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### Dietary diseases in the Marshall Islands: A research essay

The Marshall Islands are a chain of over 1,200 islands that are located in the North Pacific Ocean east of the Philippines. The chains lie about 125 miles apart and extend some 800 miles northwest to southeast (Kiste). The capital is named Majuro and the country is an “independent nation with free association with the US, which provides them with defense, subsidies, and access to US-based agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission and the Postal Service” (“Marshall Islands (U.S”). Out of the 1,200 small islands, the population is in the ballpark of 43,000. These people mostly speak Marshallese but many speak English too. The national currency is the U.S. dollar because the country “signed a Compact of Free Association with the United States in 1983 and gained independence in 1986 with the Compact’s entry into force. From 1999-2003, the two countries negotiated an Amended Compact that entered into force in 2004.” (“U.S.-Marshall Islands Policy and History - U.S. Embassy in the Republic of the Marshall Islands”). The economy of the Marshall Islands includes heavy amounts of fishing along with the agriculture of coconut trees and pandanus (Kiste). These practices heavily benefit from the warm and humid climate that is present years around. But these exports are not enough to support all of the islands so the country often relies on U.S. financial support.

One insecurity that kills many of the Marshall Islands citizens every year is dietary diseases. The people of the islands experience extreme diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. And the reason why dates back to 1946. During 1946-1958, The U.S. used some of the small islands to test nuclear weaponry. The U.S. shot off over “67 nuclear and thermonuclear weapons.” (Niedenthal). Having this happen, the environment was permanently devastated and has never been able to recover. A small island named Bikini Atoll is still to this day uninhabitable. Many of the other Islands that are inhabited by people have tested for high levels of cesium-137, strontium-90, and plutonium-239. (M.S.). These dangerous chemicals have heavily affected the coconut fruits which are the second largest export but have also had radiation that contaminated lagoon waters, contaminating fish and other marine life. This makes the seafood on these islands unsafe to eat to the people. And the people that eat these fish experience heart disease. And since the U.S. realized that they had devastated people they decided to start regularly importing food. The problem with importing food like this is that it is very different from what the citizen’s regular diet consists of. People regularly ate lots of fruits and vegetables, along with bread which would fulfill all of their nutritional needs. Once the U.S. got involved with the imports, food that was a lot more processed and fake caused the islanders to become severely obese and malnourished. The malnourishment was a reaction because processed food doesn’t contain the vitamins and minerals you would get from natural food. This causes kids to grow up malnourished and underdeveloped. On top of that, the rising of sea levels has increased greatly which made farming space more and more minimal each year. So the alternatives to these processed foods are deteriorating more and more as time goes on.

A solution to completely stop this problem would be difficult to achieve but is possible. There are ways to protect and teach the people of the Marshall Islands so they fully understand what they are consuming and what it does to their quality of life. First, the people of the Marshall Islands need to be educated on what food belongs in their bodies and what radiation can do to them and future generations. So educational programs funded by the U.S. would give people a better understanding of the situation they are in and how dangerous a diet consisting of processed food is. This would segway into the second step which is to study the food sources along the islands so the people know what food is dangerous to eat on what islands. Researching this would help people stop eating radiation-filled meat, without shutting down the entire fishing industry which is something the island heavily relies on. So instead scientists can direct fishermen where they can hunt and can assure them the meat is safe to be exported and sold. So now that people are eating safe food and keeping away from contaminated food, the U.S. could start sending over unprocessed natural food that mimics their earlier diets. This would cut down the amount of obese and malnourished people on the island and since the islanders are now educated, they will be more likely to fully commit to this type of diet. If that trend begins with healthier eating, further generations will likely be able to grow up healthier with a lower risk of inherited heart diseases.

Due to the notable history of the U.S., the Marshall Islands have gone through many obstacles when trying to eat healthy and boost their economy. It would be fair to the country itself that the U.S. was to fund these solutions and make up for the damage done in the past so future generations can have a higher quality of life.

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