

Kelman, I. 2007. "Natural hazards or human interpretation?". RiskPost: The Newsletter of the New Zealand Society for Risk Management, issue 7, no. 2 (July/August), pp. 5-6.

Full Text:

In the November 2004 issue of RiskPost (issue 4, number 3, pages 11-13), I discussed the notion that 'natural disasters do not exist'. This statement has appeared in more than three decades worth of risk and disasters research and practice. The argument is that environmental events--such as earthquakes, floods, and wind storms--are normal and neutral, often being essential parts of an ecosystem. When people build and live in areas affected by these environmental events, then they are responsible for understanding nature and for avoiding adverse impacts.

When that does not happen, a disaster can result. Therefore, disasters are not a result of environmental events, but of human decisions not to avoid adverse impacts. Of course, our knowledge is never complete, yet established techniques exist to make decisions in the face of uncertainties and unknowns, even though they are often not applied in the case of disaster risk reduction. The conclusion is that no disasters are 'natural'. Instead, they are all human-caused.

The counterargument is that a disaster would not have happened without the environmental event. Yet the disaster would not have happened without the human decisions. Both nature and humans are needed for a disaster to occur; however, only humans (not nature) have the ability to avert a disaster.

Some authors have extended this argument to global cataclysms, such as meteorite strikes. The rich amongst us have the resources to monitor beyond the solar system to identify possible threats, yet they choose not to. The USA, for example, has spent well over NZ\$1 trillion on the Iraq war. The resources for deep space monitoring exist, but the active choice is to use those resources for other purposes. Should nature or humanity be blamed if an asteroid or comet heading towards the Earth is identified too late to take action?

This discussion has been taken even further to ask 'Do natural hazards exist?' Nature produces phenomena--such as earthquakes, floods, wind storms, and meteorites--which can be hazardous to humanity. But they are only hazardous because of human choices. If rain comes through my window and ruins my carpet because I decided not to close my window, is the hazard the rain or my lack of forethought? If I approve a Wellington development without earthquake-resistant measures, is the hazard the earthquake or my decision?

Any environmental phenomenon could be termed a 'natural hazard'. Stepping off a cliff reveals the gravity hazard. Rather than suggesting that we mitigate against gravity, instead we build cliff fences, erect warning signs, and describe the dangers to children. That is, we mitigate against the human decision hazard rather than blaming nature for gravity. After all, gravity is frequently useful. Should similar standards apply to rain and earthquakes which are also frequently useful?

Nature does not create hazards; we decide that they can be hazardous to us. In the same way that natural disasters do not exist because society constructs situations where they can occur, perhaps environmental phenomena are interpreted as 'natural hazards' only because society constructs situations where nature's events are hazardous to us.

Ilan Kelman
<http://www.ilankelman.org>