

# Natural Disasters: An Eco-Tourism Tool?

In 1951, Kirk Douglas starred in a B movie titled *The Big Carnival* (originally released as *Ace in the Hole*). I saw it as a kid, many years later, when the trend was to play old movies on TV on Saturday afternoons. In the flick, Kirk plays a former big-city journalist on the downside of his career. Stuck writing for a small Albuquerque newspaper, he needs that one, big story to put him back on top. When a local miner gets trapped in a collapse, Kirk sees his opportunity. His first article about the disaster manages to garner him regional attention, so he continues to write more. With each story, his reputation and reach grow. In fact, he begins to hope that the rescuers take their time in freeing the man, since prolonging the trapped miner's agony only builds his career.



Kirk isn't the only one hoping the miner remains a captive of nature – for a bit longer. On the grounds just above where the man lies, a tent city of marketing reps, media personalities, and interested onlookers is building: more concession stands, T-shirt vendors, button-selling booths, and media equipment trucks arrive every day. In effect, the scene turns into a big “carnival.”

At the time of its release, the movie was a bit of a box office flop. Audiences in the 1950s, it seems, wouldn't buy the fact that people could be so heartless. If the movie were released today, however, I don't think we'd have that problem. It seems more and more that we consider environmental disasters a cause for tourism.

Cornwall, Great Britain, is a case in point. On August 16, 2004, the small village and fishing port of Boscastle suffered the worst flash flood in its history. Almost eight inches of rain fell in just twenty-four hours, causing a torrent of water to flow through the community. More than a hundred cars

were swept into the harbor, and thousands of dollars worth of damage was done to homes, businesses, and the surrounding vicinity. More than one hundred residents were airlifted to safety. Luckily, there were no fatalities.



News of the flooding, of course, brought Boscastle to the media's attention – and the world's. The event not only increased public knowledge about the village, but it caused an uptick in tourist interest. One year later, so many people were touring Boscastle that bed-and-breakfast owners were struggling to find adequate accommodation for all of the visitors.

That sort of occurrence doesn't surprise Sif Gustavsson, the North American manger for Visit Iceland, the country's official tourism and travel entity. When the volcano Eyjafjallajökull erupted in April 2010, it created an ash cloud that rose to thirty thousand feet and that led to the closure of most of Europe's airspace for six days. Consequently, a great number of flights within, to, and from Europe were cancelled, creating the highest level of air travel disruption since World War II. On the ground, however, it was a different story.





“Volcano tourism” quickly sprang up in the wake of the eruption, with local tour companies offering day trips to see the volcano. By January of this year, Sif reported that tourism in Iceland was up 40 percent compared to the same time last year.

Later on, on March 8, 2011, it was reported in USA Today that an eruption of Hawaii’s Kilauea volcano boosted visitation to the region. Lava bursts of up to sixty-five feet drew throngs to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, according to the National Park Service. Air-tour companies even added some flights to accommodate the demand.

Would you consider visiting a place that had just experienced a natural disaster, or do you think you’d just be contributing to the big carnival?

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