farmers, town businesspeople and their families, but for all those affected, especially these most vulnerable members of the community.⁷ We must provide more essential community services controlled by Aboriginal community members themselves. We must also train and support more Aboriginal mental health workers, healers, mental health educators, peer workers and Aboriginal liaison officers, to work alongside other mental health, and health and social service professionals. Aboriginal people need stable local employment opportunities in their communities. There is a huge opportunity to synergize traditional indigenous fire management with Western techniques, creating and consolidating more valued jobs and respected land management roles for Aboriginal rangers, vital for the future of both Aboriginal and wider communities. Pilot programs are emerging.

Aboriginal communities also need a more preventive, whole-of-life approach to social determinants, lifestyle factors, trauma, and political decisions associated with compromised neurodevelopment, and increased subsequent incidence and severity of mental illnesses in their communities.⁷

As Alexander Solzhenitsyn [observed](#): “On our crowded planet there are no longer any ‘internal affairs.’”⁸ Climate change is the ultimate form of globalization: What we each do about it affects all others’ lives. We can only insist that, alongside adequate resourcing of our most evidence-based methods of fire, water, and climate control, our governments consult and listen to our Indigenous elders about applying climate management methods. These have been demonstrated to be sustainable and effective, possibly over 60,000 years – which is the longest established record of continuous Indigenous culture worldwide.

References

1. Ten impacts of the Australian bushfires. [U.N. Environment Programme. 2020 Jan 20 <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/ten-impacts-australian-bushfires>](https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/ten-impacts-australian-bushfires) .
2. Allam L, Evershed N. “Too hot for humans? First Nations people fear becoming Australia’s first climate refugees.” [The Guardian. 2019 Dec 17.](#)
3. National Indigenous Australians Agency <<https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/coronavirus-covid-19>> . “Coronavirus (COVID-19).”
4. Phillips D. “Brazil: Judge bans missionaries from Indigenous reserve over COVID-19 fears.” [The Guardian. 2020 Apr 17 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/brazil-judge-bans-missionaries-coronavirus-amazon-indigenous-reserve?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other>](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/brazil-judge-bans-missionaries-coronavirus-amazon-indigenous-reserve?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other) .
5. Rigby CW et al. [Aust J Rural Health. 2011 Oct;19\(5\):249-54 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1440-1584.2011.01223.x>](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1440-1584.2011.01223.x) .
6. Cunsolo A, Ellis NR. [Nature Clim Change. 2018 Apr 3;8:275-81 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0092-2>](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0092-2) .
7. Gynther B et al. [EClinicalMedicine. 2019 Apr 26;10:68-77. <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(19\)30070-7/fulltext>](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(19)30070-7/fulltext)
8. Solzhenitsyn A. “Warning to the West <<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374513344>> ,” speech delivered 30 Jun 1975. New

York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976.

Dr. Rosen, an officer of the Order of Australia and a Fellow of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, is affiliated with the Brain & Mind Centre, University of Sydney, and the Institute of Mental Health at the University of Wollongong (Australia). He also is a community psychiatrist in a remote region of New South Wales. Dr. Rosen has no conflicts of interest.

**This article was updated 6/16/2020.*

Copyright © 2020 Frontline Medical Communications Inc., Parsippany, NJ, USA. All rights reserved. Unauthorized use prohibited. The information provided is for educational purposes only. Use of this Web site is subject to the medical disclaimer.