CLIMATE INEQUALITY: OCEANIA

Why we must create climate equality and a Blue Pacific for the 99%

OXFAM

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IMAGE (ABOVE): Loreto Island, Malaita province, Solomon Islands: Loreto Island, off the coast of Malaita, which is under threat from rising sea levels. Photo: Collin Leafasia/Oxfam.

COVER PHOTO: Manawei Bay, East Are'are, Solomon Islands: Coastal villages in the Solomon Islands are among Pacific Island communities paying the price for the climate crisis, forced to defend themselves from the increasing rise of the sea level. Photo: Ivan Utahenua/Oxfam.

OVERVIEW

The world faces twin crises of climate breakdown and runaway inequality. Here in Oceania, the inequality between those causing the climate crisis, those experiencing the worst of the impacts, and those who have the capacity to cope is particularly devastating.

Oxfam analysis shows that Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand's richest people are destroying the climate with their huge carbon emissions, while people in the Pacific are paying the highest price in climate impacts and have the fewest resources to cope.

When it comes to responsibility for the climate crisis, climate inequality facts for Australia (2019) paint a clear picture:

- In Australia the top 1% by income emitted 22 times as much per person as the 50% of people on lower incomes.
- The top 10% were responsible for almost 33% of all national emissions, while the bottom 50% were responsible for less than 20% of emissions, despite constituting 10 million more people.
- Since 1990, the top 1% have almost doubled their total emissions, a rate almost 2.5 times faster than the bottom 50% over the same time period.
- The top 1% of Australians by income emitted more carbon pollution than all 14.7 million passenger vehicles in the country.
- The top 1% of Australians by income emit almost 200 times more carbon pollution than the entire population of Vanuatu, with fewer people.
- Australia's top 1% out-emit all 2 million people that make up the total population of Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati, by 17 times to 1.[1]

Climate inequality facts for Aotearoa New Zealand (2019) paint a similar story to Australia:

- In New Zealand, the top 1% by income also emitted 22 times as much per person as the 50% of people on lower incomes.
- The top 1% of New Zealanders by income were responsible for almost 10% of all emissions, more than the bottom 30% combined.
- In contrast, the bottom 50% were responsible for just 20% of emissions. Total emissions for the top 10% by income exceeded those of the bottom 50%, despite the latter constituting 1.9 million more people.
- One New Zealander in the top 1% by income emits as much as 149 people from Kiribati.
- The 48,000 people who make up the top 1% in New Zealand are responsible for double the emissions of the 2 million people who live in Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati combined.

These facts show that within Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand emissions are highly unequal, with the richest generating massive emissions, while ordinary people emit less and have limited means to control their carbon footprint. When we compare the emissions of these richest people to those in the Pacific, the inequality is even more extreme. **In both cases, it is clear that the wealthy have the responsibility, as well as the economic and political power, to stop climate breakdown.**

When it comes to climate impacts, people living in the Pacific who have little responsibility for causing dangerous climate change are being hit the hardest by the climate crisis. They face more ferocious cyclones, which destroy homes and communities; sea level rise, combined with erosion and salt water intrusion, causing inundation of homes and food gardens; ocean acidification and loss of coral reefs, causing loss of fish stocks; and droughts and loss of fresh water springs that communities depend on, impacting agriculture and fresh water for drinking. Some countries in the Pacific are realistically contemplating the loss of their national homelands entirely to climate change in the coming decades.

Experts agree Pacific Island nations are among the world's most vulnerable to climate change. Earlier this year, Vanuatu was hit by twin Category 4 Tropical Cyclones Judy and Kevin, followed by twin earthquakes of 6.6 and 5.4 magnitude in the space of a few days in early 2023.[2] This was an unprecedented series of climate and humanitarian disasters, with 80% of the population affected, 90% of crops wiped out in some of the worst-affected areas, and total damage estimates surpassing 40% of Vanuatu's GDP.[3] These events have not let up; Cyclone Lola, the earliest Category 5 cyclone ever recorded in the Southern hemisphere, made landfall in Vanuatu in late October 2023, leaving significant destruction in its wake.[4] Pacific Island countries are ranked on the Notre Dame Global Adaption Index among the countries with the most vulnerability to climate change impacts. For example, Solomon Islands ranks 123, Micronesia ranks 151 and Papua New Guinea ranks 160 out of 182 countries.[5]

By contrast, per capita, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia are among the wealthiest countries in the world. They have the resources to cope with the

Lilisiana, Malaita Province, Solomon Islands: Houses on the edge of the Langa Langa lagoon in Malaita Province where rising tides are inundating the town. Photo: Collin Leafasia/Oxfam.

current climate challenges they face with bushfires, floods and droughts and with future challenges, if they appropriately tax the growing number of billionaires and properly prioritise climate adaptation, disaster compensation, and poverty alleviation in their budgets. They are ranked 9th and 13th, respectively, on the same climate vulnerability index out of 182 countries, meaning they are generally well placed to respond to any climate impacts experienced.[6] The wealthiest people in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in particular, who are most responsible for the climate crisis, have the wealth, power and influence to protect themselves from climate impacts.

The complacency associated with this inequality in impacts and capacity to cope must come to an end. Wealthy countries and the world's wealthiest people must take responsibility for their historic carbon emissions and pay reparations to fix the crisis, for the sake of humanity and protecting the precious earth.

The time to correct the course is absolutely now. According to the United Nations, without Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and other high emitting countries taking bold and immediate action to phase out fossil fuels, global targets to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius will be missed, setting the world on a path to catastrophe.[7] Without strong investment in a just transition for the Pacific and other low-income countries in the region, inequality and poverty will only deepen, creating greater political instability, loss of lives and homes, and economic and cost-of-living harms. This, in turn, will create even greater challenges to effective climate action.

This downward spiral can be stopped, and a safer world for all can be created by acting on inequality, poverty and the climate breakdown together. We can create a Blue Pacific, and a planet, for the 99%.

