

Interview Olivier Nouaillas

What has been your career path ?

I arrived at La Vie in 1981 as a journalist in the social sector. Since the 2000s, I have been specializing in the environment. I am also the head of the bureau for France Monde and there I specialize in the environment. I am also vice president at JNE, an association for Journalists supporting Nature and Ecology which has approximately 250 members. I write the pages on « eco-living well » and also the column on organic gardening. I am currently writing a book on climate change.

Had you already heard of the topic of environmental migration ?

Yes of course ! I think it is quite well known. I have heard a lot about it regarding the case of the small islands that are at risk of disappearing, on the relationship between the possible disappearance of the island and the environmental migrations that this might bring about.

In an article that you wrote for “L’Atlas des Minorités”, you used the term « climate refugee », why ?

My article was called « Climate Refugees : exiles of the future ». In journalism, a headline has to be sufficiently shocking. The term refugee brings with it this idea of compassion, if I had used the term « migrants » there would have been a risk of confusion for the readers. The term « environmental » is not strong enough and is more vague. I wanted to show in my article that this could be a huge cause for migration.

What documents did you base yourself off to write your article ?

I read a lot of Francois Gemenne’s work which I found to be very pertinent. He speaks of migrations and displacement in a world +4°C. It is actually hard to limit warming to 2°C. At 2°C, we could adapt but at 3 or 4°C... There is a climate panic, we are in an unknown area. His second point is very optimistic. He thinks that we should not think of migrations as a humanitarian catastrophe, everybody is panicking but we must find solutions. For him, there is no such thing as national solutions because of definition problems and responsibility and problems regarding the hosting of migrants.

You have quite an alarmist position ¹on the subject.

I am afraid that we will only act under pressure. We are often accused to being fatalistic but the fact is that we have to react. The islands of Kiribati which are under the risk of disappearing are currently in the process of renting 2000 acres of land on Vanua Levu, the second largest island in Fiji. For the time being we are only speaking of small islands but what is going to happen when the country being discussed is Bangladesh ?

¹ Investigator’s note : François Gemenne’s video

Do you have any ideas for short or long term solutions ?

At the next Summit of the Earth, will an international organization for the environment finally be created ? On June 2012, the Rio +20 summit will begin and France is in favor of creating such an international organization. There is already an organization dealing with the economy, the World Trade Organization, and for social issues, the Bureau International du Travail.

Either we choose to strengthen UNEP, the UN program for the Environment or we create an international organization for the environment.

Europe must use its position as a global leader to show other countries what to do in terms of ecology. The ecological crisis is added on to other crises and therefore is hard to speak of.

You were at the Copenhagen summit in 2009. Was the subject of environmental migrants brought up ?

I was sincerely hoping it would be but this summit was an enormous disappointment. There was not much discussed in terms of environmental refugees but there was a strong presence from the islands.

The islands of Tuvalu were particularly vocal during the Copenhagen summit. But to be honest, and not to be mean, there was quite a « folkloric » aspect to this.

On July 2011, I interviewed Michel Rocard who said « everybody laughs about the fact that these cute little islands like Maldives or the Tuvalu might flood over, they are small and not very inhabited. But just wait for the Netherlands, with 16 million people, and Bangladesh, with 130 million to begin to disappear and you'll see how things change. »

Another pertinent example is Hurricane Katrina, When a city is emptied, what can we do to help ?

The international community seems incapable of fighting against global warming.

Do you think that the media can play a part in making people more aware of this subject ?

I think we are already doing it. It is a fact. The problem is to get people to act but there is also a deeper issue. There are medium and long-term actions that cannot be measured out in five years.

We also must raise more public awareness on the subject. Pascal Bruckner said « I don't see why we have to change our lifestyle due to global warming ».

But it is hard to identify what migration takes place due to environmental factors. The war in Darfur could be considered a consequence of climate change. The wars that come as an argument over water sources could also be considered as such.

Unfortunately, I have a hard time picturing a positive outcome.