



Making climate waves in the Pacific and across the world: a Marshallese woman opens UN Climate Summit

It may seem surprising that a young woman from a small circle of land in the middle of the Pacific Ocean could cause waves in an international arena. But, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner did just that. Chosen from a group of over 500 nominated international applicants, Ms. Jetnil-Kijiner, a poet, professor, and co-founder of an environmental youth organization, opened talks at the United Nations Climate Summit on 23 September 2014 with a stirring speech and a poem to her young daughter.

The UN Climate Summit created a public forum for heads of state, financial institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and local groups “to catalyze ambitious action on the ground to reduce emissions and strengthen climate resilience and mobilize political will.” If the purpose of the opening speaker was to represent those peoples of the world currently observing climate change at their doorstep who wish to mobilize political will, that purpose was realized.



Jetnil-Kijiner is from the Republic of the Marshall Islands—a country of precious land and vast blue distances in the western Pacific Ocean. In the Marshall Islands there is a great history of navigation, storytelling, and cultural strength that can be heard in her speech. She also describes the sense of urgency felt by the Marshallese and other Pacific islanders who have already begun to see the impacts of climate change crashing on shores, blowing at windows, and drying out water tanks.

Her speech was a call to action to the UN and the world to reduce the carbon emissions that cause global warming and climate change. Her poem was more personal—written for her baby daughter and relating the potential changes to the land, culture, and way of life for so many island people—but no less relevant to the true meaning of climate change being realized in the Pacific Ocean.

Jetnil-Kijiner received a master’s degree in Pacific Island Studies at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa. She currently teaches at the College of the Marshall Islands in Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands and is active in regional climate issues through [Jojikum](#), a youth environmental organization she co-founded. Read more about the UN Climate Summit [here](#). See Ms. Jetnil-Kijiner’s speech [here](#).

Photo of degraded sea wall near Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands by Sarah Nash, Hawaii Cooperative Studies Unit/Pacific Islands Climate Science Center.