
From Natural Hazard to Environmental Catastrophe: Past and Present

Suzanne A. G. Leroy

Institute for the Environment, Brunel University, Uxbridge UB8 3PH (West London), UK

ABSTRACT

The number of environmental catastrophes is rising, mostly owing to an increase in hydrometeorological hazards. The number of disasters is escalating as the world population grows and people settle in marginal areas. In order to improve preparedness, the geological and archaeological records must be investigated as they hold a wider range of possible events than the much shorter instrumental record. Catastrophes will gain amplitude with rapid onset, long duration, larger affected area, inflexible society and, of course, convergence of threats. Too often, it seems that today's societies resist learning from the past and therefore tend to repeat errors. A new field of science is emerging: the science of environmental catastrophes, which requires not only robust chronologies to firmly link cause and effect, but also bridges the crossing between the geosciences and social sciences.