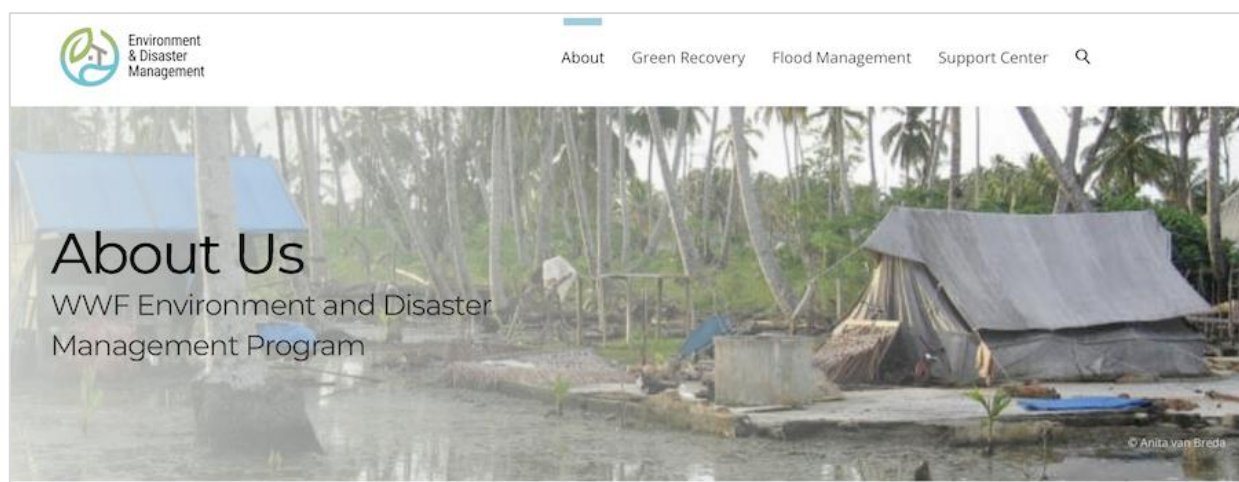


The expert view: disasters are not natural...

Interviewer: [Gareth Byatt](#) – Principal Consultant, [Risk Insight Consulting](#)
 Interviewee: [Anita van Breda](#) – Senior Director, Environment and Disaster Management for [World Wildlife Fund](#)

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Anita,

Thank you for making the time to discuss your work in environmental and disaster management. I am looking forward to hearing your thoughts on why and how we need to understand that disasters are not natural, and what we can do to reduce disaster risk by working with nature, not against it. Can we start by summarising your background, and your current activities in this area?

Anita: Thanks for inviting me into the Disasters Avoided tent for this discussion – I appreciate being able to discuss and share experiences and ideas. I describe myself as an “accidental” disaster risk practitioner. My academic background is in biology and environmental management, and after completing my studies I expected to fulfil my career working on marine and coastal management, for which I have supported initiatives in various parts of the world including the Caribbean and the South Pacific. My involvement in disasters developed after [the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami](#) occurred. I was working for WWF based in Washington DC at the time, and my portfolio of marine management incorporated Indonesia (a country impacted by this event) as part of my geographic remit. At the time we were working on fisheries and aquaculture issues in this country, and when I learned about the reconstruction and recovery efforts taking place there in the aftermath of this tragic event (much of which was focused (quite rightly) on livelihoods which were marine and coastal, fisheries and aquaculture).

I started looking at how deeply humanitarian agencies were understanding the connections between their work and nature, and the opportunity to investing in building resilience for communities moving forwards. We saw that their experience and knowledge in this space was at the time quite limited – this is not a criticism, everyone was experiencing a rapid learning curve and there was a lot to do. One of the observations we made was that, with all good intentions, actions being taken to support humanitarian assistance could have unintended consequences; that by encouraging and facilitating livelihood reconstruction in a certain way it could inadvertently set the communities they were working to support on a downward trajectory (due dwindling fish stocks, and coastal destruction linked to aquaculture production).

