

RESIDENTS' AWARENESS OF THE COASTAL FLOOD HAZARD:  
LOWER FLORIDA KEYS CASE STUDY\*

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The rapidly growing coastal population's awareness of coastal flood hazards has become a topic of great interest to planners, civil defense personnel, and hazards researchers. The population within the coastal areas of the U.S. has not only been growing at three times the national rate, but most of this population lacks experience with coastal storm flooding.

This paper reviews the public awareness of the hurricane flood hazard in one of the most vulnerable areas of the United States, the Lower Florida Keys. This area, in which the highest elevation is a mere eight feet and in which over 90% of the homesites are below the five-foot contour, has experienced hurricanes in an average of one in seven years, although the last direct hit occurred in 1966. Furthermore, the minimum base flood elevation shown on the Federal Insurance Rate Maps for the area is nine feet, and it could take 31.5 hours to evacuate the Keys (Post, et al. 1983:117). Nevertheless, the population of the Florida Keys, excluding Key West, increased by 66% between 1970 and 1980. This paper summarizes the responses of approximately 700 recent home buyers to a survey conducted during the 1983 hurricane season and compares their attitudes with those expressed by nearly 200 long-term residents.

Awareness of the Hurricane Flood Hazard

Residents who purchased their houses or mobile home sites within the Lower Florida Keys since 1979 are generally aware that hurricane destruction may occur, with 60.6% believing that a damaging hurricane is "very likely" or "likely" within the next ten years. Furthermore, two-thirds of the residents felt that "hurricane

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