

**What Do We Call Ourselves? – The Hazard Management Perspective**  
**FEMA Higher Education Conference**  
**June 9, 2005**

Deborah Thomas, PhD  
Department of Geography  
University of Colorado at Denver

The panel was charged with addressing what this field should call itself since there currently are so many terms that are used, sometimes interchangeably and sometimes with unique meanings. As emergency management, the term commonly used in the United States, emerges as an interdisciplinary area of study, there is a need to establish some consistency with terminology, particularly the name of the field. At this point it is important to distinguish between the profession and the area of study, which may not necessarily have the exact same name. Thus, hazard studies could be used to denote the area of study and could be viewed similar to women's studies or environmental studies, which are fields devoted to finding solutions to interdisciplinary challenges and questions. The corresponding profession might take on the name of hazards managements for those practicing.

As others on the panel have or will certainly address, each term for the field has a range of meanings that make each more or less appropriate. Importantly, each also comes with certain commonly understood meanings and connotations that people ascribe to that term. For instance, disaster management implies that the field is only concerned with the large impact events. Yet, the advantage to this term is that policy makers and the general public have some conception about what this means. The same is true for the term emergency management, which may have a limitation in implying a response function, but again people have a general awareness of what this is. Thus, it is not only how we view ourselves, but how those outside of our field understand what we do; a name gives insight into the profession.

Since I was tasked with the term 'hazards management', I will spend some time speaking to the appropriateness of this particular term. In fact, this term really corresponds with the area of hazards geography, which has a rich and long tradition in hazards and disasters.

Gilbert White's work in the 1940s on floodplains and human adjustment (White, 1945) established an area of study that continues today. In many ways, hazards geography still embodies the research themes set out in the early work. According to Burton, Kates, and White (1993), "a hazard (not a natural event) results from the interaction of natural and social systems. It is people who transform the environment into resources and hazards." The natural hazard paradigm (further established by Burton, Kates, and White, 1993) essentially attempts to identify hazardous areas along with the human occupancy of hazard zones. In addition, the approach examines the full range of human adjustments, people's perceptions of them, and the process by which mitigation measures are (or are not) adopted. The optimal set of adjustments and the social consequences are also carefully considered. The cumulative hazardousness of place is a cornerstone to geographic study of hazards.

Importantly, geographers research hazards and risk, not disasters per se (Cutter, 2003). Rather than focusing on singular large-scale events, the concentration in hazards geography has instead been on human-environmental interactions, where human systems (including technological) and physical systems combine to create hazards (see for example Kasperson et al., 1995; Hewitt, 1997). These include a full range of events from hurricanes and earthquakes (the more 'typical' natural events) to pollution and even terrorism. Further, reducing loss requires a more thorough conceptualization of vulnerability and resilience along with an understanding of the events themselves.

The natural hazards paradigm has certainly not remained stagnant and has broadened in scope and application. Recent models have become more robust and integrative, incorporating contextual, political, and economic aspects of hazards and society (Blaikie et al, 1994; Tobin and Montz, 1997; Cutter, et al., 1996). Place-based studies have become increasingly relevant, particularly with the advent of geo-technologies, including geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, and global positioning systems (GPS).

This brief background to hazards geography illustrates why hazards management is a term that is highly appropriate based in this historical and disciplinary context. However, the area of study is not based only in one discipline, nor do others in the field (or even general public) likely view hazard management in this broad way. Frequently, people

understand hazards management and hazards geography as being event-based, or at least focused on the physical aspects of hazards, rather than the broader, more complex approach. Thus, education to shift this view would have to occur. Of course, all of the other terms face this challenge to some degree as well.

**References:**

- Blaikie, P, T Cannon, I Davis, and B Wisner (1994). *At Risk: Natural Hazards, Peoples Vulnerability, and Disasters*. New York: Routledge.
- Burton, I, RW Kates, and GF White (1993). *The Environment as Hazard*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Cutter, SL (1996). Vulnerability to Environmental Hazards. *Progress in Human Geography* 20:529-539.
- Cutter, SL, JT Mitchell, and MS Scott (2000). Revealing the Vulnerability of People and Places: A Case Study of Georgetown County, South Carolina. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90:713-737.
- Cutter, SL (2003). GI Science, Disasters, and Emergency Management. *Transactions in GIS* 7(4): 439-445.
- Hewitt, K. (1997). *Regions of Risk: A Geographical Introduction to Disasters*. Singaport: Longman.
- Kasperson, JX, RE Kasperson, and BL Turner (eds.) (1995). *Regions at Risk: Comparisons of Threatened Environments*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.
- Tobin, GA and BE Montz (1997). *Natural Hazards: Explanation and Integration*. New York: Guilford Press.
- White, GF (1945). *Human Adjustments to Floods*. Research Paper 29. Department of Geography, University of Chicago. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.