

Not My Fault: Going on vacation? Mother Nature doesn't take holidays

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

Posted: Jun. 21, 2017

Summer is officially here and I am on vacation – a once in a lifetime trip to Botswana. Over the next few months, many of you will head off too – to seashores, mountains, tropical islands, camping trips and family reunions. Please remember, that while you leave your everyday cares and obligations behind, Mother Nature doesn't take holidays.

Ten years ago I met a professional risk manager. He worked for the Episcopal managing risk for both natural and human-caused events. He knew earthquakes well both as a professional and from personal experience in San Francisco during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. In late December 2004, he and his family were on holiday in Thailand. As he lay abed in a beach bungalow on December 26, he felt vibrations. They weren't strong and he wouldn't have noticed if he had been up and about. But he knew about earthquakes and this was unmistakable. The shaking lasted a long time, several minutes by his estimate. He could tell from the duration that the earthquake that caused them was very large, even larger than the M6.9 Loma Prieta earthquake.

So how did he respond? He rolled over and went back to sleep. He was on vacation and couldn't quite put two and two together – that he had just experienced the world's largest earthquake in forty years and he and his family were at risk. He was on vacation in Thailand – not a place he associated with big earthquakes. The shaking had been weak and he reckoned no damage – no problem. Two hours later, he joined other family members for breakfast at the restaurant, a two-story building providing them with just enough elevation for safety and an extraordinary view as the tsunami attacked the coast. He was able to help pull a few people out of the water, but sadly many perished at the site.

He was among an estimated 100,000 tourists traveling for business or pleasure in the tsunami-affected areas. Over 2,100 became casualties of the waves. Great Britain, Germany, Finland, Switzerland and Sweden all lost more than 100 citizens and casualties were reported

from 39 other countries. The 571 Swedish deaths made it the country's worst-ever natural disaster. Thirty-nine Americans, including a man from McKinleyville perished in the tsunami.

Six years later, I was part of a tsunami reconnaissance team in Chile. Chile was impressive for many reasons – tsunami signage in coastal areas and evacuation programs in schools. I heard many stories of elementary-aged children confidently showing their parents where to go. But there was one group that was vulnerable – the vacationers from inland areas who were enjoying the last weekend of summer at the beach. They had no experience with tsunamis and didn't understand that shaking meant a tsunami could follow. The experience in one campground was particularly tragic. The shaking caused many tree limbs to fall so campers headed to the beach where they thought they would be safer. Unfortunately, many became victims of the tsunami.

Here are a few safety tips to pack along with your sunscreen to make sure you are prepared.

- Share your itinerary with family or friends – make sure someone knows where you are headed and when you plan to return.
- Pay attention to your surroundings. Locate exits in restaurants and other buildings. Note the location of stairs and count the doors from your room so you can find them in the dark.
- Ask hotel personnel what their plans are in case of earthquake, fire or other emergency.
- Have a daily discussion with your family or traveling partners about how you might get reconnected in case you are separated. Identify a landmark as an emergency meeting place and agree on a contact person back home. Phone and cell service could be disrupted.
- Keep a satchel or daypack with important documents near the exit of your hotel room to easily grab if you need to leave in a hurry. Not there? Don't take the time to search. Your life is more important.
- Many beach areas have tsunami information posted. Check for how to walk to high ground. If there are no maps or signs, aim for areas 100 feet above sea level or two miles inland. If you can't make it this far, go as far as you can. Every step up or inland can make a difference.
- When an earthquake strikes, DROP, COVER, and HOLD ON. The more you move while the shaking is going on, the more likely you are to be injured.
- Ground shaking is your most important warning that a tsunami may be on its way. The longer the shaking lasts,

the more likely a tsunami will follow. Surges could arrive in minutes to tens of minutes.

- Tsunamis are tricky! The first surge won't be the biggest and just when you think the danger is over, another big wave may arrive. The danger period may last for 12 hours or longer. Stay away from the coast until officials say it is safe to return.
- If you have connectivity, register yourself as Safe and Well on the American Red Cross web site <https://safeandwell.communityos.org/cms/index.php>, and respond to Facebook's Safety Check.

Don't spend time debating whether a situation warrants evacuating. When in doubt "drill it out" – and pat yourselves on the back for improving your skills to do the right thing the next time. Call (707) 826-6019 to request a free copy of our Living on Shaky Ground magazine or contact our local American Red Cross for more ways to keep you and your loved ones safe. Enjoy the coast or wherever you travel – and gain peace of mind knowing that you have done everything you can to keep your family safe.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake. Questions or comments about earthquakes or this column can be sent to Kamome@humboldt.edu or (707) 826-6019. <http://www.times-standard.com/opinion/20170621/going-on-vacation-mother-nature-doesnt-take-holidays>