AUSTRALIA

Australia has long played an out-sized role in contributing to and worsening climate change, both as a high domestic emitter of greenhouse gases and a prolific exporter of fossil fuels to the rest of the world. Its total consumption-based CO2 emissions stood at 363 mega tonnes, putting it 10th highest in the OECD, and 17th highest overall.[8] On a per capita basis, Australia's place in the world rankings skyrocket. In 2019, Australians on average emitted 14 tonnes of CO2, putting it in company with the likes of Saudi Arabia and the United States **(Figure 1)**. This massive carbon footprint is well beyond what the science states will limit global heating to 1.5 degree Celsius by 2030, which Oxfam and the Stockholm Environment Institute calculate to be 2.8 tonnes CO2 per person.[9]

On exports, Australia continues to be the world's largest exporter of coal and the sixth largest exporter of liquefied natural gas.[10] If accounting for the emissions released by its exports, Australia's total emissions would technically double what the numbers say.[11] In a world where the International Energy Agency (IEA) has calculated that there can be no new coal, oil and gas developments from 2021 onwards to achieve global emissions reduction goals, Australia's continued exploration, expansion and exporting of fossil fuels is reckless and egregious.[12]

These national averages, however, lack nuance and obscure the real drivers of emissions within countries. Ordinary people have relatively little responsibility for the climate breakdown. Rather, it is the vast and ever-expanding emissions of the richest people who are destroying the climate through their polluting investments, their excessive lifestyles and their wanton disregard for the most vulnerable and marginalised people in the community. For decades, the wealthiest have had the power and knowledge to shift their corporations' and their personal emissions, but have failed to do so. Often their emissions have grown and they have actively blocked government action through their political influence, economic power and misinformation and disinformation.[13]

Inequality by total emissions

This carbon inequality is evident in Australia. Using research Oxfam developed with the Stockholm Environment Institute, which assesses the consumption emissions of different income groups in 2019, Oxfam has been able to estimate the findings for Australia.[14] We found that in 2019, the top 10% of Australians by income were responsible for almost 33% of all national emissions in 2019. The top 1% were responsible for almost 10%. This is compared to the bottom 50% by income, constituting almost 13 million people, but who were responsible for less than 20% of emissions **(Figure 2)**. Since 1990, the top 1% by income have increased their share of national emissions by 30%. Over the same time, the bottom 50% have actually decreased their emissions share by 8% **(Figure 2)**.

In 2019, total emissions for the top 10% by income exceeded those of the bottom 50%, despite the latter constituting five times more people **(Figure 3)**. Since 1990, the top 1% have almost doubled their total emissions, a rate almost 2.5 times faster than the bottom 50% over the same time period **(Figure 3)**.

FIGURE 1: GLOBAL PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION EMISSIONS, 2019

