

# [Natural around this argument and i will do](https://assignbuster.com/natural-around-this-argument-and-i-will-do/)

Natural disasters are often viewed by the mass ascatastrophic happenings that are often beyond our human power. However, in the recentyears attitudes are changing as disaster scholars, social scientists and geographersargue that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. The argument thatthere is no such thing as a natural disaster is formed on the claim that thehuman interference removes the naturalness of the disaster, therefore as aresult, disasters are most times rather unnatural. On the other hand, theoristssuch as Turner (1976) and Steinberg (2000) argue against this claim and insteadsupport the existence of natural disasters. In this essay I am going to explorethe natural disaster debate. I will do this by analysing two disasters indepth, the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the Foot and Mouth disease of 2001.

Also, I will briefly touch upon a third disaster, Hurricane Katrina. I will then endby coming to a conclusion and offering my opinion after my research into thedisasters, as to whether or not it can be argued that there is such a thing asa natural disaster. Understanding whetherthere is such thing as a natural disaster is a complicated topic. Firstly, thisis because for example, according to researcher Whatmore (1999) there is anextensive discussion around if humans should be viewed as part of nature andbeing a natural element, or if we should be expelled and separated from thenature argument. Whatmore (1999, as cited in Cloke, Crang and Goodwin, 2014, p156) argues that nature is “…socially constructed in the sense that it istransformed through the labour process and is fashioned by technologies ofhuman production.” With this argument in mind in the first half of this essay Iam going to tackle the statement “ there is no such thing as a natural disaster” by supporting it and building my case around this argument and I will do thisby taking the word nature and separating it from the concept of humanity.

The first disaster that is going to be explored inthis essay is the earthquake which took place in Haiti in the year of 2010. Haiti is a small country which is located on the island of Hispaniola. Haiti isa less economically developed country and it is also one of the world’s mostpoverty-stricken countries (Schuller and Morales, 2012). In Haiti there arelimited opportunities for people and because of this as mentioned many peopleface heavy levels of poverty. With the theme of poverty in mind the locals haverestricted pliability to a potential disaster for example, there are noevacuation plans, there is poor protecting infrastructure and the people ofHaiti also have minimal and poor emergency access (Lackoff, 2007 and Newman, 2010). However, despite this on January the 12th 2010, an earthquakewith a measured magnitude of seven on the Richter scale devastated the smallcountry of Haiti. The effects that followed after the earthquake hit Haiti wherecatastrophic, devastation followed in the forms of damage to infrastructure, families left torn apart and a death toll estimated at two hundred and thirtythousand people.

Haiti was left torn apart after the earthquake destroyed thecountry. To begin with, Pierre-Louis (2017) argues that what wecall natural disasters such as, earthquakes, hurricanes and floods are indeed natural, but they are just natural hazards. According to Pierre-Louis (2017) populationin the area which is affected by the hazard plays a key role in defining whathas occurred. To use an example, according to Pierre- Louis (2017) if thepopulation is affected it is a natural hazard. However, if a population is notaffected we should just label a flood as the weather because there have been nolives lost or damage to buildings and infrastructure (Pierre-Louis, 2017). Thiscan be linked to Pelling’s (2003) environmental outline whereby a naturalhazard merged with human vulnerability results in a disaster. Pierre-Louis(2017) takes problem with the word ‘ natural’, such as used by Pelling (2003) inthe environmental diagram, because according to Pierre-Louis (2017) it shouldbe used loosely as there are often predictions and warnings about disasters, therefore we should in fact as a population we are able plan accordingly for adisaster.

Therefore, as a result they are not ‘ natural’ because we have hadpredictions and warnings. Consequently, only when there are problems such as, lack of infrastructure and poor planning we can then label it as a disaster(Pierre-Louis, 2017). If we refer to disasters such like, the Haiti earthquakeand Hurricane Katrina as natural we immediately untie ourselves from theresponsibility and adequately planning for the hazard as instead as apopulation we adopt a seemingly lazy it is inevitable attitude (Pierre-Louis, 2017).  Therefore, it could be arguedthat natural disasters are socially constructed events which are tied up inproblems of marginalisation and prejudices. There is no such thing as a naturaldisaster and rather it is a term used which allows people and groups to avoidresponsibility and blame. Secondly, Sheller (2012) in the article introduces theconcept of the ‘ islanding effect’ to help us understand that there is no suchthing as a natural disaster. In the article Sheller discusses how islands suchas Haiti are at a severe pitfall when it comes to escaping from a post disaster.

The islanding effect works firstly by restricting movement in a triad of stages. Firstly, in the case of Haiti, travel out of the island is restricted duringevacuation for safety purposes, travel was restricted after the disaster hasoccurred and travel is often restricted if the disaster can be predicted. Inthe case of the Haiti earthquake there was little distress warning given andadditionally there was no time to evacuate when the disaster earthquake struckand therefore people become trapped.

