

Opinion

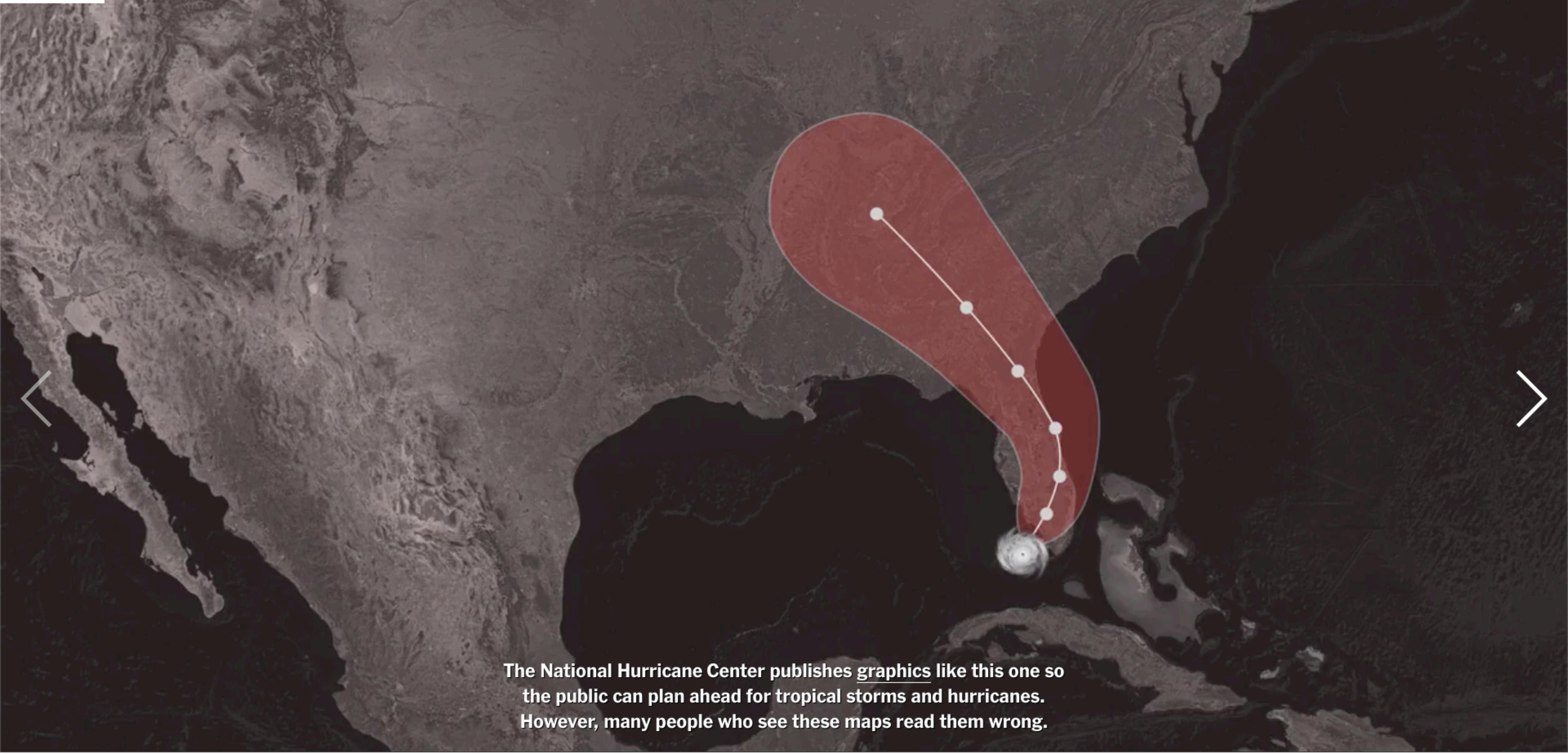
Those Hurricane Maps Don't Mean What You Think They Mean

We use hurricane forecasts to warn people. Why do we misinterpret them so often?

