Examining issues management in a New Zealand public service context

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The Clockwork Lahar:

Examining issues management in a New Zealand public service context

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David Mark Dittmer
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Abstract

Issues management has been practised over the past 30 years. However, the literature has focused on how corporations manage issues, while public service organisations have been ignored. This study looked at the issues management of a tephra dam-break lahar from 1996-2007 on Mount Ruapehu, New Zealand by a group of public service organisations. 19 interviews were conducted with people involved with the management of the ‘lahar issue’ to find out how the issue was managed. Further a content analysis of 309 articles from five newspapers, spanning the full eleven year period, was conducted to examine the salience (attention) given to the issue, the frames commonly used to present the issue and the sources who ‘drove’ the issue.

The data from the content analysis was interpreted to create a five-stage lifecycle of the ‘lahar issue’. Further, data from the interviews was compared with a summary process of the issue management process. This comparison showed that five issues management process stages were employed to manage the ‘lahar issue’ although they were not referred to as such.

Initially, the Department of Conservation consulted stakeholders during the development of options to deal with the lahar (1996-1999). Later in the lahar’s management, lahar stakeholders fell into two categories: internal - those involved with the mitigation and response - and external - the public. Internal stakeholders were communicated with through meetings and email. External stakeholders were communicated with through local media, presentations and meetings.

Overall, it was concluded that media gave substantial attention to the lahar issue over the eleven year period. Some of those involved with managing the ‘lahar issue’ were able to identify the phases of media coverage. Further, this study identified ten frames that media employed when reporting the lahar. The most-frequently used frames were those focusing on the response (lahar response), describing the lahar (diagnosing causes of problem(s)) and discussing the potential impacts from a lahar (definition of problem(s)). Department of Conservation Scientist, Dr Harry Keys, was shown to be a
primary definer – an influential source. The results suggest he defined coverage because of his status as both an official source, due to the organisation he was associated with, and also as an authoritative source due to his role as a scientist. Further, he was regularly drawn upon as a source over the entire period of the ‘lahar issue’ coverage.
Acknowledgements

Writing a thesis is like running a marathon. And no marathon runner can do what they do without support.

Listed on this page are the names of the people who helped make the Clockwork Lahar happen and to who I owe a big “thank you” for their help...

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To my interviewees for their generosity with their time and information. They all deserve to be named here...

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- Harry Broad (Department of Conservation)
- Herb Christophers (Department of Conservation)
- Mike Craig (Police)
- Johan Cullis (Ruapehu District Council)
- Barbara Dempsey (formerly of Ruapehu District Council)
- Roland Devine (Opus)
- Paul Green (Department of Conservation)
- Harry Keys (Department of Conservation)
- Murray Marshall (Ontrack)
- John Norton (former of Civil Defence)
- Annie Pedersen (Ruapehu District Council)
- Brad Scott (Geological Nuclear Sciences)
- Brian Sheppard (Department of Conservation)
- Doug Tucker (Genesis)
- Dave Wakelin (Department of Conservation)
- Grant Webby (Opus)
- Paul Wheatcroft (Ruapehu District Council)
- Dave White (Police)

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Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>CIMS</td>
<td>Co-ordinated Incident Management System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOC</td>
<td>Department of Conservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOC</td>
<td>Emergency Operation Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERLAWS</td>
<td>Eastern Ruapehu Lahar Warning System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICP</td>
<td>Incident Control Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCDEM</td>
<td>Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAL</td>
<td>Ruapehu Alpine Lifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RDC</td>
<td>Ruapehu District Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRLPG</td>
<td>Southern Ruapehu Lahar Planning Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDC</td>
<td>Taupo District Council</td>
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Key Terms

<table>
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<td>Bund</td>
<td>A rock embankment, built on the flank of Ruapehu during summer 2001/2002. It was designed to prevent a lahar from spilling into the Tongariro River catchment, which flows into Lake Taupo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lahar</td>
<td>A mixture of rock, ash and other volcanic debris. Their consistency has been compared to flowing concrete. Lahar’s can occur in a variety of situations, but the key ingredient is water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangiwai 1953</td>
<td>The fifth-worst disaster in New Zealand’s history. On 24 December 1953, 151 people died when a passenger train bound for Auckland went into the flooded Whangaehu River at Tangiwai after a lahar washed out the rail bridge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tephra</td>
<td>A term that describes the products of volcanic eruptions: ash, rock and other material.</td>
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