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Earl, We Hardly Knew Ye: A Martha's Vineyard Update

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By: Cristine Russell and Ben Heineman Jr.

This Saturday morning, after Earl, dawned just as bright and serene as the Friday morning before. The only difference was the wind—now blowing briskly at 20 miles per hour from the West—and the ocean waves, sending an even louder rumbling sound across our pond as the storm swells crash on the barrier Atlantic beach. (See our post from yesterday, "[Waiting for Earl.](#)")

For those of us in Chilmark, this small community at the western end of Martha's Vineyard, Earl paid a surprisingly brief and uneventful visit: Torrential rain for three hours in the middle of the night, accompanied by winds of 30 miles per hour, which may have gusted to 40. There was far less turbulence—and far fewer frogs, snakes, and witches falling from the sky—than during a healthy three-day blow when a Nor'easter arrives.

Already there is some grumbling that officials and forecasters over-reacted and that all that effort hauling boats from the water and moving furniture—during summertime when the living is easy, the fish are jumping—was unnecessary.

But to us, this was the precautionary principle applied very sensibly by those responsible for the safety of Eastern seaboard communities, including our little one. A number of variables interacted, including the direction, power, and speed of Earl and the steering impact of a front moving in from the West.

As it turned out, when Earl arrived, he was further out to sea (90 miles east of Nantucket), weaker (downgraded to a tropical storm), and moving more quickly north towards the Maritime Provinces than some original consensus forecasts. So ... no big deal. And the risk-reward principle of preparedness tilts overwhelmingly toward the old adage "better safe than sorry": The cost of prevention was sensible compared with very real possibility of grave damage. With President Obama leaving our island last Sunday to go to New Orleans on the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, we were more than happy to be prepared.

The careful forecasters, particularly those providing the "official" updates from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, had made clear over and over during the week that a different combination of factors was certainly possible, if not highly likely. They quite clearly said that they simply didn't know with any precision how the factors would combine, and that different tracks and results were well within the realm of reason. If the combining of probabilities had worked against us, rather than for us, we could easily have faced sustained hurricane force winds lashing that torrential rain with much greater damage to trees, power, water, homes, and possibly people.

Perhaps the greatest criticism should be leveled, once again, at the breathless on-the-spot and around-the-clock television reporting on The Weather Channel and local channels (the folks in the rain slickers positioned on the beaches who have to say something even when there is nothing to say), as well as the public addiction in the modern media age to 24-hour updates online. The more you look, the more you worry (unless you listen to the more serious meteorologists).

So, today we sit looking out on a sparkling, sunny seascape, scrubbed clean by rain and moderate wind, happy that our nightmares turned out only to be dreams, not reality, and grateful for the advances in science which allow people—both public officials and private citizens—to understand ranges of probabilities and act with sensible caution.

We didn't mind the work preparing for the storm that never came.

We do mind the work on this glorious September day: packing our bags and loading the car for our end-of-summer drive home tomorrow.

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