

MICRONESIAN YOUTH SPEAK ON CLIMATE, CULTURE, AND THE FUTURE

“JUST BECAUSE WE’RE YOUNG DOESN’T MEAN WE DON’T
HAVE A VOICE”

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Across Micronesia and the wider Pacific, culture is not separate from the environment. Land, ocean, weather, and people are deeply interconnected, shaping identity, livelihoods, and ways of knowing.

For generations, this relationship has been expressed through Traditional Knowledge — knowledge built through observation, experience, and intergenerational learning, guiding how communities understand and respond to environmental change.

Traditional Knowledge is not only a tool for environmental management. It is carried through language, stories, practices, and relationships. It connects people to place, to identity, and to each other. When this knowledge is not passed on, it is not only adaptation capacity that is at risk — it is culture itself.

Pacific peoples have long relied on natural indicators — from the behaviour of winds and clouds to the flowering of plants and movement of species — to anticipate weather patterns, prepare for extreme events, and sustain daily life (SPREP, 2024).

These knowledge systems are not static. They are adaptive, place-based, and have been refined over generations through lived experience.

Academic research also confirms the long-standing role of Traditional Knowledge in climate resilience. Pacific Island societies have, over thousands of years, developed sophisticated coping strategies in response to environmental variability and extreme events, embedding these within cultural practices, governance systems, and everyday decision-making (Nunn, 2024). These systems have enabled communities to survive and adapt in some of the most dynamic and exposed environments in the world.

Yet climate change is now introducing challenges beyond historical experience. While Pacific communities have always adapted to variability, current changes — including sea level rise, ocean acidification, and increasing intensity of extreme events — are occurring at a scale and speed that disrupt both ecosystems and the knowledge systems connected to them (Weir et al, 2015).

At the same time, social change is transforming how knowledge is shared, with increasing gaps between generations.





Youth in Micronesia are at the heart of this disconnect. They are navigating multiple worlds: formal education systems grounded in scientific knowledge, and cultural systems rooted in Traditional Knowledge. However, these systems are often presented separately, rather than as complementary ways of understanding the world. As a result, opportunities to learn from elders, apply cultural knowledge, and connect it with modern science are becoming more limited.

Bridging this gap is critical. Research increasingly highlights that climate responses are most effective when they bring together Traditional Knowledge and scientific approaches, combining place-based insight with technological and predictive tools (Nunn et al 2024). This is not about replacing one system with another, but about strengthening both through collaboration and mutual respect.

For Micronesia, this means creating space for intergenerational learning, supporting youth to engage with cultural knowledge, and recognising that culture is not a barrier to climate action, but a foundation for it.

The future of climate resilience depends not only on science, but on culture – and on the ability of young people to carry both forward together.

FSM'S NATIONAL ADAPTATION PLAN

This awareness campaign forms part of the Federated States of Micronesia National Adaptation Plan (NAP) project, funded by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and implemented by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), in partnership with the Government of the Federated States of Micronesia and Haskoning New Zealand.

The NAP will be central to strengthening long-term climate resilience across the nation. It will provide a coordinated roadmap to identify climate risks, prioritise adaptation actions, and guide investments that protect communities, livelihoods, and future generations.





MAHONEY'S STORY: LIVING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CHUUK

Mahoney Mori was born and raised on Weno Island in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia. For him, it is home — a place he still describes as paradise, even after travelling widely. But it is also a place under growing strain.

Climate change, he explains, is not something people here debate in theory. *"We don't really talk about climate change," he says. "Because we live it."*

Mahoney grew up on the shoreline. His childhood memories are tied to the ocean — playing on the beach, fishing, gathering, living closely with the sea. Today, that beach no longer exists. Entire stretches of shoreline have disappeared within his lifetime.

What was once familiar is now gone. And he knows the next generation will never experience it.

This loss is not isolated. Coastal erosion and king tides that encroach further inland are becoming more frequent, damaging homes and reshaping how communities live. While no islands have been fully submerged, many families have lost significant portions of their land. Storm damage often remains unrepaired. Crops are lost and not replanted.

