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Global Expert To Evalute Reconstruction Efforts In Chile

WRITTEN BY AARON CANTU
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U.S. specialist will lead two-week investigation into human and ecological effects

Charles Kelly, one of the world's foremost humanitarian and environmental experts, will travel around Chile's earthquake-damaged regions for the next two weeks as part of an effort to survey the impact of reconstruction efforts on the environment.

The U.S. specialist will lead an assessment coordinated by a collection of organizations, including Chile's chapter of World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Mining Group of Antofogasta, and the government's Environmental Ministry.

Kelly, a member of the WWF with over 30 years of humanitarian working experience in 60 countries around the world, said that identifying environmental issues early is the key to a sustainable and effective reconstruction effort.

"Unfortunately, experience has shown us that environmental issues are usually not considered appropriate concerns in rebuilding efforts. What happens is that a few years later region can end up with even worse issues," he said.

Kelly explained to the Santiago Times that the urgent need for resources, coupled with issues of debris disposal on the tsunami-battered coastal regions, could eventually lead to an environmental nightmare years down the road.

"Sometimes environmental damage is unavoidable during reconstruction efforts, but if we can anticipate problems, we can mitigate them," he said.

Members of the assessment will include governmental and regional authorities, representatives from Onemi, local reconstruction groups, and municipal leaders from the cities of Talca, Duao, Curanipe, Cobquecura, Concepción and Tirúa.

Throughout the two weeks members will measure the environmental impact of both the earthquake itself and subsequent reconstruction efforts in the Maule and Bío Bio regions, using The Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment in Disaster (REA).

"The REA is a tool that identifies, defines, and prioritizes the social and environmental impacts

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of natural and man-made disasters, and the extent to which they could affect the welfare of local communities," said Susan Díaz of WWF Chile in a press release.

The REA is a qualitative measure of damage based on a survey of ecological damage and free response answers from those in the disaster zones; it does not in itself offer solutions to environmental problems.

WWF Chile director Ricardo Bosshard expressed hope that the REA, backed by Kelly's expertise, would establish important parameters with which to improve relief efforts in the south.

"We hope that [Kelley] will help us lay the groundwork for a sustainable reconstruction effort, in the sense that we won't be inciting new environmental damage on top of what the earthquake has already done," said Bosshard. "Above all, we're working toward creating better environmental and social conditions in the affected zones than even before the earthquake struck."

Jorge Gómez, Vice-President of Operations for the Mining Group of Antofagasta, added that sustainability must be a fundamental pillar in the reconstruction effort.

"We have the opportunity to make things in Maule and Bío Bio even better than they were before the disaster - that's is why we were so interested in bringing an expert like Charles Kelly to tell us his opinion on what we can do from here," said Gómez.

After the data has been gathered and analyzed, Kelly will discuss his findings in a symposium in Santiago open to the general public.

The REA system was developed by the Benfield Hazard Research Center in conjunction with CARE International and with financial assistance from the UN Office for the Coordination of Human Rights and the UN Environment Programme.

By Aaron Cantu (editor@santiagotimes.cl)

About the writer

Aaron Cantu

Aaron Cantu is an undergraduate student from Tufts University currently spending the year in Santiago, Chile. He is originally from McAllen, Texas.

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