The Virgin Islands Consortium

Letter To The Editor | Tourism: An Entire Economy, Wiped Out In Ten Minutes

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Sky view of St. Thomas' Waterfront

For the past century, and perhaps more, tourism has helped the Caribbean build impressive economies. The industry has allowed very small islands to amass large amounts of revenue without needing to export or even manufacture large amounts of products. As we begin to approach the first quarter of the 21st century, it seems much of the Caribbean, including the Virgin Islands, has fallen blind to a reality that we may face at any moment.

According to the Seismic Research Centre, in the past 500 years, there have been ten earthquake generated tsunamis in the Caribbean Basin.

In 1867, it was reported that a large earthquake occurred between St. Thomas and St. Croix. Buildings on both islands did not sustain much damage as many people continued on with their day. In under 10 minutes, a tsunami wave had already decimated all of Downtown Charlotte Amalie and the surrounding areas of the capital. On St. Croix, a large naval vessel was washed ashore from the wave. Within minutes, a second wave struck both islands causing further devastation.

According to experts, no country on Earth is more prepared for earthquakes and tsunamis than Japan. In 2011, Japan was hit by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake. A number of tsunami waves were generated that swiftly killed over 15,000 people. Surprisingly, this is not the deadliest tsunami disaster recorded. Today, immediately after an earthquake hits Japan, all television and media switches to official earthquake coverage.

On December 26, 2004, a 9.3 magnitude earthquake in the Indian Ocean changed the world. Scientist estimated that the earthquake was equivalent to 23,000 Hiroshima-type atomic bombs. The tsunami hit 11 countries, traveling over 3,000 miles to Africa and killing people on the continent’s coast. In total, the tsunami killed over 227,898 people; making it the deadliest tsunami disaster in recorded history.

There are two dangers Virign Islanders are facing here. If you asked the average local how to find contingency plans for VITEMA in the event of a tsunami, they probably couldn’t tell you where to look. But even VITEMA’s website lacks full details on a clear contingency plan for locals and tourists if a tsunami warning was issued. We know what to do when the earthquake hits and the sirens blare, but what do we do after a wave has devastated our islands?

The second danger we would face would be a territory that is brought to its knees after a tsunami. A disaster of this magnitude could potentially wipe out almost two thirds of our economy. At the beginning of 2017, many residents and businesses urged public officials to seek alternative revenue streams. Further diversifying the Virgin Islands economy can potentially shield the territory from losing all of its income in the event of an unpredictable natural disaster.

A diverse economy would incorporate EDC companies, brouder support and resources for small businesses, an online/service driven economy and the reversal of laws banning residents from capitalizing on the sale of recreational marijuana.

Toursim and hospitality is deeply embedded into the economy of the Virgin Islands and many other Caribbean nations. The world is changing, as we face global economic shifts more and more, the time has come for the United States Virgin Islands to move into a more progressive and economically sustainable future. “There's a pure and simple business case for diversity: [Organizations] that are more diverse are more successful.” - Mindy Grossman

Submitted by: Amaziah George, founder, editor in chief, of budding Virgin Islands news site State of the Territory.