

Mancke: Japan's nuclear situation is a 'Radioactive Volcano'

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Famed South Carolina naturalist and Chernobyl expert Rudy Mancke said Sunday that Japan's nuclear situation could become a historic catastrophe if early reports of meltdowns turn out to be true — depending on the severity of the meltdowns.

"If they are melting down and being released into the air, they are going to become a radioactive volcano," said Mancke, 65, the University of South Carolina's naturalist in residence who has studied animal and plant life around Chernobyl for more than two decades.

Mancke is one of several S.C. experts featured on an upcoming three-part ETV series on the 25-year aftermath of Chernobyl, whose April 1986 meltdown up until now was regarded as history's greatest nuclear reactor disaster.

Mancke has visited Chernobyl and its environs four times and in 2003 made a half-hour ETV show on what has happened to plants and animals around Chernobyl since the 1986 disaster.

Contamination from Chernobyl resulted in the relocation of some 336,000 people and a 30-kilometer wide exclusion zone in which no humans are supposed to live. Some 4,000 deaths from cancer will eventually occur because of the accident, scientists predict.

The full extent of Japan's situation, in which four nuclear reactors were damaged, is not yet known. However, early reports say safety and containment features on Japan's reactors are superior to those at Chernobyl.

A key difference, said Mancke, between the Japanese nuclear reactor failures and those at Chernobyl, is that Chernobyl's were caused by a series of easily avoidable human errors, while it was a natural event that shook Japan's reactors.

In Chernobyl, the then-Soviet government at first refused to acknowledge a problem and warn people of the dangers. In Japan, said Mancke, although the power companies that operate the reactors haven't released a definitive account, "at least they are admitting there's a problem."

The full impact of radioactive contamination in Japan will depend on exactly what types of radioactive particles are released and where they land. "It depends on what comes out of there, whether it's cesium or strontium, or radioactive iodine, or plutonium — which is the worst; it's got a half life of 25 years. If you are exposed to that, you're dead," Mancke said. "Radiation can cause leukemia and other abnormal growth in the body, tumors, cancers."

Plants and animals will survive around the damaged nuclear plants. "Nature just keeps sending in the troops," Mancke said. In Chernobyl's exclusion zone, "birds fly back in; moose walk into Chernobyl."

As a lecturer and teacher, Mancke is noted for his sense of wonder about the world around us.

Characteristically, he noted, "Isn't this amazing this is happening a month before the 25th anniversary of Chernobyl?"

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