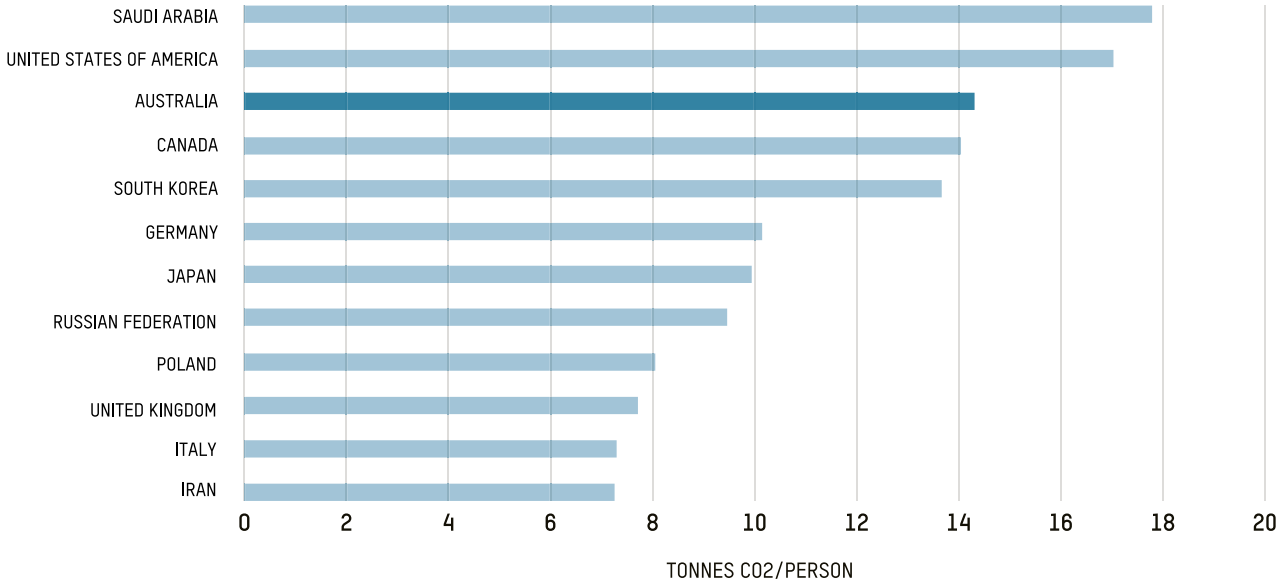


FIGURE 2: SHARE OF CONSUMPTION-BASED CO2 EMISSIONS PER INCOME GROUP, AUSTRALIA

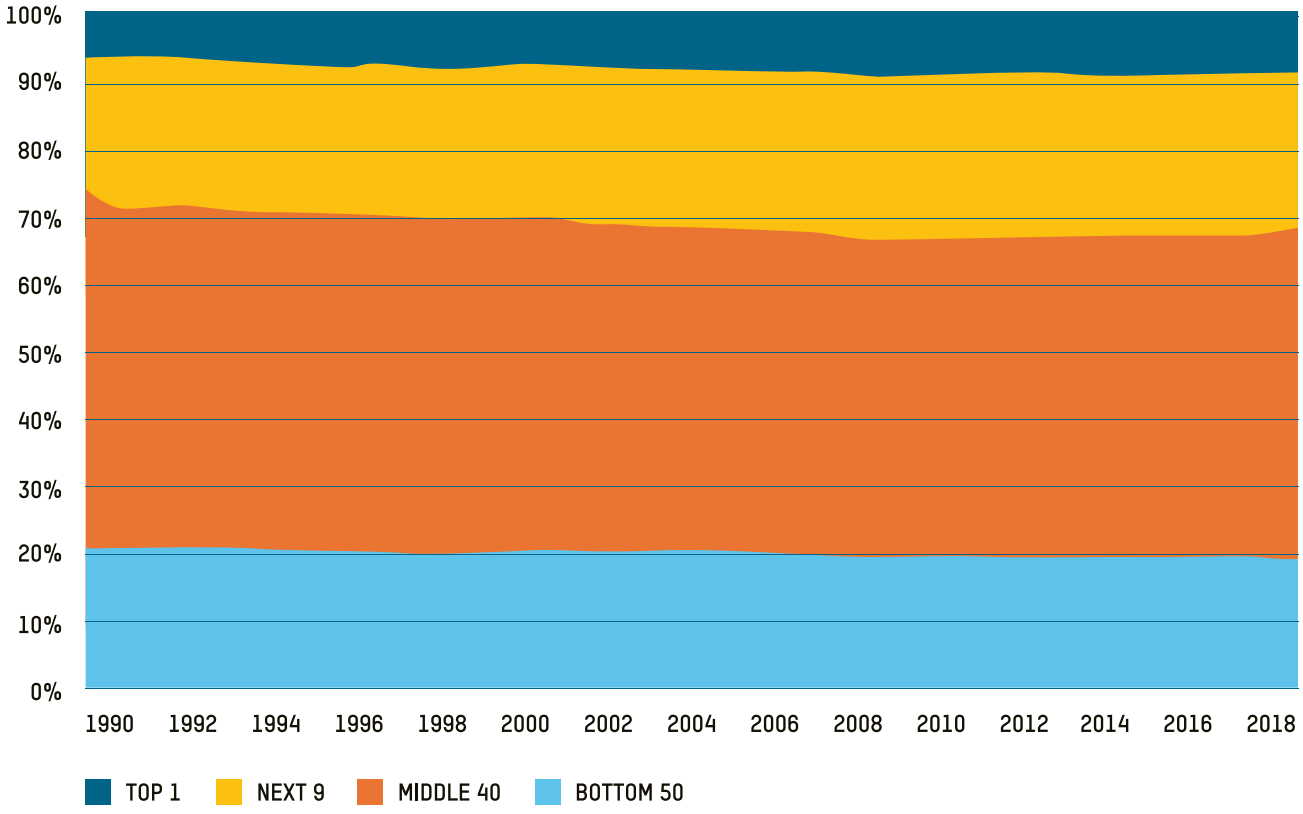
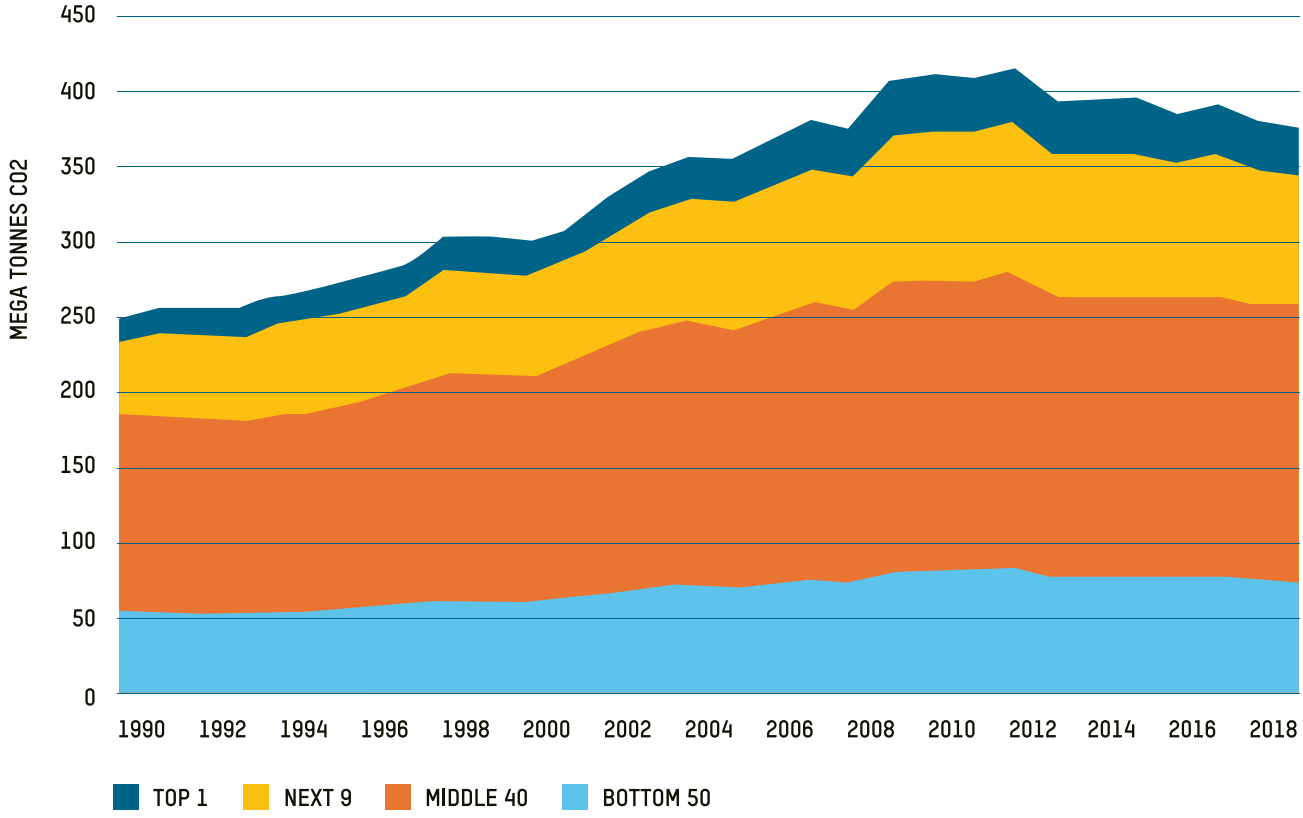


