

October 30, 2007

Evacuating dangerous areas would leave nowhere to live

By: **Dov Levin**
UCLA Daily Bruin

Whenever a major natural disaster occurs, such as the massive fires that struck Southern California, the public discussion that ensues to try to understand the situation brings about many positive effects.

Problematic governmental policies and procedures are detected and alternatives offered, incompetent officials are found and gotten rid of, and the public becomes more educated than before.

However, together with these great benefits, often truly idiotic memes begin to proliferate wildly.

One such idea that began to grow in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has now started to bloom in full force with the Southern California fires.

This idea is that areas in which natural disasters can be reasonably expected shouldn't be settled and that, if possible, their populations should be permanently evacuated.

For example, Dan Cray titled his recent article for Time magazine "Why Californians Don't Leave." He then spent all of his article trying to explain why "people choose to live in hazardous regions in the first place."

Cray employs innate human cognitive biases and faulty risk assessment mechanisms in order to explain this baffling fact and the behavior of those nutty Californians.

In order to make things entirely clear, there are certain small and limited areas in which the expected danger is extremely high.

In this case, it is best to prevent construction in those areas if possible. In some rare cases, preemptively evacuating a few small neighborhoods may be a good idea.

In many cases, the government could and should do more (via better, mandatory building codes, bush- and fire-hazard

clearing, etc.) to minimize the damages from these disasters.

Many times, cognitive biases are true causes of crazy human risk-taking, including in choices of residence.

However, those who propagate this idea seem to have a misunderstanding of the scale of danger from natural disasters and when areas should be deemed unlivable under this criteria.

Simply put, in order to have everyone living in areas free of the danger of significant natural disasters, we would have to abandon much of the surface of the earth.

Let's start with fires -- the case that brought about the latest claims in this vein.

After we finished evacuating much of Southern and Central California of residents who had the nerve to want housing closer to nature and not just in congested urban areas, we should evacuate much of Greece (the massive forest fires in the summer of 2007

alone claimed the lives of over 50 people), Spain (four major fires in the last 15 years alone) and much of the South of France and Southern Italy (where there were massive fires in 2000).

With them, we should evacuate much of Australia, a country whose forests and shrubs -- this is not hyperbole -- truly reek of oil. Many of the native plants exude various kinds of highly flammable oils as a way to cause fires that will create fertile ground for their seeds' successful growth. Australia suffered three major fires in the last decade alone, including a series of fires in 2003 that burned much of the outskirts of the capital city Canberra.

How about another scourge of California: earthquakes?

Whatever parts of Southern and Central California haven't been evacuated yet because of the dangers of fire should now be evacuated in response to this constant danger.

This short list doesn't even exhaust the list of frequently occurring natural disasters, let alone the possible effects of global warming on the coastlines.

The bottom line is that most of those who live in such areas know of these risks and accept that this is the "cost of doing business" and living in areas with great resources and benefits otherwise.

The solution to these disasters is to find ways to deal with them, not to run away from them.

As for those who think otherwise, sometimes seemingly logical arguments should be thought through to their illogical ends.

(C) 2007 Daily Bruin via U-WIRE