

14. Klobbered by Katrina

Natural disasters have always been a problem for the planet. With global warming, they're still around, but with more intensity. Failure to address environmental concerns has had devastating effects on our land, air and water on many levels. One such devastating example fell upon the city of New Orleans on August 29, 2005 when hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast.

A few considerations could have either prevented this disaster, or at least lessened the impact of that storm, such as measures being undertaken to address what fossil fuels have done on the warming of the planet. The possibilities for protection and prevention don't end there. Technology has given us advanced warning of coming tsunamis, tornadoes and earthquakes. As we progress, this knowledge ahead of time saves lives and resources. A year from now, meteorology will only get better in predicting the weather.

Unfortunately, the City of New Orleans is below sea level and vulnerable to flooding. It has been that way for quite a while and levees were constructed to cover this deficiency. Over time, this engineering feat has done its job in fine fashion. As with all things though, maintenance is required, meaning funds are necessary to see to it that deterioration doesn't occur. When it does, it has to be fixed to avoid problems. There was enough advance warning – not days before Katrina hit, but years – for action to be taken to guarantee that the levees wouldn't have a problem. Time and again, money was requested from the government, but it wasn't forthcoming. Had the cash been available, Katrina may have been nothing more than a tropical storm. Moreover, thousands of dollars would have been spent beforehand, instead of the millions it is taking for cleanup and remediation.

Warnings can be a great thing provided citizens have the resources to heed them. Vast areas in the Delta are inundated with people having the minimum of amenities. They certainly could have walked away from the danger if they had started well in advance of the storm – sometime in July would have sufficed. Of course, they needed to hear about the upcoming hurricane early enough. Mass transit could have been a great ally if it had been capable of handling the crowds. As history has shown, these alternatives failed for a number of reasons. Consequently, innocent people perished while others suffered greatly and lost their homes in the process.

One of the reasons for this is the fact that the City of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana aren't exactly free of political corruption. You may have heard of Huey Long and Carlos Marcello, one politician and another individual who had a great deal of control without being in the state legislature. Their home state certainly doesn't lead the United States in doing things on the sly with hands held open for payola. Both the town where I grew up and the city in which I now reside have known a bit of graft – although they can't be compared to our nation's capital. Other cities in our nation practice this way of doing business and get away with it. When Katrina hit, there was a conglomeration of incompetence and payoffs at the local, state and federal levels. This was evident well before August 29, 2005, during the crisis and after it. Even today, New Orleans is an area with much work that still needs to be done regarding cleanup – in more ways than one.

There are a few other resources that help to keep New Orleans honest, that is, to keep hurricanes at bay, minimizing catastrophes. Leading the way are the wetlands, which soak up incoming winds and water. They do an unbelievable job and all that is

needed is that they be integral. When they get destroyed or neglected, difficulties can and will arise. For too long, these great resources were ignored. Combining this abandonment with a few other already mentioned scenarios didn't help in the least.

Within the New Orleans swamp sit a large number of cypress trees, which also play as huge a role in controlling what happens to the region as the levees and the wetlands. Over time though, big business felt that removing these majestic wonders of nature would bring more cash because of the value of the wood. That may be true, but the small increase in profits pales when weighed against the costs of cleanup incurred from Katrina. The CEOs never considered that at any time. It gets even worse as some businesses sell the wood for homes, but other corporations simply process it for mulch. It is truly ironic that this product was to be used around the houses that are rebuilt in the future, but at the same time the removal of the cypress trees for this purpose is one of the reasons for much of the damage caused by Katrina.

People exhibit some very risky behavior and then ask for forgiveness, handouts, tax benefits and insurance policies. Our Founding Fathers may have written laws for citizens to act at will – within reason, of course – but there is nothing in writing in those same documents that will guarantee payment of your hospital bills if you climb walls of ice. You'll have to open your own wallet for that. The same consideration applies to people who have homes constructed on cliffs overlooking the ocean, near raging rivers or in known earthquake regions. You can build anywhere you want, but you'll have to pay a hefty insurance premium to do so. Then, when disaster strikes and rebuilding is necessary – if you still feel that's a good idea – don't be surprised if the cost of the insurance doubles or triples.

Rebuilding the City of New Orleans must take into consideration this same outlook. I feel that it certainly should be restored to what it was. Of course, if in the process, much of the graft and corruption could be eradicated, that would be what's best for all of us. Perhaps New Orleans should be reconstructed above sea level. Doing so would assure that there would never be a problem with levees again. It would also create numerous jobs, something which is needed right now in that area even if that fine city isn't elevated. Under any circumstances, changes have to be made to accommodate either choice and the wetlands need to be maintained, especially the cypress trees. If a company wants to sell mulch, they are going to have to obtain it from some place that won't be affected in any way by the removal of that great natural resource, the cypress.

*The above is an excerpt from Robert S. Swiatek's 2008 book, **Take Back The Earth – The Dumb, Greedy Incompetents Have Trashed It**. You can find reviews and more information on it at the web site he created and maintains, bobcooks.com. All his books are available as free downloads from the site.*