

The earth's power and might

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The Boxing Day tsunami death toll has now risen to 230,000. Apart from cyclones, it constitutes the worst loss of human life in a single day as a result of war or natural causes. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima brought 66,000 dead. The most destructive tsunami and earthquakes have been centred on Portugal in 1755 (100,000 dead), Sicily in 1908 (120,000 dead) and Japan in 1923 (145,000 dead). Cyclones have been rather more destructive with 300,000 dying in a cyclone in the Indian city of Coringa in 1839 and at least a quarter of a million in what is now Bangladesh in 1970.

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The Boxing Day tsunami was coincidentally preceded by the publication of Michael Crichton's new novel, [State of Fear](#). Crichton, author of *Jurassic Park*, draws attention to the blind fanaticism pervading a great number of environmental activist organisations and their supporters. He depicts activist groups sustained by big name celebrities with lots of passion but little knowledge. He portrays them being assisted by mendacious scientists playing on fears to improve their case for research grants.

Crichton in his novel even anticipates a tsunami. He has environmental fanatics attempting to set one off to demonstrate planetary instability and a consequent need for greater giving. This latter distortion of nature is what the great bulk of Hollywood blockbuster novels would attribute to "big coal", "big oil", "big pharma" or other fabricated capitalistic ogres.

In fact, the resources major corporations provide for political persuasion are trivial and in many cases zero. In contrast, many non-government organisations (NGOs) are primarily in the business of political influence mongering.

In attempting to persuade a somewhat apathetic general public of the reality of their fanaticism the NGOs in Crichton's novel, as in real life, consider it perfectly legitimate to exaggerate and distort.

It is not difficult to relate to this in Australia. Thus we hear of Tasmanian forests that have lived undisturbed by man for 1,000 years now being under threat - yet those forests have been logged countless times and owe their very existence to aboriginal plant husbandry. Australia's forested area has been increasing for over half a century.

We hear of dire consequences from the non-signature by the US (and its Australian lackey) of the Kyoto Treaty including a boiling planet with increased extreme weather events. In fact the outcome of Kyoto, even if the modelling predictions prove accurate (and they have failed to do so since the first satellite records in 1978), would be a trivial 0.2 degrees of heating accompanied by fewer extreme events.

Activists hint darkly that natural phenomena are a harbinger of the impending catastrophe. The Antarctic "carving" of icebergs is said to portend a vast meltdown, but in fact Antarctica itself is showing increased ice build-ups. They point to a glacier here and there retreating and are mute to the equivalent numbers that are advancing. Gullible politicians are taken in and the scientific establishment is all too reticent to offer correct facts.

Although there is an ancient tradition of blaming ourselves for the punishments the gods have meted

out on us with physical catastrophes, the popularity of modern environmental activism stems from hubris about the overweening power of mankind. In fact the area of the globe over which mankind might be said to exercise some dominance - the top one kilometer of the surface - comprises only 0.7 per cent of the planet.

This lends weight to one of the more humbling statistics emerging from the disaster - that the power of the tectonic shift was equivalent to over 8,000 nuclear bombs. That places nature full square ahead of mankind in its ability to create cataclysms. It also demonstrates the resilience of the earth. There was no feedback from the disaster of the sort that some scientific luminaries with a weather eye on their next grant will routinely predict with man-made conflagrations. The earth is a massive and stable structure. Neither the six billion of us crawling on its crust nor the gazillions of other sentient beings on its surface can do even as much damage as its own occasional stirrings.

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- > [November](#)
- > [October](#)
- > [September](#)
- > [August](#)
- > [July](#)
- > [June](#)
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- > [February](#)
- > [January](#)

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- > [December](#)
- > [November](#)
- > [October](#)
- > [September](#)
- > [August](#)
- > [July](#)
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- > [April](#)

- > [March](#)
- > [February](#)
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- [2005](#)
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- [2003](#)
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