

Short Report on Cyclone Yasi Experience, Cairns, Queensland, Australia

There's a problem when trying to describe something that is outside that person's experience. You have to use similes, metaphors and parallels to get them to appreciate a different experience.

People who lived in southern England may have some idea of high winds if they experienced the Great Storm of 1987. There was a central pressure down to 953mb and wind speeds of 120mph (nearly 200kph).

Compare this to Cyclone Yasi last week, which had a central pressure of 922mb and wind speeds of around 300kph. There wouldn't be many people around who know the sound of a 300kph wind; the odd failed parachutist, or the pilot who's canopy flipped open in flight, perhaps, but they are way beyond describing it.

The thing with cyclones, hurricanes and typhoons is that if you have experienced them before, then the rules and procedures are known, as are the effects of the winds, give or take a bit. If you have no previous knowledge then the whole experience becomes a time of terror, of fear through ignorance, and if the first one is a big blow it will make a very deep impression.

Since I have been through several hurricanes in the Caribbean, even flown through 'Hurricane Faith' from Miami to Nassau, and have also been in a dozen or so in Cairns over the years, my knowledge of procedure and the 'do's' and 'don'ts' is good, the whole time/danger measurement is known and understood.

The precautions include taping the windows with masking tape to avoid flying glass, having a working radio and torch with spare batteries, storing water for cooking, drinking and flushing toilets, and laying in a store of non-perishable food, enough for three days or more. You clear up your garden from potential flying missiles, e.g. by throwing the pool furniture in to the pool where it will not blow away. Bring indoors or put into the shed or garage anything that could be picked up by the wind and thrown at someone's house, such as garden tools, corrugated iron and plant pots. Make sure your vehicles are full of gas so you can evacuate if told to do so by the police or the Emergency Services. Ensure that your pets, such as cats and dogs are indoors and you have safe boxes for them, and sufficient food and litter.

You clear the gutters and roof of debris. It's usual to take your mattress in to the smallest, and therefore the strongest room in the house, like the bathroom. Have a hurricane lamp ready because when the electricity goes off, you will need light: for re-assurance and for doing stuff.

With the electricity out for anywhere between 12 hours to 3 weeks, you will have no refrigerators or freezers, no TV and associated entertainment, no cooking facilities and no water, hot or cold. That really mucks up the average teenager's life! In our last blow, 80 microwave towers went down and there was no texting, no Face Book, no Twitter and no e-mails. Wouldn't that change the colour of your day?

That's the standard sort of stuff that Dads and Mums deal with each time in cyclone preparation, and it's just another chore, except that the biggest investment the average family make in their lives could well end up as matchwood, but still with the mortgage. So you also check that your insurances are up to date.

Having made all these preparations, the smart ones trust their house and settle down for some family time with card games, reading or sleeping.

Low atmospheric pressure over time does have strange effects on the human psyche. Cyclone Tracy, which ravaged Darwin in 1974, left people who went quite strange, sometimes not able to cope with the rigours of life afterwards. They, like their wartime service men and women before them, would dissolve in tears when thinking or talking about that time. It used to be called, 'Shell-shock,' but we now call it Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and have counsellors to ameliorate the worst effects of it.

Sod's Law dictates that most cyclones come at night, which means that one tends to lose a night's sleep, but that it's all over in the morning. You appear, bleary eyed, out in to the garden to see what extent of damage there is. Then you have a cup of tea and start putting everything back where it was, get the palm fronds off the roof and put all the green waste out on the footpath for the Council to collect within about 10 days. As soon as the electricity comes on, life gets back to normal, and Dad goes back to work and the kids go back to school. The whole experience forms the basis of conversation for a fortnight or so, and the newspapers and TV have a field day, and you get to have hot food once more.

There may have been a few buckets of rain, which have resulted in creek and river rises to the extent that some people are unable to go to work for a few days, and generally they 'party' on for a bit!

I recall in the '70's getting an enterprising chopper pilot to take me to work, as I owned a pharmacy, which didn't function at all if the 'boss' wasn't there.

