15 Tribes and Indigenous Peoples

Wind River Indian Reservation students collect seeds for a land restoration project.

Key Message 1

Indigenous Livelihoods and Economies at Risk

Climate change threatens Indigenous peoples' livelihoods and economies, including agriculture, hunting and gathering, fishing, forestry, energy, recreation, and tourism enterprises. Indigenous peoples' economies rely on, but face institutional barriers to, their self-determined management of water, land, other natural resources, and infrastructure that will be impacted increasingly by changes in climate.

Key Message 2

Physical, Mental, and Indigenous Values-Based Health at Risk

Indigenous health is based on interconnected social and ecological systems that are being disrupted by a changing climate. As these changes continue, the health of individuals and communities will be uniquely challenged by climate impacts to lands, waters, foods, and other plant and animal species. These impacts threaten sites, practices, and relationships with cultural, spiritual, or ceremonial importance that are foundational to Indigenous peoples' cultural heritages, identities, and physical and mental health.

Key Message 3

Adaptation, Disaster Management, Displacement, and Community-Led Relocations

Many Indigenous peoples have been proactively identifying and addressing climate impacts; however, institutional barriers exist in the United States that severely limit their adaptive capacities. These barriers include limited access to traditional territory and resources and the limitations of existing policies, programs, and funding mechanisms in accounting for the unique conditions of Indigenous communities. Successful adaptation in Indigenous contexts relies on use of Indigenous knowledge, resilient and robust social systems and protocols, a commitment to principles of self-determination, and proactive efforts on the part of federal, state, and local governments to alleviate institutional barriers.

Executive Summary

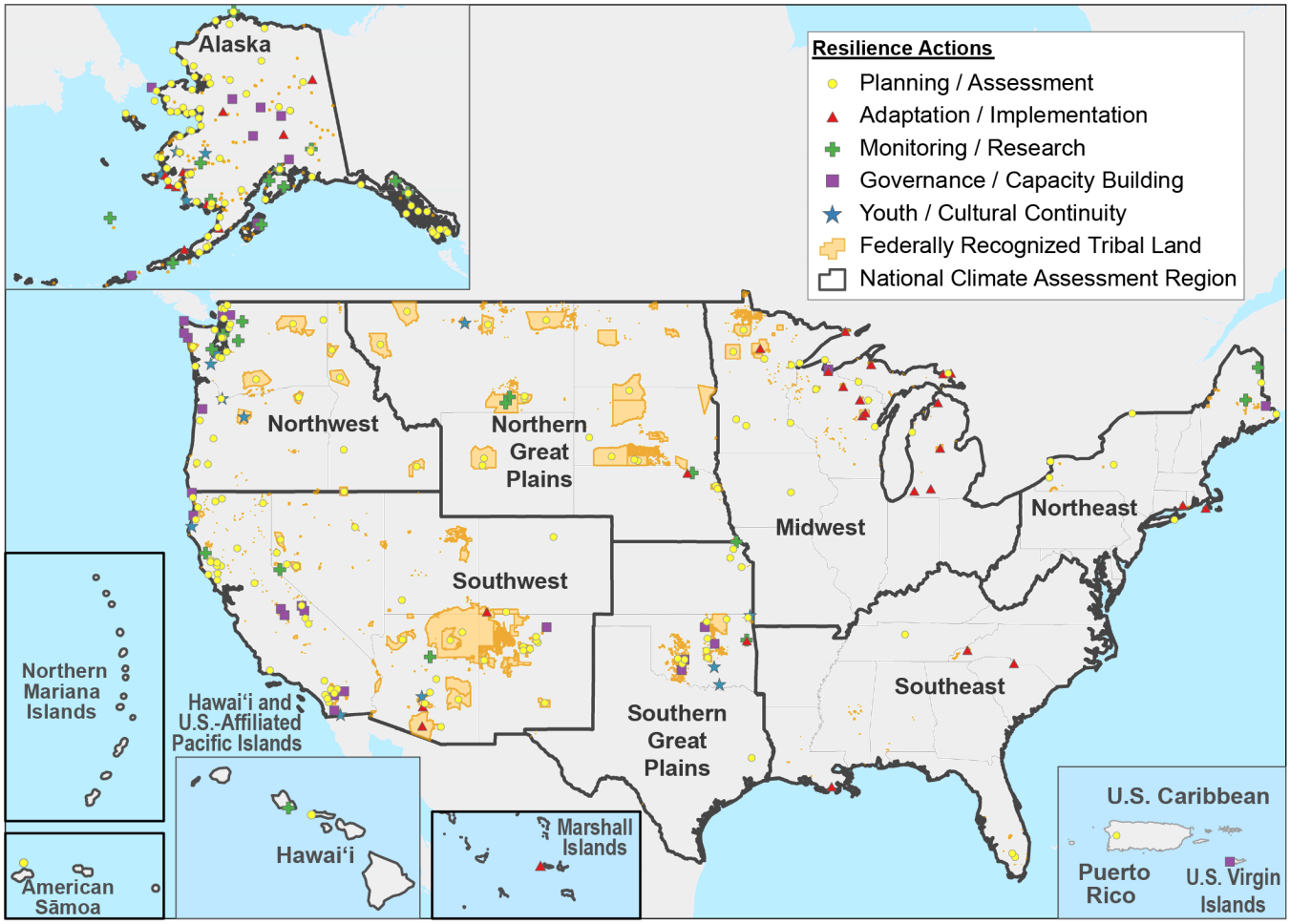
Indigenous peoples in the United States are diverse and distinct political and cultural groups and populations. Though they may be affected by climate change in ways that are similar to others in the United States, Indigenous peoples can also be affected uniquely and disproportionately. Many Indigenous peoples have lived in particular areas for hundreds if not thousands of years. Indigenous peoples' histories and shared experience engender distinct knowledge about climate change impacts and strategies for adaptation. Indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge systems can play a role in advancing understanding of climate change and in developing more comprehensive climate adaptation strategies.

