

## Social Scientists Suggest a Disaster Research Agenda: Understanding Socio-Ecological Sustainability and Disaster Resilience Prioritized

By: ERIC C JONES

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**\*\*\*Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

In response to a perception that hazard and disaster research funding is sporadic in scope and focus, Duane A Gill organized and presided over a Katrina Summit held November 18-19 at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center, where Gill is the associate director for research on society and environment and coordinator of the societal risk unit. During the summit social scientists developed a disaster research agenda, including a set of themes and specific funding criteria.

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Figuring prominently as criteria for prioritizing research were policy contributions, innovative ideas, comparative analysis, emergency management, participatory recovery timeliness and collection of baseline data. The criterion that received the most discussion, however, was the potential for understanding the nexus of vulnerability reduction, socio-ecological sustainability and disaster resilience.

Sustainability research in relation to Hurricane Katrina and other disasters could reach from local perceptions of risk, to the potential social and cultural impacts of allowing part of the Mississippi to run free again to create buffering wetlands, to geographically representative studies of the experience of displaced people and the receiving communities.

Of course, the 2004 Asian Tsunami was much more destructive than these US storms, and has provided some impetus for studying socio-ecological vulnerability and resilience. Still, below-sea-level New Orleans and its surrounding wetlands present a particularly interesting case for studying human ecosystem sustainability.

As the wards recreate themselves, can New Orleans support the incredible sense of belonging and identity of its wards in a way that also encourages local production and consumption? When rebuilt, can New Orleans incorporate water and rail into a transportation system that will minimize automobiles and related water pollutants? Can *chinampas* agriculture be adopted in the city if soil and water pollutants are re-mediated? Can new buildings, especially larger ones, incorporate green or natural design to minimize air conditioning needs? Would merry-making

tourists still visit such a new and green New Orleans, and would they take any lessons on environmentally low-impact living back home?

Despite technology's inability to protect people in developed countries from disasters, summit participants considered the possibility that planning and technology might be better incorporated that allows the biophysical environment to do the things that it does best.

The consensus of the summit was that sustainability is feasible for the New Orleans area, but only if funding agencies and policy makers support and consider research that carefully focuses on socio-ecological sustainability and resilience; Though still relatively unimplemented, these concepts force us to think about how human-dominated ecosystems of varying scales might be able to better weather major natural disasters and resulting emergencies. However, the concepts of sustainability and resilience typically only allow for peripheral consideration of who is affected and who is not—through subsequent social unrest and related potential lack of sustainability. Nonetheless, the summit's emphasis on a participatory planning and recovery process is one way of addressing differential social impacts of future hazards and disasters, since the post-disaster liminal experience (ie, temporary abandonment of many social rules) can be relatively egalitarian and provide the ground for relatively inclusive community responses if they are enacted quickly.

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Gill and summit attendees will submit their report to Gulf Coast congressional delegations, the US President's science adviser, relevant governmental funding agencies like NSF, NIH and DHS as well as non-governmental funding agencies interested in sustainability, such as the Ford Foundation, Kellogg Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation.

The summit was funded by the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, and included 18 invited scholars from geography, anthropology, sociology and psychology who study disaster. Five of the participants were from New Orleans universities, four of whom have been granted visiting scholar status at Mississippi State's Social Science Research Center while their institutions rebuild following Hurricane Katrina's damage. Anthropologists Ann Edwards (U New Orleans) and Eric C Jones (U North Carolina-Greensboro) participated. VI]

*Eric C Jones is a post-doctoral research associate with Arthur D Murphy's NIMH-funded project, "Social and Cultural Dynamics of Disaster Recovery." Jones has helped form the multidisciplinary Extreme Events Work Group at UNC-Greensboro which is sponsoring an invited workshop on Event Quality and Community Resilience in May.*