FIGURE 3: TOTAL CONSUMPTION-BASED CO2 EMISSIONS PER INCOME GROUP, AUSTRALIA



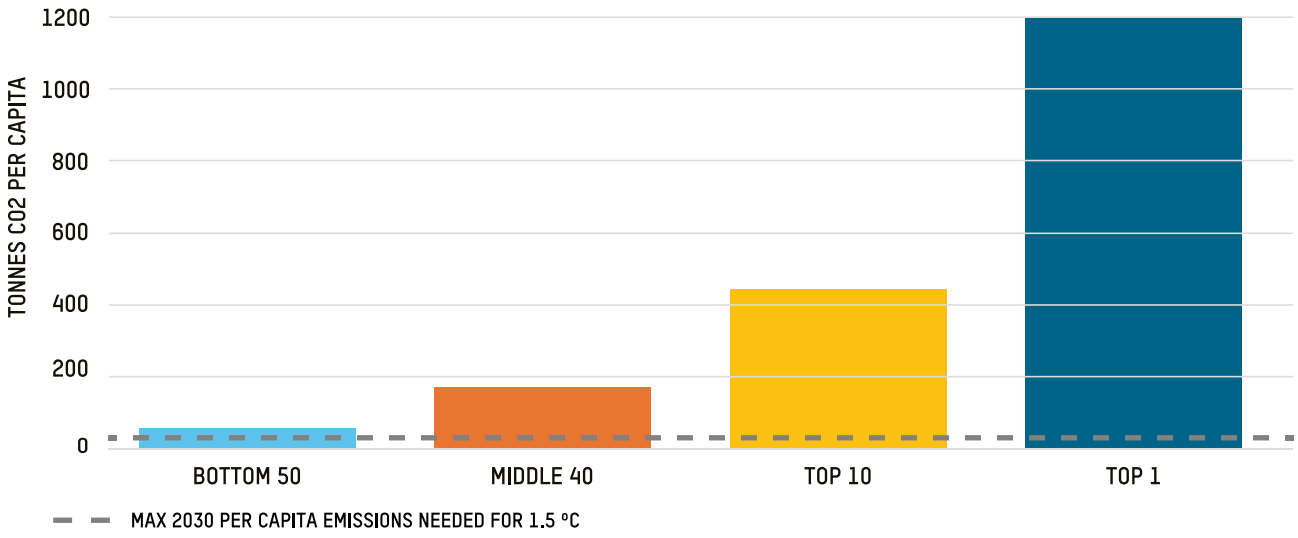
Inequality per capita

On a per capita basis, the top 1% by income emitted 22 times as much as the bottom 50% in 2019, with the top 10% emitting eight times as much **(Figure 4)**. Earlier, we indicated that CO2 emissions need to be capped at 2.8 tonnes per capita globally by 2030 in order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Australian per capita averages across the income spectrum exceed this already, indicating the need for greater national climate ambition and an accelerated just transition for all. However, the extent to which this carbon budget is being exceeded is drastically uneven across income groups. The per capita consumption emissions of Australia's top 1% by income exceeded this 1.5 degree-aligned limit 43 times over. The top 10% exceed this limit by 16 times **(Figure 4)**. This 2.8 tonne CO2 global per capita figure does not factor in Australia's responsibility to act even faster, given its high historical and current emissions, and its higher capacity to pay. If this is factored in, Australia's emissions would be even further in excess of what is required.

In 2019, the CO2 emissions of the top 1% totalled 31.8 megatons, despite them making on average over AUD $725,000 every year, enough to pay for clean alternatives. These emissions exceed that of all 14.7 million passenger vehicles in Australia.[15]

Meanwhile, low-income households are locked into polluting vehicles, fossil-fuel-based energy and inefficient homes, because affordable, clean alternatives simply are not available due to a lack of government and corporate leadership.

FIGURE 4: PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION-BASED CO2 EMISSIONS BY INCOME GROUP, AUSTRALIA 2019



AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC

The climate and inequality story is even starker when the focus is on Australia's neighbours in the Pacific. Pacific small island developing states have done very little to cause climate change, only emitting about 0.03% of emissions globally.[16] At the same time, communities in the Pacific are the first to experience the brunt of floods, cyclones and other climate-induced disasters, as well as lost lives, livelihoods and ways of living, representing some of the most climate vulnerable states in the world.[17]

The emissions of the richest Australians surpass entire countries and sub-regions in the Pacific.

Compared to Vanuatu, the top 1% of Australians by income, who total about 250,000 in number, emitted almost 200 times more CO2 than the entire population of Vanuatu, currently sitting at around 300,000 **(Figure 5)**. At a per capita level, one Australian from that income group emits as much as 229 people of Vanuatu **(Figure 7)**.

If all the emissions from Pacific countries such as Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati are added, representing over 2 million people, Australia's top 1% by income still out-emit them by 17 times to 1 **(Figure 6)**.

