



DISASTER ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropologists were quick to respond to recent disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. But weeks after these events, important questions remain. What insights can anthropologists who study disasters provide in reconstruction and recovery efforts? What are the dilemmas faced by anthropologists who work in the Gulf region, and how might we go about best responding to them? Is there a need to continue to develop and coordinate research funding to address issues emerging from major disasters like the tsunami in South East Asia, hurricanes in the Gulf region and the earthquake in Pakistan? Send your responses to slathrop@aaanet.org.

The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

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Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans?

—Louis Armstrong

The world witnessed the terrible aftermath of Katrina, the flooding of New Orleans, the destruction of Gulfport, Biloxi, and less-televised points along the Gulf coast. Those who stayed began to realize no one was getting them out. Those who left began to realize they weren't going home in a few days. People were displaced from their homes, their city, their work or school, friends, families, pets and belongings.

The infrastructure that held society together broke down: communication, transportation, electricity, water service and bureaucracy fell apart. There were gas shortages. Ham radios and satellite phones worked. Cell phones, landlines and email did not. It was hard to find friends, colleagues and family. Anyone with a boat rescued people. Coast Guard helicopters rescued people from rooftops, street corners and inside buildings.

The basketball stadium at Louisiana State University became a medical triage facility, and soon the nation's largest acute-care field hospital in US history. LSU called for doctors, nurses and other medical personnel. Helicopters flew overhead almost constantly for weeks bringing medical evacuees.

School buses commandeered in Baton Rouge were stuck on the Interstate, unable to rescue people in the Superdome and Convention Center. The world watched in horror. Days passed. We saw images of people walking out of New Orleans. Finally buses arrived and took evacuees to shelters in Baton Rouge, Houston and beyond.

Why did the mayor initially call for a voluntary evacuation instead of a mandatory evacuation? It's common knowledge in Louisiana that many people don't have any means of getting out of the city. Why weren't people rescued sooner? Media reports variously blame FEMA, Bush, lack of coordination among local, state and federal agencies, or racial prejudice. FEMA's former boss suggested that Louisiana is "dysfunctional." But Louisiana was and remains a poor state. Poverty is endemic. Infrastructure and adequate response take money.

COMMENTARY

The exodus of people from New Orleans doubled the population of Baton Rouge. Efforts for relief and recovery from Katrina (and from Rita) were directed from Baton Rouge, now the biggest city in the state. FEMA, the Red Cross, volunteers from across the US and from foreign countries and the media came. People and businesses from New Orleans relocated to Baton Rouge. The Riverside Centroplex became a shelter for thousands of evacuees. Churches became shelters, housing up to 500 people each. The East Baton Rouge parish public school system enrolled some 5,000 new students from the hurricane-affected area, with thousands more students enrolling at Catholic and other private schools. LSU extended registration, enrolling over 3,000 students from the hurricane-affected area. Some 8,000 students from LSU medical, dental and health services schools in New Orleans relocated to Baton Rouge for classes October 6.

The Internet worked before the phones. I tracked down colleagues, former students and friends by emailing other people. Tulane administration relocated to Jackson, Mississippi, and then to

Houston, and established a new web page, without any records. Tulane anthropologists created a weblog and new email addresses. As part of the LSU system, UNO relocated its administrative office to LSU. Estimates are that some



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73,000 college and university students and 9000 faculty and staff in Louisiana were displaced after Hurricane Katrina and Rita, with more from Mississippi and Texas.

Gulf coast archaeological consulting companies continue to operate, despite various levels of destruction, although Earthsearch moved to the Pearl River and R Christopher Goodwin relocated to their Tallahassee office. The LA State Archaeologist Thomas Eubanks is working with FEMA to develop a plan to coordinate the role of archaeology in the cleanup, restoration and development. NSF made a call for small grants for exploratory research about Katrina, as did other federal agencies, as well as extending support for existing grantees. The LSU web page became a local focal point for hurricane information and resources for displaced people, volunteers and the concerned public. It has links to satellite imagery, aerial photography and other information. The AAA Katrina web page is a clearinghouse for information for students and faculty affected by Katrina and for people, organizations and universities providing assistance or information. The web page documents the outpouring of support from universities throughout the US and beyond to students and faculty from the hurricane affected area. The Louisiana GIS

Council has maps, data and other information about the hurricanes. The Louisiana Hurricane website is LA State government's portal for information to assist people affected by the hurricanes and provides extensive web links.

From Katrina on August 29 and Rita on September 24, there remain today (October 6) thousands of evacuees in church and school shelters, hotels, apartments, private homes and the Riverside Centroplex. There is no available housing or hotel space in Baton Rouge. The devastation to southwestern Louisiana from Hurricane Rita exacerbated the humanitarian, financial and environmental crises in the state. Louisiana has declared a freeze on spending and hiring, except for hurricane recovery. Tulane, Loyola, Dillard, Xavier, UNO, Southern University at New Orleans, McNeese State (Lake Charles), Lamar (Beaumont, Texas), University of South Mississippi, among many other universities, remain closed.

Although thousands of people have returned to see their homes in New Orleans, the city remains largely vacant, without infrastructure or a tax base, and in parts uninhabitable. New Orleans' mayor laid off hundreds of city employees. The federal government approved a one-billion-dollar loan to Louisiana governments. The first 2,500 person FEMA-funded trailer park for evacuees opened October 6 north of Baton Rouge. Restoration of the levees in New Orleans, due to be completed June 2006, will be built to the same level as before Katrina.

In addition to the humanitarian aid, there are many issues associated with the recovery efforts—the diaspora of displaced people, poverty, breakdown of infrastructure, environmental collapse, loss of a sense of place, loss of heritage—that could benefit from the insights of anthropologists. ■

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