This was my introduction to disasters and the tough realities of managing reconstruction after disaster events occur. I saw how everything humanitarian agencies do in a post-disaster situation has an environmental footprint and a climate footprint. My team in WWF decided to look at how nature and environmental management could, and should, be part of a holistic post-disaster recovery process that would lead to better outcomes for people who were rebuilding their lives, and nature and the environment that is fundamental to our collective “safety net”. We felt that WWF and other environmental groups had something positive to offer in this space. This became my life’s career and passion, to understand how we can work with nature to reduce disaster risk and vulnerability for people, recognising that there are always trade-offs which are often challenging and difficult.

We cannot, in my view, eliminate all the impacts that hazards create when they occur; however, we can reduce the impact with forward looking actions, whilst working towards the goal of putting people on a pathway towards a future that is safer and more secure for survival.

My team at WWF has been working in this space since 2005. Every year there are more challenges and more issues to solve that drive us to keep improving how we carry out our work, and to bring what we hope is a positive contribution to what are always difficult circumstances. Amongst the challenges, climate change and the range of impacts it is having are leading us to see how we can speed up some of our work and the breadth of people we undertake it with. We have seen a change in attitude and approach since 2004 with regard to the role of nature in reducing risks that are present, and the risks we need to anticipate.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview, Anita. There’s a lot for us to unpack in this interview based on what you have outlined. For example, I wonder if the interlinkages between humanitarian support and environmental management are regularly thought about by decision-makers and funding owners of disaster risk reduction and management. This point makes me think about the importance of taking a systems approach to disaster risk reduction and disaster response, which perhaps we will come back to later in this interview.

As a first follow up point, I am keen to get your views on the power of words – specifically, on the way we describe disasters.

We talk about hazards, we talk about occurred disasters, and many people use the term “natural disasters”, which ourselves as the Disasters Avoided team feel is incorrect – they are disasters, and they are not natural. We know from your work including an article you wrote [for CNN, published in August 2024 about “Why there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ disaster”](#), that you are aligned with us on this point.

Are you seeing an increasing recognition, and value in doing so, by people to not describe disasters as natural; that the choices we make – noting of course that some people are not given a choice, they are placed in harm’s way due to their circumstances – are key factors to whether disasters occur?

We know that many definitions of a disaster exist. The IFRC definition as of September 2024 is:

Disasters are serious disruptions to the functioning of a community that exceed its capacity to cope using its own resources.

Disasters can be caused by natural, man-made and technological hazards, as well as various factors that influence the exposure and vulnerability of a community.

In our Disasters Avoided work, Ilan Kelman, Ana Prados and I put forward the following short definition, which bears similarity to the IFRC one:

[A major situation requiring outside support for coping.](#)

Anita: It’s a very interesting question, to which there are several points and factors to think about, and issues that are wrapped up into it. As Ilan Kelman, Kevin Blanchard (who led the [#NoNaturalDisasters](#) campaign) and others have pointed out, the effort to explain that disasters are not natural is not new – this matter has been debated for a long time. I am glad that the current advocacy approach about this matter is working and seems to be taking hold, whilst noting that there is always more to do.

When we agree that disasters are not natural, it opens the door to a conversation – to discuss “So, why isn’t a disaster natural?” Unpacking the short phrase, no natural disasters, opens many avenues to explore which can help us in many ways. It allows us to discuss the many factors that contribute towards disaster risk, and in my case as an environmentalist, explain that hazards can be natural, but risk is something we create. And it allows me to advocate for the notion that nature should be part of a full disaster management cycle, and to turn the conversation into a positive one that shows the valuable role nature has in this area rather than a negative-based discussion of inevitable problems.