According to Sheller (2012) the islandingeffect is down to unequal access to mobility and this can be linked to thetheme of marginalisation. Consequently, this unequal access to mobilityresulted in the Haitians becoming confined and trapped on their own island(Sheller, 2012). Moreover, in the case of the Haiti earthquake the disasterlogistic tragically produced uneven mobilities, for example outside foreign aidworkers held the ability to bring in supplies and they could come and go withfree will, whereas the poverty-stricken locals faced decreased mobility(Sheller, 2012). The people that generally escaped the island where UnitedStates citizens of a Haitian origin, or the affluent citizens of Haiti(Sheller, 2012). Therefore, the people trapped after the disaster and unable toflee where the marginalised poorer citizens of Haiti, with some people havingno passports, or money to travel.

In a like manner, the theme of marginalisationof the poorer social groups is not just aligned to the Haiti earthquake. Marginalisation of the poorer social groups is a common theme throughout manydisasters and to give another example this can be seen in the disaster ofHurricane Katrina. The evacuation plans for Hurricane Katrina relied onautomobility as Sheller (2012, p188) states “…evacuation plans relied onsystems of automobility…” Therefore, again the theme of marginalisation of thepoor can be seen because those who cannot afford their own transport are notcovered in the evacuation plan. Brooks (2005, as cited in Squires and Hartman, 2006) argues that Hurricane Katrina was mislabelled as a natural disaster andrather it was a social disaster. Then, with this argument in mind it can beconcluded that both the Haiti earthquake and Hurricane Katrina are humaninduced disasters rather than natural because if it was not for themarginalisation of the poor then there would not have been such a high deathtoll and destruction rate. Therefore, with this second argument in mind we canindeed say that there is no such thing as a natural disaster.

Moreover, disasters are further made worse by humaninteraction and vulnerability. To put this into context, disasterreconstruction more often than not deepens the exploitation of the marginalised(Smith, 2006). After the disaster struck New Orleans with Hurricane Katrina andthe dead became unaccounted for it was found that developers had already beganto look for a new opportunity. The takeover of the developers was compared to a” developers’ gold rush” (Streitfield, 2005, as cited in Smith, 2006, para 3).

This is a common theme after disasters asdevelopers seek to rebuild. However, the poor and marginalised often become worseoff after the disaster due to a decrease in wages, an increase in stigma and anincrease in costs for alternative housing (Smith, 2006). Therefore, again thereis a theme of the marginalisation of the poor as the money focused developersstrive to make a profit and as a result the poor are displaced. Smith (2006, para 16) claims that “ There is no such thing as a natural disaster, and thesupposed naturalness of the market is the last place to look…

” I agree withthis because as demonstrated it is human interaction as proved which almostalways links up with disasters and often this worsens them, especially in thecase of post Hurricane Katrina. To sum up, the argument put forward by theorists suchas Squires and Hartman (2006), Smith (2006) and Sheller (2012) that there is nosuch thing as a natural disaster. I believe is accurate.

Firstly, I am insupport of the claim because if it was not for the marginalisation of the poorin Haiti and Hurricane Katrina then the damage and death toll could have indeedbeen reduced, or even prevented. Moreover, if it was not for the ignorance ofwarning given pre-disaster then again, the damage could have been on a muchlower and less damaging scale. Additionally, I believe it is important to takethe stance like theorists Smith (2006) and Sheller (2012) by insisting thatthere is no such thing as a natural disaster because through taking this stancewe are able to take responsibility as a society and also take action tominimise the possibility of such disaster, or hazard happening again. On the other hand, it is important to recognise thatthere is a weakness to the argument formed by the social scientists, geographers and disaster scholars in that there is no such thing as a naturaldisaster.  In the second half of this discussionessay I am going to consider nature and humanity as intertwined concepts.

Iwill explore why it could be argued that there is such thing as a naturaldisaster.  I will achieve this by using theFoot and Mouth disease case which visited the UK in 2001 and again the Haitiearthquake of 2010 to demonstrate this point of view. The Foot and Mouth disease is an infectious and oftenfatal disease that affects cloven-hoofed animals.  In 2001, over a period of seven months theFoot and Mouth contaminated over 2030 premises. The contamination led toslaughter of six million animals and it was particularly hard hitting for therural communities (Law and Singleton, 2004). Animals which are affected by Footand Mouth are cloven-hoofed animals such like, sheep, goats and deer. Cumbriawas the hardest hit compared to any other place in the United Kingdom, theoutbreak lasted for months on end in upland areas and this was particularlytragic because the farming community was already suffering due to the droppingglobal prices and the changes in exchange rate between £ sterling and the Euro(Law and Singleton, 2004). Turner (1976, as cited in Alexander, 1999, p4) definesa natural disaster as “…an event concentrated in time and space, whichthreatens a society or a relatively self-sufficient subdivision of a societywith major unwanted consequences…”  The definitiongiven by Turner (1976) aligns to the 2001 Foot and Mouth disaster.

