

By Philip Howard
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Hurricane *Florence*, a Category 4 storm packing 140 mph winds, was churning away in the Atlantic. The forecast indicated she would make landfall on the coast of North Carolina in a few days. Strong winds and coastal flooding were predicted. Ocracoke, where I live, is a narrow sandy island 20 miles from the mainland. Average elevation is about four feet. Evacuations had been ordered, first for visitors, then for residents.

I stayed.

Various family and friends wondered why I would stay. To some it seemed more than foolish. After all, evacuation orders are designed to save lives, and when ignored can have serious consequences. I knew that.

News programs tracking the hurricane described *Florence* as a “monster storm” that could cause “serious,” “catastrophic,” and “life-threatening” conditions. Reports said a 12-foot storm surge could cause widespread coastal flooding; strong winds could rip roofs from houses.

I have lived on Ocracoke for nearly 50 years, and have weathered many hurricanes and storms. Not a single Ocracoke resident has ever died in a hurricane. But what were the risks involved in this particular storm, I wondered.

I wanted facts and details, not just scary-sounding adjectives and over-hyped weather reports. Would *Florence* remain a Category 4 storm, or weaken as it approached land? Would the storm be catastrophic for everyone on the coast, or just for those living in sub-standard housing or mobile homes? Would a 12-foot storm surge inundate houses on the barrier islands, or those along rivers on the mainland?

So, I turned to NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) for some answers. First, I looked at their “Potential Storm Surge Flooding Map (Inundation)” for Hurricane *Florence*. Although some sections of Ocracoke Island (right along the shoreline) had a forecast of more than three feet of storm surge, only a few areas of the village were identified for even “more than one foot” of flood waters. As vulnerable as the Outer Banks can be, we know that storm waters come ashore, roll over the islands, and flow into the sound. The process is reversed when flood waters return from the mainland.

On the mainland, however, a storm surge will pile up with no other place to go, inundating

communities along rivers, streams, and estuaries. The forecast called for more than twelve feet of water there.

Next, I assessed my house. It is more than 150 years old, and had weathered at least three major hurricanes, in 1899, 1933, and 1944, as well as many others, including Matthew in 2016. In 2005 I did a major rehabilitation of the house. We raised the house, screwed six-foot earth augers into the ground, and anchored the floor joists to the augers with heavy chains. All of the exterior siding was removed, additional studs added, hurricane tie-downs nailed to the rafters and top plates, and an underlayment of plywood applied before the siding was re-nailed. The roof was removed, new and larger rafters nailed to the existing rafters, sturdy plywood laid down, and 40-year asphalt shingles installed. The house was never better prepared for a storm.

Still, I was not naïve. A Category 4 storm could be truly catastrophic. What to do? Outdoor furniture, lawn mowers, and other objects had been brought inside or secured. My carpets were rolled up and placed on chairs. The bottom drawers of my filing cabinets were removed and placed on tables. Family and neighbors were beginning to evacuate. My car's gas tank was filled with fuel. I had a suitcase and daypack ready to throw into my car if I decided to evacuate.

And so I waited a little longer, and monitored *Florence's* track.

The last ferries would leave Wednesday morning. On Tuesday the forecasts converged on a near certainty that *Florence* would turn south before making landfall near Wilmington, NC. Although Ocracoke would probably be hit by the northeast quadrant of the storm (usually with the strongest winds), it looked as if we would just get the outer bands. What to do?

I knew that hundreds of thousands of residents and tourists would be fleeing from the storm. I was sure that fuel would be scarce, lodging along the way hard to find, and traffic often snarled. I didn't want to be stranded in a low-lying flood plain. Fatal accidents were a definite possibility. I remembered leaving for Hurricane *Floyd* in 1999. Although Ocracoke fared well then (as it usually has), it was a nightmare trying to return home. Storm surge and rainfall had flooded nearly all of eastern North Carolina mainland.

We humans are notoriously bad at rational risk assessment. Although many people are afraid of lightning, sharks, or flying, driving on the Interstate at 70 mph, something we do routinely, is one of the most dangerous things we do. I decided to try to think clearly about this situation. Which was less risky...staying on Ocracoke during the storm or driving on the highway for 400 or more miles?

I decided to stay.

The extra time had a number of benefits. It gave me an opportunity to make additional last-minute preparations, including boarding up some windows. I wouldn't have to drive for hours in an exhausted state. And I could at least make repairs after the storm passed.

I was fully aware that emergency services would be non-existent, and I would have to deal with any injuries or misfortunes myself. I was not expecting others to put their lives in danger for me.

As it turned out, Hurricane *Florence* had only minimal impact on Ocracoke. Winds did not exceed Tropical Storm velocity, no tidal storm surge inundated the village, and only a few tree limbs were downed. We continued to have municipal water, and power was out for only a few short periods. I know it could have been worse, and some people will continue to think I made a poor decision. That may be, but I will live with it. I respect everyone's decision in these situations. No one has a crystal ball, and it is never easy or clear what to do. Some leave, some stay. My daughter and grandson, among many others, decided to leave. It was the right decision for them.

I might make a different decision next time, but I am content with the decision I made this time.