

NEW YORK TIMES, OCT 12 2023

After Refusing to Fly, Climate Researcher Loses His Job

To reduce emissions, he took five trains, nine buses, two ferries, two taxis, one shared car and one police convoy to reach a research site.



Gianluca Grimalda, an Italian social scientist, right, on his way to Pokpok Island in Papua New Guinea, where he was conducting field research, by canoe. Gianluca Grimalda

By Cara Buckley

Oct. 12, 2023

Climate Forward There's an ongoing crisis — and tons of news. Our newsletter keeps you up to date. Get it with a Times subscription.

Getting from the northern German city of Kiel to the South Pacific is a schlep no matter what. By commercial air, it takes about two days and several connecting flights.

But Gianluca Grimalda, an Italian social scientist, opted to make the trip much, much longer when he set out from Kiel to Papua New Guinea on a research trip earlier this year.

To journey the 14,038 miles, he took five trains, nine buses, two ferries, two taxis, one shared car, one police convoy and, when there were no other options, two flights. Dr. Grimalda did this out of concern for the climate, wanting to generate as few planet-heating emissions as possible, even though the whole trip took 35 days.

But he said his plan to journey back to Kiel much the same way cost him his job.

On Wednesday, Dr. Grimalda said he was being fired from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, a German think tank, after refusing to take transcontinental flights back from Papua New Guinea.

“Many people asked me if I regret not catching a plane to go back,” Dr. Grimalda wrote by email. “And my answer is no.”

“I have a moral commitment to this type of travel,” he later said in a phone interview from Papua New Guinea. “To be at peace within myself knowing that I have done the absolute right thing.”

Elisabeth Radke, a spokeswoman for the Kiel Institute, said the organization would not publicly comment on personnel matters, but largely supported climate-friendly travel and had “no general reservations about slow traveling.” She also said the Kiel Institute had supported Dr. Grimalda’s slow travel plans before.

Yet on Sept. 27, Dr. Grimalda said he was told that he had until Oct. 2 to return to Kiel, or be dismissed. To him, flying back was inconceivable. His research included the effects of climate change on the people of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, which is part of the Solomon Islands chain, a remote, economically stricken archipelago being swallowed up by rising oceans. He said he had promised local residents that his return trip would be low carbon.

“White men (as we’re called here) are often referred to as giaman (= liars, fraudsters),” he wrote on X, formerly Twitter, adding that he didn’t want to be giaman.

Dr. Grimalda said he first committed to avoiding flying whenever possible in 2010, and had the support of the Kiel Institute, where he began working in 2013.

He said his relationship with the organization grew fraught last year, after he joined a protest with Scientist Rebellion, a group of scientists engaged in climate activism, and glued his hand to the floor of a Volkswagen museum in Germany. Dr. Grimalda said supervisors at Kiel warned him that similar actions could get him fired. The next month, he partook in a brief blockade of a private Italian airport while on vacation there. Though neither action led to his arrest, the actions drew attention from the press.

Dr. Grimalda and the Kiel Institute both agreed that he had its support when he presented his plan to travel slowly to Papua New Guinea in February.

But Dr. Grimalda said his fieldwork had lasted seven weeks longer than expected, partly due to a volcanic eruption and security threats; he said he was held hostage by a group of machete-wielding bandits. After learning that the Kiel Institute expected that he fly back, Dr. Grimalda went public, posting about its warning on social media. “There is nothing I must do in Kiel that I cannot do while traveling,” he said. “Nothing.”

Dr. Grimalda said traveling by plane from Germany to Papua New Guinea would create 5.3 tons of carbon dioxide emissions per person, about a dozen times more than the 420 kilograms of carbon dioxide slow travel would generate.

He acknowledged that one trip by plane would create just a fraction of the total greenhouse gas emissions generated by aviation; commercial flights are responsible for about 3 percent of worldwide emissions.

But Dr. Grimalda said there was research showing that climate scientists who worked to reduce their carbon footprint were more persuasive than those who did not. As of Thursday, he was still in Bougainville, with plans to leave by cargo ship and then to travel by ferry, bus and train back to Kiel, where he will appeal his firing.

“I understand not everyone has the privilege to be able to travel 50 days,” he said. But he hoped to inspire others to do more to help the Earth.

“Many people tell me I’m crazy, that I’m not going to change anything,” Dr. Grimalda said. “To me it’s crazy to go on like a herd of sheep going toward the cliff without trying to sound the alarm.”