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COMMENT NATIONAL **OPINION**

Bali eruption: why would you choose to live close to an active volcano?

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What is it about volcanoes that fascinates and attracts humans? Mount Agung is spewing ash and debris over eastern Bali, requiring the evacuation of over 100,000 people, but around the world 750 million people live within 60 miles of these primal threats, and their capacity to spew fire from the belly of the Earth. Some have little option, while others depend on the rewards that the volcanoes can provide.

Of course, some people live on a volcano because they do not realise that it is active - this was the case for many islanders on Montserrat prior to the devastating 1995 eruptions. Others live near volcanoes because they are trapped by poverty, dependence on volcanic land, and poor governance - development is at the root of many disasters globally and reducing inequality is essential to taking people out of harm's way.

Yet many perceive the benefits of living on volcanoes as outweighing the risks. After all, most erupt very rarely - some only every few thousand years or so. In the context of a human lifetime, this is a relatively fleeting threat. On political timescales, it is even more so.

Fertile land, mining resources, geothermal energy and a thriving tourist industry - the benefits of living on active volcanoes can be many. Furthermore, volcanoes are often striking landscapes - and so can be unrivalled symbols of place.





A family on a motorcycle passes by the Mount Agung volcano erupting in the background in Karangasem, Indonesia on Monday. AP

Take Chaiten volcano, in Chile, which erupted in 2008 for the first time on record. The town of Chaiten was evacuated for months, and the government wanted to relocate it permanently a few miles along the shore of the lake on which it sat. Some residents were happy to relocate, but a substantial number resisted. Though they had watched the volcano almost completely destroy their town, they still wanted to return. After a long stand-off with the government they were allowed to rebuild - albeit on slightly higher ground. Their determination was driven by community and familiarity; a sense of home.

Lack of choice and rich rewards can come hand in hand. In some countries there are relatively few areas that are wholly safe - think of Japan, Chile and Indonesia, all of which sit on large fault lines with chains of volcanoes and the risk of earthquakes. Naples - wedged between Vesuvius and Campi Flegrei - faces the same dilemma. The city is among the most dangerous places in the world for volcanic hazard in terms of exposed population, but Neapolitans do not only look upon their volcanic neighbourhood with trepidation, they also see it as the source of substantial tourist revenue (Pompeii and Herculaneum are major attractions, as are the mountains themselves), and as fundamental to the history of the region.

No wonder so many volcanoes are associated with belief systems. On Mount Merapi, in Indonesia, a local guardian communes with the spirits of the mountain, and his role is to maintain harmony between the local sultan, the mountain and the sea. His predecessor was killed in a 2010 eruption.

Volcanoes might seem obvious dangers. Yet many communities who know them best also know that, despite the risk, they owe them their very existence.



Villagers carry their belongings during an evacuation following the eruption of Mount Agung, seen in the background. AP

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