

Comment on “Forest clearance boosted power of Cyclone Nargis” Nature 453, 270 (2008)
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This article implies that the destruction of the cyclone was intensified by recent loss of forest in Myanmar. However, neither the article nor those in the conservation movement making such statements have presented any evidence to support this. Much of the damage was caused by the 4 m storm surge and the associated flooding. There is, in fact, no empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that forest can reduce damage from storm surge or tsunami as the article also suggests. The comparison between cyclone Nargis and cyclone Sidr which struck Bangladesh in 1991 is, however, informative. But the difference in death toll between these events has nothing to do with differences in forests cover between locations as the article implies. The much lower death toll in cyclone Sidr was the result of a much higher level of preparedness. Unlike Myanmar, Bangladesh has a recent history of destructive cyclones and, as a result, has an effective early warning system for tropical storms and well developed contingency plans. These include elevated shelters close to population centres, which provide a quick and effective means of vertical evacuation, the only effective way to escape a storm surge or tsunami. The article also states that areas where mangroves had been conserved suffered less damage from the Indian Ocean tsunami. Four years after the event there remains no credible evidence to support this statement and much to refute it (Kerr and Baird 2007). Indeed, the protective role of forest against even wind generated waves has recently been questioned (Feagin et al. 2008). In the absence of evidence that vegetation can protect life and property from storm surges or tsunami, it is irresponsible to recommend revegetation as a tool for disaster mitigation. Replanting schemes must lead to an unnecessary loss of life in future events because they direct time and energy away from effective solutions, such as early warning systems (Baird 2006). We find it troubling that organisations, such as the FAO and the IUCN and numerous mangrove support groups, are using these human disasters as an opportunity to promote a narrow ecological conservation agenda. Rusty Feagin Andrew Baird Alex Kerr Baird AH (2006) False hopes and natural disasters New York Times, New York (A27) Feagin, A. R, et al (2008) Vegetation's Role in Coastal Protection. Science 320: 176b-177 Kerr AM, Baird AH (2007) Natural barriers to natural disasters. Bioscience 57: 102-103

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