I also want to say that I agree with Ilan when he says that the process of appreciating why disasters are not natural is one of learning, experience and being ready to adapt. I have referred to “natural disasters” in the past, and it is through learning and thinking about things carefully that I now look at disasters, and that phrase “natural disasters differently. I hope that the learning process and journey I have been through helps me in turn to help others understand the role of nature in disaster risk – and risk reduction.

Gareth: I appreciate this perspective about how a conversation about “no natural disasters” opens up a conversation. One of the things you talk about in the CNN article you wrote is the need to focus on things that are within our control and that, if we start with the premise that disasters are not natural, there are things that we can and should do that are within our control to prevent disasters from occurring, or to minimise the effect if hazard eventuates. This includes a discussion about funds available for preventative action (UNDRR for example continue to talk about how there is too little funding in the preventative space).

I noted the point you make about how *“the word “natural” implies that disaster events are entirely out of our control, thereby absolving us of the responsibility to prepare and reduce risk from natural hazards.”* For me, this discussion point leads to a discussion about accountability for ensuring funding and action to reduce disaster risk is in place. I’d be interested in your thoughts on this.

Anita: *Accountability for action is certainly key. For context, I believe there are less frequent cases nowadays than in the past of terms used by politicians and policy makers such as “Acts of God” when referring to disasters – which is a good thing.*

We need to continue with an education and awareness drive to maintain this mindset. It is increasingly difficult to make the case for “natural disasters” and “Acts of God” when, for example, as a global population, our actions keep adding to climate change risk.

A core part of this from my perspective comes down to what we think as a species, in terms of our ability to control or manipulate nature. We believe in our ability to make nature work and change the way we want it to. In the past, I have listened to many people in government agencies lament the fact that the mindset in the past was to think we could streamline riverbeds and channelise and engineer nature in a way that was felt to be most advantageous to people. We now see that this mindset is coming back to bite us. It is good that we are seeing changes in the mindset and the actions we take, to work with and appreciate nature rather than build over and try to conquer it. Concepts and programs such as Engineering with Nature are helping us to be honest about the limitations of engineering and the limitations on ourselves as humans to manipulate and “overcome” nature. Instead of looking at nature as a resource to be exploited, we need to look at it as our safety net. We cannot survive without a healthy functioning environment.

In the work we do in disaster risk and reconstruction, this has to be part of our mental mindset. We have to keep moving in this direction – from a policy perspective, practical application of actions and through the funding we commit.

Gareth: The point you make here reminds me of this quote in your article: *“it’s not nature’s wrath that’s ultimately responsible for the death toll and destruction. It’s vulnerable social, physical and ecological systems – communities living with inadequate water, sanitation, shelter and healthcare, poorly built and maintained infrastructure, and degraded forests, wetlands and coral reefs unable to provide protection from storms.”*

On a positive note, through our Disasters Avoided work we are seeing examples, from small-scale to large, of good action being taken to minimise disaster risk and avoid disasters. Nature-based Solutions are increasingly being adopted, as one example which links to the point you just made.

You mentioned the importance of a good mental mindset just now. This is the first factor we focus on in [our Disasters Avoided model](#) – we call it “the right mindset”. Some good examples exist of how the right mindset can make a big difference to how we conceive of and design solutions to minimise disaster risk. For example, for flood management, rather than seeing a concrete “grey infrastructure” barrier solution as the way forward to “conquer” nature’s watery threats, we should work with nature to achieve a better, more harmonious, and longer lasting solution. You mention in your article the use of mangroves for coastal resilience, for example.

I see a lot of these types of examples in my work in urban resilience as well as in disaster risk, not just the coastal cities around the world, but others inland. Whilst people may use slightly different terms, it is about being sensible with where we build and respecting the role and the power of nature. There is a lot to do, isn’t there.