Observed and projected changes of increased wildfire, diminished snowpack, pervasive drought, flooding, ocean acidification, and sea level rise threaten the viability of Indigenous peoples' traditional subsistence and commercial activities that include agriculture, hunting and gathering, fisheries, forestry, energy, recreation, and tourism enterprises. Despite institutional barriers to tribal self-determination stemming from federal trust authority over tribal trust lands, a number of tribes have adaptation plans that include a focus on subsistence and commercial economic activities. Some tribes are also pursuing climate mitigation actions through the development of renewable energy on tribal lands.

Climate impacts to lands, waters, foods, and other plant and animal species threaten cultural heritage sites and practices that sustain intra- and intergenerational relationships built on sharing traditional knowledges, food, and ceremonial or cultural objects. This weakens place-based cultural identities, may worsen historical trauma still experienced by many Indigenous peoples in the United States, and adversely affects mental health and Indigenous values-based understandings of health.

Throughout the United States, climate-related disasters are causing Indigenous communities to consider or actively pursue relocation as an adaptation strategy. Challenges to Indigenous actions to address disaster management and recovery, displacement, and relocation in the face of climate change include economic, social, political, and legal considerations that severely constrain their abilities to respond to rapid ecological shifts and complicate action toward safe and self-determined futures for these communities.

Indigenous Peoples' Climate Initiatives and Plans



Many Indigenous peoples are taking steps to adapt to climate change impacts. Search the online version of this map by activity type, region, and sector to find more information and links to each project: https://biamaps.doi.gov/nca/. To provide feedback and add new projects for inclusion in the database, see: https://www.bia.gov/bia/ots/tribal-resilience-program/nca/. Thus far, tribal entities in the Northwest have the highest concentration of climate activities (Ch. 24: Northwest). For other case studies of selected tribal adaptation activities, see both the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals' Tribal Profiles,[1] and Tribal Case Studies within the U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit.[2,3] *From Figure 15.1 (Source: Bureau of Indian Affairs).*