President Tong: On the Front Lines

Despite major challenges, Kiribati's President Anote Tong has gone further than almost anyone to protect the planet's most pristine waters for the global good.

Depending on who you ask, Anote Tong is many things. He's the president of the island nation of Kiribati, a respected local leader who has been seen planting mangrove seedlings alongside the communities he governs. He's an ever-present figure at international climate negotiations and one of the most vocal advocates for climate change action on the global stage. He's a loving grandfather who is concerned that his country will no longer exist when his grandchildren grow up.

And even as Tong considers relocating Kiribati's entire population to escape rising seas, he has gone further than almost anyone to protect some of the world's most pristine waters for the global good.

Kiribati is a country of contrasts. A scattering of islands about halfway between Australia and Hawaii, this tiny island nation could just as easily be called a large ocean state; Kiribati controls a marine region the size of India. And although the country's residents have a negligible carbon footprint, they are dealing with some of the strongest impacts of climate change worldwide.

President Tong, who has led Kiribati since 2003, knows better than anyone the challenges his people face. Like all I-Kiribati (as the country's citizens are known), he grew up with a deep sense of connection to the sea. "We live virtually most of our life in the ocean. If we're not swimming in the ocean as children, we are fishing in the ocean as adults...It is part of our lifeblood."

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>
> Anote Tong, President of Kiribati

Despite their cultural importance, the true ecological value of Kiribati's waters was only discovered recently. In 2000, CI and the New England Aquarium conducted the first scientific study of the Phoenix Islands, one of three island chains that make up Kiribati.

There, the scientists explored diverse underwater ecosystems — from shallow reefs to underwater mountains called seamounts — that remain almost untouched by human influence. Home to sharks, giant clams, groupers and brightly-colored reef fish, these waters also contain some of the healthiest tuna populations left in the world. Marine life here resembles how other oceans may have looked thousands of years ago.

The scientists presented their discoveries to Tong and his government, who hadn't realized that their marine holdings were so unique and intact. Yet despite these findings, Tong has observed many changes in the local environment during his lifetime — mostly attributable to climate change.

In recent years, rising sea levels have taken a serious toll on Kiribati — most of which is less than 2 meters in elevation. Residents have erected seawalls in an attempt to protect their homes from the crashing waves — many to no avail. Entire villages have been abandoned. Tong is quick to point out that while the rising waters pose a huge threat, salinization of the islands' drinking water supply will threaten survival first.

Studies have indicated that the islands may be completely uninhabitable by the 2050s; as a result, Tong has begun to explore options for relocating his country's entire population of 102,000 to other Pacific Island nations that have offered their support.

While attending international climate change negotiations across the globe, Tong often describes Kiribati as a "front line country" that has been among the first to experience dramatic climate change impacts. As progress continues to stall at these meetings, Tong says, "For some countries, the negotiations are over. We have to get down to the ground and actually take action."

Equal parts visionary and realist, Tong has taken extraordinary measures to set an example for the rest of the world. In 2006, Tong created the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA), which became the world's largest marine protected area upon its expansion in 2008. At more than 400,000 square kilometers, it currently encompasses an area the size of California. Three percent of PIPA is completely off limits to fishing and a total of 52,000 square kilometers (12.5% of the protected area) is under zoned fishing restrictions. This protects more than 80% of the priority habitats identified within PIPA.*

Notwithstanding this historic achievement, Tong had bigger goals on his mind. In 2009, he proposed the Pacific Oceanscape concept as a way to build on Kiribati's success and foster greater collaboration between Pacific island nations.

"With rising sea levels, overfishing, warming ocean temperatures, pollution and acidification, our oceans are changing in ways that our ancestors could not have imagined. There is an urgent need for us to join together and face these common threats if we are to successfully conserve the ocean's precious resources for present and future generations of people."

* In June 2014, Tong announced the closure of the Phoenix Islands Protected Area to all fishing by the end of the year (with the small exception of one island that relies on subsistence fishing to meet local needs). Read the announcement »

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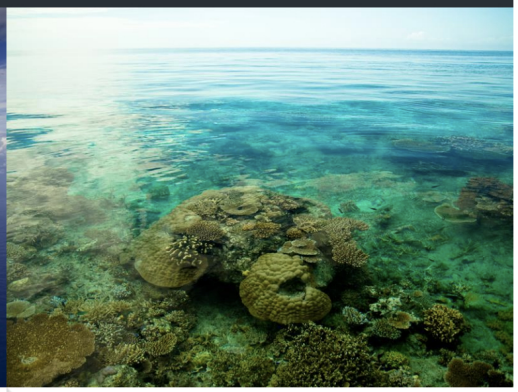

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