

Study: Florida tourists unfamiliar with aspects of hurricane readiness

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Many Florida tourists come for the perfect weather but do not know what to do in the perfect storm, finds a new University of Florida study of visiting vacationers and their preparedness for a hurricane strike.

More than one third of [tourists](#) surveyed didn't understand the importance of taking immediate steps to protect themselves when a [hurricane](#) warning is issued, said Ignatius Cahyanto, a researcher in UF's Tourism Crisis Management Institute.

"It's shocking but not really surprising that such a large number of the state's visitors have no idea what to do in a hurricane because we haven't done as much as we could to inform them about understanding these [natural disasters](#)," Cahyanto said.

Because Florida's hurricane and tourist seasons coincide, Cahyanto and a team of UF researchers decided to study what influenced visitors' evacuation decisions. They found that tourists' knowledge, gender, mode of travel, location, past experience with hurricanes and aversion to risk, as well as characteristics of the hurricane itself, were among the factors.

International tourists are worst off because they are in unfamiliar surroundings, may not speak English and often come from places that don't have hurricanes, he said.

"Florida receives about 83 million visitors a year, which generates about \$62 billion in tourism dollars," Cahyanto said. "By being a good host in

informing our guests exactly what they need to do if a hurricane strikes, we make it more likely they will feel comfortable about coming back to Florida on their next vacation and spend money.”

The researchers randomly surveyed 228 male and 217 female tourists during eight days in July and August 2009 at five locations; the Sheraton Sand Key Resort in Clearwater, Pier 60 at Clearwater Beach and St. Pete Beach, the Florida Mall in Orlando and Wyndham Bonnet Creek Resort in Lake Buena Vista. Nine participants also participated in a focus group. The research was funded by the Eric Friedham Foundation.

Nearly three quarters, 73 percent, reported they had no experience with hurricanes or typhoons during past travels, Cahyanto said. Of the remaining 27 percent who did, 46 percent said they remained at the vacation spot, 26 percent relocated to another destination, 19 percent canceled the rest of the trip to return home, and 9 percent answered “other,” he said.

“Those who flew to Florida report they were more likely to stay during a hurricane than those who drove their cars here,” Cahyanto said. In the survey, more tourists arrived by plane, 65 percent, than personal vehicle, 31 percent, followed by other means, he said.

The travel path of a hurricane also is important, with tourists more likely to evacuate if storms come from the Gulf than the Atlantic, Cahyanto said. “We believe that Hurricane Katrina contributed to the perception that hurricanes in the Gulf are more dangerous,” he said.

Safety concerns may be why women reported they were more likely to leave than men, Cahyanto said. “Women in the focus group said that because they are responsible for their kids’ safety, they are more inclined to say ‘let’s get out,’” he said. “Hurricane evacuation also involves emotions, and while some studies suggest that women use emotions more

in making decisions, more research is needed to see if that is a factor.”

Hurricane knowledge varied. Sixty-three percent agreed with the statement “if a hurricane warning has been issued, it means that you should immediately start preparing to protect yourself as hurricane conditions will begin within 24 hours.” Seventeen percent of the respondents disagreed, and 20 percent said they didn’t know. Survey participants were slightly more aware of the duration of [Florida’s](#) hurricane season, with 69 percent answering correctly that it extended from June 1 to Nov. 30. Ten percent were wrong, and 21 percent didn’t know.

“The findings suggest that places with large numbers of tourists, such as coastal areas, might need extra time for evacuation, possibly 48 hours,” he said, adding that in 2010 the National Hurricane Center increased the lead time for hurricane warnings from 24 to 36 hours and hurricane watches from 36 to 48 hours. “There is a caveat though that if we issue the evacuation warning too early the hurricane may weaken, making it no longer necessary to evacuate.”

The study recommends that state tourism and emergency management officials collaborate to provide more information to tourists about shelters and evacuation routes.

“Creating strong partnerships between the tourism industry and the Emergency Management Operations offices in each community would allow for increased dialogue, which could then be translated into effective materials to distribute to tourists at key attractions and accommodations,” said Lori Pennington-Gray, the institute’s director. “This material would provide the needed information for visitors who are unaware of the scope of a hurricane and how to respond if one is headed their way.”

Provided by University of Florida

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