FIGURE 5: EMISSIONS AND POPULATION NUMBER OF TOP 1% OF AUSTRALIANS VS ALL PEOPLE OF VANUATU

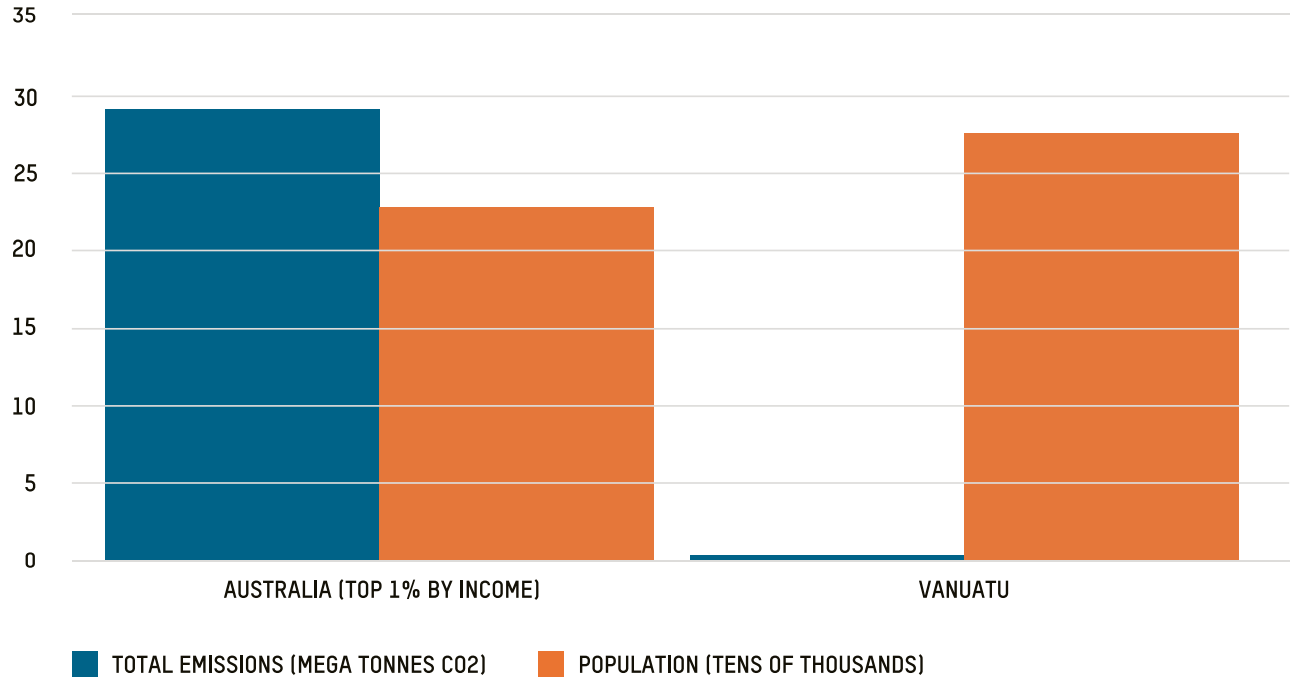


FIGURE 6: THE EMISSIONS OF AUSTRALIA'S RICHEST 1% AGAINST FIJI, VANUATU, SOLOMON SLANDS, KIRIBATI AND TUVALU COMBINED

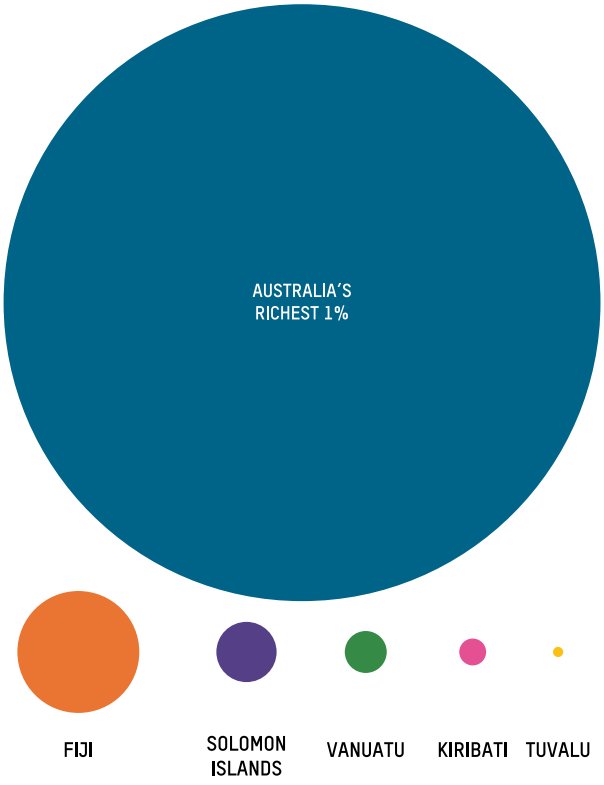
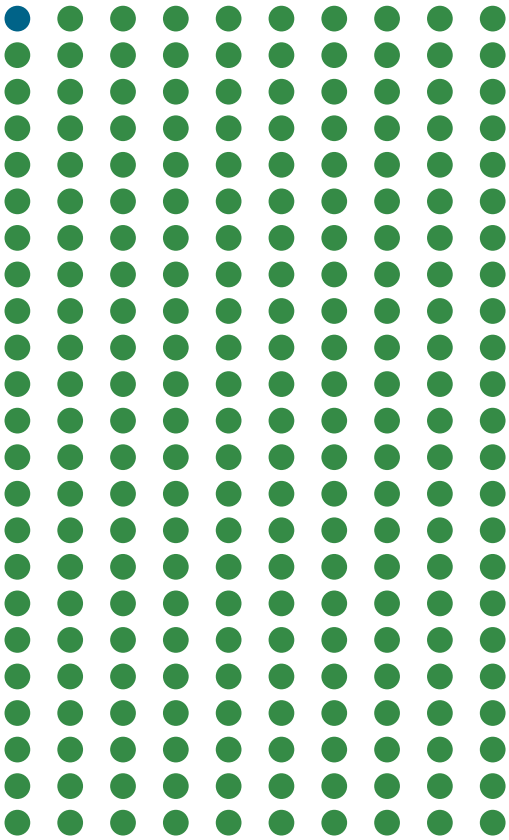


FIGURE 7: AN AUSTRALIAN FROM THE RICHEST 1% EMITS AS MUCH AS 229 PEOPLE FROM VANUATU



AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

The story of inequality in carbon emissions continues in Aotearoa New Zealand, despite some seemingly positive climate policies. In 2019, New Zealand adopted its 'Zero Carbon Act' which set the course for New Zealand's ambition to reduce emissions in line with the Paris goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius, a target of net zero emissions by 2050, and established an independent Climate Change Commission.[18] The country also has an accompanying emissions reduction plan and an emissions trading scheme.[19] New Zealand introduced an historic ban of new offshore oil and gas exploration in 2018, and in recognition was granted associate membership of the diplomatic Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance.[20] However, the trajectory of the New Zealand Government's policy response to climate change is now uncertain following a change in government. Notably, all parties forming the new government have pledged to reverse the offshore exploration ban. New Zealand has ongoing fossil fuel production, as well as exploration for new coal, oil and gas fields onshore. Offshore permits continued to be issued as late as 2023, as the ban comes into force.[21]