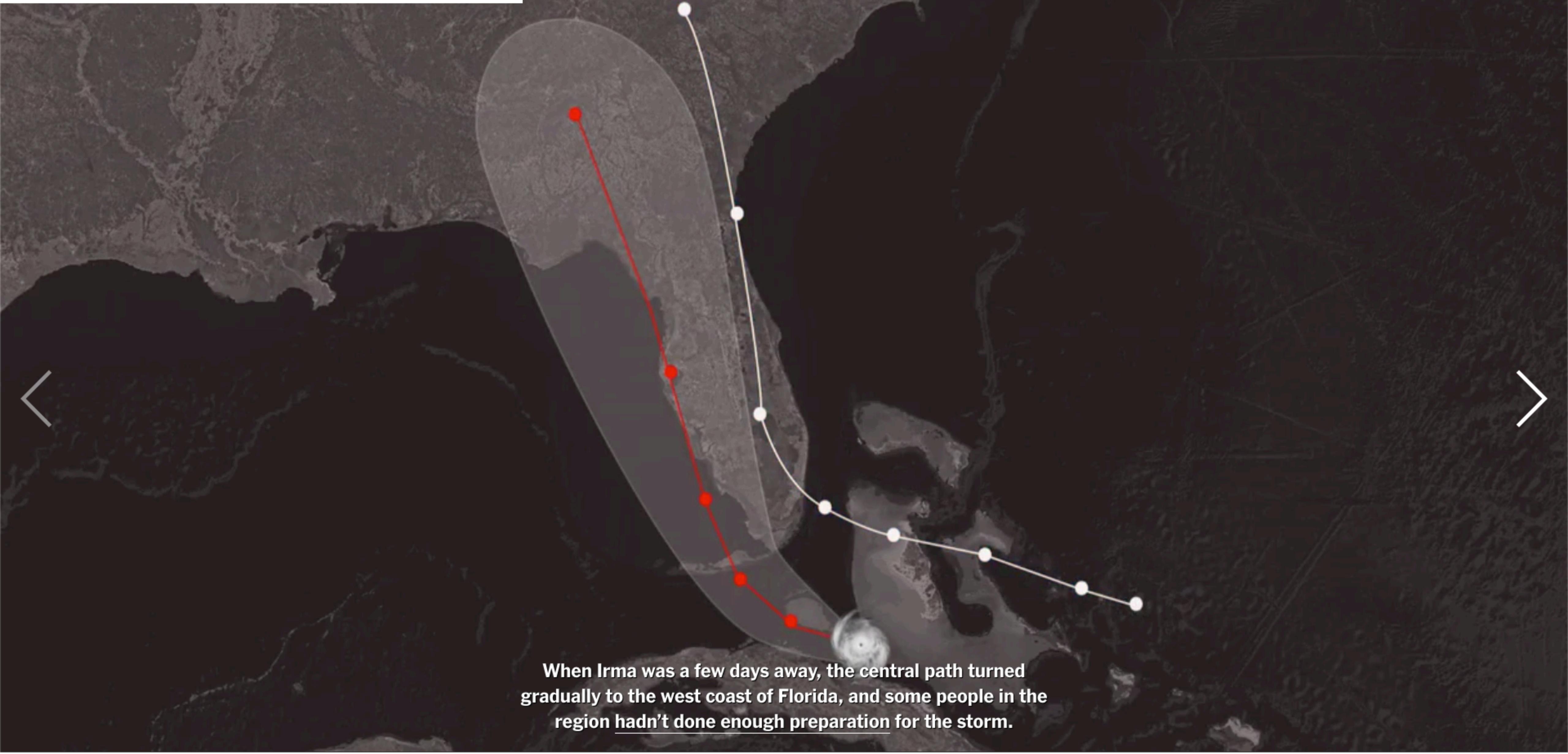
By Alberto Cairo

With Tala Schlossberg

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The National Hurricane Center publishes graphics like this one so
the public can plan ahead for tropical storms and hurricanes.
However, many people who see these maps read them wrong.



