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# Welcoming a monster to the world: Myths, oral tradition, and modern societal response to volcanic disasters

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### Abstract

Volcanic eruptions can overwhelm all senses of observers in their violence, spectacle and sheer incredibility. When an eruption is catastrophic or unexpected, neither individuals nor communities can easily assimilate the event into their world view. Psychological studies of disaster aftermaths have shown that trauma can shake the very foundations of a person's faith and trigger a search "supernatural, religious, or scientific" for answers. For this reason, the ability to rapidly comprehend a traumatic event by "accepting" the catastrophe as part the observer's world represents an important component of community resilience to natural hazards. A relationship with the event may be constructed by adapting existing cosmological, ancestral, or scientific frameworks, as well as through creative and artistic expression. In non-literate societies, communal perceptions of an event may be transformed into stories that offer myth-like

explanations. As these stories make their way into oral traditions, they often undergo major changes to allow transmission through generations and, in some cases, to serve political or religious purposes. Disaster responses in literate societies are no different, except that they are more easily recorded and therefore are less prone to change over time.

Here we explore ways in which the language, imagery and metaphor used to describe volcanic events may link disparate societies (both present and past) in their search for understanding of volcanic catastrophes. Responses to modern eruptions (1980 Mount St Helens, USA, and 1995â€“present Soufriere Hills, Montserrat) provide a baseline for examining the progression to older historic events that have already developed oral traditions (1886 Tarawera, New Zealand) and finally to oral traditions many hundreds of years old in both the Pacific Northwest US and New Zealand (NZ). We see that repeated volcanism over many generations produces rich webs of cosmology and history surrounding volcanoes. NZ Maori have incorporated volcanoes into the lineage of tribes and individuals, thus good and bad outcomes from volcanism are part of long-term cycles of reciprocity and equilibrium that link modern Maori to their ancestors. In both regions, cosmologies and mythologies not only document the attempts of past cultures to recover from the impacts of volcanic disasters, but also provide a means by which following generations can understand, contextualize, and therefore recover from, future volcanic catastrophes. We further suggest that such local traditions can provide a valuable community education tool as well as an important means of aiding the psychosocial recovery of individuals and communities after volcanic disasters.



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## Keywords

geomorphology; volcanic hazard mitigation

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