FIGURE 8: SHARE OF CONSUMPTION-BASED CO2 EMISSIONS PER INCOME GROUP, NEW ZEALAND

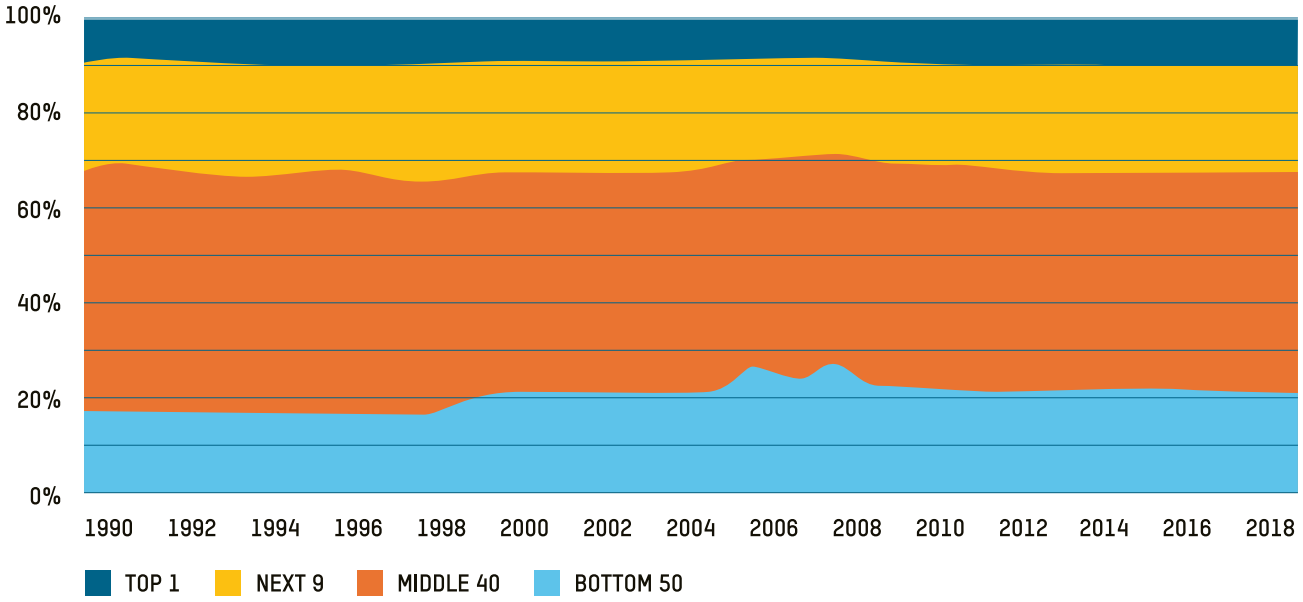


FIGURE 9: TOTAL CONSUMPTION-BASED CO2 EMISSIONS PER INCOME GROUP, NEW ZEALAND

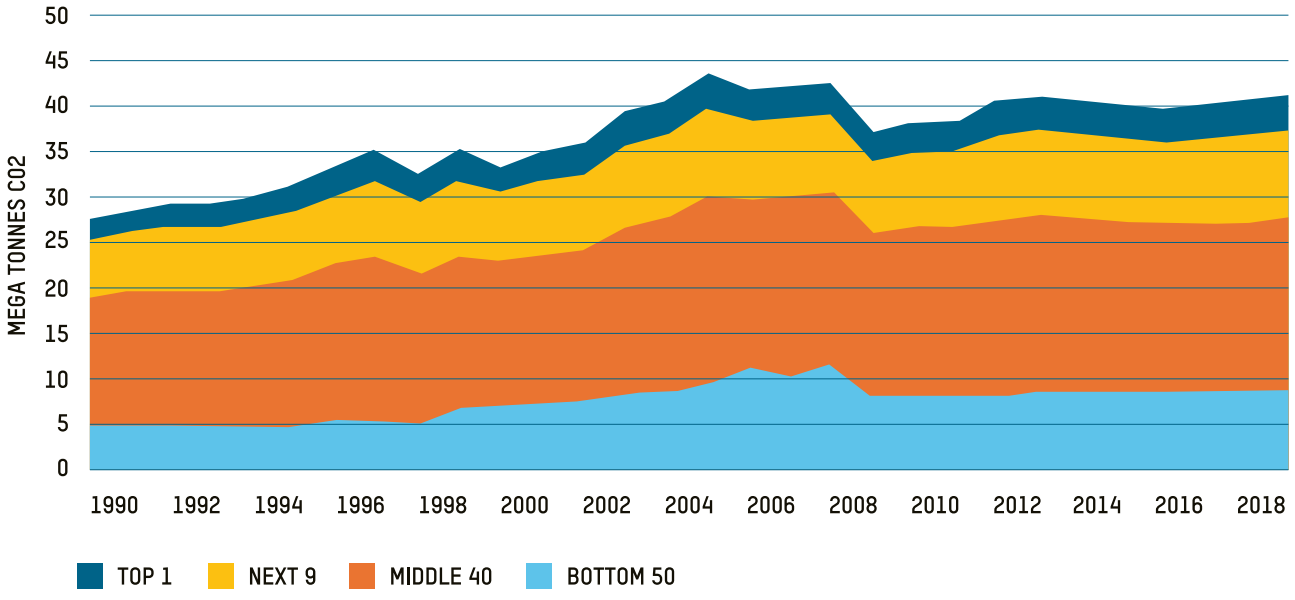
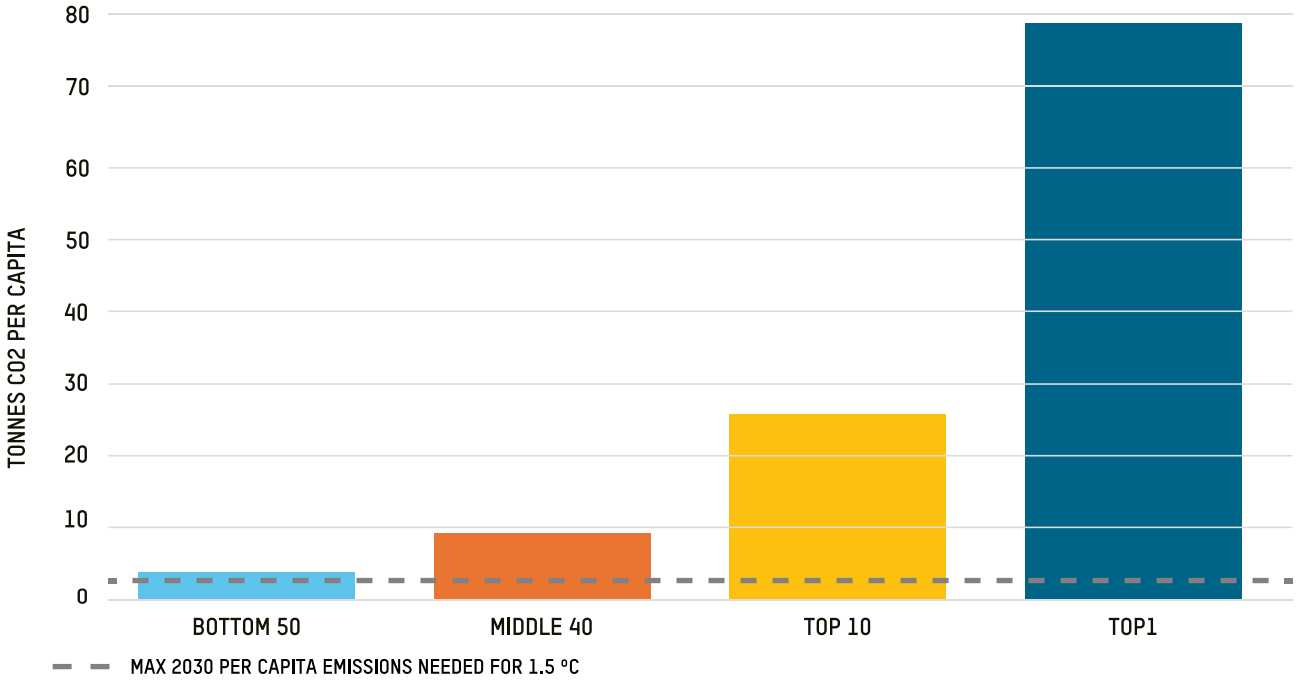


