



## Five Things You Need to Know about Hurricanes

By Carl Pope, Huffington Post

Posted on September 8, 2008, Printed on September 9, 2008

<http://www.alternet.org/story/98026/>

Three years ago Katrina devastated New Orleans and upended American politics. Gustav has proved to be kinder, at least so far, to the Crescent City and to the Gulf Coast in general, but it was still a sobering reminder of some basic truths. Its impact on politics remains to be seen.

**Truth 1:** Hurricanes are big; nature is bigger. Natural systems, not engineered ones, are the only defenses big enough to rely on in a big storm. Hurricanes get their energy from passing over heated water and lose it when they hit land. Storm surge builds in open water but dissipates rapidly in coastal wetlands or barrier islands. One acre of wetlands typically absorbs one million gallons of water.

South Louisiana is in such big trouble because we allowed its wetlands to be starved -- courtesy of the Army Corps of Engineers -- of the natural silt and sand that fed them and because they were then opened up to storm surge and erosion -- courtesy of oil and gas drilling. Our first priority on the Gulf Coast after immediate recovery needs to be wetlands restoration. Otherwise, it's only a matter of time before the coastal regions become uninhabitable or vanish beneath the waves.

**Truth 2:** This is not new news. The oldest parts of New Orleans survived Katrina the best because the first French settlers built on "higher ground." Indeed, for most of human history, people built, whenever they could, on higher ground. They didn't need an environmental impact statement to tell them. It was common sense. They knew how big nature was and how important natural defenses were, so they used them. This common sense began to go astray in the mid nineteenth century. The Victorians, who were the first to believe that man could conquer nature, tried to relocate the capital city of colonial India, Calcutta, from its inland location behind the mangrove islands of the Sundarbans -- India's equivalent to Louisiana's wetlands. A few voices protested that Port Canning, the new city on the edge of the Bay of Bengal was doomed to die in a typhoon. But the British Raj, in the full flush of its hubris, went ahead anyway and copied Calcutta on the end of the sea. Five years later, the typhoon came, Port Canning vanished, and the Raj scuttled back to Calcutta.

**Truth 3:** Twentieth-century America took the Victorian pride in the ability to conquer nature and put it on steroids. The vast network of dams and reservoirs, canals, and water projects that we have built, is constructed on the delusion we can control nature. And as climate changes, these "engineering marvels" are rapidly becoming obsolescent. Thanks to drought, Glen Canyon Dam is no longer needed to store the water of the Colorado. It didn't need to be drained by the Sierra Club or

Earth First -- the climate took care of it.

**Truth 4:** Although human systems are only a supplement to natural defenses, they are essential -- and they are the job of government. A government unable to finish the job of repairing New Orleans in the interval between Katrina and the arrival of Gustav is a government too small and too weak to keep us safe. Keeping taxes low will not defend the Gulf Coast against the bigger-than-Katrina monster sure to come.

**Truth 5:** It really doesn't matter -- for these purposes -- whether you think Katrina and Gustav are evidence that global warming has already arrived, or that they are merely harbingers of what climate change will be like when it arrives. It actually doesn't matter whether you think climate change is human-caused or a myth. Any way you look at it, for the past eight years the U.S. government has failed abysmally in one of its most fundamental duties -- to identify, prepare for, and cope with weather-caused natural disasters. The basic philosophy espoused by Grover Norquist, who has held this Administration terrorized in the palm of his hands, is that the federal government should be shrunk until it was small enough to drown in a bathtub. The actual consequence was that New Orleans became a bathtub. It doesn't matter what ideology you subscribe to -- we needed more, not less, government in the years before and after Katrina.

*Carl Pope is the Sierra Club's executive director.*

© 2008 Huffington Post All rights reserved.

View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/98026/>