



LESSON PLAN

# At-Risk Communities



RELATED PHOTO ESSAY

## Waiting to Move

BY CIRIL JAZBEC



### Key Idea

Indigenous communities in coastal Alaska are facing the impacts of climate change as rising sea levels and changing weather patterns threaten to disrupt and destroy entire villages. If coordinated relocation efforts are not successful, residents risk losing their community and their traditional lifestyle.

### Background

Just three miles long and a quarter-mile wide, Shishmaref Island, located 600 miles northwest of Anchorage, Alaska, is slowly sinking into the sea. Residents, mostly Alaska Native Inupiat people, voted in 2002 to move their small village off-island to avoid inevitable destruction due to the impacts of climate change. But funding has not been allocated, stalling the community relocation. Some residents—especially older generations—are choosing to remain on Shishmaref despite challenges such as a lack of running water, high unemployment, diminishing population, and loss of land and housing.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Alaska is warming at almost twice the rate of the rest of the United States, causing a number of ecological impacts, including decreasing sea-ice, diminished fish stocks and game, rising sea levels, an increase of extreme storms, and the melting of permafrost (frozen ground typically located a few feet below soil surface). More than thirty Native Alaska villages are either in the process of relocating or in need of relocation due to issues related to climate change.\*

Those who have already left Shishmaref Island belong to a growing number of “climate refugees,” people forced to geographically relocate due to the impacts of climate change. In the United States, rising sea levels are forcing relocation in many states with low elevations, such as Louisiana, which loses approximately 65 square miles to the sea every year.\*\* Other reasons for relocation, due to climate change, include extreme weather events, such as in New Orleans,\*\*\* which lost over half its population after flooding from Hurricane Katrina, or in Syria where a four-year drought caused the internal displacement of more than 2 million people intensifying the social and political discord that led up to a civil war.\*\*\*\*



**Class:** 60 minutes

### SUBJECT AREAS

#### HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- Environmental Science
- Modern World Studies

#### COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- Environmental Studies
- Geography

### THEMES

- Coastal living
- Connection to home
- Climate change
- Change versus tradition

### MATERIALS

- Access to the photo essay online (or printed copies of it)

### PREPARATION

- (Optional) Make copies of the photo essay



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“Waiting To Move,” a photo essay by Ciril Jazbec, documents the community and traditions of Shishmaref Island. Jazbec’s photographs capture the daily activities of island residents, including subsistence activities that have taken place for centuries, as well as some of the physical destruction being wrought by climate change.

\*“[Climate Impacts in Alaska](#).” Environmental Protection Agency.

\*\*“[Climate refugee](#).” *National Geographic Education*: Encyclopedic Entry.

\*\*\*“[Hurricane Katrina Statistics Fast Facts](#).” CNN, August 24, 2015.

\*\*\*\*Aryn Baker, “[How Climate Change is Behind the Surge of Migrants to Europe](#).” *Time Magazine*, September 7, 2015.

## Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.11-12.1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Geo.9.9-12. Evaluate the influence of long-term climate variability on human migration and settlement patterns, resource use, and land uses at local-to-global scales.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-ESS2-2. Analyze geoscience data to make the claim that one change to Earth’s surface can create feedbacks that cause changes to other Earth systems.

## Lesson

### SETTING THE STAGE

Ask students to consider their own relationship to where they live. Do students think there is a connection between community, traditions, and place? Do they think there is a connection between where we live and how we live?



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Ask students to think about their own community. How long has their family lived in that community? What is the geography or the land like in their community? Has there been a moment in students' lives when they felt especially connected to their community? Or at odds with it? If students had to pick up and move their entire community to a new location, would the community be the same? What might be lost in the move?

### ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Introduce this photo essay by telling students they will view a series of photographs depicting life on Shishmaref Island. The island, inhabited by the Native Alaska Inupiat people for over 400 years, is a three-mile-long, quarter-mile-wide, piece of land in Northwestern Alaska. Tell students that global warming impacts—including rising sea levels, increased storms, and melting permafrost, which is frozen ground located a few feet below soil surface—are destroying the island and forcing residents to move.

Direct students to view the photo essay, making note of the traditional activities depicted in the photos. “Traditional” means activities that have taken place throughout generations. Ask students to consider which traditions documented in the photo essay depend on the land, animals, or plants in the area. Which traditions, do they notice, are integrated into the community and strengthened by others' participation?

## Delving Deeper

After viewing the photographs, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- Based on evidence from the photo essay, make a list of ways that residents of Shishmaref are affected by the environmental challenges of climate change.
- What are the main activities of the Inupiat people, including the youth, depicted in this essay? (Answers include: hunting, fishing, preparing and cooking food, recreational activities such as baseball, spear throwing, and watching videos.)
- Refer to your list of the traditional Inupiat activities depicted in the photographs. What might happen to residents if these activities no longer took place?



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- What animal species do the Inupiat people rely on for subsistence?
- In 2002, residents of Shishmaref Island voted to relocate their community to the mainland. Yet, as of 2015, very little progress has been made. What might be some reasons for this lack of progress? (Answers: funding, coordination, and personal preference to stay).
- Photographer Ciril Jazbec writes that Shishmaref suffers from a generational divide. Younger members dream of leaving the island in search of opportunities to create a new life with access to jobs. What might life be like on Shishmaref with fewer young people? How might their departure affect the remaining residents? What could be lost?

### Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the photo essay to justify their reasoning.)

1. Photographer Ciril Jazbec explains on his website, “I want to show the world things such as gratitude, solidarity, and respect.” Pick one photograph that you think depicts gratitude, solidarity, or respect. Write a paragraph describing how the photograph you chose symbolizes one of the three qualities. Include in your paragraph what gratitude, solidarity, or respect means to you. (CCSS.ELA.SL.11-12.1.c)
2. *National Geographic* defines climate refugees as “people who must leave their homes and communities because of the effects of climate change and global warming.” Visit the [National Geographic](#) website and read the encyclopedic entry about climate refugees. Name two other places in the world, cited in the entry, which are also experiencing sea level rise like Shishmaref Island. Describe the similarities and differences from these two places and Shishmaref Island. (NGSS.HS-ESS2-2)
3. Due to high relocation costs, residents of Shishmaref Island have yet to move their village. Some of the younger residents are moving off-island to various cities and towns for better employment opportunities, while many elders remain, hoping to retain a traditional life. Former



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resident Richard Kuzuguk, in his early 50s, moved off-island to the Alaska city of Nome. He explained in an interview in *The Huffington Post*, “I have to consider my children’s future...The best way I can do that right now is to move to Nome, get started there, introduce them to the Western lifestyle. They can always come back and learn the subsistence, traditional lifestyle.” Imagine you were a youth living in Shishmaref. Would you want to stay on the island to remain close to the traditional lifestyle or would you want to move to another place that would have access to more education and work resources? Write a paragraph describing your decision using the photographs as evidence. (C3.D2.Geo.9.9-12)

### Resources

Kate Sheppard, “[Climate Change Takes A Village: As The Planet Warms, A Remote Alaskan Town Shows Just How Unprepared We Are.](#)” *The Huffington Post*, December 14, 2014.

Chris Mooney, “[The Remote Alaskan Village That Needs to Be Relocated Due to Climate Change.](#)” *The Washington Post*, February 24, 2015.

“[Climate Impacts in Alaska.](#)” Environmental Protection Agency.

“[Climate refugee.](#)” *National Geographic Education*: Encyclopedic Entry.

Aryn Baker, “[How Climate Change is Behind the Surge of Migrants to Europe.](#)” *Time Magazine*, September 7, 2015.