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Integrating Ethics, Behavior and Modeling for Just Climate Adaptation via Managed Retreat

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Abstract

This study investigates the design of just managed retreat policies in vulnerable coastal regions. Existing approaches are often incomplete, prioritizing biophysical hazard data (Natural Science) over the complex interplay of socioeconomic barriers to relocation (Social Science) and the essential normative questions of land justice (Humanities). Our objective is to generate a fully integrated framework for ethically informed, equitable adaptation planning.

The methodology employs a mixed-methods, comparative case study approach. Coastal erosion and sea-level rise projections (Natural Science) were used to define necessary retreat zones; these projections then informed Social Science data collection (surveys on household adaptive capacity and economic displacement models). Crucially, the resulting policy scenarios were critically evaluated against Humanities perspectives, specifically distributive justice principles, to ensure equitable outcomes.

Key findings reveal that technical necessity is often socially and ethically unviable without significant policy restructuring. Specifically, adaptation policies framed through a lens of intergenerational fairness achieved demonstrably higher predicted compliance and social acceptance in modeling compared to purely cost-benefit approaches. The core implication is that biophysical necessity must be mediated by ethical acceptability for successful climate adaptation. This integrated research offers a necessary model for balancing scientific urgency with social equity in global climate governance.

Keywords: Managed Retreat, Climate Adaptation, Transdisciplinarity, Climate Justice, Ethics, Behavioral Science, Coastal Modeling, Policy Integration.

1. Introduction

Managed Retreat —the strategic, planned relocation of people, assets, and infrastructure away from high-risk hazard zones—is becoming an unavoidable component of climate adaptation planning globally. As sea-level rise accelerates and the frequency of extreme weather events increases, the calculus shifts from *resistance* to *relocation*. However, the implementation of MR faces a tripartite challenge that current planning often fails to address: the physical timeline, the behavioral resistance, and the ethical debt.

This research identifies a critical gap in the literature and policy landscape: the isolation of knowledge domains. Current MR planning often proceeds by prioritizing Natural Science (NS) hazard mapping, followed by a Social Science (SS) understanding of costs, with ethical considerations Humanities, often relegated to a final, easily dismissed legal hurdle. This results in policies that are technically sound on paper but socially unviable in practice, leading to community distrust, litigation, and ultimately, forced, reactive relocation under crisis conditions—the very outcome MR seeks to avoid. This paper argues that a just and effective MR policy requires a transdisciplinary framework that integrates these three domains from the initial design phase. We propose the Ethics-Behavior-Model (EBM) Framework, which mandates that normative principles of justice define the acceptable scope of policy options, which are then informed by behavioral science (SS) to ensure compliance, all within the non-negotiable physical constraints (NS). This paper outlines the EBM framework, explores its application through a comparative case study methodology, and demonstrates how ethical mediation is crucial for policy success.

2. The Disciplinary Silos in Managed Retreat Literature

The challenges inherent in MR stem from how its constituent parts are traditionally studied and governed in isolation.

i). **The Natural Science Imperative (The 'What' and 'When'):** The NS domain establishes the **physical reality**. This relies on geospatial analysis, hydrodynamic modeling, and climate scenario projections (e.g., RCP 4.5 vs. 8.5) to delineate the Necessary Retreat Zone (NRZ) and establish the timeline for action. While this data is foundational, a policy based *only* on the NRZ is inherently flawed, as it treats land as an empty asset rather than an occupied place.

ii). **The Social Science Barrier:** The SS literature explains the human resistance to moving. This includes

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established concepts such as status quo bias, where the pain of a certain loss (moving) is perceived as far greater than the uncertain future risk of staying. Furthermore, SS highlights the erosion of social capital and place attachment—non-monetary values that traditional economic valuations completely miss. Policies that rely solely on financial compensation fail because they cannot compensate for lost community identity.

iii). The Humanities Mandate

The Humanities domain provides the critical moral boundary conditions for MR. It centers on environmental justice and the "right to place". This requires scrutinizing policies for failures in:

- **Distributive Justice:** Ensuring relocation benefits and burdens are shared fairly across socioeconomic strata.
- **Procedural Justice:** Guaranteeing that affected residents have genuine, co-design power over the *process* and *destination* of their relocation. Historically, MR has often resulted in the displacement of low-income populations to less desirable areas, effectively transferring climate risk rather than solving it.

iv). Synthesis: The Integration Gap

The literature reveals a clear sequence of failure: NS defines the zone, SS identifies behavioral barriers to exiting that zone, and H critiques the ethical fairness of the proposed exit routes. The integration gap lies in failing to use the *ethical mandate* to *shape* the policy solutions that are *behaviorally acceptable* to the affected population, all within the *timeline* set by the science.

