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Oceans, Natural Disasters and Tourism

In recent years, the world seems to have seen increasing numbers of natural disasters, affecting coastal tourist destinations as well as places with no connection to tourism. Ritchie noted in 2008 that despite the apparent increases in natural disasters there still seemed to be a lack of research in the tourism field on the management of these disasters covering response, recovery, reduction and readiness (Ritchie, 2008). While things have improved since then there is still some truth in his contention. These natural disasters include extreme weather events such as hurricanes, storms, floods and landslides, and heatwaves as well as disasters in which the weather plays a part, such as wildfires, and disasters that are not linked to the weather at all, such as earthquakes, volcanoes, and disease outbreaks. These natural disasters not only appear to be becoming more frequent but also more severe and sometimes occurring in places which have not seen such things before, and sometimes in major coastal tourist destinations.

Over the past 15 to 20 years we have seen:

- Powerful hurricanes and typhoons in the Caribbean, the USA, and south-east Asia.
- Deadly wildfires in California and Oregon in the USA, southern Australia, New Zealand, Portugal, Greece and the Canary Islands in Spain.
- Outbreaks of potentially lethal diseases, sometimes spread by air travel, including SARS avian flu, Ebola, Dengue fever and Covid-19.
- Record-breaking heatwaves in Australia, parts of the USA and southern Europe.
- The catastrophic tsunamis in the Indian Ocean in 2004 and Japan in 2011.
- Major landslides in Afghanistan, the Philippines, the USA, China, India, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Colombia and Madeira in Portugal.
- Lethal or highly disruptive volcanoes in Iceland, Italy, Japan, Guatemala and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This list requires a little commentary to put it in perspective. First, many of these phenomena are regular occurrences in some parts of the world. However, we are seeing some of them become more severe and start to appear in places where

they are not normally seen. Weather phenomena are also becoming more difficult to predict as the global climate changes; this is particularly true of the seasonal monsoon rains that affect parts of Asia. It is fair to say that most places affected by the natural disasters outlined above are not tourist destinations, and those affected are generally not tourists or those working in tourism. However, in the interests of accuracy, it is fair to point out that coastal tourist destinations do seem to have become more affected by natural disasters in recent years. In Europe, for example, we have seen record-breaking deadly heatwaves and widespread wildfires followed by floods and landslides. These have affected tourist destinations from the Canary Islands and Portugal to Greece. This has been happening at the same time as we have been becoming increasingly aware of a potential man-made, rather than natural, disaster that threatens the future of the planet, namely climate change and global warming.

While debate still rages, most scientific opinion suggests that some of the upsurge in natural disasters relates directly to global warming and that the oceans are at the heart of what is happening. Global warming is increasing sea temperatures and causing rises in sea levels around the world. As we saw in Chapter 2, what happens in the oceans largely determines the weather on land, so it should not be surprising that as global warming gathers pace, our weather becomes more extreme and flooding more widespread. It is also becoming increasingly clear that in coastal areas in particular, the impacts of some natural disasters such as wildfires, floods, landslides and even tsunamis are magnified due to the actions of man. In coastal tourist destinations these actions include building too close to the shoreline, clearing trees and mangrove swamps for new developments, and altering the composition of the beach.

The complex relationship between the oceans, natural disasters and tourism

In this section we are going to examine the complex relationship between the oceans, natural disasters, and tourism, especially the impact of such disasters on coastal tourist destinations. We will look at several aspects of this relationship including:

- The role which oceans play in the natural disasters that have an impact on coastal tourism destinations.
- Potential typologies of natural disasters such as those which are extreme weather events and those which are not and those which originate from the ocean and those which do not.

- 'Natural disasters' which are made worse by global warming, which is partly caused by tourism, against those natural disasters which are not the result of any human activities, including tourism.
- The impacts which natural disasters have on the oceans themselves through the effects of the impacts of the disasters on land, both on the coast and inland.

Figure 8.1 sets out a simple typology that endeavours to present a perspective on the relationship between oceans, natural disasters and tourism. It distinguishes between natural disasters that originate from the oceans and those which are land-based. Furthermore, it identifies those which are partly the result of tourism itself and those in which tourism plays no causal role whatsoever. It also suggests that the impacts of natural disasters can be business impacts as well as physical impacts on coastal tourist destinations.

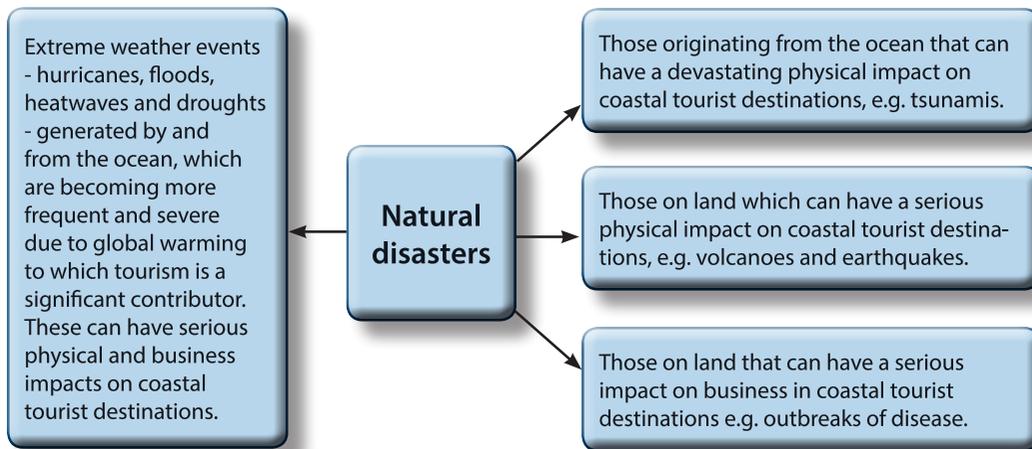


Figure 8.1: A simple typology of the relationship between oceans, natural disasters and tourism

In Figure 8.2 I attempt to model the relationship between the oceans, extreme weather events and tourism. Of course, I am fully aware that the model presented in Figure 8.2 is simplistic. This is not least because of its focus on coastal tourist destinations, and the exclusion of a consideration of other human activities and industries which have an impact on global warming and thus on the frequency and severity of extreme weather events.

However, it also excludes the impacts of natural disasters, of whatever kind, on inland tourist destinations, whether they be cities and historic towns, mountains or rural areas.