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Volcano Continued from Page 1

Knowing what predictions and forecasts are and how to make them still doesn't make them any easier, and gives a strong case for more research. In a 1984 Washington Post article, Motoaki Sato, a scientist at USGS headquarters in Reston, Va., said predicting eruptions is tricky business.

"Look how much trouble meteorologists have," he said. "And what they're studying is above ground."

"It's the difference between saying there's probably going to be a storm sometime in the next week and 'Quick, there's a hurricane coming down the street, get into your cellar,'" said Alfred T. Anderson, a University of Chicago volcanologist, in a 1985 Christian Science Monitor article.

All this brings to light the "cry wolf" syndrome, as Goles terms it.

"If you give a warning, and nothing happens, then people tend to ignore you the next time around," he said. "If you do that too many times, they say 'You guys don't know what you're doing, so we're not going to put any of our tax dollars in your pockets.'"

There is definitely a hazard in making premature predictions before one is really sure, and there may not be too many ways around this, Goles said.

On the other hand, Swanson thinks

the "cry wolf" syndrome may be a little overplayed, he said.

"If scientists are careful with their statements, the public will understand if we're wrong," he said. "The memory of St. Helens is still fresh and may prompt people to act."

Pringle wonders if people even pay attention at first.

"You can tell somebody to leave — that they'll get blown away, and they'll accept the risk," he said.

These risks are especially acute in the Pacific Northwest, Swanson said. He believes Mt. Rainier and/or Mt. Hood will most certainly erupt sometime in the next 100 to 200 years. This may seem far off, but how large will Seattle and Portland be in area and population by that time, he asked.

Most volcanoes have such an infrequent eruption pattern that people do tend to forget the dangers, Goles said.

The significant length of time it takes to obtain results from volcano research adds to this memory loss as well as indifference to the research itself, he added.

The federal government has not been real helpful to volcano research, Goles said.

"The present administration, and to some extent its predecessors, has not been very interested in science that

doesn't have a direct technological or military application," he said.

Time is an important aspect of the scientific process, Pringle said.

"There is a definite lag of time in the dissemination of information from volcano research. There's a test period we have to go through before it goes to the public because it must be scrutinized by scientific peers."

This time lag is unacceptable to the American people and government because "they're trained to think in a different way. They expect accountability on a one or two year time scale. It may take five years to get a new type of program going," Goles said.

The people at the USGS are doing a good job, but they need a doubling in staff and about one-and-a-half times the budget, he said.

"What might be even more useful would be to set up one or more research institutes focusing on the same problem," he added. "That may sound like unnecessary duplication, but people tend to get locked into certain ways of looking at things; by having different groups of people working on an important problem, you're much more likely to come up with breakthroughs."

Swanson agreed.

"We need more manpower," he said. "All these volcanoes in the Cascades will erupt sometime." He added people need to prepare more modern volcano risk and hazard maps to help recognize mud flows.

"We know more about mud flows now than we did four years ago, and the maps need updating. We also need at least three seismometers on each volcano. Right now we only have one per volcano."

Pringle thinks there is a "fair amount" of research being done on all Cascade volcanoes that people are not aware of, but that scientists can always do more. He does believe research has eliminated what he called the "folklore aspect."

In his book "Fire and Ice," Stephen Harris said volcanic activity in the Cascades was episodic, tending to come in clots, and that a St. Helens eruption was usually the beginning of increased volcanic activity.

Pringle, although not in total disagreement, nevertheless says each volcano has its own history. "There is no evidence of a grand plumbing system," he said.

Pringle also said research helps refute the myth that volcanoes just sit there waiting quietly to erupt.

"We hear these things became hot all of a sudden," Pringle said, "but they really do that or had they been hot for a long time and nobody noticed?"

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to increased funding for volcano research is the problem of economic scale and the fact that it is a regional problem. In countries like Indonesia, Japan and Colombia, where active volcanoes still wreak havoc, there simply isn't enough money for volcano research.

The problem is regional in the United States, Goles said.

"The guy in Gary, Ind., isn't going to want to pay for volcano research on the west coast," he said.

