

KILLER LANDSLIDES

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At 10:37 a.m. on a sunny Saturday morning in March 2014, residents in 30 homes along a bend in a beautiful river in the mountains of Washington state were enjoying their morning coffee, many spending time with family on their day off, when a distant roar interrupted the routine. It was the terrifying sound of what would become the United States' deadliest landslide in decades. The equivalent of three million dump truck loads of earth came plummeting down the valley, snapping trees and shattering houses along with everything inside. In less than two minutes, a one-square-mile field of debris, 20-feet deep, slammed into the neighborhood.

Geomorphologists are now tracing the geological history of Oso, Washington, from the deposition of loose sand and gravel during the last Ice Age to modern-day logging to climate change, to explain why the site was so unstable. But all around the world, scientists have reason to fear that the worst is yet to come.

Globally, landslides and other ground failures cost more lives and money each year than all other natural disasters combined, and climate change could cause an increase in landslide activity worldwide. The largest loss of life due to a landslide occurred in Afghanistan in May 2014, when an estimated 400 people were buried alive. In the Himalayas, where more than 1,000 people were killed in landslides in 2007 alone, the threat of devastating landslides is always lurking.

NOVA surveys the tell-tale signs of future colossal landslides that will strike when the next mega-earthquake hits Nepal, discovering the methods scientists are using to reveal how and why landslides happen, and how new satellite monitoring technologies are giving researchers hope that they may be able to predict landslides and issue life-saving warnings to those in the path of nature's destruction.

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CREDITS

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