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## Science - AFP

# Human activities contributed to tsunami's ravages: environmental expert



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PARIS (AFP) - Human activities, notably the building of coastal resorts and the destruction of natural protection, contributed to the enormous loss of life from killer tidal waves that hit the shores of the Indian Ocean after an earthquake, an environmental expert said.



AFP Photo

Jeff McNeely, chief scientist of the Swiss-based World Conservation Union (IUCN), who lived for several years in Indonesia and Thailand, two of the countries hit by Sunday's disaster, said it was "nothing new for nature" in a geologically active region.



AP Photo

"What has made this a disaster is that people have started to occupy part of the landscape that they shouldn't have occupied," he told AFP in a telephone interview from Paris. "Fifty years ago the coastline was not densely occupied as now by tourist hotels."

The hotels did not replace traditional villages because the villagers built inland, McNeely said.

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"What has also happened over the last several decades is that many mangroves have been cleared to grow shrimp ponds so that we, here in Europe, can have cheap shrimp," he added.

"The mangroves were all along the coasts where there are shallow waters. They offered protection against things like tsunamis. Over the last 20-30 years, "they were cleared by people who didn't have the long-term knowledge of why these mangroves should have been saved, by outsiders who get concessions from the governments and set up shrimp or prawn farms."

The shrimps and prawns are sold to Europeans and other foreigners "at

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a price that does not include the environmental cost which is being paid today," McNeely said.

The same thing has been happening with the coral reefs that also provided protection to the coast, he explained.

"When a tsunami comes in, it first hits the coral reef which slows it down, then it hits the mangroves which furthers slow it down. It may get through that but by then a lot of the energy has already been dissipated."

Conservationists in India and Srilanka and Thailand had warned that mangroves had tremendous value for conservation and to protect the coastline, McNeely said.

On the other hand, Sunday's quake would not have been a disaster for local wildlife still left in the affected areas, he added.

"Those living along the coast are seldom particularly rare, that's not a rare habitat, the mangroves are not particularly rich in species, the species that live there are used to typhoons, to storms and all that.

"Animals are smart enough to move."

More than 23,000 people were killed in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, the Maldives, Myanmar and Thailand as a result of the massive quake off the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

Many victims were European and other holidaymakers swept away when the waves hit beach resorts.

But the bulk of the dead were residents of coastal towns inundated by waves more than 10 metres high and fishermen living in flimsy housing along the shores of the Indian Ocean.



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