That same year, I walked through an overflowing river along a road with a line of stalled cars. I had a bathing costume on with my pharmacist's uniform in a garbage bag on my head. At one point I walked past a police car that had a Far North Queensland Police Sergeant sitting in the driver's seat. He had the windows down but the water inside the car came up to the top of the door. All his equipment, including the radio, was underwater, and that man was not happy! That particular breed of Police Sergeant was recruited because they were enormous, had no neck and although they were in no way related to Einstein, they did have 'Presence.' They also had a lot of power in the political climate of the day, so I thought better than to greet him with my usual optimistic approach to life and adversity.

Cyclone Joy was a big brute that came from about 1700 km away and seemed hell bent on wiping out Cairns in general, and me in particular. It has been the only cyclone to give me a little worm of fear in my gut. Rebecca and I were at her parents' place, which was a pole home on a hill. This ensured that while we could still tumble down the hillside, we'd never be drowned. Hey! Reducing a threat by 50% is good – ask any Insurance Assessor.

Rebecca had taken the cats in their cat boxes and the most valuable books from our library, and I brought food, blankets and tarps and sundry 'stuff.' On the way, I thought, 'I wonder if anyone remembered to buy some wine, to see us though,' for medicinal purposes you understand. (We have this wine container in Australia, which we call a Cask, and other people call, 'A Bag in a Box', which is essentially what it is, and it comes in 4 litre quantities. The end of the story is basically that everyone remembered 'wine,' and we ended up with 42 litres in our rush not to run out. That's a lot of wine, for four people! (I make that a tad under 10 gallons, but check my numbers by all means.)

I've tasted salt in the rain during one of these events, and we're 6 km from the sea. I've seen corrugated iron sheets tearing through the air quite fast enough to decapitate the unwary. High-speed coconuts can also be lethal, as can falling trees and fallen live powerlines.

By now, I hope you've got some feel for what goes on during one of nature's wild things that are called, confusingly, hurricanes in the north Atlantic, Cyclones in the south Pacific and Indian Oceans and typhoons in the northern Pacific Ocean.

And that brings us to Cyclone Yasi. The unusual name comes from the Fiji Meteorological Service, since it was in their area of responsibility when it formed in to Cyclone status, which involves a certain low pressure and certain wind speeds at the centre to be classified as a cyclone – look it up if you want the details.

Our weather forecasters became quite twitchy when this thing was still about 2000km away, in itself unusual. Then they started calling it ‘a monster.’

‘Honestly, some people will do anything to make a living,’ I thought, but when I did check on it a couple of days later, I could see what they were on about.

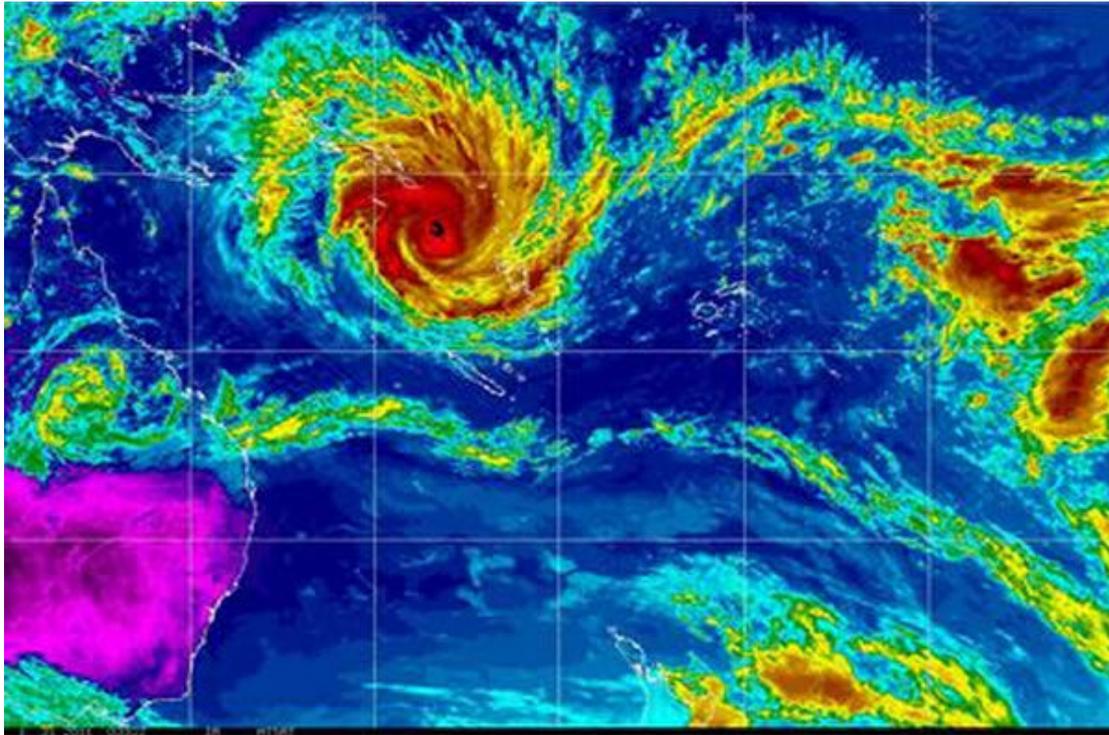
Who remembers the pictures of Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf of Mexico, looking like the biggest Polo mint imaginable, Category Five, the strongest, and heading for New Orleans? I guess people from around the world put in some good and fervent words to their God for a little mercy for those poor people in its path.

