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The International Tsunami Museum: Researchers Making a Difference in Thailand

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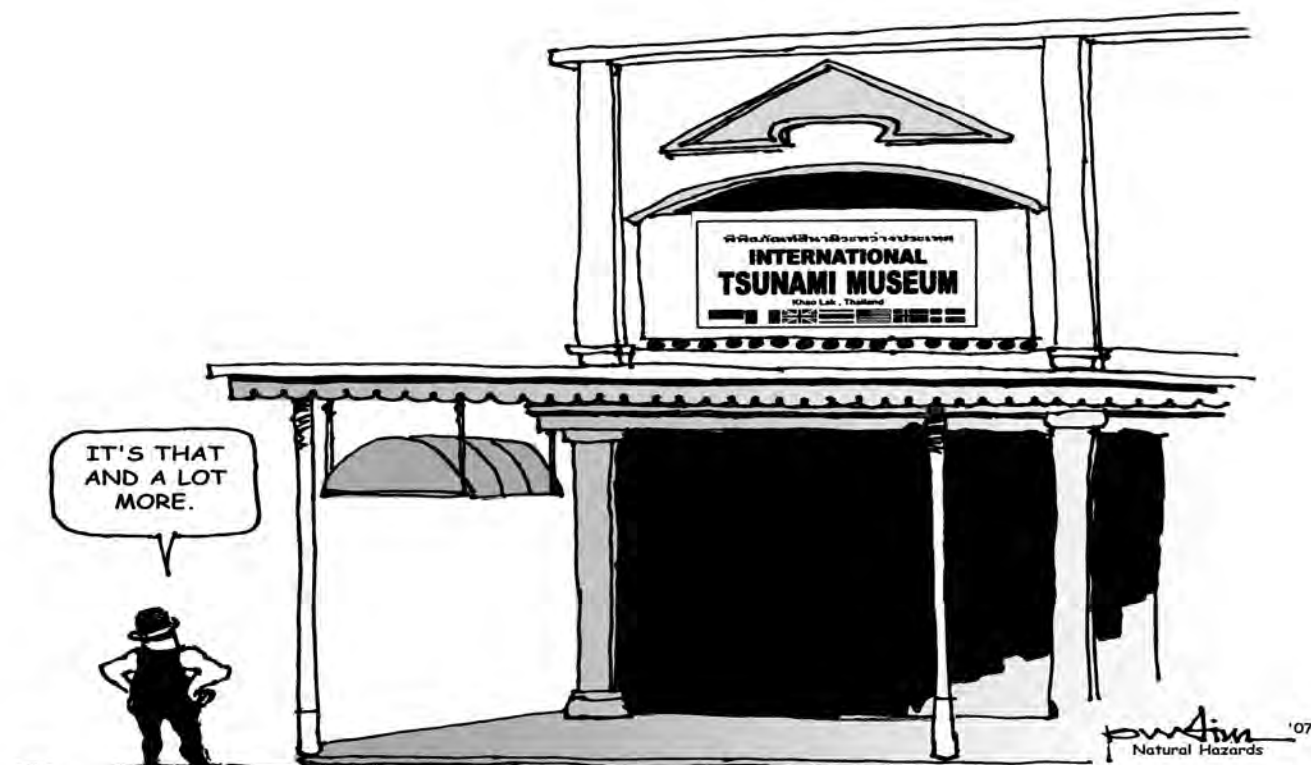


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The International Tsunami Museum: Researchers Making a Difference in Thailand

– an invited comment

On December 26, 2004, a 9.1-magnitude earthquake created a devastating tsunami that struck 12 countries around the Indian Ocean. Nearly 230,000 people lost their lives, and 2.3 million people were left homeless. Tens of thousands remain unaccounted for. Estimated property damage and economic losses were in the tens of billions of dollars. In Thailand alone, the death toll reached 5,600, with 8,400 people injured.

After the tsunami, I traveled twice to the Khao Lak region of Thailand with a Western Washington University graduate student and a licensed clinical social worker to interview hundreds of survivors who were living in temporary shelters. We were joined by four Thai nurses from Prince of Songkla University in Thailand who vol-

unteered to work with us. Khao Lak experienced extreme devastation, and thousands lost their homes and jobs.