***Anita:** I agree with these points. There is a lot to do to create and maintain safe environments for people and to minimise the impact that hazards can have and the risk of disasters occurring. Of course, many people like to live in wonderful areas where nature thrives – be it by the ocean, within forests or in other landscapes – yet we have to appreciate the power of nature and our vulnerabilities, and to take sensible measures to protect ourselves. Whilst saying this, as we know there are also many (too many) people who live in hazard-prone areas that they did not choose and would rather not live there, yet they are the only places available to them.*

If we get better collectively – as individuals, families, communities, neighbourhoods, cities, districts, states and nations – at truly understanding, in a systemic way, where risk comes from and how hazards and risks are interconnected, we can make better choices on how to live and how to live with nature that reduce the risk of disasters occurring. The interconnections that exist are not talked about and discussed enough. We need to be able to apply, at different levels, a systems perspective as you mentioned earlier, to see and appreciate these connections. We have to appreciate that when we implement an engineering solution in one place, it will have some type of impact somewhere else – whether that is “downstream” or in another, perhaps unanticipated way. We don’t want to inadvertently displace risk to others and other areas, yet this is often the case. So how can we understand our context and build and live in a way that is safe without displacing the risk elsewhere, wittingly or not. This is a big challenge that we have to tackle, in all parts of society globally.

Gareth: The point you make on thinking holistically about engineering solutions is an interesting one that resonates with us. In July 2024 we published [a case study on the implications of flood management infrastructure](#), which aligns to your point. The appropriate design and implementation of infrastructure was a key topic of [an interview I held with the ex-head of UNDRR](#), Mami Mizutori, in November 2023.

I agree also that systems thinking should help us to create traction for the right types of sustainable solutions that address disaster risk.

I mentioned just now my work in urban resilience, in which I frequently see the benefits of taking a systems approach to designing and implementing vibrant and thriving urban places. It's not always easy when there are competing interests to cater to, challenges with implementing good governance, and ensuring inclusive design and implementation of agreed solutions, but it can be done – not just in urban areas, anywhere we choose to live.

There is a strong synergy with this discussion point and one of the six factors in [our Disasters Avoided model](#), that of good governance. How important in your view is good governance, at all levels – government, support agencies, development banks, businesses and others – to drive the right focus of acting on the things we can control, upstream and downstream, with the right investment (another of our model factors)?

You provide some examples in your article of positive action being taken. For example, you cite Nepal's learning from [the May 2015 earthquake](#), how they are “building forward” in a way that preserves rather than depletes the natural systems and resources, resonated with me. I often use the phrase “build forwards better” rather than “build back better”, focusing on pragmatic use of systems thinking rather than abstract theories. What other examples have you seen around the world where good learnings are being applied to reduce disaster risk, and to hopefully avoid disasters (we might pick up on some of these for our Disasters Avoided work)?

Anita: I don't tend to use the term “build back better”. I prefer “build back safer and greener”. In the early days of my work in this space, after the 2004 tsunami, which is when the “build back better” term became known and started to be used, better means different things to different people. To some it means bigger, and / or particularly focused on building materials. For others it means not replacing human-made structures, and instead taking a different approach. At WWF we prefer to use build back safer and greener. We use it as a term as shorthand for environmentally responsible, yet we also appreciate that green does not translate to being environmentally friendly in many parts of the world. It's important that we check our assumptions about the words we use with people we converse with. I know that yourselves as a Disasters Avoided team focus on this point.

Gareth: We always try to think about the meaning and context of words that we use, and how they may or may not translate in different languages. For me, this is part of the mental mindset part of our Disasters Avoided model.

Speaking of the use of words, I would be interested in your thoughts on the media. Whilst it is encouraging to see a gradual understanding in the media about disasters not being natural, why do you think many media outlets keep using the words “natural disasters” in their headlines? I know that many of us (me included) have suggested to various media outlets that they stop referring to natural disasters, sometimes providing them with links to [the UNDRR campaign](#) about this and to the [#NoNaturalDisasters campaign](#), yet we still regularly see and hear these two words in the news. I appreciate that journalists and news editors are very busy people, working to deadlines and having to keep up with many things.