3. A Transdisciplinary Framework: The Ethics-Behavior-Model (EBM)

To overcome siloed failure, we propose the Ethics-Behavior-Model (EBM) Framework, which mandates a specific sequence of inquiry to ensure justice is built-in, not bolted on.

i). Phase 1 (Humanities): Ethics as the Foundational Filter: The EBM begins by establishing the Normative Guardrails. Before any financial or engineering models are run, the community, in partnership with ethicists, must define what a "just outcome" looks like. This moves beyond simple compensation to define justice in terms of intergenerational fairness and community continuity. This ethical definition immediately screens out policy options (like individual buyouts) that fragment community ties, regardless of their economic efficiency.

ii). Phase 2 (Social Science): Behavior as the Policy Mechanism: With the ethical goal established "preserve community cohesion", Phase 2 uses Social Science tools to develop the *mechanism* to achieve it. This involves understanding *how* the community negotiates place attachment and designing relocation options that actively preserve social capital—such as planning for the collective purchase of new land or developing joint infrastructure in the receiving area. This directly addresses behavioral barriers by offering a pathway that honors the community's values.

iii). Phase 3 (Natural Science): Modeling as the Ultimate Constraint: The final phase subjects the ethically-grounded, behaviorally-informed policy scenarios to the NS timeline. The NRZ provides the urgency factor and spatial limits. The scientific model constrains the Social Science solutions: If a community chooses a new site, the NS model must confirm that this *new* site is safe for the next 50–100 years. This iterative feedback loop ensures that the policy is simultaneously just, acceptable, and physically sound.

4. Findings and Discussion: Justice as a De-Risking Strategy

Applying the EBM Framework in comparative case studies demonstrates that integrating ethics is not merely altruistic; it is a critical risk-mitigation strategy.

i). The Failure of Cost-Benefit Logic: In communities where planners defaulted to the traditional cost-benefit model the results were near-total policy paralysis. Economic models predicted high compliance due to financial incentives, but real-world surveys showed overwhelming rejection rooted in fear of social isolation (a behavioral barrier). The technical necessity defined by NS models was rendered politically inert by SS/H resistance.

ii). The Efficacy of Ethical Framing: Conversely, policies explicitly designed using the EBM Framework—those where the ethical lens of intergenerational fairness (H) defined the solution, which was then shaped via procedural co-design (SS)—showed significantly higher predicted compliance in modeling exercises. When residents saw the process as *fair* and *protective of their future community*, their inherent risk aversion was overcome.

The core implication is that ethical acceptability mediates technical necessity. A policy that is perceived as unjust (a failure of H) will provoke behavioral resistance (SS failure), causing the necessary retreat timeline (NS constraint) to be missed. Therefore, the most "efficient" policy is often the one that is designed to be the most just.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Managed Retreat is a necessary tool for climate adaptation, but its implementation must evolve beyond technical expediency. The evidence strongly suggests that the failure to formally integrate Ethics, Behavior, and Modeling leads directly to policy deadlock and exacerbated inequity.

The Ethics-Behavior-Model (EBM) Framework offers a robust, transdisciplinary pathway forward. It elevates normative questions to the level of foundational constraints, leveraging behavioral science to make difficult transitions socially viable, while respecting the non-negotiable urgency defined by climate science.

Policy Recommendations:

i). Mandate Transdisciplinary Impact Assessments (TIAs): Policy proposals for MR must demonstrate they have passed the EBM process, with explicit documentation on how justice principles guided scenario development.

ii). Shift from 'Buyout' to 'Community Endowment': Financial mechanisms must compensate for the loss of community, not just the structures, perhaps through collective land trusts or infrastructure endowments in receiving communities.

iii). Invest in Receiving Communities: Future planning must include SS/H assessment of the *destination* areas to ensure that the burden of climate migration is not simply transferred from one vulnerable group to another.

By embracing the EBM Framework, policymakers can move from planning for *retreat* to planning for a *just future*,

ensuring that adaptation efforts succeed not just against the ocean, but in partnership with people.

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