

Are You Ready for the Flood?

Published on April 20, 2001

It's always fun to talk with my friend Bryan Norcross when he comes back from a hurricane conference. (Bryan is the guy widely credited with minimizing the loss of life and property damage from Hurricane Andrew – NBC even made a TV movie of his story.)

It seems, there are a few places you really don't want to live if a hurricane is headed your way. You think you're OK living in Manhattan? Read on. But let's start with New Orleans, the worst of them. New Orleans sits 13 feet below sea level, with a huge levee around it, so that the city is like a dry soup bowl. Dry, that is, until a serious hurricane, driving massive volumes of storm surge over the levee, hits dead on *and fills it up*.

Even after the storm, there'd be the small problem of draining the bowl so those who survived could come down off their roofs and out of the trees. Imagine a night or two spent in complete darkness on top of your roof, with nothing but snakes and insects to keep you company. The city's massive pumps, if they could all be made to operate, could drain the bowl – *more* than 13 feet deep, because of course the lip of the bowl, the levee, is purposely built *higher* than sea level – at the rate of about half an inch an hour. So it would take a mere three weeks or so, in optimal conditions, to get rid of the water . . . beginning, I suppose, only after you dynamited the levee, so that the *extra* water, now trapped *inside* the levee, could rush back out to a once-again tranquil sea.

And what if everything *isn't* working optimally?

We are talking about a pretty massive catastrophe. Let's hope it's 50 hurricane seasons, rather than this next one, before – as is bound to happen sooner or later – it hits.

Then there's South Florida. Broward County (Ft. Lauderdale), for example, had a population of 14,000 in 1926, I think Bryan told me, versus 1.6 million today.

And New York? If a hurricane identical to the one that hit in 1938 were to hit again this summer, Long Island would be toast. (Very soggy, salty toast.) Nor would many of its 2 million residents evacuate.

You try persuading some guy out on a languid, sunny beach, after working hard all week and fighting traffic to get *out* there – *you* try to persuade him to pack up, turn around and go home, just because there's a hurricane down around Daytona Beach, Florida, that could be headed north.

Not gonna happen! He's not gonna go.

Yet do you know how long it took the 1938 hurricane to get from Daytona Beach to New York? About 24 hours. Even if everyone would evacuate, how would you get 2 million people off Long Island in 24 hours?

And of course, most of the time, the hurricanes around Daytona *don't* hit Long Island, or *aren't* fifty-year type storms – so the guy who didn't evacuate had a nice sunny weekend after all, and feels even less inclined to evacuate the next time there's a scare. Plus, he could always go to a shelter or a Home Depot or something. (Big boxy flat-roofed buildings don't do well in hurricanes.)

Yet most of the buildings on Long Island, Bryan tells me, were not built to withstand a hurricane.

I'll get to Manhattan in a minute, and a link to a map. But what, exactly, can reasonable people living along the hurricane coast do?

Well, be certain their flood insurance is paid up. And maybe think twice before spending a lot of money on an asset in a high-risk zone, especially to the extent it can't be fully insured.

And take the hurricane warnings and evacuation notices seriously, even though most of the time they'll be false alarms. That one unpredictable time it isn't, you could, well, *die*.

“Can't you just tread water for a few hours?” I asked, naively. Charles and I have a place on the edge of the dune. “It's possible,” Bryan said, “but when the storm surge comes in, the force of those millions of tons of water rushing at you at 25 miles an hour is murderous.” And hard, blunt, things are flying around and slamming into you. Bryan displays a photo of a large palm tree, perhaps two feet thick at its cement-like core. Sticking all the way *through* that cement-like core – like an arrow throw a cowboy – is a six-foot piece of wood that must have been flying through the air at more than 100 miles an hour.)

Everybody should have one of those no-batteries-needed radio-cum-flashlights you can operate by cranking the little dynamo generator. If you live *anywhere* you could lose power – California comes to mind – you might want one in each room. [This one](#) lacks the hand-crank generator but would work until you ran out of batteries. [This one](#) isn't cheap, but it runs on batteries, stores solar power, or, if need be, runs forever with nothing but your hand cranking its generator. Here's [another](#) kind for half the price.

A large inflatable raft couldn't hurt, either. (Look at the poor folks along the banks of the Mississippi this month.)

So what could happen in Manhattan? “A hurricane that comes up the coast and pushes water into New York Harbor would take out the financial center of the world,” Bryan explains. It would flood lower Manhattan, flood the tunnels in and out of New York, flood the subways – they would become submarine ways – and wreck the underground power and communications systems.

Have I mentioned buying tuna fish in bulk, lately?

It's always fun to talk with my friend Bryan Norcross when he comes back from a hurricane conference

To see how you might fare in your neck of the woods, from Texas to New England, click [here](#).

© 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 Andrew Tobias