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"Freedom of the Press belongs to those who own one."

A. J. Liebling of the New Yorker

January 4, 2005



Commentary

Let's Try Education on THIS!

We tried "The answer is education" to the AIDS problem, but it had zero effect. Perhaps it will work better on the tsunami possibility. Education has a much better chance with the tsunami problem.

Everyone knows exactly what causes AIDS, but it continues, worldwide, nevertheless.

Almost no one knew anything about tsunamis, but this tragedy lesson will remain for a long, long time, because of television and because the personal tragic stories are gripping.

I vacation on the north coast of Kauai for several months each year, and I often kayak the Kalihiwai River. To get to the river I walk beneath the telephone crossbar that marks the high water mark of the 1957 tsunami, and then I kayak past the remnants of the concrete and steel bridge washed out in that tsunami.

Hawaii has had 13 tsunamis in the past 100 years, and there are monthly siren warnings just as a reminder of the power of the ocean. Admittedly, most tourists do not have a clue but there are usually sufficient locals around to get most tourists out of harms way in an emergency. The warning system is designed to give a few hours warning of a tsunami from Alaska...if it is locally generated and you are on the beach, place your head between your knees...

You can see the results of education first-hand on Kauai. Seldom is a local resident pulled off a rock by a rogue wave, but in just the past few weeks I have read several news accounts of tourists who disappeared. Knowledge is power.

Yes, Hawaii is part of a Pacific-wide “early warning system” but knowledge is even more powerful than warning. Tsunamis can be caused by anything from an asteroid hitting the ocean to volcanic action – but ANY oceanographic earthquake of 7.0 Richter Scale or greater is an automatic warning system. The Richter scale 9.0 earthquake on Sumatra — more than a hundred times stronger than 7.0 is a HUGE RED FLAG. The nations on the Indian Ocean could bet the rent on a tsunami even without a warning system in place.

Was everyone in the governments of India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka asleep? Anyone reasonably educated about tsunamis and watching CNN KNEW the odds favored a tsunami. The Pacific Tsunami Center in Hawaii tried to call those nations, but there was no phone number for a governmental agency designed to get the message in any of the countries likely to suffer – and if there had been there was no way for a signal to have been sent uniformly to the coasts, as there is in Hawaii. The inevitable investigation will root out many problems, but the answer to most of them is: education.

Education can’t get to everyone, but there is zero chance of Waikiki tourists going out into a receding sea to pick up flopping fish...locals would be screaming to high heaven that was a signal for a tsunami! Certainly there would be some individual candidates for the Darwin Award who would rush to “surf the wave” – but the akamai (smart) locals would know in which direction to run...you don’t stay alive in the ocean long by being stupid.

In listening to reports of the news of the disaster I have been enraged with the lack of knowledge shown by almost everyone, but especially by the media. I have heard the media refer to “tidal waves,” although tsunamis have NOTHING to do with tides. I have heard questions about “global warming” and other stupid and non-scientific musings.

Just a quick review: Tsunamis are usually caused by rapid and immense water displacement, as happens in an underwater rock slide. The resulting “wave” is really a deep water, molecule-to-molecule force transmission, akin to those toys men keep on their desks that have a number of balls...pull back hit the remaining ones and the all remain still but the one ball at the end jumps as far as you pulled back the one at the other end. Similarly, force is transmitted in water, which like the steel balls does not compress, and with a small friction loss the power of the rock slide at one end of the ocean is transmitted, molecule-to-molecule, to the remote beach. In the middle of the ocean, in deep water, there is hardly a ripple, although as a decade long submarine officer I often wondered if a submerged submarine would notice that which a surface ship would not notice. Although the transmission of force, molecule-to-molecule occurs at a rate of about 500 MPH, that speed slows to only a few MPH as the force gets into shallow water...and the force, working against less and less water in shallower water, generates a high wave with the force far more concentrated.

At Phuket, Thailand, a 10-year old girl saved her family and many other people because she had studied tsunamis in school and recognized the unusual receding sea as an oft-occurring signal of tsunami, while no one, local or tourist, understood the danger. Unfortunately, many rushed to the shore to take photos...they may have been very bright, but they were unknowledgeable. A little knowledge could have saved many thousands of victims..

There is NO good that can come from the loss of 150,000 people, but the lesson about tsunamis is imprinted more powerfully because of them. This huge and tragic loss of life guarantees that "even" residents of the East Coast, who think tsunamis are a Pacific Ocean problem, may become educated. They may even hear that before this tragedy, one of the greatest losses of lives had been in Lisbon, Portugal in 1755, when more than 60,000 people died.

Tsunamis are an Equal Opportunity killer...rich countries, poor countries, tourists and locals. Only education can save people because we cannot either avoid the initiating occurrence or the resulting occurrence, although several Japanese communities that are particularly low-lying have been partly successful with huge walls.

Geologically, there have been tsunami waves of Biblical proportions (think 1,000 feet!), and there is nothing to preclude those in the future, although they are unlikely. The Big Island in Hawaii is a prime candidate for partial collapse and the generation of so huge and rapid a tsunami as to swamp Honolulu...but the odds of it happening on any given day is truly infinitesimal. One local expert gives it a 50/50 chance in the next 20,000 years – so don't worry about it, but that is simply one place that is known to be in POTENTIAL danger.

When Krakatoa exploded in 1883, the resulting tsunami was measured six times as it reverberated around the world, but human vacationing on nearby Indian Ocean islands was at a minimum. We are wealthier, more mobile, more sybaritic.

Unfortunately, we are not necessarily more knowledgeable. When the ocean looks and sounds different, it is trying to tell you something, and that something is seldom nice.

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Eppur si muove

Galileo



Dolphin Realty

Allen P. Hemphill

Real Estate Broker

15817 Bernardo Center Dr,
111, San Diego, Ca 92127
RB Office (858) 487-4750

27739 Mountain Meadow Road
Suite #5

Hidden Meadows CA 92026
Meadows Office (760)-749-5005

Home Office (760) 749-2654

www.allenhemphill.com
allen@allenhemphill.com