

Environmental Refugees?

nationality, membership of particular social group or political opinion."³ Using this international legal definition there are about 15 million refugees.

The current parameters of the international legal definition of refugee makes it inappropriate to use the term environmental refugee in a general context. Uncritical use of the term may quickly result in confusion over what precisely is being discussed. Different users of the term may have greatly different understandings of the characteristics of the migrant, or group of migrants, to which they are referring. To avoid the legal criteria required for a bona fide refugee, it is constructive to speak of environmental migrants or environmentally displaced persons (EDP). Nor is this mere semantics. The use of these terms allows more readily for the conceptual development of environmental links with migration. In this paper, to minimize confusion, the term conventional refugee will be used when reference is made to the current international definition of a refugee.

In addition to removing the persecution criteria, EDP has the benefit of capturing the idea that people may migrate within a country as well as across international borders. International responses may be warranted whether environmental factors contribute to people becoming internally displaced or crossing borders. It is also worth stating that the use of the term environmentally displaced persons in no way minimizes the plight of these migrants and the conditions they face. However, it is essential to distinguish between those requiring humanitarian assistance to those requiring international protection. Conventional refugees are essentially a human rights problem, environmentally displaced persons are not. When it comes to public discussion of "environmental refugees" this distinction is seldom made.

There is also a need to distinguish between types of environmental factors and how they may contribute to or cause migration. An environmental factor can readily be identified with population movement if the environment is broadly defined. The literature on environment and migration uses the word environment in a number of ways and there is a need to clarify how it is being used in a specific analysis. For example, environmental degradation and resource scarcity are not synonymous. Environment degradation includes pollution, or the loss of ozone shielding the planet's surface from ultraviolet radiation, but is also more, such as the loss of fertile land.

³United Nations High Commission on Refugees, The State of the World's Refugees 1993, New York and Geneva, p. 163.