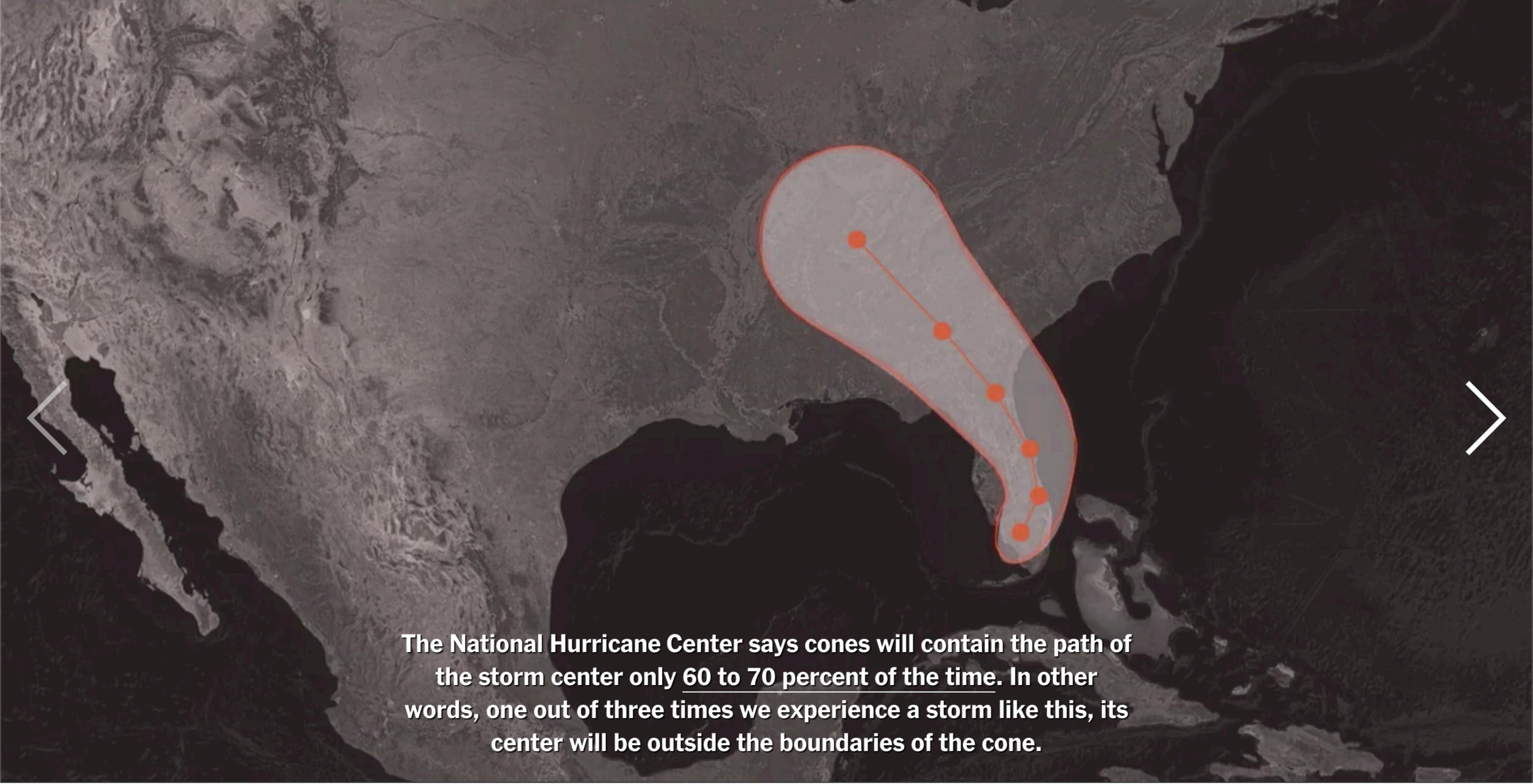
When Irma was a few days away, the central path turned gradually to the west coast of Florida, and some people in the region hadn't done enough preparation for the storm.



This means that the storm center may end up being anywhere inside those circles — and even outside of them. The uncertainty circles grow over time because it's easier to predict what will happen one day from now than five days from now.



Finally, a curve connects the circles. The result is what is popularly known as the “cone of uncertainty.”



The National Hurricane Center says cones will contain the path of the storm center only 60 to 70 percent of the time. In other words, one out of three times we experience a storm like this, its center will be outside the boundaries of the cone.



The cone graphic is deceptively simple. That becomes a liability if people believe they're out of harm's way when they aren't. As with many charts, it's risky to assume we can interpret a hurricane map correctly with just a glance. Graphics like these need to be read closely and carefully. Only then can we grasp what they're really saying.