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For Some, Mighty Clouds Of Joy

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Okay, so Hurricane Isabel knocked out your electricity and flooded your basement and ripped off your roof and hurled an ancient oak tree into your living room and now rabid raccoons have wandered into your house and they've devoured the cat food and now they're eyeing the cat and licking their lips -- hey, don't dwell on the negative. It's time to look at the bright side of hurricanes.

"You have to look at the silver lining," says Frank Marks, a research meteorologist for the hurricane research division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "They're good for the ecosystem, even if they're bad for us."

Not only are hurricanes good for the ecosystem, they're also good for the aquifer. And for Lake Okeechobee. And for coral reefs. And for barrier islands. And for the piping plover. In fact, if it wasn't for hurricanes, the poor piping plover would have no place to mate.

The piping plover is a seashore bird. It makes its nest in sandy stretches of beach. If too much vegetation grows on the beach, the piping plover can't nest there. If they can't nest, they can't mate. And the piping plover is already classified as a "threatened" species.

"Hurricanes," says Sidney Maddock, "create the habitat conditions that allow these birds to nest."

Maddock is an environmental analyst for the Center for Biological Diversity. He works on Hatteras Island, which sits off the mainland of North Carolina, but he's not there now. He fled to Raleigh to escape Isabel. He's a little worried that the hurricane might have thrown a pine tree through his living room. But he is comforted by the thought that Isabel is creating some wonderful nesting places for the piping plover and other seashore birds: the black skimmer and the common tern and the American oyster-catcher.

"A storm like this is so powerful," he says, "that it will push massive amounts of sand and water across the island and you'll have large areas of open sand without vegetation, and those are the areas where next summer the shore birds will breed."

A hurricane is like a forest fire, Maddock says: It causes a lot of destruction but it also "plays an important role in protecting the habitat."

Orrin Pilkey agrees. A retired Duke University professor of coastal geology and the author of "A Celebration of the World's Barrier Islands," Pilkey says hurricanes are good for barrier islands, like Assateague Island in Maryland and the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

"Barrier islands are formed by hurricanes and big storms," he says. "Every grain of sand that's on a barrier island came from the beach in a storm. . . . These islands require these big storms for their survival. If there were no big storms, there would be no barrier islands. They'd disappear or they'd be teeny little bars of sand."

Think about it. No hurricanes, no barrier islands, no Outer Banks, no vacation trip back when you were young and you met that cute kid and you slipped off into the twilight and you watched the waves roll in and you started smooching and one thing led to another and . . . well, surely the hassle of a hurricane is worth those magic memories.

Or maybe not. But surely having water to drink is worth the hassle of a hurricane.

"The most beneficial effect of hurricanes is that they transfer fresh water from the tropics northward," says Marks. "They mitigate drought conditions. They bring a lot of fresh water to places that might need it."

A hurricane can dump five to 15 inches of fresh water on a place that desperately needs it, replenishing the aquifer, Marks says. It can also clean out clogged-up and polluted bodies of water.

"It flushes out all the garbage," he says. "It cleans out the plumbing, so to speak."

Take, for example, Florida's Lake Okeechobee. It's fed by slow-moving streams that are polluted with phosphates from sugar cane plantations, Marks says. Hurricanes do wonders for Lake Okeechobee.

"You get a hurricane dropping five to fifteen inches of fresh water and it flushes that system out like Drano," says Marks. "It flushes a lot of the garbage out into the ocean."

Hurricanes even help some things they're accused of hurting, like the coral reefs in Florida's Biscayne Bay.

"In Hurricane Andrew, people worried about reef damage," Marks says. "And the reefs *were* damaged. Pieces of the reefs were broken off. But they looked later and saw that the pieces of the reef that broke off were starting new reefs."

Not only does Marks tout the ecological benefits of hurricanes, he also touts the economic benefit of hurricanes. He remembers the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, which devastated South Florida in 1992. There was tremendous destruction. People whose homes were destroyed were living in tents. That was bad. But it was followed by a huge infusion of insurance money.

"A lotta money gets spent," he says, "and it flows through the community and reinvigorates the community for years."

Carl Hiaasen remembers that hurricane, too. He covered it as a columnist for the Miami Herald, then wrote a comic novel about it called "Stormy Weather."

"It's a boon to roofing contractors," he says, "and to plywood, drywall and window manufacturers. It's not good for insurance companies."

Beyond that, Hiaasen says, hurricanes deliver a valuable message to humanity.

"It's a cosmic message to anybody who bought oceanfront property -- and I'm one of them," he says. "It's really a cosmic IQ test, to tell you the truth."

Of course, none of these folks is defending hurricanes. They're just pointing out that even disasters have their positive side.

"The danger is that if you say there's a beneficial effect, you come off sounding like a nut," says Maddock. "You would not wish a hurricane on your worst enemy. I've got friends back in Hatteras who are getting walloped right now. But from a scientific perspective, you have to acknowledge that there are certain effects that are beneficial for wildlife. It's just a fact. Please put that in a way that I won't come off sounding like a complete wacko nut."

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If it wasn't for hurricanes, the piping plover would have no place to mate; just one of the many benefits to nature in exchange for, say, your roof.

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