Firstly, thefarming society was threatened because farmers lost their animals and this inturn led to farmers losing their livelihoods, an unwanted consequence. Moreover, referring back to the 2010 Haiti earthquake according to Turner (1976) thiscould also be seen as a natural disaster. The Haiti earthquake could be seen asa natural disaster because the earthquake destroyed infrastructure, homes andfamilies, all of which are major unwanted consequences.

For this reason, theFoot and Mouth disease (2001) and the Haiti earthquake (2010) could be seen asnatural disasters as they correlate to the definition presented by Turner(1976). Secondly, it is argued that natural disasters do existand occasionally they are said to be ‘ acts of God’ and this therefore meansthat natural disasters are both inescapable and certain (Apodaca, 2017). Therefore, it could be argued that the Foot and Mouth disease, Haiti earthquake and HurricaneKatrina where certain to happen, no matter what. Erikson also explores thistheme and can be seen to be supporting it within his book “ Natural disastersare almost always experienced acts of God or caprices of nature. They visit us, as if from afar” (Erikson, 1994, as cited in Law and Singleton, 2004, p3).  Therefore, from Erikson (1994) and Apodaca(2017) points of view natural disasters cannot be stopped. Natural disastershave been previously criticised in the first half of this discussion essay for notexisting because as according to Sheller (2012) disasters such as HurricaneKatrina and Haiti could have been prevented, or at least impacts minimisedthrough early preparation and emergency planning.

In major contrast, the ‘ actof God’ viewpoint assumes that disasters are entirely natural and are a resultpunishment for sin (Steinberg, 2000). However, a key weakness of the ‘ act ofGod’ theory is that it is used by officials such as governments to escaperesponsibility for the disaster (Steinberg, 2000) For example, through namingHaiti earthquake as an ‘ act of God’ governments are able to escape therealities of marginalisation of the poor. Moreover, in the case of Foot andMouth disease by claiming an ‘ act of God’ officials avoid realities of thedisaster and how to prevent an outbreak from happening again in the futureyears to come. Overall, the argument putforward by Turner (1976), Steinberg (2000) and Apodaca (2017) in that disastersare natural I believe is that of a weak one. Firstly, using the statementdisasters are an ‘ act of God’ is an escapist term and a way to avoidpunishment. I use the term avoid punishment because officials do not want to beseen as responsible because if they are they may incorporate fines fordisasters and this claim of responsibility can also lead to imprisonment. Therefore, then as a result, negative press will follow and whoever is fined to beresponsible will be faced with stigma.

However, on the other hand thedefinition of a natural disaster put forward by Turner (196) of an event whichthreatens a society with unwanted consequences does hold some logic I believe. There is always going to be a split in society of the classes, for example richand the poor and more often as we have found the poor are mostly affected, dueto marginalisation. However, class division on one hand should not stop adisaster such as, Haiti earthquake from being labelled as ‘ natural’, since theweather is a natural element which tragically destroyed a community. Toconclude, this essay has explored the claim that there is no such thing as anatural disaster using three disasters, Haiti earthquake, Hurricane Katrina andthe Foot and Mouth disaster. This essay has concluded the two sides of theargument and I have incorporated my views into each sections conclusion. However, as I have established the causes of disasters are more complex thanthey appear to be at first and this is because they transpire out of complexsocial and natural interactions.

It becomes increasingly hard to distinguishwhether a disaster is natural because as this essay has revealed humans arealmost always involved and because of this many argue that this removes thenaturalness from the disaster (Whatmore, 1999). Nevertheless, I am concludingthat indeed there is no such thing as a natural disaster. I am concluding withthis opinion because if it was not for the social and economic issues coupledwith human interaction then the primary and secondary effects of HurricaneKatrina and Haiti earthquake would not have been so adverse.

On the contrary, this arguably does not explain the reasoning behind Foot and Mouth disease(2010). However, it was found that the Government ignored advice given in 1969Northumberland report into previous Foot and Mouth whereby it was said infectedanimals should be killed and buried on the same day (Brooker and North, 2001). This crucial piece of information again signifies that humans contributed tothe intensifying disaster and if farmers did kill and bury infected animals onthe same day then the disaster may not have destroyed such high numbers oflivestock.

Therefore, with this in mind it can be argued there indeed is nosuch thing as a natural disaster, humans coupled with inequalities almostalways do remove the naturalness from disasters. Word count – 2, 893