FIGURE 10: PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION-BASE CO2 EMISSIONS BY INCOME GROUP, NEW ZEALAND 2019



Inequality in total emissions

New Zealand joins Australia and countries across the world in having very unequal emissions between income groups. Using research Oxfam developed with the Stockholm Environment Institute, which assesses the consumption emissions of different income groups in 2019, Oxfam has been able to estimate the findings for Aotearoa New Zealand.[22]

The research found that in 2019, the top 10% of New Zealanders by income were responsible for almost 33% of consumption emissions, more than the poorest 50% combined, despite the latter including 1.9 million more people **(Figure 8)**.

The top 1% of New Zealanders by income are responsible for almost 10% of consumption emissions, more than the poorest 30% combined.

Inequality per capita

New Zealand's top 1% by income are by far the greatest polluters. A New Zealander in the top 1% emitted almost 22 times as much as a New Zealander in the bottom 50% of incomes in 2019. The top 10% emitted almost eight times as much **(Figure 10)**.

While CO2 emissions need to be capped at 2.8 tonnes per capita globally by 2030 to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, New Zealanders emitted on average 8 tons of CO2 per person in 2019. This is almost three times the 2.8 ton average needed to keep the 1.5 degree Celsius target alive by 2030.[23] The per capita consumption emissions of New Zealand's top 1% exceeded this 1.5 degree-aligned limit 28 times over **(Figure 10)**.[24]

Mataniko River, Honiara, Solomon Islands: Children play at the Mataniko river mouth. Harry Tamateika, who lives along the Mataniko River near Honiara has seen the river rise in the 20 years he has lived alongside it.Photo: Collin Leafasia/Oxfam.

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND AND THE PACIFIC

Again, these figures become even starker when viewed in the context of the Pacific. Just like Australia, the emissions of the richest New Zealanders exceed the emissions of entire countries in the Pacific region multiple times over.

The top 1% of New Zealanders total about 48,000 in number, compared to the population of Kiribati, whose population currently sits at around 124,000. Despite outnumbering I-Kiribati people by almost three to one, the emissions of the top 1% of New Zealanders by income exceed all I-Kiribati people 60-to-one **(Figure 11).**

At a per capita level, one New Zealander in the top 1% emits as much as 149 I-Kiribati **(Figure 12)**.

Beyond one country and looking at the region, taking into account all the emissions from Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati, who number about 2 million people, the 48,000 people that make up New Zealand's top 1% still out-emit them all by two to one **(Figure 13)**.