These changes do not stay at the shoreline. As land degrades and ocean resources decline, communities are forced to rely more on imported, processed food. Mahoney draws a direct connection between climate change, food security, and health.

At the same time, Mahoney reflects on the role of culture and Traditional Knowledge.

Chuuk has always been resilient. Communities have long relied on local knowledge, shared practices, and systems of care to respond to environmental change. But he also asks a difficult question: *"What happens when the land itself is no longer there?"*

When gardens are flooded by saltwater, when shorelines retreat, when entire areas become uninhabitable — resilience alone is not always enough. For Mahoney, this does not mean that Traditional Knowledge is no longer relevant. Instead, it means that it must be actively discussed, revisited, and adapted.

Communities need space to ask: What still works? What no longer works? And how must knowledge evolve in a changing climate?

That conversation, he says, is largely missing.



In the past, communities would come together to discuss shared challenges. Today, most climate engagement happens through technical consultations – government-led processes that rarely create space for community-wide or intergenerational dialogue.

Young people, he notes, are deeply interested in culture, language, and Traditional Knowledge. But they lack platforms, resources, and recognition.

Many are conditioned to leave decisions about the future to elders, chiefs, or political leaders. This shapes everything from career choices to leadership aspirations. As a result, while young people will inherit the future, they are often not given the opportunity to shape it.

Through the Pacific Youth Council, Mahoney and others are challenging this. They argue that young people must help create the future they will live in. Climate change makes this urgent. Plans can be written, but without youth ownership, they are less likely to be carried forward.

At the same time, he points out that leadership already exists – even if it is not formally recognised.

“When disasters hit, it’s women and youth who respond first.” They organise, mobilise, care for the injured, and support their communities. During the COVID-19 outbreak in Micronesia, young people stepped in when systems stalled – coordinating testing, communication, and response efforts.

Yet when disaster task forces are formed, these groups are often excluded. Unpaid responders do the work, while decision-making and resources remain elsewhere. This gap, Mahoney says, is one of the most frustrating realities of climate governance.

For Mahoney, this disconnect between rhetoric and reality is central. Governments speak about youth inclusion and gender equality. But budgets tell a different story.

Climate finance remains difficult to access. Youth and civil society are consulted repeatedly – often without compensation – but rarely included in implementation or funding decisions. Promises made at global and national levels do not always translate into action on the ground.

This is where he sees the importance of national planning processes, such as the National Adaptation Plan. For these plans to matter, they must go beyond aligning with global frameworks. They must clarify roles across government, civil society, and communities. They must simplify access to climate finance. And they must recognise climate change as more than an environmental issue – but rather as a matter of culture, food security, health, displacement, and human rights.

They must also invest in the future.

Education, Mahoney stresses, must be part of climate adaptation. Climate realities need to be embedded into school curricula, ensuring that young people are equipped not only with scientific knowledge, but with an understanding of their own context, culture, and lived experience.

In Mahoney’s story, climate change is not only a story of loss, but of transition. As the environment changes, so too must the ways knowledge is shared and carried forward. Ensuring that young people can engage with culture, Traditional Knowledge, and new forms of learning will be critical to how Micronesia navigates the future.





“WE SEE IT, WE FEEL IT” YOUTH VOICES FROM XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL IN MICRONESIA

Across Micronesia, climate change is not an abstract concept in a textbook. It is the road slowly disappearing under the sea. It is the heat that feels heavier each year. It is rain that no longer follows familiar patterns.

And it is youth who are watching. A 17-year-old student from Chuuk does not hesitate when asked whether he worries:

“I’m really scared that I might wake up one day and I’m already engulfed in water.”

He describes driving along the shoreline and watching the ocean inch closer to the road. Droughts make fresh water scarce. Wells run low. On outer islands, families struggle to access drinking water.

For students like him, climate change is not something to debate. It is something they experience daily.

