

Guatemala has lived in the shadow of volcanoes for centuries

June 8 2018, by Sophie Brockmann



Fuego. Credit: EPA/Santiago Billy

When the Fuego volcano near Antigua, Guatemala erupted on June 3, it wasn't immediately apparent to the people living on its slopes quite how dangerous this event would be. The explosive nature, speed and direction

of the eruption were all [unexpected](#). Entire villages were destroyed, and houses covered in thick ash. The death toll stands at at least 99, hundreds of people are missing, and further volcanic activity is [hindering](#) rescue efforts.

Guatemalans have come together in solidarity with the victims and are responding generously to calls to donate basic necessities and money. Celebrities, foreign governments and aid organisations are all pledging their help.

This is the worst volcanic [eruption](#) in Guatemala for [more than a century](#), but it's not an isolated event – Fuego is an active [volcano](#) that erupts with some regularity. As one official [put it](#), at first this seemed like "one of those normal eruptions that people are used to". Several teenagers died because they wanted to take in the [spectacle of the eruption](#), not realising that this one was different.

Guatemalan media have started to [ask questions](#) about the effectiveness of existing evacuation protocols, but there is no doubt that [inequality and poverty](#) (themselves legacies of centuries of Spanish rule, oligarchic regimes and a 36-year civil war) also [exacerbated the tragedy](#).

Poor, often indigenous rural communities dependent on subsistence farming are particularly [vulnerable](#) to natural disasters, but the chain of volcanoes that includes Fuego is not a remote area.

Volcanoes dominate the landscape of the lowland core and Western Highlands that are home to the most populous and historically significant cities in the country. They are a part of Guatemalan national identity. The imposing beauty of their silhouettes and the potential for hikes up dormant volcanoes makes them a bedrock of the tourism industry, but it's also difficult to overstate their ubiquity in Guatemalan culture – especially indigenous culture.

Sacred and dangerous

In the Maya worldview, the earth is sacred, and [so are volcanoes](#). They have a [dual meaning](#) as powerful beings that can destroy, but also guard and nourish, providing fertile lands for agriculture. The most internationally successful Guatemalan film to date, 2015's "Ixcanul", revolves around a remote agricultural village on the slopes of a volcano. Its title is a [Kakchiquel Maya word](#) for "volcano".

For centuries, Guatemalan societies have lived with the threat of volcanic eruptions. Some Mayan cities were destroyed by eruptions, others [benefitted](#) from the volcanoes' fertile ash. But after the Spanish conquest of Central America in the 1520s, the colonial state tried to create some uniformity in the government and built environment of its American dominions.



Fuego erupts in July 2017. Credit: EPA/Santiago Billy

In my own historical research, I've explored how the state's officers dealt with what they could not easily change: the natural world. Volcanoes, perhaps unsurprisingly, feature heavily in Spanish government accounts that officials sent back to Madrid. As defining features of the landscape, they tower over hand-painted Spanish maps, distinguished from regular mountains with a bright plume of fire or smoke over their peak – a visual language that was itself based on earlier [indigenous maps](#).

Reading eyewitness accounts of major eruptions as far back as the 18th century vividly brings to life that people living with risk and trying to deal with uncertainty has a long history. In 1775, one of Fuego's neighbouring volcanoes, Pacaya, erupted. Panic and confusion is evident in the more than 100 pages of testimony collected by the colony's government about the eruption, which went on for more than a month. "I see an enemy here who can fill us with the most passionate fear", wrote the governor of Guatemala, Martín de Mayorga, to the Spanish king. The reports described new, secondary craters and eruption sites opening up on the sides of the volcano.

Underlying these human and material tragedies were political worries.

Out of harm's way

Only a few years before, in 1773, the old capital "Antigua Guatemala" had been destroyed by an earthquake. In its wake, the government took the monumental decision to move the capital to a new, supposedly safer site on a plain about 20 miles away, which they called "Nueva

Guatemala".

The new city was not formally made the capital until January 1776 – no wonder then that politicians were getting nervous about a nearby volcanic eruption in late 1775, which suddenly might threaten the new capital as well. Villagers gave their testimony about the progress of the eruption, and a group of militia rode up a neighbouring volcano to map the area from a bird's eye view. Two of these Crown employees used their testimony to show off their knowledge of current scientific theories about why volcanoes erupted.

But the decision to move the city was never just about risk assessment. It was mixed with a solid dose of political opportunism, since it weakened some of the established power structures. It generated new commercial possibilities for some of Guatemala's most powerful families, while other established landowners (such as the Church) lost out.

The archbishop of Guatemala at the time also opposed the move because it was impossible for the poorest parishioners to relocate, making an enemy of the governor, who thought that the bishop's failure to comply with his policies threatened the public order. Even in the 18th century, volcanoes generated discussions about the relationship between poverty and natural disaster.

Once Governor Mayorga established that Pacaya was probably not a threat to the new capital but was still raining ash on the old one, he took the opportunity to get back at his opponents who were still holding out in the old city. "The inhabitants of the ruined city should remove themselves from the danger in which they live", he declared. "It is easy to see what danger this is, with a ball of fire six miles away". He contrasted the old capital, still in danger of forest fires, with the new one, which was separated from the volcanoes by deep ravines that would stop fires from spreading.

Dealing with natural risk, then, was never just an abstract scientific problem, but one that affected all of society – with serious political repercussions.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Guatemala has lived in the shadow of volcanoes for centuries (2018, June 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-06-guatemala-shadow-volcanoes-centuries.html>

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