



## Shepherd Bliss: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and Peak Oil

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Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

"When people get hungry, they do desperate things," retired Santa Rosa, CA, firefighter Andrew Aguilar recalled at a Peak Oil meeting this summer in Sonoma County. He was referring specifically to the Mexican Revolution of 1910, during which his family fled the violence to get to safer America.

Aguilar's words came back to this reporter as he observed the chaos in New Orleans and elsewhere on the Louisiana and Mississippi Coasts in the devastating wake of Hurricane Katrina. The dead are left lying where they fell or float eerily down rivers created by water-filled streets. The dead were not even being counted by press time, though the mayor of New Orleans estimates that the number may be into the thousands. Armed gangs assault rescue and medical crews, making the tragedy even worse. The streets are filled with the stench of human waste.

It's a sad moment when we know that as of press time some 200,000 people were still scrambling to get out of a sinking New Orleans, once one of America's many great cities, now laid to waste. Katrina left a million homeless and created refugee camps to house hundreds of thousands of people for weeks and months. Preliminary damage estimates top \$25 billion, making it the worst "natural" disaster in American history.

"Civilization is a thin veneer," is another quotation that comes to mind.

New Orleans will probably never be rebuilt. One wonders if this could be a preview of how some American cities--especially the poorer ones with racial tensions--will be impacted by Peak Oil crises. Various writers--including James Howard Kunstler in "The Long Emergency"--have predicted severe problems, especially in urban and suburban areas, as the supply of petroleum continues to dwindle in the years to come and individuals and nations compete for the remaining supply.

Civilizations have collapsed before. The causes of collapse often have to do with diminishing natural resources and losing wars, both of which seem to be happening for the US.

The pending crises may come sooner than even Peak Oil theorists predicted. Another dozen tropical storms are predicted to strike the US during this hurricane season, according to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Warmer water in the Atlantic Ocean--resulting from global warming--is being blamed for what NOAA calls a "very active" hurricane season. How well prepared is the US for a series of hurricanes strengthened by global warming?

In contrast to New Orleans, after the terrorist attacks on New York of Sept. 11, 2001, and this year in London, people pulled together. Good local leadership helped. Those attacks, of course, were not as devastating as Hurricane Katrina on a whole city, but their surprise and shock values were high. A hurricane attacking New Orleans was no surprise. New Orleans leading newspaper,

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the Times-Picayune, National Public Radio, and the New York Times all had major articles three years ago about the vulnerability of New Orleans to being flooded.

New Yorkers and Londoners have been able to recover after the attacks. New Orleans may never recover-the first major American city to fall to a combination of factors, including global warming and the oil industry that surrounds it. The Gulf Coast is America's major national site to extract oil. The Louisiana Coast is a center of the growing natural gas industry, which is symbolized by fires now burning from broken natural-gas mains. If one of the Liquefied Natural Gas terminals that is slated to go into the Gulf had been in place and had been struck by the hurricane, the disaster could be far worse.

Katrina's impact upon energy production will be tremendous. Some predict that the US just lost between 10% and 20% of its energy supply. Most of this may not come back. Geological limits, such as the amount of oil in the ground, and climate limitations, worsening because of global warming, are contributing to a drastically diminished supply of energy here in America and world-wide.

New Orleans, which used to be described as "Big Easy," presents a much uglier picture than did New York or London. The people and their elected officials have not been able to pull together, for a variety of reasons. Though Hurricane Katrina is usually described as "natural" and an "act of God," in fact there are elements of it and its impact that are not so natural, but are in fact human-made.

### Global Warming Strengthens Katrina

Hurricane Katrina's devastating impact was worsened by three factors: 1) its strength was increased by global warming; 2) the lack of preparation to avoid such a crisis and the availability of the National Guard to help manage it; 3) the massive destruction by development of wetlands, which contain storm run-off.

Global warming and our over-consumption of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas are related. Burning fossil fuels emits greenhouse gases that cause global warming. Among its symptoms are the strength of Hurricane Katrina, according to an Aug. 30 article in the Boston Globe by Pulitzer Prize-winner Ross Gelbspan, author of "The Heat Is On" and "Boiling Point."

"The hurricane that struck Louisiana was nicknamed Katrina by the National Weather Service. Its real name is global warming," Gelbspan contends. "As the atmosphere warms, it generates longer droughts, more-intense downpours, more-frequent heat waves, and more-severe storms. Although Katrina began as a relatively small hurricane that glanced off south Florida, it was supercharged with extraordinary intensity by the relatively blistering sea surface temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico."

Gelbspan connects the hurricane to the fossil fuel industries, "Unfortunately, very few people in America know the real name of Hurricane Katrina because the coal and oil industries have spent millions of dollars to keep the public in doubt about the issue. The reason is simple: To allow the climate to stabilize requires humanity to cut its use of coal and oil by 70 percent. That, of course, threatens the survival of one of the largest commercial enterprises in history."

President Bush, according to the British daily Independent, "found himself the target of an unusual degree of anger from across the political spectrum, as editorial writers demanded to know why he had sat out the first full day of the disaster." It added that "present and former government officials detailed the numerous ways in which Congress and the White House has cut

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funding for the very emergency management programs that the New Orleans area so desperately needs."

The Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Administration, for example, have had their budgets cut drastically and resources diverted towards Bush's "war on terrorism." In June Bush cut \$71.2 million from the budget of the New Orleans Corps of Engineers, a 44 percent reduction-a costly mistake.

"Washington knew exactly what needed to be done to protect the citizens of New Orleans from disasters like Katrina," writes Will Bunch of the Philadelphia Daily News. "Yet federal funding for Louisiana flood control projects was diverted to pay for the war in Iraq."

The looting that happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit could be a wake-up call of what could happen elsewhere in the face of such major disasters. Much of the National Guard and its equipment were in Iraq, rather than at home, where they should be. In a speech in San Diego on Aug. 30 Bush finally admitted the real reason for the troops remaining there-to protect the oil fields.

More than a third of Mississippi's and Louisiana's National Guard troops were either in Iraq or supporting the war effort. Speaking for the Mississippi National Guard, Lt. Andy Thaggard was quoted as follows in the Washington Post, "Missing the personnel is the key thing in this particular event. We need our people."

When Katrina struck the Louisiana Coast had already made the mistake of building over much of its important wetlands, which can blunt a storm's power. Wetlands suck up surging waters, but in recent years development has compromised what oceanographer Abby Sallenger of the US Geological Survey calls the "first line of defense." Over the last 75 years Louisiana's coast has lost enough wetlands to cover the entire state of Delaware.

"One of the main reasons New Orleans is so vulnerable to hurricanes," writes Texas columnist Molly Ivins, "is the gradual disappearance of the wetlands of the Gulf Coast that once stood as a natural buffer between the city and storms coming in from the water."

Though New Orleans has gotten most of the attention, cities and rural areas in nearby Mississippi have also been hard hit. People there have been begging for help. The Sun Herald of Biloxi criticized the relief effort in its ravaged area, "People are hurting and people are being vandalized. Yet where is the National Guard?"

To the nearly 2000 Americans killed and scores wounded in Iraq, we can add many of the Katrina casualties, some of whom could have survived if we engaged in climate protection efforts, if the wetlands had not been built over, with better hurricane- and flood-control preparations, and with citizen soldiers present to defend the people.

(Dr. Shepherd Bliss, sb3.pon.net, teaches college in Hawai'i, where he will be offering a one-day class this semester on Peak Oil. This article may be reprinted, with permission from sb3@pon.net, provided it is done in its entirety and with credit to both the author and the original publication.)

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