

People vs. Volcanoes: Place Your Bets

Written by Alex Baer

Monday, 30 January 2012 16:00

If you have a good bearing, know of human nature, and want to pick up some quick cash, take your laptop and head to the nearest Republican watering hole -- one with wifi -- and chat up some suits. You're stalking big game and bar bets.

Set up your computer, going on purpose to FOX or some other right wing site, to set the mood, so everyone can see it, displayed right on the screen. Start up some chit-chat, about good web sites to check things, places that can be trusted. You might have to suggest some fact-based sites, so be ready to suggest some. Once there's agreement, go to your next move.

Prime the pump a little, chum the water, get another bourbon and water, ask all around you, "Whaddya think of this 'Global Warming' stuff?"

They won't be able to resist, once you hit their "Global Warming" buttons, the ones installed by the Bush and the Rush.

Once it's pretty well settled it's all goose snot, that it's all crap, then, spring your trap. Here, you may want to slur your speech a little to set the hook, to make it seem like they'd be shooting fish in a barrel.

"I bet people make at least as much of that greenhouse gas, that CO2 stuff, as volcanoes do, maybe even more -- whaddya wanna bet!" Don't overdo it here -- maybe bump your glass into another just a bit.

When the money's all on the bartop, all in a nice heap, the rules of the bet all set and all clear, go surfing for moolah, on their very own sites, the ones they approve of.

You're in a crowd of hand-rubbers now, they've all got big pieces of your pie -- heck, everyone knows volcanoes can dwarf anything that people can do.

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You might look up this man: Terrance Gerlach, a retired volcanologist, formerly with the Cascades Volcano Observatory, part of the U.S. Geological Survey, in Vancouver, Washington.

He said, "The question of whether or not volcanoes emit more CO₂ than human activity is one I get more than any question in my email from the general public."

Everyone's about to find out you're on firm ground on this bet. But it's understandable, what people believe. Volcanoes are so much more glamorous when they blow their lids, whereas people are just lidless to start -- which may be why so many are protectively close-minded.

Still -- what are pedestrian tailpipes or coal-fired electric plants alongside pyroclastic flows?

Then, back at the bar, the information starts to flow: Humans release 135 times more CO₂ in a year than all volcanoes, everywhere, in that same year. And, hey, look what it says here: In less than three days, human activity makes more CO₂ than all volcanoes do in a year.

Going toe to toe, humans make 35 billion metric tons a year of the stuff. Volcanoes? Puny put-puts, only 130 to 440 million a year or so.

If you get tired of volcanoes, just switchover and cruise jet flights: The average commercial jet parks 250 pounds of CO₂ into the air for every mile that it flies -- almost a pound for every passenger, every single mile that it goes.

Watch the expressions when the carbon calculator comes up on the screen, noting that flying coast-to-coast once a month would require each and every passenger to plant 150 trees every year, to offset that CO₂.

If their eyes were not yet crossed, you could show them where it says, in 2006, there were more than 31 million flights in the world that burned up 188 million tons of fuel. In the U.S., around 87-thousand flights a day, about 30-thousand of them commercial.

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"A round-tripper from New York to L-A," you could say, reading from the screen, "puts out more than 15-hundred pounds of CO2 into the air -- and that's per person, on every one of those flights."

For effect, if you felt like it, you could shrug, make one of your hands, held up in mid-air, do a beeline into the other one. "Bam!" you could say, "That's only from flying -- just the tip of the iceberg, like the poor ol' Titanic."

Then order a scotch, *splashed up on the rocks*.

By now, someone's likely to say "Pinatubo!" like a magician's incantation, to make all this be all wrong, Just an illusion. So, you're a good sport -- you go take a look.

Turns out, Mount Pinatubo popped its cork and belched for nine hours. For a while, it kept up with humans, but then quit, releasing just half as much as humans do in a day.

How much you keep from those bets is up to you -- you could buy some carbon offsets, plant some trees with the rest.

The upside here: It could net you more than your day gig, if you're lucky to have work now. Of course, you'd have to keep moving, to keep opening up new vistas of, uh, learning opportunities, wherever you go.

Both up and down sides, as you know: Republicans are all over.

In time, you could become an urban legend, part of suburban lore, too, as "The Volcano Avenger," or "The Carbon Basher," or, "Bar-top Revenger," or, more simply, "The Teacher," one who walks slow, but lugs some mighty big facts.

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Careful, though -- keep your track shoes handy. Whether it's people or volcanoes, when they blow their tops, it can get messy. People, at least, it is actually and technically possible to outrun.

In any case, you'd make one of our cultural heroes, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., pretty darned proud. He once fumed, "We could have saved the Earth but we were too damned cheap."

Of course, he was fully aware that greed is the grease for civilization's largest, hard-workingest gears -- slipperier, even, than oil.

Step right up, place your bets -- try not to crowd in, no blowing your tops.