It must be that we get weather extremes very frequently and that we are so used to them that the organisations are trained in procedures to the point that you know ‘stuff’ is going to be sorted in record time. They have the right equipment and the right people in the right place with back-up organisations, and it all gets done. Three days after Yasi, Cairns was basically, back in business.

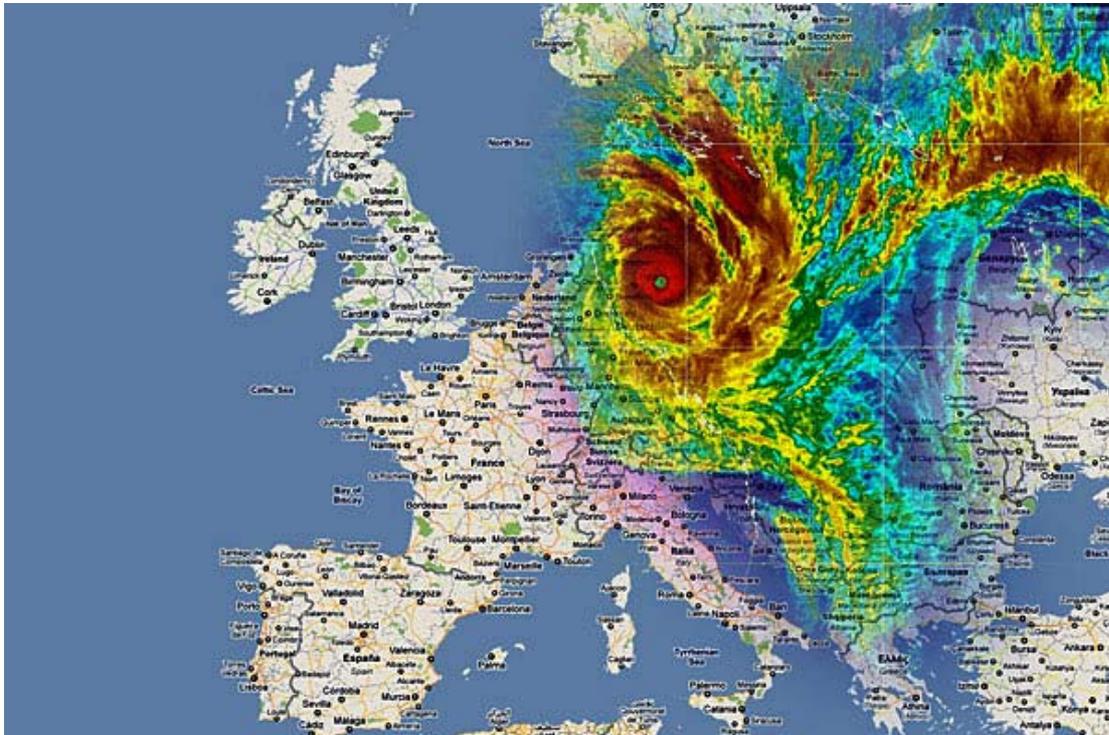
We were appalled at the lack of response to the tragedy of Katrina. No water, no food, no evacuation to centres with food and water and sleeping space. It seemed like nothing went on. We even sent people over to help, but I never heard their report.