Our objectives in conducting these interviews were to examine the prevalence and predictors of post-traumatic stress disorder (a set of psychological and physical symptoms that may develop after people experience a life-threatening event), post-traumatic growth (an increased awareness of life priorities and positive life changes that can occur as a result of experiencing a traumatic event), and the role of culture in relation to distress and growth. The project is the most recent in a series of post-disaster studies my research team has been conducting for the past 15 years.

Our interviews with the tsunami survivors revealed that many people were fearful about future tsunami

threats. They did not have a good understanding about the warning signs of a tsunami, how to evacuate, or how tsunamis form. Many interviewees also reported symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, such as constantly thinking about future tsunami threats and having difficulty sleeping. They also did not realize how millions of people around the world had pulled together to help those affected by the tsunami. Like other disasters, the tsunami challenged people's sense of control, predictability, safety, and trust.

The survivors we spoke with asked us to tell them how the tsunami formed, about the worldwide response to provide aid, and about the new tsunami warning system that is being built in the Indian Ocean. We explained, for example, that the tsunami warning system utilizes a network of buoys that measure wave height and transmit the information via satellite to monitoring stations.

The survivors told us that this information helped alleviate their fears about future tsunami threats and their anxiety. Hearing about how the world community came together to develop a tsunami warning system made them feel grateful, and learning that the warning system would give them lead time to go to a safe location helped reestablish their feelings of control. For our team, the question then became, "How might we convey this information to large numbers of people at minimal cost?" Little did I know that a new chapter was about to unfold.

Applying Research Findings: Building the International Tsunami Museum in Thailand

As a team, we decided that an educational museum created with great care and sensitivity could help people understand the event that changed so many lives by showing how the tsunami formed and affected the environment, as well as how organizations, businesses, and individuals around the world rallied to help. Exhibits also could discuss the warning signs of a tsunami and how to evacuate, and could describe the new tsunami warning system being built in the Indian Ocean. And, by illustrating hope, resilience, and the human spirit, the museum could help people move forward with their lives.

We spoke with a businessman in Khao Lak who had a vacant building, and he generously made a space available for the museum. When I returned to the United States, I designed an independent study project at Western Washington University so students could be involved in the project and help design exhibits for the museum. The five students who participated gained an increased interest in research and learned how research findings can be applied to promote education, mental health, social responsibility, and compassion. In 2007, the project received the Action Teaching Award from the Social Psychology Network—an award that recognizes teaching activities that lead to a better understanding of psychology and to a more just, compassionate, and peaceful world.

Because the museum would be located in an area visited by tourists from around the world, it was crucial that the exhibits present information in both Thai and English. Four students at the University of Washington

translated the exhibits into Thai, and a graphic designer at Western Washington University worked with a native Thai speaker to create the museum exhibits, based on the text and graphics we provided.

The Dean's Fund for Excellence at the School for Humanities and Social Sciences and the Center for Cross-Cultural Research at Western Washington University provided \$9,000 to establish the museum and to conduct a research project in Khao Lak. These funds also covered part of the students' expenses to travel to Thailand. In December, 2006, I traveled with four students and a volunteer to Khao Lak to set up the museum.

“By illustrating hope, resilience, and the human spirit, the museum could help people move forward with their lives.”

On December 21, 2006, after working many 16-hour days building the museum, we opened the International Tsunami Museum. In the first three months of operation, more than 10,000 people from all over the world visited the museum, and visitor comments were overwhelmingly positive. One Thai visitor said that he had never seen a map of the Indian Ocean or heard about how an earthquake can cause a tsunami. The *Phuket Gazette*, a newspaper published 80 miles to the south in an area also struck by the tsunami, wrote of the museum, "In a subtle and ethical way, visitors are introduced to the tragic events of the December 26, 2004, tsunami."

Action Research and Community Service: Helping Children at Local Village Schools

Other visitors to the museum included teachers and students from local village schools, for whom we provided transportation to the museum. During their visit, teachers told us about the significant challenges that schools and students wrestled with in the aftermath of the tsunami. Water wells at some schools were contaminated, children went to school without breakfast and were fed soup for lunch (the only meal of the day, for many), and buildings needed repairs (such as fixing holes in the wall to keep poisonous snakes from entering the classroom). Some schools also did not have funding to replace teachers who retired or were transferred to another school. We considered what we might do to help the children and schools—yet another new chapter was about to unfold.

