

beatts me!; **The Left Coast Is Toast--Very Wet Toast:[Home Edition]**

ANNE BEATTS. *The Los Angeles Times*. (Record edition). Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 27, 1998. pg. 8

Full Text (1020 words)

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OK, I'm not going to write about You Know What for a change. The president of Sweden--or whatever they have that passes for president over there in those foreign parts outside the Beltway, maybe it's the king--said we Americans are lucky not to have anything more serious to worry about than the president and his Starr-crossed love affair with Monica Lewinsky. (And if you actually watched all four hours of Clinton's testimony, and couldn't find anything better to do with your time, like rolling your socks into balls or putting that blue stuff in the toilet bowl, then maybe you should seriously consider getting a life.)

So, in the public interest, this column is going to give my fellow Americans something else to worry about--at least those of you who live in Southern California. I have one word for you: tsunami. Or, in two words: tidal wave (only it doesn't sound as scary). Yep, you read it here first.

Or maybe not. Maybe, like me, you read about it last weekend in another section of this very newspaper, the Westside Weekly. With a real grabber of a computer-generated photo showing what would happen to the Malibu pier should a tidal wave strike. Only there weren't any people, computer-generated or otherwise, on the Malibu pier in the photo.

If your guess is that the Malibu pier, when hit by a tidal wave, would crumble faster than the president's Democratic congressional support, you'd be right. And then most of the Westside would follow.

"In a way, the parking lots on the beach would enhance the destruction of the wave," tsunami expert Costas Synolakis suggests. "The cars would become projectiles and hit the houses." Of course, on the up side, if Malibu happened to be on fire, as it is at least once or twice a year, the big wave might help to douse the flames.

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Here's how it works: An earthquake triggers a landslide in an offshore underwater cavern, and a tsunami is born. And it doesn't even have to be all that big an earthquake. The undersea earthquake that started the tsunami that all but totaled Papua, New Guinea, a few months ago was only a 7.0. Naturally, however, we didn't pay too much attention to that one, because it didn't happen here in God's country but off in some place that your average first-year USC student couldn't find on a map.

The most deadly tsunami in California in recent memory hit in 1964, striking the Northern California shoreline between Eureka and Crescent City, killing 11 people. Of course, only 11 or possibly 12 people and 13 Frisbee-tossing dogs, many of them wearing colorful bandannas in place of collars, lived in Northern California between Eureka and Crescent City in 1964, so while it was devastating, particularly to the medicinal-herb-cultivating industry, it wasn't that lethal on a grand scale.

By contrast, if a serious tsunami--like the 45-foot-high, 5-mile-long, 20-mile-wide number that did the job on Papua--collided with the Southern California coastline, it would flatten everything in its path for two miles inland, wiping out countless homes, businesses and more than 2,000 Starbucks in Santa Monica alone.

Are you starting to get anxious yet? Makes all that to-do in Washington seem pretty unimportant now, doesn't it, compared with a whole lotta water--and maybe a coupla flying cars--heading over and through what used to be your house?

But not to worry, because Malibu has an emergency preparedness office. And this very weekend, the city's officials have been carrying out an emergency earthquake exercise, as mandated by state and federal authorities.

Unfortunately, I'm unable to attend the exercise, due to some very important personal business related to the organization of my own sock drawer, but from what I can understand, tens of volunteers are practicing earthquake and tsunami response at parks and parking lots in Malibu.

The official plan relies mainly on an emergency phone number that people (or, anyway, those people who know the emergency phone number) can call for help, as well as a team of five (count 'em, five!) emergency workers who are dispatched to areas with hand-held radios and cellular telephones. One hopes that future tsunamis will cooperate and not strike at, say, noon on a sunny Saturday, when no one in the 'bu can be dispatched to any areas at all, even to the corner store for margarita mix, without cooling his or her heels for two or three hours in bumper-to-bumper traffic on PCH.

Apparently there are two kinds of tsunamis: tele-tsunamis and local tsunamis. A tele-tsunami forms far off-shore, giving coastal residents several hours to evacuate. A local tsunami can reach shore in as few as 10 minutes--and once it does, it'll be moving at 30 to 50 mph.

I don't know about you, but sometimes it can take me quite a bit longer than 10 minutes to reach anyone on a cell phone. And that's not allowing any time for the dispatching part. But the emergency preparedness office has gotta be, well, prepared, right? I mean, these guys must know their stuff. Because they're all that stands between us and a major disaster.

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Oh, the authorities are on it, for sure. For instance, members of the National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program met two weeks ago in Pasadena (a good safe distance from the ocean) ostensibly to "update one another on their progress." I'm guessing that while they were there, they checked out some local real estate options.

But before you freak out about your oceanfront property becoming the property of the ocean, take heart. Because the states of Alaska, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington and California have joined forces in an aggressive new tsunami-awareness program. Their first sweeping five-state-wide offensive involves signage. That's right, signs.

The blue-and-white warning signs, to be installed in beach areas, depict a person running from a giant wave, with the message: "Tsunami hazard zone. In case of earthquake, go to high ground or inland." Apparently the steering group rejected the alternative slogan: "If you're close enough to read this, it's too late."

Credit: Anne Beatts is a writer who lives in Hollywood

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