The background here is that you know there is a large and capable organisation to help out, which is comforting.

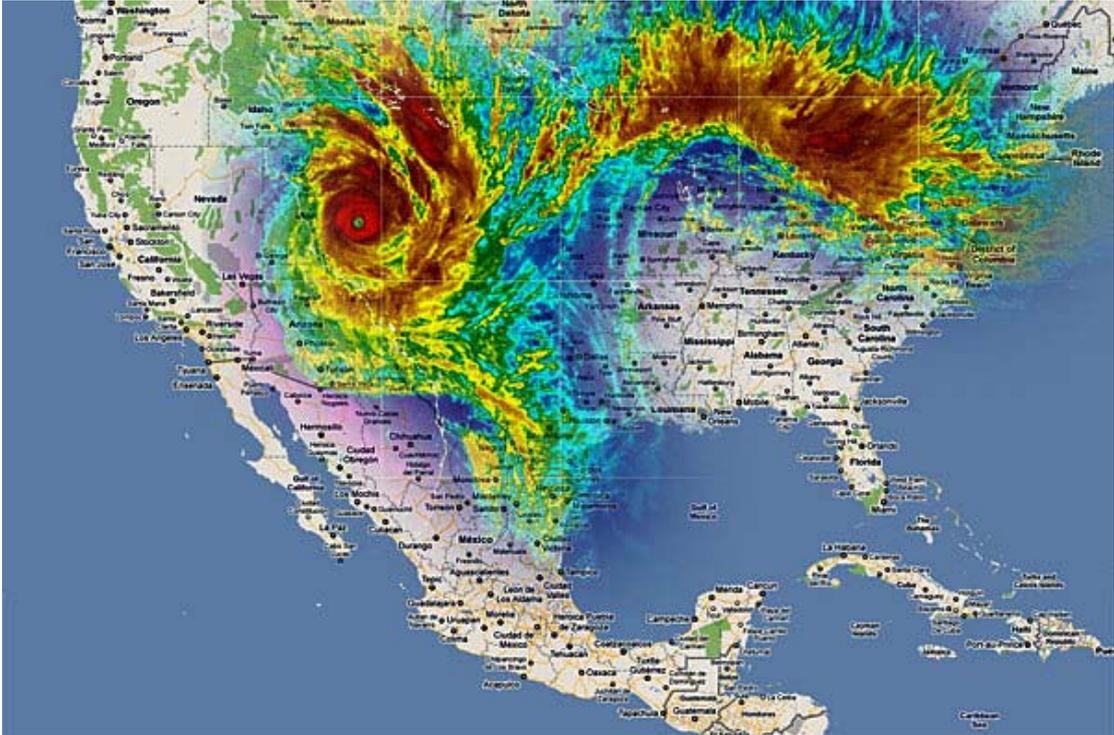
I finally looked up two websites, our own Australian Bureau of Meteorology and Hurricanezone.net, an American site out of Hawaii, I believe. This is the picture they gave me. Cyclone Yasi was close to 20 degrees of latitude and 40 degrees of longitude in size and already had Katrina’s Polo signature. Its direction was WSW, which was guaranteed to throw it straight down our throats!



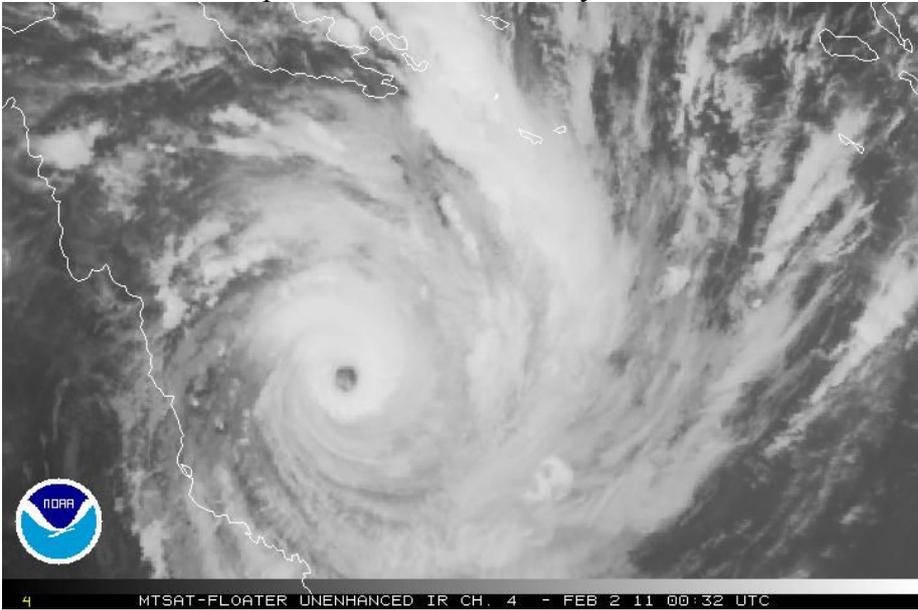
Below is the super-imposed Cyclone Yasi on to a map of Europe



