

The Earth is suffering a sort of mass extinction right now, and many species are in grave danger of extinction. It is often called the '6th mass extinction', and unlike earlier mass extinctions, it is the result of human activities. How similar do you think the causes of this 6th extinction are to the effect of volcanoes in the pre-human past?

When considering mass extinctions, the questions arising most frequently are those surrounding accountability – who or what is the oppressor? One consideration to which this is applicable is the extent to which human hubris is aligned with the audacious power of volcanoes – are all extinctions created equal?

First, however, it should prove useful to define what is meant by 'volcanic activity'; a far cry from the comparatively muted allegretto of Vesuvius, 'volcanic activity' leans more towards the foreboding unease created by fissures within the Earth's surface. Whilst a solitary eruption may indeed have a cacophonous impact, it is the leisurely onslaught of lava which likely culminated in the End Permian Mass Extinction as continents were lathered one kilometre thick in the deadly viscosity. Despite this, one would be forgiven for failing to see any of the volcanic hallmarks in the sixth mass extinction, and undoubtedly if the implication is literal then the notion is absurd and the question posed rendered redundant.

Fortunately, in lieu of this, the metaphorical comparisons are rife, for much like the lava, humans are guilty of an until now concealed onslaught on biodiversity. Unfettered human activity (arguably accelerated by opportunistic capitalism – a distinctly human issue) has exponentially increased the threat to a plethora of species stemming from the abuse of Mother Nature for superficial gains - according to the centre for biological diversity, scientists predict that in excess of one million species are on track for extinction in the forthcoming decades, an impact of harmful practices akin to deforestation and industrialisation. Just as humans are complacent in halting their extinction; the lava forges on, undeterred, into the abyss.

Likewise, just as humans are callously disposing of greenhouse gases, provoking climate change, large volcanic eruptions launched dust clouds into the air with the resulting expulsion of mercury likely prompting the Permian-Triassic extinction. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that both volcanoes and humans are equally accountable for their respective extinctions (although there is potential evidence for naturally induced climate change, which, if viable, would acquit our species to a degree).

In this vein, an anthropocentric scholar may argue that volcanoes are diametrically opposed to humans in their role in mass extinction, for volcanoes are the propagator and humans the victim within the Earth's rhetoric. Whilst it is true that a volcano cares not whether it ruins or invigorates populations, as highlighted above, what is disputable is that humans have innocently fallen foul of the environment. The volcanoes, being abiotic, did not suffer as a result of loss of biodiversity but humans inevitably will as a result of the organisms in vital ecosystems soon playing truant in healthcare, research and extractive fields.

In conclusion, the answer does not lie in whether Homo Sapiens are a carbon copy of the villainised volcanoes, but rather in the thought that any natural evolution or occurrence is a destructive force. Mass Extinctions are seemingly unavoidable, but the starkest similarity between volcanoes and humans is the catalyst they provide to the doomed natural impetus...