

Caution: Do Not Explode Lightly

Written by Alex Baer

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Where will you go when the cow, whale, and/or volcano blows?

Instead of starting with Parrotheads -- fans of Jimmy Buffett and his songs -- for clues, we first go to Colorado, where the U.S. Forest Service is pondering what to do with a group of stray cows that wandered away from the herd over the winter, then moseyed into a ranger cabin, making themselves at home.

Problem is, the guest cows never left the impromptu cow hotel, but checked all the way out at some point during the harsh winter. Six cows are inside the cabin. A few more are outside. The carcasses were found in late March near the Conundrum Hot Springs in Aspen; what to do next has become its own hot conundrum this Spring.

Spokesman Steve Segin told the BBC, "Obviously, time is of the essence because we don't want them defrosting."

The area is inside a federal wilderness area high in the Rocky Mountains, limiting some mechanical methods of disposal. Water contamination is a concern as well as "negative interactions" with other wildlife, along with minimal disruption of the land.

None of the actions seems attractive: Close off the area and wait for the cows to slowly go back to the land, or purposefully setting the ranger cabin on fire. Another line of thought is to use explosives to break up the size of the animals to help speed up the decomposition process.

This is where we would wave off the Forest Service, and direct them to the scene of similar thinking, back in November of 1970, where a 45-foot, eight-ton sperm whale washed ashore, dead, in Florence, Oregon.

Half a ton of dynamite later, sightseers were dodging plummeting chunks of unvaporized whale. One substantial-appearing car had its roof caved in, no thanks at all for catching a large chunk of raining-down whale.

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The plan had been to break the whale apart into smaller, more manageable pieces for oceanside scavengers, like gulls and crabs, to help rid the beach of all that strongly-scented whale. Instead, a whole lot of whale flesh was suddenly airlifted more than 800 feet away. In the end, much of the rest was reluctantly buried.

Whales can explode every now and then, without any prompting or encouragement from humans. In Taiwan, in 2004, a sperm whale was being transported to a post-mortem when gasses inside the decomposing mass caused it to explode along the transit route, in a crowded urban area.

Wildlife of all sorts gets into the act at times, even to the point of exploding through windshields, arriving in unorthodox fashion in the vehicle's passenger seat, as did a frozen squirrel falling out of a tree.

Another tale your insurance agent will squint at, should you announce, as did a driver in the UK, "My parked car was hit by a bull which had escaped from an agricultural show."

Imagine your own reaction to a report like that, or to this one: Mexico's second highest peak may be getting ready to explode, too, with Popocatepetl spewing ash and steam and shaking the ground. Its name means "Smoking Mountain," and is doing just that, only 40 miles from Mexico City.

Imagine a volcano like this, less than half a hundred miles from a major population center in the U.S.: Its peak is almost 18-thousand feet into the sky, and is 16 miles in diameter at its base. Imagine that, outside Los Angeles or New York, and you've got to imagine what else you might be thinking, now that the third-highest level has been sounded -- a yellow stage three, as it's called.

A major eruption in 2000 caused the evacuation of tens of thousands from the area.

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And that is no bull -- or cow or whale or squirrel or whatever. Parrotheads may still wonder where they will go when the volcano blows, but Rolling Stones fans may simply shout, "Gimme Shelter!" as they scatter, hoping to avoid not only rolling stones but flying boulders, lava, pyroclastic clouds and flows.

Cows: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-17750245>

Volcano: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17750891>

Insurance: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4683918.stm>

Whale:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploding_whale

<http://www.snopes.com/critters/disposal/whale.asp>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79tl2H3QzT0&feature=relmfu>