



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

There's one particular expression that is guaranteed to make me irritable and bad tempered. It's a phrase that's used a lot in newspapers and on the news: 'natural disaster'.

I accept that earthquakes, erupting volcanoes, hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis and even floods are natural disasters. But what seems to go largely unnoticed is that the devastation they wreak is increasingly *unnatural*, made worse by human greed and ignorance.

A recent report by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) compared the death toll from two villages in Sri Lanka that were hit by the 2004 tsunami. Two people died in the settlement surrounded by dense mangrove and scrub forest, while some 5,000-6,000 people died in the one without a similar natural barrier. Previous research had already shown that mangroves are able to absorb between 70-90 per cent of the energy from a normal wave. Though there is no reliable data on how they mitigate the impact of a full-scale tsunami, the IUCN's study – and analysis by the Environmental Justice Foundation and others – suggests that it could be quite significant. Mangroves not only broke the impact of the giant waves but they also trapped

debris and prevented people from being washed out to sea.

Yet they've long been regarded as wastelands ripe for development. More than a quarter of the mangroves in Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and Indonesia – the countries that were hit hardest by the tsunami – have been destroyed in the past 20 years alone. Shrimp farms and tourist resorts are considered more important than these 'bio-shields', which are also breeding and nursery grounds for commercially valuable species of prawns and fish.

It's happening all over the world. In Britain, we remove vast tracts of forest – which has a crucial role to play as a natural sponge – and then wonder why heavy rainfall causes serious flooding. Everything from deforestation and wetland drainage to the location of cities in high-risk areas is to blame, and we're giving destructive forces a helping hand by destabilising the climate. The disasters themselves may be natural, but we're making ourselves far more vulnerable than ever before.