Losing Ground: An Ethnography of Vulnerability and Climate Change in Shishmaref, Alaska

A dissertation defense by Elizabeth Marino
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This dissertation presents an ethnography of vulnerability in Shishmaref, Alaska. The village of Shishmaref, population 563, faces imminent threat from increasing erosion and flooding events -- linked to climatic changes and ecological shift -- making the relocation of residents off of the island essential in the foreseeable future. In spite of ongoing conversations with government agencies since 1974, an organized relocation has yet to occur in Shishmaref.

While ecological shift and anthropogenic climate change are no doubt occurring in and around the island, the literature on vulnerability and disaster predicts that social systems contribute at least as much as ecological circumstances to disaster scenarios. This research tests this theory and asks the question: what exactly is causing vulnerability in Shishmaref, Alaska?

The resulting dissertation is an exploration of the ecological, historical, social and cultural influences that contribute to vulnerability and risk in Shishmaref. Unlike common representations of disaster that present the natural environment as a sole driver of risk, this research finds complex systems of decision-making, ideologies of development, and cultural assumptions about social life contribute to why Shishmaref residents are located on the island in the first place, and why government intervention and planning remain difficult.

On a theoretical level, this dissertation presents a rare, comprehensive case study of disaster and climate change that suggests why indigenous and other marginalized communities may be at higher risk than others of experiencing the negative outcomes of climate change, including environmental migration. Finally, the research will provide key recommendations for stakeholders and policy makers to consider as they move forward with policy at multiple scales.