

Climate change guyana

A seawall stretches for hundreds of miles along the coast of Guyana, in northern South America. It protects the low-lying coastal lands where the majority of Guyana's population lives. The region is acutely threatened by rising sea levels, as well as other symptoms of climate change, yet Guyana is embracing the oil industry. Ryan Kellman/NPR hide caption

GEORGETOWN, Guyana - For more than a century, a wide, low seawall has protected the country of Guyana from the depravations of the Atlantic Ocean.

Today, the weathered old seawall is a cheerful place. Vendors sell beer and coconut water, blasting local radio stations as they look out over muddy waters. Kids play, couples flirt. Exhausted workers catch a cool breeze after another 90-degree day in the capital city of Georgetown.

Already, high tides periodically wash over the top of the seawall. Left: Brian Pramo believes the government will make the seawall higher. The only alternative is to swim, he jokes. Right: Owen Stewart and Sherman John sit near the seawall. Stewart is optimistic that oil development will help Guyana. "The natives [are] not getting anything off of the oil as yet," he says, "but it's in process." Ryan Kellman/NPR hide caption

Hamer has seen the climate models. In the worst-case scenario, they predict that rising sea levels would eventually reach far inland and this capital city would be completely submerged.

Climate expert Seon Hamer, a lecturer at the University of Guyana, is familiar with the scientific data showing Guyana's rapid sea level rise. He's also seen it firsthand. When he fished along the seawall as a boy, it was rare for high tides to spill over the wall. Now it's a much more frequent event. Ryan Kellman/NPR hide caption

Climate change is causing catastrophes worldwide, but for Guyana, which is one of the poorest countries in South America, the risks are especially existential.

Nonetheless, the country is hitching its future to the same fossil fuels that are accelerating climate change.

By the latest estimates, there could be more than 10 billion barrels beneath Guyana's waters, providing a potential windfall to its citizens. That's bigger than Mexico's proven reserves -- for a country with a tiny fraction of Mexico's population.

So Guyana is emerging as the world's newest oil producer at a time when world leaders are under pressure to reduce their countries' reliance on oil, coal and natural gas, one of the main objectives at the COP26 talks in Glasgow, Scotland.

Dusk near Georgetown's seawall offers a respite from the heat of the day. Singer Jackie Jaxx (top right) has written a song inspired by the muddy waters near Georgetown, which are dark with sediment carried from the inland rainforests. "Guyana is really special to us who live here," she says. "You know what I mean? We write songs about her." Ryan Kellman/NPR hide caption

The seawall that stretches along Guyana's coast can be traced back to Dutch colonizers, who reclaimed the low-lying, marshy plains to expand their land.

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