

Is there a Natural Transition from Geography and Natural Hazards to Geography and Natural Disasters?

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Editorial

My transparent attempt at using a pun or two in the title of this short editorial is warranted, as there is in today's world less natural about natural hazards and natural disasters and more and more human actions involved in both the causes and consequences of both so-called natural hazards and natural disasters. More and more often humans are an underlying cause (earthquakes are a clear exception here) and their uses of geography and nature in the sense of the locations of various activities and land uses more and more often convert natural hazards into natural disasters. In earlier times, say 50 to 100 years ago, a simple delineation between natural hazards and natural disaster could be made. For example, an earthquake event would be an example of a natural hazard and the damage caused by the quake could accurately be labeled as the natural disaster, that is, a natural hazard event would cause a natural disaster effect. But as the first sentence implicitly postulates, things are much more complicated and complex in today's highly urbanized, populated and energy intensive industrialized world.

Before continuing further allow me to digress for a moment and give credit and acknowledgement to the academic father and intellectual luminary of the field of research and scholarship known as natural hazards, namely, Gilbert White. In his work White in effect argued for policies and actions, where possible, that would avoid or at least mitigate the harmful impacts of various natural disasters, especially floods. He strongly argued for the use of non-structural adjustments such as land use planning and zoning rather than structural features such as dams to prevent or preclude large flood disaster impacts. All too often, in effect, structural features put in place under the guise of flood protection, have increased rather than decreased the scale and damage costs or losses from large floods because dams and artificial levees created a false sense of security and people hence built homes and other buildings and structures in what were thought to be flood-safe environments.

Perhaps, to geographic researchers reading this new journal the words "natural hazards" and "natural disasters" are self-evident concepts and need no clarification. But to others it may well be wise to provide clearer meanings of how these terms are defined and what

they imply. Simply stated natural hazards have long been defined as naturally occurring events that threaten to have negative effects on either the environment or humans and their infrastructure or both. Some natural hazards are commonly linked such as when an earthquake triggers landslides and/or tsunamis. All of which, hence, may result in natural disasters such as the loss of human life and property. The traditional list of natural hazards is long, but can be categorized, for example, into climatic and atmospheric hazards, such as, blizzards, drought, ice storms, tornados, hurricanes, heat waves, and climate change. Besides earthquakes, examples of geological natural hazards include such events as avalanches, volcanic eruptions, collapsing sinkholes, and lahars. Natural hazard events that often are as much human in origin as "natural" include such hazards as epidemics and wildfires. Implicit in the title of this new journal is that it is focused on the geography and nature of the adverse effects of such natural hazards, that is, the "natural disaster" effects of natural hazards. None of this is new information or particularly earthshaking other than of course earthquakes themselves. However, what is relatively new and earthshaking is the scale and increasingly rapid pace at which human actions are becoming ever more dominant causes and triggers of events often formally considered natural, such as climate change. For example, our sheer population numbers and our multifarious and prodigious use of energy and raw materials are making a transition to a stable CO₂ level ever more problematic. In systems parlance humans are becoming ever more powerful change agents of the parameters and rates of energy and material rates of flow and even the energy and material pathways that constitute the earth's atmosphere-lithosphere-hydrosphere-biosphere system.

Nonetheless, for me the very fact that this new journal is named "Geography and Natural Disasters" rather than "Geography and Natural Hazards" indicates that we have made progress in recognizing that we are becoming powerful natural hazards ourselves and we are ever more living in the natural disaster zones of our own making. It is positive that we are hearing some loud wake-up calls, hopefully this new journal will become one of the beacons shining clarifying light on potentially avoidable (not so natural) disasters of our own making.

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