FIGURE 11: EMISSIONS AND POPULATION NUMBER OF TOP 1% OF NEW ZEALANDERS VS ALL OF KIRIBATI

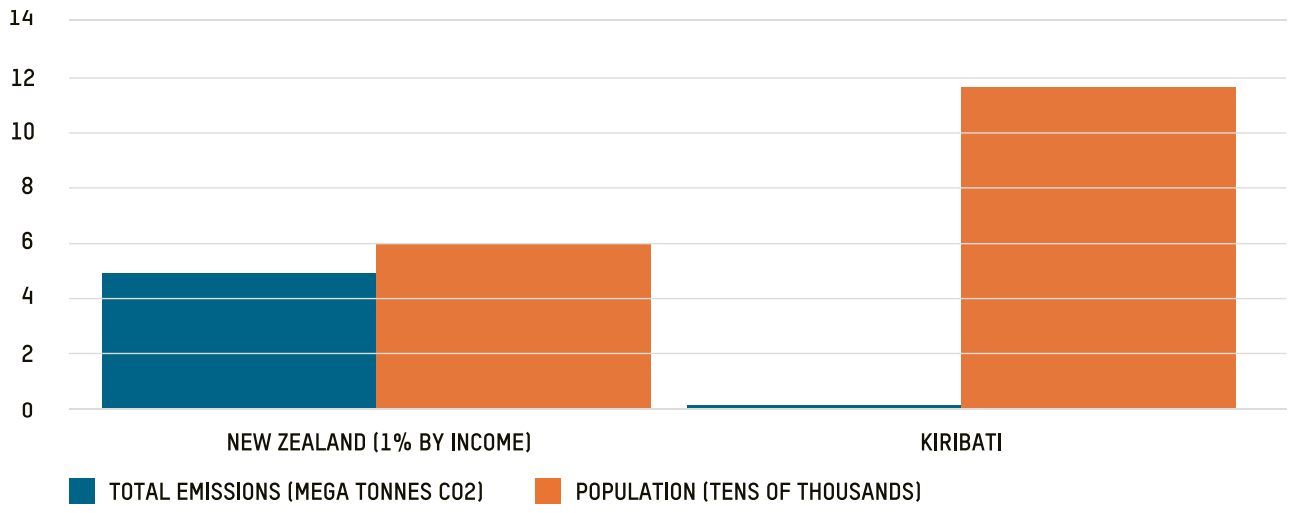


FIGURE 12: A NEW ZEALANDER FROM THE RICHEST 1% EMITS AS MUCH AS 149 I-KIRIBATI

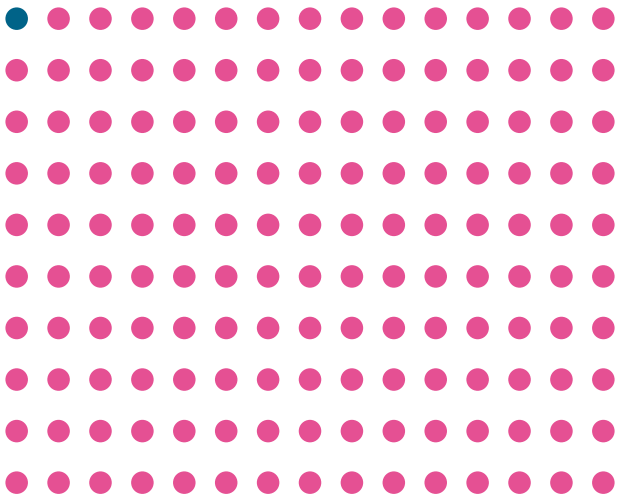
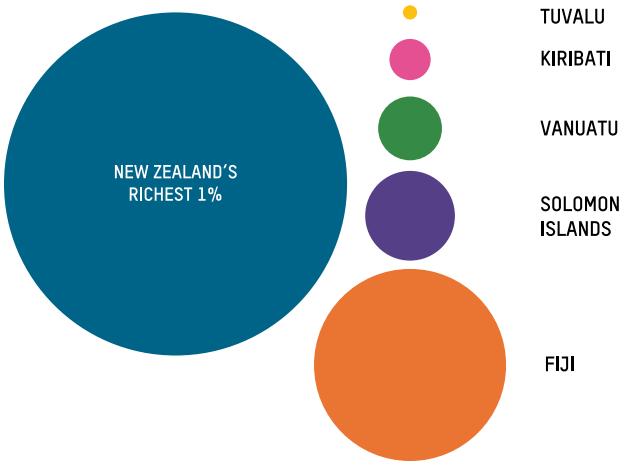


FIGURE 13: THE EMISSIONS OF NEW ZEALAND'S RICHEST 1% AGAINST FIJI, VANUATU, SOLOMON SLANDS, KIRIBATI AND TUVALU COMBINED



CONCLUSION

Climate and inequality are deeply intertwined, and the Oceania region is no exception. It is clear that the super wealthy in Australia and New Zealand are driving the climate crisis, while Pacific Island communities are paying the consequences. Ordinary people in Australia and New Zealand have relatively little responsibility for the high total emissions of their respective countries. It's the wealthiest who are profiting the most from fossil fuels, holding the most power in investment decisions that are propping up polluting industries, and failing to address the climate crisis. They are also personally responsible for a hugely disproportionate amount of climate pollution – pushing the region and the rest of the world towards climate catastrophe. The wealthiest have the responsibility and the economic and political power to drive change but have resisted at great peril to the rest of the population. The two countries' governments must fill the chasm between action taken and action needed by better taxing wealth and big corporations' pollution, and using those funds to drive change.

Inequality must be tackled within and between countries in Oceania. Doing so not only makes societies more fair, just and able to provide everyone with the resources and services needed to live a good life, it would also go a fair way to address the climate crisis and put the world and nature on a path to recovery and balance. Let's create a just climate transition to a Blue Pacific for the 99%.

Shefa province, Vanuatu: Shefa Provincial Disaster and Climate Change Officer, Eddy (left), and community member Phelina discuss a project to plant vetiver grass on the shoreline of Phelina's island as part of an effort to slow beach erosion, which has accompanied sealevel rise. Photo: Elizabeth Stevens/Oxfam America.

ENDNOTES

1 Emissions data is not available for other Pacific Island countries, so a comparison to all Pacific Island countries is not possible.

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14 Ashfaq Khalfan et al., 'Climate Equality: A Planet for the 99%' (Oxford: Oxfam International, November 2023).

15 This figure was calculated comparing by comparing the emissions of the top 1% against passenger vehicle emissions in 2020. We highlighted the National Transport Commission's 2020 average for CO2 emissions intensity for passenger cars and light SUVs at 149.5g/km. (See National Transport Commission, 'Carbon Dioxide Emissions Intensity for New Australian Light Vehicles 2020' (Melbourne: National Transport Commission, August 2021), https://www.ntc.gov.au/sites/default/files/assets/files/Carbon%20dioxide%20emissions%20intensity%20for%20new%20Australian%20light%20vehicles%202020.pdf). Then, according to the ABS' Survey of Motor Vehicle Use, there were 14,726,967 passenger vehicles in Australia, travelling a total of 162,983 million kilometres. (See Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Survey of Motor Vehicle Use, Australia, 12 Months Ended 30 June 2020', 21 December 2020, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/tourism-and-transport/survey-motor-vehicle-use-australia/latest-release). Multiplying these two figures, we estimate that total emissions from all passenger vehicles in Australia in 2020 equals 24.4 mega tons.

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