

What Sea Level Rise Looks Like When Today's Kids Grow Up

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Sarah & George

When Sarah (left) reaches the age of her life expectancy in 2068, sea level in Portland, Oregon, will be 26 inches higher than it is today. When Roy (right) reaches his life expectancy in 2076, sea level in New Orleans will be 39 inches higher than today. (Courtesy Mary Brandenburg)

If you don't live in a coastal city, sea level rise is likely one of the impacts of climate change that doesn't sound like a big deal. Especially because it's happening so slowly, by only a few millimeters every year in most places around the world.

But if you live in a place like South Florida or along the coast of Louisiana, rising sea levels already are beginning to interfere with daily life. Witness the street flooding that now regularly occurs during high tides in parts of Miami Beach, with or without rain.

Events like these were the inspiration for a series of portraits titled "Sea Level Rise in My Lifetime," commissioned by Florida Atlantic University for its annual Sea Level Rise Summit, and shown in the photo slideshow above.

Taken by Florida-based photographer Mary Brandenburg, the portraits aim to show what kind of future awaits for the children now living in many of the nation's biggest coastal cities, by depicting how far sea levels will rise by the time those children reach their natural life expectancy.

"I don't think we realized how powerful they would be," said Mary Beth Hartman of the university's Center for Environmental Studies, who worked with Climate Central's Ben Strauss to calculate for each photo how far in inches sea levels are expected to rise in different coastal cities around the U.S.

The numbers were based on data from Climate Central's Surging Seas project, which combine ZIP code, age and gender, and local sea level rise projections to come up with estimates for how far the sea level is expected to rise for a person living today in any given coastal location.

Many of the kids shown in the photos are the children of scientists at the university, Hartman noted, adding that her group considered photographing people from different generations.

"But it's just not the same as me standing up to my shin [in water] as it is of these kids," she said. "As parents, it's so powerful that this is what we're leaving them. This is a real and difficult issue that we're leaving them."

Two of the children in the photos are the sons of Keren Bolter, a geosciences Ph.D. candidate at the university who gave a TEDx talk in Miami in October on what South Florida faces from sea level rise over the coming decades.

In the talk (shown in the YouTube video below), she presents a series of slides that reveal how much of South Florida will be inundated by sea water in scenarios of 3 feet, 4 feet, 5 feet, 6 feet and 10 feet of sea level rise.

"My last slide is my two children," Bolter said in an interview. "I say, these are my two little boys, this is for them – this is their future. I make a commitment that they do have a future in South Florida. And it's very compelling."

Communicating the often complex issues around climate change and sea level rise, she added, requires doing so in a way that engages – but doesn't frighten – the public.

"You can't solve a problem if you don't know it exists," she said. "A lot of scientists out there are doing these gloom and doom ideas that get people afraid and worried. And I really don't agree with that."

"I think it needs to be positive," Bolter added. "And the message can be: This is going to save us money in the end, and it will protect us, and we're going to be safe. How can that be bad?"

Calculate how far sea levels will rise near you at Climate Central's Surging Seas.

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