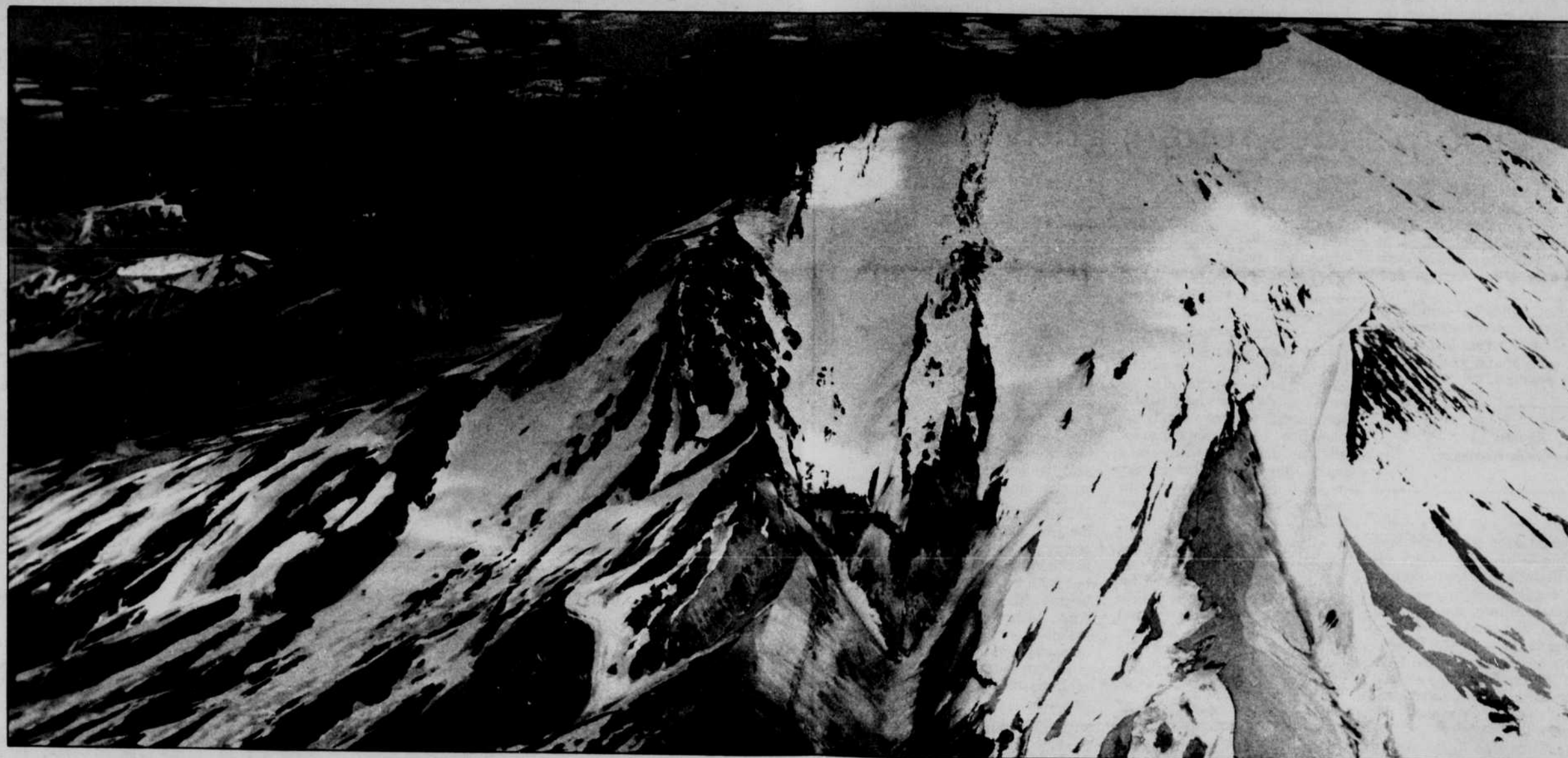
Swanson and Pringle wonder if the guy in Gary has the right attitude.

"It sure would matter to him if he happens to be visiting Mr. Rainier when it erupts," Swanson said.

The attitude stems from education, Pringle said.

"People pick up on this stuff if it's presented in an accessible fashion," he said. "We focus too much on the means and not the how. We do need better education about volcanoes."

"If something loses its mystique, it doesn't lose its elegance. The more I learn about volcanoes, the more I'm fascinated with them."



Even though volcanic activity at Mt. St. Helens in southwestern Washington has calmed in recent years, scientists believe research and education are important in learning how and why volcanoes erupt.

Photo by Michael Wilhelm

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