Nonetheless, I wonder if there is a central media body, a forum or some other mechanism that can influence and drive a change of wording and communication worldwide about disasters in the global media?

Anita: I wonder the same thing. I have talked with my communications colleagues about this, and I don't understand why the "natural disasters" language continues to be used by so many who are in the media business. I have offered internal training and resources on appropriate and accurate language regarding disasters, to the communication team within WWF in the US, and we have had some good discussions on this point. I do wonder how we can crack the "communications nut" in this space.

The [#NoNaturalDisasters](#) group has some great resources available, particularly for journalists, which articulate why we should not refer to natural disasters. Perhaps it is a question of how we can do something that makes the message "stick", that truly resonates with people who work in the media.

One thing I have found to be of value is to partner with journalism programs of universities. If we can have a discussion with budding journalists early in their career, hopefully this can help to ensure the core ethos of disaster risk and disaster management is understood, and the appropriate terms are used in media communications, together with making time to cover good examples, not just the events that happen that lead to disasters.

If you do manage to crack this nut, let me know how you did it!

Gareth: Whilst there are ongoing challenges, it's good to know that many people partake in the debate to stop the use of the term "natural disasters".

You mention in the article examples of natural and green infrastructure – how, for example, being responsible with wetlands, rain gardens and green roofs, in addition to supporting a diverse array of life, can help communities absorb rainwater, reduce water pollution and regulate temperature.

We feature examples of working with nature to avoid disasters (including the use of Nature-based Solutions) in [case studies on our Disasters Avoided website](#), and it is something I cover in [my work on urban resilience](#) as part of a systems approach to designing urban places to be more resilient.

Are you seeing greater awareness and action towards an appreciation of working with nature for our infrastructure needs, and are there successes being achieved around the world in this manner?

Anita: It's always good to describe good examples, but they are not always easy to measure. A lot of our work for NGOs, including at WWF, is project-based and has a short timeframe. We rarely have the opportunity to go back after we have worked on something to see its impact (good or bad) over the long-term – be it five, 10, or 20 years later. This type of follow-up action isn't usually incorporated into project scopes (for various reasons).

The Disasters Avoided effort to highlight examples of good work undertaken is great to see. I appreciate that the avoidance of disasters does not tend to get the attention of people or the media very often, albeit there are exceptions. It's hard to justify the resources to scout for such examples around the world, yet finding a way to gather these stories is always going to be helpful. When we think about covering examples involving nature, we have to appreciate that there is usually a time lag between work undertaken and the impact seen. Nature doesn't usually function immediately the day after, albeit sometimes we see early changes.

One example that is well studied and documented is the US response to Superstorm Sandy which occurred on the Eastern side of the US in 2012. The mindset that was applied to what happened, and how much better we now understand the role of nature and how to work with it rather than against it, is a good example.

As another example, one that is still yet to be determined in terms of its long-term impacts, is what has happened in Türkiye since the tragic earthquake that struck in February 2023 (in Türkiye and Syria). Soon after this disaster occurred, I had some virtual conversations with the WWF Türkiye team about our work in WWF in the environmental and disaster risk program. WWF Türkiye and their partners quickly organised a high-level national [forum](#) on green recovery and [reconstruction](#), which was great to see. Mayors from impacted communities attended, which was the first time they had taken part in something like this since the earthquake, and they agreed on the importance of this approach. Some work is ongoing in Türkiye to demonstrate with local partners different and alternative ways of [construction](#), different building materials to use and other aspects of disaster risk reduction related to rebuilding housing and rebuilding livelihoods. Is it taking place at the broad scale that is needed? Not yet, but I believe that we will see some positive things arising from these efforts.

Gareth: We appreciate you mentioning the work we do for Disasters Avoided, and the examples you have provided. Linking to the example you provided just now about the 2023 earthquake in Türkiye, good governance is clearly a key factor towards achieving good outcomes for people and nature.

