

The Politics of 'Climate Refugees'?

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Abstract: Amongst academics, practitioners, IGOs and NGOs concerned with climate change and forced migration, there is consensus that the coming years and decades will see large numbers of people moving across the globe as a result of the effects of the global rise in temperatures. There is also, as one would expect, a growing body of ideas about how to develop legal solutions to the current rights-gap faced by these migrants. While debate on this question is lively, it is characterised by the usual tenor of academic and policy discussions.

However, when it comes to identifying and labelling the people affected, the debate has often had a far more antagonistic tone. Terms such as 'climate-induced migration', 'climate displacement', 'environmental refugee/migrant', plus many more, have been deployed, and each one of them has fervent supporters and virulent detractors. Perhaps the most controversial term, though, is 'climate refugee', and in my own research and writing on the subject, I have chosen to use this nomenclature.

My aim is to explain why I think this label is correct for both historical and political reasons. I will also reflect on why this term – particularly the use of the word 'refugee' – has been so fiercely resisted by many in the field, and in particular by those most concerned with advocating for the rights of refugees in general. In essence, I will argue, too many of us have become trapped by a narrow and outdated legal definition of the refugee, driven largely by a defensive response to a generalised hostility towards migrants and refugees.

As the numbers grow exponentially over the coming decades, the phenomenon of climate refugees has the potential to accelerate this hostility and the barriers already faced by many forced migrants today. Alternatively, depending on how we frame the issue, it could open up the possibility of reconceiving the concept of asylum, by foregrounding questions of responsibility for their plight, and thus widening the scope of protection for people fleeing the effects of climate change. For reasons that I explain, adoption of the phrase 'climate refugee' can be critical in achieving this transformation.

Bio: Dr Simon Behrman is a Lecturer in Law at Royal Holloway, University of London. His work critically engages with refugee law from the perspective of social movements, history, and literature, as well as from a legal standpoint. Amongst his recent publications, Dr Behrman has co-edited a collection entitled *'Climate Refugees': Beyond the Legal Impasse* (Routledge) and co-authored a monograph entitled *Facilitating the Resettlement and Rights of Climate Refugees: an argument for developing existing principles and practices* (Routledge). Simon has also acted as a technical expert on climate change and migration for the International Organisation for Migration, the Platform for Disaster Displacement and the UNFCCC Task Force on Migration.