

# OPINION: Disasters are not divisible

**Morgan Ray, Opinion Writer**

With the acceleration of global warming, natural disasters are an undeniable threat to all parts of our country. Between Hurricane Helene unexpectedly striking the Carolinas and Tennessee, to the vast and uncontrollable California wildfires, it is ignorant to chalk these events up to chance.



**Chloe Pound**

But perhaps scarier than impending global doom is the state of empathy in our society, specifically within the media.

Any sort of disaster is tragic, but what's worse is the contrasting response to these situations. With the media favoring densely populated, high-profile regions, there is a clear divide in the response to the severity of Hurricane Helene compared to the California wildfires.

As emergency workers, military, foreign aid and volunteers rally to either take hold of the fires or clear muddled roads, there is an endless mixture of myths, lies, comparisons and downright cruelty that follows on social media. Many of these responses targeted the Appalachian region, especially Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee.

To begin with, the disasters are far from comparable due to the nature of how they came to be. Prior to Helene, the most notable disaster for the Appalachian region was The Great Flood in 1916, caused by two back-to-back hurricanes that devastated the Asheville area.

Considered a tropical storm at the time, this system passed over just west of Asheville and destroyed the French Broad River dams, resulting in rising water levels and flooding. Looking at the path Helene took, it was far stronger by the time it hit Appalachia rather than dropping in magnitude as it continued west. The path of the hurricane reflects the growing influence of climate change on weather patterns.

While a hurricane in the Gulf always has potential to bring rainfall inland, the extra warm temperatures and low pressure act as a breeding ground for hurricanes. As Helene moved inland, it experienced what's known as the "orographic lifting" — moisture is forced upwards when it comes into contact with a mountain range, eventually squeezing out more rain than average, like a cruel sponge.

Compare this uncommon occurrence to the California wildfires; in the entire state of California, there are over 7,500 wildfires per year. While much of this is, again, due to the conditions created by climate change, such as increasingly arid temperatures and drought, there are other factors that contribute to such a large number.

Some occasions are man-made, incidental or not, while others are merely a product of the environment. Many fire-resistant plants in such dry regions of California require fire to activate their seeds, grow, reproduce and survive. While tragic and overwhelmingly devastating to the land, animals and citizens, they are not to be unexpected.

There's a clear favorite in the mix for the media. Many out-of-state were unaware of the effects of Helene, yet the destruction of the fires was broadcasted nonstop. While this is in part due to the greater population of California and to the length of the disaster, it is also due to the "relevancy" of it all. It's compelling to display the smoke and growing inferno compared to the downed trees and flooded towns.

Afterall, seeing Los Angeles, the pinnacle of glitz, glamour and wealth, engulfed in flames is much more heart-wrenching than the humble buildings and bodies of Appalachia.

Far beyond the coverage of the disasters lies the true evil. Many Helene victims were met with comments ranging from knowing about the hurricane but not evacuating, to the event being deserved as the region most impacted is undeniably right wing. With doubts of hurricane severity and little resources, who would be able to evacuate? And in what world is it acceptable to politicize disaster?

The same brazen remarks repeat once again with the California wildfires, with comments such as "You're asking for it living in a fire zone," "Hollywood/blue areas deserve to burn for mocking God," and "War victims overseas have also lost everything."

It seems that no matter who, what, when, where or why disaster strikes, social media is already jumping to conclusions about how a victim ended up as they did and why. When sensationalism and domineering opinions become a priority over context and truth, it disregards the suffering of the victims, creating an even bigger divide between the people of the U.S., while simultaneously diminishing the importance climate change plays in it all.

It's a collective dissonance society faces now, fully indebted to social media and the downfall of empathy. The neverending, horrific content we encounter daily contributes to compassion fatigue.

It's unnecessary to fret over another state when it or its people have nothing to do with you. This, combined with overexposure to such disasters, desensitizes those chronically online and detached from reality into believing it's normal to belittle someone's situation based on their finances, political alignment and education.

Regardless of the rage bait that exists online, both disasters are truly devastating, with many lives unjustly taken and countless homes destroyed. Ultimately, those who are in need deserve compassion, especially when the changing climate unites everyone in disaster, whether you believe it or not.