The museum has now partnered with All for Villages, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Admission to the museum is free, but visitors can leave a voluntary donation if they wish, and 100% of the donations are passed on to five village schools. These funds are providing potable drinking water, more nutritious and substantial lunches daily, and supplies. They are also being used to repair buildings and have allowed the schools to hire four teachers and two teaching assistants for the year. Donors also

are supporting 12 children who are orphans, and we have built a home for an orphan and her grandparents.

Many people cannot visit the museum because they do not live close by. With a grant from Psychology Beyond Borders, we are now producing a video that will be freely distributed to schools along the coast in Thailand. The video will include the same content that is presented in the museum and will educate viewers about the warning signs of a tsunami, the new tsunami warning system, how to evacuate, and how the world came together to help survivors. Versions in both English and Thai will be available. In March 2008, I will return to Thailand to distribute the video and assess its effectiveness. We may seek funding to translate the video for use in Indonesia and in other tsunami-prone countries. This is especially timely given the recent large magnitude earthquakes that continue to strike off the coast of Indonesia.

Many children who became orphans as a result of the tsunami are living with their grandparents, and for some, living conditions are dire. One six-year-old girl and her three-year-old brother had lost both parents, and their grandparents are living in extreme poverty. For work, their uncle—a man in his 40s who is without one leg—scrapes hardened rubber from the bowls that hang on rubber trees. He earns US\$1.50 to \$2 per day, and his income is the primary means of support for the entire family. When we visited, the exterior wall in the bedroom of their home was made of husks from palm trees, and the tin roof over the living room had two- to three-inch holes. Rain came pouring in as we spoke with the fam-

ily over the loud roar of water falling on the roof. My Thai colleague who oversees the museum and I hired a contractor, and the family moved into their new home two months later, just before the rainy season. This is just one example of how the museum has changed survivors' lives.

For the many of us who have never experienced a disaster such as the 2004 tsunami, it is sometimes difficult to understand how one project can make a difference in so many lives. But perhaps it was best stated by Dale Boe of Bellingham, Washington, whose brother-in-law lives in Khao Lak and lost his business during the tsunami. "A lot of the organizations from around the world helped with the tsunami recovery, but now they are gone. Many people are still hurting and need help, and the International Tsunami Museum projects are making a real difference in the lives of children and families."

I am deeply grateful to the following people, who helped make the museum a reality: Sawitri Assanangkornchai, Mehnaaz Begum, Dale Dinnel, Dale and Nimnual Boe, Wiworn Kesavatana, Adam Moller, Rochelle Parry, and Heidi Sattler-Philips.

To view photos of the International Tsunami Museum and the school projects, please visit www.wwu.edu/~tsunamimuseum.

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Call for Papers: Annual Student Paper Competition

The Natural Hazards Center announces its fifth annual Hazards and Disasters Student Paper Competition. Papers may present current research, literature reviews, theoretical arguments, or case studies. Subject matter may include, but is not limited to, floods or floodplain management, Hurricane Katrina, earthquakes, climate change, warning systems, hazard mitigation, emergency management, vulnerability, or other topics relevant to the social and behavioral aspects of hazards and disasters.

Papers will be judged on originality, organization, and demonstrated knowledge of the topic. One undergraduate and one graduate winner will receive \$100 each; mention in the *Natural Hazards Observer* newsletter; publication on the Natural Hazards Center Web site; and an invitation to the Annual Hazards Workshop in Boulder, Colorado, including registration fees. The deadline for submissions is March 14, 2008. Additional information, including eligibility and criteria, is available on the Natural Hazards Center Web site at www.colorado.edu/hazards/awards/paper-competition.html.

FEMA Emergency Management Institute (EMI) Training

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EMI offers an Integrated Emergency Management Course (IEMC) curriculum of exercise-based (tabletop and functional) training, which emphasizes the integration of emergency operations center functions performed by public officials and emergency managers in disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation phases. State and local governments may also request community-specific IEMCs tailored to their jurisdictions and specific hazard. For more information, please visit the IEMC Web site at <http://training.fema.gov/emi-web/IEMC> or contact William Tschumy at william.tschumy@fema.gov or (301) 447-1095.