

Researcher: Global warming not to blame for tsunami

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The shock and awe resulting from the massive tsunami that hit Indian Ocean nations Dec. 26 has left many wondering what could have caused such a disaster – and if there is anything humans can do to control or mitigate future events.

Some quickly suggested that an increase in the frequency of natural disasters such as the tsunami were a harbinger of what we have in store because of the increase of Earth's greenhouse gases resulting from the burning of fossil fuels.

Nothing could be further from the truth, says Daniel Sarewitz, a professor of science and society and director of the Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes at ASU.

In an article in *The New Republic*, “Rising Tide – The Tsunami’s Real Cause,” Sarewitz and Roger Pielke Jr., of University of Colorado, Boulder, say that tying the tsunami and other natural disasters to human induced climatic change “is both scientifically and morally unsupportable.”

"Reducing emissions is important, but it will not reduce vulnerability to disasters," Sarewitz adds.

Sarewitz notes that while the world has seen a sharp increase in natural disasters, from around 100 per year reported in the early 1960s to 500 – 800 per year by the early 21st century, the cause is not an increase in the frequency or severity of such events, but an increase in human vulnerability caused by where people live – and how they live.

"We know how to prepare for disasters, but the world has not made this a high enough priority," Sarewitz says. "If disaster preparation received the same political attention as global warming, significant progress could be made."

While more people live in coastal regions, especially in poor and developing countries, and while it is true that sea levels are rising, there is no research that suggests that the Kyoto Protocol or even more ambitious emissions reduction proposals would significantly reduce the impacts of disasters like hurricanes and tsunamis.

"It is absurd to suggest that reducing greenhouse gas emissions is an important part of the answer," Sarewitz says.

Yet coastal populations will continue to swell, putting more people in a vulnerable position should another tsunami strike. Sarewitz adds that tools to mitigate the effects of these disasters are at hand.

"Most tools needed to reduce disaster vulnerability already exist, such as risk assessment techniques, better building codes and code enforcement, land-use standards, and emergency preparedness plans," both researchers say. "The question is why disaster vulnerability is so low on the list of global development priorities."

For Sarewitz, the answer is clear: Fruitful action on climate change and disaster vulnerability should proceed simultaneously.

"This will not happen until the issues of climate change and disaster vulnerability are clearly separated in the eyes of the media, the public, environmental activists, scientists and policymakers," Sarewitz says.

Source: ASU

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