“It’s a really big topic,” he explains. *“Even when you’re driving around, you can see it.”*

Across the region, young people share similar observations. In Kosrae, 17-year-old student reflects on how the climate is shifting:

“It’s starting to get really hot, especially during the summer.”

Rain now falls in less predictable patterns. Storms feel more intense. And alongside these changes he recognises something else:

“I think what we’re doing right now is adapting. We don’t have a solution, but we’re in the process of adapting.”

Adaptation, however, does not mean acceptance. When asked what he would say to decision-makers, his message is direct:

“Climate change is real. We need change or we need to find a solution now because everyone is already starting to experience it.”

Islands, Identity, and the Fear of Loss

For many young people, the concern is not only environmental. It is deeply cultural.

The fear is not just about rising seas or extreme heat – it is about losing home and, with it, identity.

“How can we preserve our islands? This is our home. Not just for us, but for future generations.”

If islands are lost, what happens to the knowledge tied to them? What happens to the stories, the practices, and the ways of living that are rooted in land and ocean?

“If climate change leads to our islands not being here anymore, our people will be driven away to different lands, which could lead to a loss of culture and identity.” Says one student from Pohnpei.



For many, culture is not something separate from climate. It is embedded in everyday life.

Young people speak about weaving, fishing, and local practices passed down through generations – skills learned from grandparents, siblings, and community members. These are not simply traditions; they are systems of knowledge and ways of living.

“The way we weave is how we live.”

And in the changing world and environment, many communities are losing these skills.

At the same time, some acknowledge the challenges within their own communities. It is challenging to come up with effective solutions when there isn't a strong guiding strategy towards it. One student summarises it well:

“It's hard to work towards a common goal when everyone's divided.”

Respect, one student reflects, is where it must begin:

“Respect goes a long way. Respecting the environment, respecting others, respecting everything.”

Learning Across Generations

Many young people emphasise the importance of listening to elders and learning from Traditional Knowledge.

Some note that, while they may not have seen all the changes themselves, they hear stories from older generations – observations of shifting seasons, changing coastlines, and disappearing resources.

These stories shape how they understand climate change. They also highlight a gap.

Climate change is often taught through science, in classrooms and textbooks without context. But young people recognise the need to connect this with local knowledge – to understand not only global climate systems, but also how change is experienced in their own communities.

Bridging this gap between knowledge systems is something many youth are already trying to do.

Youth Are Not Silent

If there is one message that emerges clearly, it is this: young people are not disengaged. They are already acting.

One student from Yap writes letters to leaders. She has raised concerns about oil spills and plastic pollution. She has called for stronger support for students and communities. She has not received responses – but she continues.

Others organise school presentations, conduct surveys, plant gardens, and raise awareness in their communities. They are learning, adapting, and contributing in ways that often go unrecognised.

They are not asking to be rescued. They are asking to be included.

“Just because we're young doesn't mean we don't have a voice.”

Across Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Yap, the message is consistent. Young people see the changes. They feel the impacts. They worry about water, food, and the future of their islands.

They also care deeply about culture – and about carrying it forward. Climate change may be reshaping their environment.

But it is also shaping a generation that is aware, engaged, and ready to act.

And perhaps that is the most powerful message of all.





LEGACY

Across Micronesia, the stories shared here point to something deeper than climate change alone. They speak to the relationships between people, place, and knowledge — and to what is at risk if those connections are lost.

Climate change is not only altering coastlines and weather patterns. It is reshaping how knowledge is lived, shared, and passed on. Culture and Traditional Knowledge are not just part of the response — they are central to it.

But the future of all generations depends on connection. Connection between lived experience and formal education, between local knowledge and scientific understanding.

Young people stand at this intersection. They are already observing, learning, questioning, and acting. What they need now is not to be told what the future will be, but to be given the space to help shape it.

Because in the end, climate resilience in Micronesia will not be built through plans alone. It will be carried forward through people — through the knowledge people hold, the culture the people live, and the voices that are raised.

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ISBN 978-982-04-1474-7



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