Chronicles of Change: Using Oral History to Document Climate Change on the NC Coast

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Introduction

Hurricane Florence made landfall as a Category 1 in September 2018, costing the state of NC roughly $17 billion in damage (NWS, 2023). The frequency of storms, such as hurricanes and nor'easters, is increasing due to climate change (Pörtner et al., 2022), exposing coastal communities to renewed surges of threats. Understanding how people experience environmental change locally is critically important to making relevant climate policy and disaster preparedness.

Carteret County remains vulnerable to catastrophe, with higher poverty rates than similar counties and experiencing widespread tree loss due and recurrent flooding due to climate change.

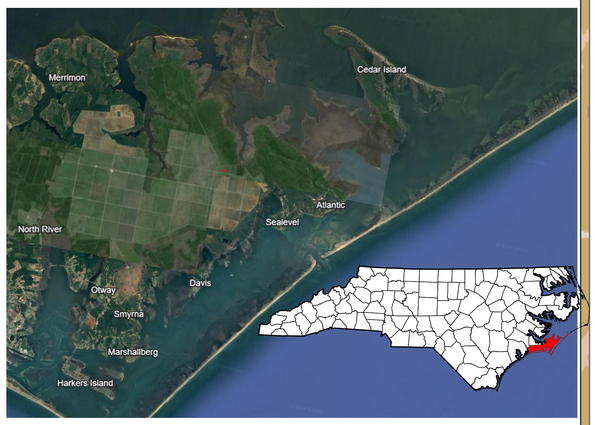
Objectives

Create an archive to…

- Understand how residents remember and recover from the drastic environmental change incurred by Hurricane Florence in 2018.
- Explore how people in "Down East" Carteret County experience slow environmental changes like sunny day flooding, ghost forest formation.

Study Site

"Down East" is a collection of 13 mostly unincorporated communities located northeast of the North River Bridge in Carteret County. These communities were settled in the late seventeenth century – mid-eighteenth century, still linguistically notable for remnant "brogue."



Methods

Co-created 9 oral history interviews with 11 residents from across the "Down East" communities

Why Oral History?

Oral history is a process of creating historical primary source material through planned, unstructured interviews.

- **It privileges experiences of everyday people and prioritizes deep listening.**
- **Climate change is a global issue, but we need local narratives**

Core Sound Museum, Harkers Island, NC

Results

Lessons from Hurricane Florence

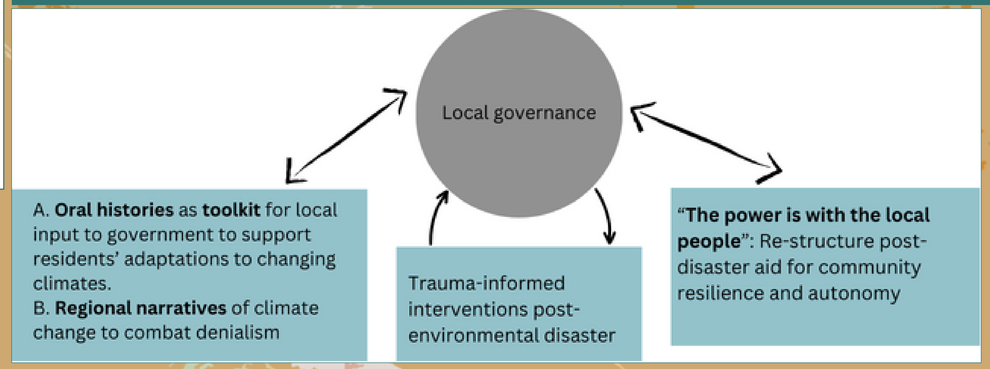
- Hurricane Florence represented a **unique turning point in public memory** and personal climate/flood adaptation
- Those already vulnerable economically, socially, or physically feel the effects of climate change the most, with the aging population along the coast experiencing unique barriers related to climate adaptation.
- Storm-related PTSD is perceived to amplify generational trauma and interfere with educational outcomes of children
- Unincorporated, rural areas face additional barriers to hurricane recovery and access to funding
- With and through": Community members express desires for local autonomy over post-disaster fund allocation

> *"A hurricane is basically like **ripping the roof off of your community**, and then giving you the opportunity to stare down at your community, and what's going on and what's really happening."*

Perceptions of Environmental Change

- Environmental changes, such as the widespread development of ghost forests, are alarming and disheartening to community members, though many do not attribute environmental changes to sea level rise.
- **Impacts of (sunny day) flooding and storms cause concern in rural, aging folks cut off from hospital access and prompt adaptation measures**
- **"Ghost forests" are often linked to pine beetles, rather than sea level rise.**
- **Climate change denial:**
  - Interviewees demonstrate loss of trust in governmental climate change narratives, an attitude often re-expressed as grievances about inadequate disaster relief but were amenable to talking about **local indicators** of climate change (flower blooming time, snow, etc.)

Recommendations: Toward Reciprocity



Listening as a tool: Personal narratives reveal fine-scale environmental injustices

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