

Ants, Lemmings, Ostriches, or Sheep?

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Ants, lemmings, ostriches, or sheep. Which most suits your palate? For imitating, not for eating. When it comes to disasters, we often emulate some of the worst animalistic characteristics.

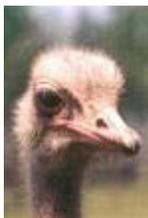


Ants. Are we industrious, being productive continually and sacrificing ourselves for the common good? Few would claim that to be entirely true. The optimist suggests that parts of the model are sometimes seen through altruism and devotion towards building a better society for everyone. The pessimist, even the realist, claims that the parts seen are the rich making the poor work. The rich are protected from disaster, but the poor could be wiped out at any moment and are expected to sacrifice themselves in order to protect the rich.



Lemmings. Or the myth thereof. Are disasters part of a collective consciousness towards species survival, an unconscious and unintended drive towards a population cull? Suicide is not implied, because few, if anyone, would seek out disasters in which to die. Lemming theorists do include suicide as one reason for the apparent mass lemming deaths, but they have other suggestions.

Stupidity is a possibility. The lemmings do not intend to drown or to fall off cliffs, but they do not see the danger. The specter of murder, lemmingicide, is raised through plants releasing a toxin to protect themselves from being munched by the lemming overpopulation. Disasters could be the human form of lemming stupidity — the danger is obvious but we do not realize or bother — or murder when certain sectors of society deliberately protect or help themselves at the expense of others.



Ostriches. Let's bury our heads in the sand, because disasters are not a problem. Oops, a flood is washing away the sand. Let's move and bury our heads in some other sand. Oops, a wind storm is blowing the sand away. Let's move and bury our heads in the ash. Erm, the volcanic ash. Which is shifting with the earthquake. We must search until we find sand without any hazards.

Sheep. Follow the leader, even if their choice of path or reason for choosing that path does not make sense. Follow the leader, even if only out of a morbid sense of curiosity. Thinking for ourselves is too difficult and is not really possible anyway. Just do what the flock does. Life becomes so simple.



Traits of all these animals, and others, are evident in our actions regarding disasters. For example, an excuse often cited is that mitigation measures cost too much, even though reams of studies show that mitigation saves money, resources, and lives. The lemming is indifferent to large losses of life in foreseeable and preventable incidents. The ostrich closes its eyes. The sheep follows what has gone before, even when that has been proven to be unworkable.

The ant, however, is hard at work. Hard at work building walls around the facts and avoiding solutions that do better. Industriousness, creativity, energy, and skill are devoted to constructing and maintaining a society with tremendous disaster losses. The way we operate yields immense disaster losses for even the rich, with an array of short-term and long-term vulnerabilities which we are not yet willing to address.

Perhaps we should avoid the distracting and problematic animal analogies. Instead, we should simply ask why we are not willing to do enough to stop disasters and to reduce vulnerability. And how we could change.

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