

Disaster Preparedness and Response for Cultural Properties among Caribbean States

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Resumen

La gestión de los desastres que afectan a los bienes culturales en la región del Caribe

En la región del Caribe, la dinámica de la tectónica de placas genera una actividad geológica considerable, causando terremotos y erupciones volcánicas frecuentes.

Distintos centros regionales de investigación (universidades, organismos y asociaciones) se dedican al estudio de los movimientos sísmicos y forman una red de profesionales que proporcionan una valiosa asistencia. Esos centros colaboran al mismo tiempo con los organismos internacionales en el ámbito de la gestión de riesgos, así como en el de la protección y conservación de los bienes culturales.

Résumé

La gestion des catastrophes touchant les biens culturels dans les Caraïbes

Les Caraïbes ont une activité géologique importante due à la tectonique des plaques qui donne naissance à de fréquents tremblements de terre et irrptions volcaniques.

Des centres de recherches régionaux (université, agence, association) étudient les mouvements sismiques et forment un réseau de professionnels assurant une précieuse assistance, tout en collaborant avec des organismes internationaux sur la gestion des risques, la préservation et la conservation des biens culturels.

Between the continents of North America and South America lies an arc of islands extending eastwards from just south of Florida in the USA, then curving southwards to the South American mainland. The roughly rectangular area enclosed by this chain of islands and bordered on the west by the narrow continuous land mass connecting the continents north and south, is occupied by the Caribbean Sea. This Caribbean Sea lies atop a tectonic plate whose northern, eastern and southern edges meet the Atlantic, North American and South American plates respectively in an area of volcanic and earthquake activity which indeed explains the origin of the islands themselves.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in the same tropical latitudes of the Caribbean islands, hot easterly winds from off the Sahara in North Africa are heated further by the surface of an ocean exposed to the

radiation of the sun which is more or less directly overhead in May-July. This gives rise to the cyclonic moisture-saturated air currents which hustle across the Atlantic each year from July to October, some of them bombarding the islands as well as Central America and the southern area of North America, as hurricanes.

It was in this part of the world that in the 16th and 17th centuries European explorers and adventurers first encountered then exploited different cultures, different environments to which other people, other fauna and flora were introduced in large numbers.

There were profound impacts on the culture, economy, demography and ecology of the region.

The legacies of this colonisation are everywhere. There is a distinctive Hispanic Caribbean, an Anglophone, Francophone, a Dutch Caribbean, and different forms of government and administration. At the same time there is a recognizable Caribbean culture – a syncretic but fluid combination of Africa, Europe, Asia and Native America. The social histories were similar, are shared; the geological history is the same; and the geographical realities – of location, sea, winds, temperatures, hurricanes, droughts, floods, etc. – are common to the entire region, albeit in varying degrees.

Natural Disasters

The process of subduction of the North and South American tectonic plates beneath the Caribbean plate is continuous and gives rise, from time to time, to earthquake and volcanic activity. In historical times, Port Royal in Jamaica and Jamestown in Nevis subsided into the sea and were destroyed with much loss of life in the late 17th century. In 1843 another big earthquake was felt throughout the islands of the Eastern Caribbean resulting in loss of life. There were several minor tremors throughout the years, with more severe activity recorded in 1974 and 1997.

There are, likewise, volcanoes throughout the islands which act up every now and again; and there have been major eruptions, most notably the Soufriere volcano in St. Vincent in 1902–1903 resulting in more than 1,500 deaths, and the explosive eruption of Mount Pelé in Martinique in 1902 which destroyed the town of St. Pierre and its 28,000 inhabitants. More recently the Soufriere Hills volcano in Montserrat began erupting in July 1995 and still continues to pose a threat to the entire island. Two-thirds of the island lies in the danger zone and more than half the population have left.

For most Caribbean people however, the most urgent threat is from hurricanes. These are seasonal, more predictable and, in recent years, fairly regular.

Preparedness and Response

Volcanic and earthquake activity in the Commonwealth Eastern Caribbean is monitored by the Seismic Research Unit of the University of the West Indies which is funded by these former British colonies which now, except for Montserrat and the British Virgin Islands, are

independent states. Close links are maintained with the French and Venezuelan agencies which monitor such activities in the French Caribbean Departments and Venezuela respectively. The Seismic Research Unit also monitors, under contract, the Dutch Antillean Islands.

The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA) on the other hand, is concerned mainly with disaster response and management. There is a Regional Intergovernmental Agency of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), an association of former British colonies in the Caribbean, now widened to include Haiti and Surinam. Each Member State of CARICOM has its own disaster response agency, linked with each other through membership of CDERA.

There is no regional, nor indeed national policy or mechanism which addresses disaster mitigation and response for cultural heritage including monuments, structures and collections. Cognizant of this deficiency, the Museums Association of the Caribbean (MAC), comprising museums and related institutions throughout the region as well as museum professionals and other associates, has convened two workshops for its members in which professionals from CDERA and other agencies have provided invaluable assistance. Out of these exercises, most museum members of MAC have put in place disaster mitigation and response strategies for their respective institutions. The training derived from this experience has been expressed several times since as one hurricane after another, accompanied in some cases by heavy rainfall, flooding and salt-saturated air, have battered the islands in recent years. An outstanding example of inter-island collaboration occurred when members of MAC secured the museum collection of the Montserrat National Trust which was threatened by the erupting volcano, and stored it for a time at the Barbados Museum.

In 2001 a one-week Caribbean and Central American workshop in risk management for cultural properties was held in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. This important workshop was conducted by ICCROM, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. A follow-up workshop is to be held next month (December 2003).

Most of the museums of the Caribbean are small, woefully under-funded, with staff strong on commitment but weak in training. Governments of the islands tend to spend little of their scarce resources on the preservation and protection of cultural heritage, and even private sector corporations prefer to support the more populist projects such as sports and festivals. Yet as we all know here, cultural heritage and its preservation and protection are of fundamental importance to national development. Many initiatives have been taken by non-governmental non-profit organisations in promoting greater awareness of the value of cultural heritage and in implementing measures to protect this heritage. They need more help.