



ISSN: 2473-3350

Journal of Coastal
Zone Management

OPEN ACCESS Freely available online

Commentary

Global Sea Level Rise: Causes, Consequences and Sustainable Adaptation for Coastal Communities

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DESCRIPTION

Sea level rise is one of the most pressing environmental challenges of the twenty-first century, driven by the combined effects of climate change, thermal expansion of seawater and the accelerated melting of polar ice sheets and glaciers. It poses serious threats to coastal ecosystems, infrastructure and human settlements worldwide, altering landscapes and economies in both developed and developing nations. Understanding the complex processes behind sea level rise and its cascading impacts is essential for developing adaptive and resilient strategies to safeguard vulnerable communities and environments.

The primary cause of global sea level rise is the warming of the planet due to increased greenhouse gas emissions. As atmospheric temperatures rise, ocean waters absorb much of this heat, leading to thermal expansion-a process in which warmer water occupies more volume. This alone contributes significantly to the observed sea level increase. In addition, the rapid melting of glaciers in the Himalayas, the Alps and the Andes, along with the disintegration of massive ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica, adds enormous quantities of freshwater into the oceans. Together, these processes have caused global sea levels to rise by approximately 20 centimeters since the late nineteenth century, with the rate of increase accelerating in recent decades.

Beyond the global average, sea level rise is not uniform across the world. Regional variations occur due to differences in ocean currents, gravitational effects from melting ice and land subsidence. For instance, parts of the western Pacific experience faster-than-average sea level rise, while certain regions in the North Atlantic see comparatively slower increases. Moreover, in many deltaic and low-lying areas, such as the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta in Bangladesh, the Mekong Delta in Vietnam and the Nile Delta in Egypt, land subsidence due to groundwater extraction and sediment compaction exacerbates the relative sea level rise, intensifying flooding and erosion risks.

The consequences of rising seas extend far beyond physical changes in coastlines. Millions of people living in coastal regions

face increased vulnerability to flooding, storm surges and saltwater intrusion. Low-lying island nations such as the Maldives, Tuvalu and Kiribati are at the forefront of this crisis, where rising waters threaten to engulf entire communities, forcing population displacement and potential climate-induced migration. Urban centers like Jakarta, Miami and Bangkok are already witnessing regular tidal inundation, damaging infrastructure, contaminating freshwater resources and disrupting economic activities. In many cases, sea level rise amplifies the severity of tropical cyclones, as higher baseline sea levels allow storm surges to penetrate further inland, leading to catastrophic losses of life and property.

The ecological impacts of sea level rise are equally significant. Coastal wetlands, mangroves, coral reefs and estuaries serve as vital buffers against storms and as breeding grounds for countless marine species. However, as sea levels rise, these ecosystems are submerged or eroded faster than they can naturally adapt. Coral reefs, already stressed by ocean acidification and warming, face drowning if sedimentation rates exceed their growth potential. Mangroves, which play a crucial role in carbon sequestration and shoreline stabilization, are being lost to encroaching waters, reducing biodiversity and releasing stored carbon into the atmosphere. The resulting ecological imbalance threatens fisheries, tourism and food security for millions of people who rely on these habitats for their livelihoods.

Socioeconomic repercussions are profound and far-reaching. Coastal cities are hubs of commerce, industry and population growth and their exposure to rising seas makes them economic hotspots of vulnerability. The cost of coastal protection infrastructure, such as seawalls, levees and drainage systems, runs into billions of dollars annually. Poorer nations, particularly those in the Global South, often lack the financial and technological capacity to implement large-scale adaptation measures, leaving their populations disproportionately affected. Furthermore, sea level rise may spark geopolitical tensions as

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Received: 30-May-2025, Manuscript No. JCZM-25-30240; **Editor assigned:** 02-Jun-2025, Pre QC No. JCZM-25-30240 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 16-Jun-2025, QC No. JCZM-25-30240; **Revised:** 23-Jun-2025, Manuscript No. JCZM-25-30240 (R); **Published:** 30-Jun-2025, DOI: 10.35248/2473-3350.25.28.680

Citation: Petrova E (2025) Global Sea Level Rise: Causes, Consequences and Sustainable Adaptation for Coastal Communities. *J Coast Zone Manag*. 28:680.

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nations contend with the displacement of people and the potential loss of territorial waters and exclusive economic zones.

Adapting to sea level rise requires a combination of engineering innovation, ecosystem-based solutions and community engagement. Hard engineering approaches like dikes and sea barriers can offer short-term protection, but they often disrupt natural sediment transport and can transfer erosion problems downstream. Soft engineering methods such as beach nourishment, dune restoration and wetland rehabilitation work with natural processes to enhance resilience. Urban planning must integrate climate risk assessments, restricting construction in vulnerable zones and promoting adaptive architecture, including elevated structures and floating houses.

On a global scale, mitigation efforts aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions remain the most effective long-term strategy to curb sea level rise. Achieving the targets set by the Paris Agreement is critical to slowing the rate of warming and

preventing catastrophic ice sheet collapse. International collaboration is essential to share scientific knowledge, technological advancements and financial resources to support adaptation in developing nations. Education and awareness programs can empower local communities to participate actively in conservation and preparedness initiatives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, sea level rise is not merely an environmental issue but a complex global crisis that intertwines climate science, ecology, economics and human rights. The rising oceans are a powerful reminder of humanity's influence on the planet and the urgent need for coordinated, science-based and equitable action. Through a combination of mitigation, adaptation and international solidarity, it is possible to minimize the impacts of sea level rise and ensure a more sustainable and secure future for coastal communities around the world.