

1946-1958 : Nuclear tragedy in the Marshall Islands

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A former Peace Corps volunteer shares her experience seeing the impacts of US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands conducted between 1946 and 1958—and calls for an apology and justice

We were innocent 21-year-olds entering an organization called the Peace Corps in 1969. We came from all over the United States, some wanting to dodge the draft, but most of us were embracing a desire to help others. We were thrilled looking out the window of Micronesia Air plane peering down at a beautiful atoll, a thin necklace of green trees and white sandy beaches, floating on the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. As we approached for landing, we buzzed first over the runway to clear all the trucks, pigs, cars, chickens, and people off the landing area. Then we landed, on the rough runway, the pilot forcing the plane into reverse to come to a stop, much to our relief, at the end of the concrete road in Majuro, looking across at the Pacific Ocean.

We stepped off the plane and into an extremely humid hot environment, where we received greetings by the Marshallese placing leis over our heads, so many leis that they were eventually stacked all the way to our chins. Young, naive Americans, we knew little about the area, other than, perhaps, fleeting thoughts that we might find the remains of Amelia Earhart or artifacts from her plane there.

Our naivete began to diminish when we were told the Atomic Energy Commission was coming to check out the health of the children and adults and of course to give out candy and show a dated movie. We asked questions and learned about the nuclear test over Bikini and the fallout coming down over a neighboring island, whose residents thought it was snow. We were told that the Marshallese ran outside, allowing the fallout to land on their skin, with some children putting it to their eyes. Luckily many residents sensed danger and ran to the ocean, saving themselves from a future road of at least some fallout ailments.

As we spent more time in the islands, little by little more detailed stories emerged—of still births, high cancer rates, and other radiation-related health issues. Islanders had been moved from Bikini before nuclear tests were conducted ; some of the explosions were so great that one of the small islands simply vaporized, leaving a deep cavern. Many Marshallese had to endure being relocated from their blessed atoll to Kili, an island in the middle of the ocean with no lagoon.

Over the years, more and more people spoke out about such atrocities and such disregard for the Marshallese, who were actually called “savages” by a US paper in the 50’s. My heart wept as I learned more information about the scope of nuclear testing in the Marshalls.

Between 1946 and 1958, the Marshall Islands region was the site of the testing of nuclear weapons equivalent to the explosive power of 1.6 Hiroshima bombs every day for 12 years—67 in all at the Bikini and Enewetak atolls—a fact that is impossible for me to comprehend.

A resolution is now in front of the Congress asking the United States to prioritize nuclear justice in its negotiations with the Marshall Islands on an extended Compact of Free Association between the countries. The resolution recognizes that the United States nuclear testing program and radioactive waste disposal, including not just contaminated debris from the Marshalls but also material transported from the Nevada Test Site, caused irreparable material and intangible harm to the people of the Marshall Islands. We believe this harm continues to this day. Within this resolution is a call for an apology for what the United States did to the Marshallese and to raise awareness about the need for more action to undo this harm. US Rep. Katie Porter of California and senators Mazie Hirono of Hawaii and Edward Markey of Massachusetts are spearheading this effort, which would formally apologize for the US nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands and raise public awareness of the issue. Please write or call your representatives and senators, asking them to support House Joint Resolution 73 and Senate Joint Resolution 40.

What happened in the islands is simply incomprehensible to me. The toll on the Marshallese and the environment is impossible for me to grasp. And I have another nagging thought : Why as Peace Corps volunteers were we not warned about the radioactive fallout and the social issues we were being dropped into ? Of course, there's the implication that we were being used as pawns to smooth the relationship between the Marshall Islands and the United States and to continue to have the islanders as our friends for strategic reasons.

Who makes these decisions to drop bombs on such beautiful, pristine islands ? Who sends 20-year-olds into a potentially radioactive area without warning them ? When can we as a human race honor peoples around the world and get out of building weapons and gaining lands for strategic reasons ? Please stop. I'm sad and weep and write letters asking for an apology. So sad. Where is our soul ?

Sally Clark

P.-S.

- The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. May 25, 2022 :
<https://thebulletin.org/2022/05/nuclear-tragedy-in-the-marshall-islands/>
- Sally Clark served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Marshall Islands in Majuro from 1969 to 1971. She then became a high school teacher and the coordinator of global education in her district in Newark, California. Since retirement, she has been a practicing psychologist focused on developmental issues in adults and children.