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Finding the Green Lining in a Gray Ash Cloud

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A volcanic eruption, unlike a giant oil spill, is an act of nature, not the outcome of risky behavior on the part of man. Nothing we do could have caused or prevented a vent near Iceland's Eyjafjallajokull glacier from spewing flames, molten lava and plumes of ash into the air.

And yet, the relationship between man and volcano is not a simple one. Given the explosive nature of such sites, it would make sense for humans to give a wide berth. But homes and farms are built right at the feet of volcanoes, and even up their flanks. From time to time we see news images of lava flowing over them, wiping them out. What were those people thinking?

The fact is, volcanic sites are among the most fertile places on the planet. Volcanoes helped form our planet -- its water, air and soils -- and their eruptions continue to nourish us, bringing up huge payloads of elements in the form of lava, rock and ash that eventually break down into plant-nutritive forms.

Soils in places such as Java, New Zealand, Hawaii and Iceland have been greatly enriched by volcanic activity. Farming downwind of Mount St. Helens in Washington state will benefit in the long run from all that drifting ash. And numerous fertilizer products have been created from volcanic rock dusts, ash deposits and clays.

Ash, because it travels on the wind, has a widespread effect. Initially it can smother crops, but light deposits are usually benign. Ash has a dehydrating effect on insects, so that bees and other populations may decline temporarily after an eruption. Inert dusts made from volcanic ash can be used to control pest insects, if targeted to spare benign ones.

Recently, ash dispersal stopped air traffic and stranded busy travelers. It also made possible the first conclusive study of how much pollution is caused by air travel, by allowing its temporary decline to be quantified.

The ash also affected the transportation of food, leading to shortages. How little that would matter if most of the world's food supply were locally produced and countries could feed themselves, the way they used to. We could all sit back then and admire the spectacular fiery show.

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