

Listen to the prophets in lab coats

Want to know the future? Forget magic and start paying attention to scientists.

Climate change, tsunamis, bird flu, rising sea levels, super hurricanes, dying coral reefs, and other similar big stories are all over the mainstream news media these days. Certainly they are all worthy of coverage but the it-came-out-of-the-blue tone of the journalists and the slack-jawed surprise of readers and viewers is bewildering. None of these things should

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be a surprise because scientists have been screaming about them for years.

Why, for example, was anyone shocked when a hurricane caused the levees around New Orleans to fail? For years, scientists repeatedly warned anyone who would listen. Nonetheless, many people, even some in high places, were amazed that such a thing could happen. US Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff called the disaster “breathhtaking in its surprise.” In an interview a few days after the levees broke, President Bush revealed that he doesn’t pay much attention to scientists either. “I don’t think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees,” he said.

Well, nobody anticipated it except for a bunch of scientists. But who listens to them?

A 2001 article in *Scientific American* (“Drowning New Orleans”, by Mark Fischetti) could not have been more clear about the danger of a hurricane-related flood swamping New Orleans. Now, four years later, after Hurricane Katrina struck and the levees crumbled, Fischetti looks like a psychic. But he didn’t use magic to tell the future. He relied on something that works: science.

An excerpt from Fischetti’s article: “New Orleans is a disaster waiting to happen... A direct hit is inevitable. Large hurricanes come close every year.”

A *National Geographic* article (“Gone with the water”, Oct. 2001) published a year before the disaster, was also prophetic: “The chances of such a storm hitting New Orleans in any given year are slight, but the danger is growing. Climatologists predict that powerful storms may occur more frequently this century, while rising sea level from global warming is putting low-lying coasts at greater risk. ‘It’s not if it will happen,’ says University of New Orleans geologist Shea Penland. ‘It’s when.’”



Want to stay informed about the latest science news? Check out the following:

- **Magazines:**
 - New Scientist** – Weekly, always fascinating, best source of science news money can buy;
 - Scientific American** – monthly, great feature stories;
 - National Geographic** – Monthly, outstanding articles and beautiful photographs in every issue.
- **Web sites:**
 - www.sciencedaily.com
 - www.nature.com/news
 - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech>

Okay, being president of the United States is a big job and maybe it doesn’t leave much time for reading magazines, but wouldn’t you think that at least one aide who has Bush’s ear is skimming through *Scientific American* or *National Geographic* every now and then?

Remember the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004? That massive wave of death destroyed numerous communities and killed more than 200,000 people. Terrible as it was, however, it should not have been a surprise. Consider these lines from a 1999 *Scientific American* article (“Tsunami!”, by Frank I. González): “Tsunami researchers and emergency response officials agree that future destructive tsunamis are inevitable.”

There is a pattern here. Scientists publish articles in journals or magazines that most of the world’s people—including most of the world’s leaders—do not read. Then, when the very thing that scientists warned us about happens, millions stare at their televisions and newspapers in stunned disbelief. “How can a wave kill that many people? Who could have ever imagined such a thing?”

What’s next? If you have an interest in what may be coming our way next, then buy a subscription to *New Scientist*.

If you don’t want to be caught off guard by tomorrow’s headlines then visit a good science-news web site every day.

Scientists are always ahead of the game so it makes sense to listen to them. More than 25 years ago they said that the atmosphere was warming and there would be serious consequences. These people have crystal balls that actually work.

If a supervolcano obliterates a big chunk of North America or Asia tomorrow morning, feelings of terror would be understandable, but not surprise. Scientists told us years ago that supervolcano eruptions will happen sooner or later. Same with an asteroid strike.

Scientists have been chattering away for years now about the threat of drinking water shortages in many parts of the world. They predict it will reach crisis levels in coming decades, causing severe hardships and even the outbreak of wars as a result. When it happens, be concerned, but, please, do not act surprised.

Most people just don’t give science enough credit for its accuracy and reliability. It’s not perfect but it is obviously a superior source of information. Who, other than a scientist, can predict something as complicated as an eclipse, for example? Astronomers—not astrologers—can foretell them thousands of years in the future, even down to the second. Science works. That’s why you don’t mount a magic carpet when you want to go to Miami for a shopping trip. Instead, you get on an airplane—a product of science—and eat peanuts until you land.

The benefits of science surround us. We don’t think about it much, but our homes, cars, offices, televisions, radios, kitchen appliances, computers and many other indispensable pillars of modern culture trace their origins to science. None of these things were conjured up by wizards. Not a single one.

Why do people still seek out psychics, astrologers and other charlatans in the hope of glimpsing the future? Only science offers credible clues to what tomorrow has in store for us. Given the superior track record of scientists when it comes to figuring out events of the past, present and future, it is difficult to understand why the world doesn’t pay more attention to them. Clearly they are an undervalued resource; for the real prophets wear lab coats, and we ignore them at our own peril.