In case our friends in America are watching, then here is our comparison to your size.



...and we are the blip on the coastline directly to the west of the EYE!



Cyclone Yasi's readings and projected parameters as she closed in on the coast included:

Wind gusts near the centre 295kph.

Central pressure 922 hectoPascals

Severe category five Cyclone.

Flood rains (meaning 3-4 inches of rain per hour, every hour)

Storm Tide up to 7 metres. (The low pressure 'Eye' in the centre pulls up a dome of water, which comes ashore with the cyclone and inundates coastal land. 1 or 2 metres is not unusual, but 7 metres of water on top of whatever tide level you have definitely is!)

So if the wind gusts don't get you, or blow your house to bits, then the fresh flooding rain or the salty storm surge will drown you. That's about the nub of the message, followed by the words, which were thought to enforce the fact that there was no one alive who had any memory of anything that big. Our State Premier, Anna Bligh, (yes, related):

'SEVERE TC YASI IS A LARGE AND VERY POWERFUL TROPICAL CYCLONE AND POSES AN EXTREMELY SERIOUS THREAT TO LIFE AND PROPERTY WITHIN THE WARNING AREA, ESPECIALLY BETWEEN CAIRNS AND TOWNSVILLE.

'THIS IMPACT IS LIKELY TO BE MORE LIFE THREATENING THAN ANY EXPERIENCED DURING RECENT GENERATIONS.'

We made all our preparations, secured the cats, who alternated between terror and bewilderment, and bunkered down wondering whether we would have a house or, indeed, ourselves in the morning.

The wind increased in tempo, but the electricity was still on at around 9pm, which was really good as we were playing the POMS in the last ODI, and it was coming down to the wire. The electricity held on until we took the final victory, then went out. We lit candles and the hurricane lamp and listened to the wind, which was rising in pitch, but I couldn't feel any movement, shake or tremor in the building. Our cottage is a timber construction, with very big horizontal and vertical beams. It's also up on concrete block stumps precisely to avoid getting our feet wet in times of cyclones and flooding rains.

There appeared to be a diminution in pitch and volume around 11.30pm. I thought, 'that's strange, I didn't think the eye was going to pass through Cairns, and we've only had about 150kph winds, what's going on?'

I decided to go to bed on the understanding that the noise of the other side of the cyclone eye would wake me when it came around.

I awoke with Rebecca and the cats sound asleep in our bed at 6am. I checked outside and could see only minimal damage. There were palm fronds down from my big Cuban Royals. They are big leaves at 20 to 25 feet each. Half a tree from my neighbour's yard had come down on my garage, and that was it. The cyclone of the century! Lucky! Lucky! Lucky!

In three days we were back with electricity, water, computers, the dreaded mobile phones, milk and bread. A fizzer, I thought, but no. I will leave you with some pictures of those who actually bore the brunt of this monster.



A house, blown in half.



Is this my roof or yours?



A policeman on duty to stop idiots from going through floodwater.



‘Excuse me, Mr. Insurance Assessor, can you come and check this lot?’
From Port Hinchinbrook Marina, near Cardwell.



A fearsome way to get a makeover!



Caravan parks are NOT the place to be in situations like this.



Trashed!



They've got the right idea.



The Spirit of Survival.

If the hair stands up on the back of my neck the next time there is more than a breeze,
I shall know why.

Here is another account of living through Cyclone Yasi www.news.com.au/.webloc

Greetings from an OF
Chris Shaw (K) '51-56