Anita: *In the case of Türkiye, and also Syria, the world knows how to build earthquake-resistant buildings, but we know there are various issues in societies that make this complex.*

A key point about the Türkiye situation, and other situations such as in Nepal, is that there is value in laying the groundwork about the idea of reconstruction and rebuilding differently, in advance of a disaster event occurring. We saw this in Nepal in relation to the 2015 earthquake. There were floods in Nepal in 2014 and my team was asked to do some training about Natural and nature-based Flood Management, which we duly undertook. While we were there, we shared our work on Green Recovery and Reconstruction Training, and the feedback that my team received was that it was good to know for flood management, and that it would be even more valuable for when the next major earthquake occurs. None of us knew of course that a major earthquake would happen in 2015.

It was easier to make the case for green reconstruction support after the earthquake because there had been exposure to the different ways of reconstruction in 2014. When events happen and there is attention and funding available to build back, these moments are important ones to make sure we do it better – in our words, to build back safer and greener.

Gareth: As you say, there are examples out there, large and small. For example, I think of how governance and the right investment works at a personal level, not just at a national and global level. It's not always easy, but when people are able to protect their homes and livelihoods against hazards when they live in known high-risk areas, it could make the difference between keeping their home and belongings, or their business, or losing it all. We have documented a few of these examples in [our case studies](#). We know that other examples in the media do exist.

I see implied media coverage of the right mindset being in place with risk awareness meaning that protection measures prove their worth when a major hazard occurs. For example, we created a case study about [the diligent work in Australia in recent years](#), since 2019-20, to avoid wildfire disasters. In September 2024 in Southeast Australia, we know that climate conditions are conducive to potential wildfires (August was dry, and there have been strong winds in early September – see [the Seasonal Bushfire Outlook Spring 2024 by AFAC](#)), and there is a definite mindset of heightened awareness about the risk of fires (bushfires and grassfires).

It is good to continue to make sure the good work being undertaken receives the right recognition. We know that governance approaches and indeed levels of commitment can change through political cycles, but hopefully the work to reduce disaster risk can span these changes and keep going.

Finally, I wonder if a better understanding about hazards, including with good use of data and technology, and how we need to work with and respect nature would increase the commitment of individuals and communities to increase their resilience, if they have the means to do so – which isn't always the case, unfortunately. In cases where people and communities need external support to achieve resilience, there's a link back to the definitions I provided earlier, with a focus on providing support pre-emptively rather than reacting after a disaster.

Anita: *I'm a great believer in the value of what is often called "citizen science". In my view there is great value in supporting local people monitoring their own environment. For example, in my past work in coral reef management I've trained local people to do their own coral monitoring that is different from, but equally as valuable, as "scientific coral studies". Why? Because people notice more, and get more engaged with, what is happening around them. Likewise, I would like every community group, school, citizen association, and the like, to have their own weather monitoring stations. And not high tech that passively records data electronically and sends it off to a remote location for analysis. I'm a supporter of humans having responsibility to daily record max/min temperature and precipitation. Watching and recording the natural world can be a powerful way to engage people and raise awareness of what is happening around them.*

It was not until several years into my flood management project that I joined the [CoCoRaHS](#) program and now record and contribute precipitation data from my own backyard. Its changed how I understand precipitation. I highly encourage everyone to join, it's international!

Gareth: Thank you very much for your time, Anita. I'd like to finish this interview discussion with some of the points you make in your CNN article:

"Because disasters reveal our vulnerabilities, they reflect the choices we make as a society. When we destroy and degrade much of the natural world, we make communities more vulnerable to disasters."

"We have a choice. We can rebuild the same vulnerabilities by relying only on traditional technology, engineering and materials, or we can embrace innovation and rebuild communities to be safer and more robust in the face of future shocks and stresses."

Context is always key – what works in one geography or location may not work in another.

Ana, Ilan and I do hope that by us all highlighting such action, people can see the real-life benefits to humankind of respecting and living with the natural world, not destroying and building over it.