

Heather Lazrus: WAS*IS 2007 Statement of Interest

Personal background

I have recently returned to the United States after 15 months conducting ethnographic research in New Zealand and Tuvalu on perceptions of global climate change. The fieldwork is toward my PhD dissertation in Environmental Anthropology at the University of Washington. I am currently a Visiting Researcher at the National Center for Atmospheric Research where I am involved with several projects regarding impacts of atmospheric hazards on small island communities. My research interests are oriented by traditional environmental knowledge, local observations of environmental change, and perceptions of vulnerability and resilience to weather extremes, climate variability, and global climate change. Although my dissertation research has been conducted outside of the United States, I have previously worked extensively with coastal communities in Alaska and the West Coast and have sought to do research which is of relevance to this country and its international roles, for example through policy and development aid.

Motivation to participate

I hope to bring my experiences and perspectives to bear in conversations and collaborations with wider groups of people from diverse backgrounds, such as the participants of a WAS*IS workshop. Hopefully, too, I will benefit from becoming part of a larger network of concerned scientists from whom I can learn more about present interactions between science and society in the field of weather studies.

Interests in culture change to better integrate science, society, and meteorology

I look forwards to discussing and planning the future trajectories of interactions between society and science, both social and physical. My interests lie generally in bringing a cross-cultural perspective to the table. More specifically, I am interested in exploring further – and in the US context – the concepts of vulnerability and resilience as they are perceived by individuals in relation to weather and atmospheric hazards. I am interested in extending work on how people understand and deal with uncertainty in weather forecasts and warnings to how they perceive themselves to be resilient or vulnerable in cases of extreme weather events.

For instance, in Tuvalu perceptions of vulnerability related largely to precipitation patterns which in turn related to adequate freshwater supplies and to the occurrence of tropical storms – droughts and storms being culturally salient hazards. Perceptions of resilience were sometimes defined according to the ability of leaders (at community, island, or national level) to prevent or mitigate disaster, sometimes according to individual preparedness and ability to cope, and sometimes ascribed to aid from supernatural powers. In the context of a small island developing state I have argued that by re-orienting research on vulnerability and resilience toward local perspectives we create room for human agency, decision making, and capacity building.

I extend this argument to populations elsewhere and believe that vulnerability and resilience research is one dimension of the larger task to better integrate science and society in an applied sense. A re-orientation of the field must occur to better understand personal perceptions and cultural models of vulnerability and resilience. However, the initial step will be to bring people to the same page by beginning discussions between social and meteorological scientists about terminology and definitions. I am excited about the venue to begin this discussion which is offered by WAS*IS.