

# Finding Fault

**By Bobby Oerzen**

**Geophysicist Kelly Wiseman is keeping a close watch on earthquake activity in one of Earth's danger zones.**

Kelly Wiseman was only 6 years old in 1989. Still, Oct. 17, 1989, is a day she remembers as if it were yesterday. Late in the afternoon, she and her mom were traveling to their home in San Jose, Calif., after picking up some take-out food. They couldn't wait to watch Game 3 of the World Series on TV. Two California teams, the San Francisco Giants and the Oakland Athletics, were playing.



Courtesy of Kelly Wiseman

Kelly Wiseman collects data near the San Andreas Fault in California.

Suddenly, the pavement started to heave. A magnitude 6.9 earthquake had struck. "Cars started bouncing; streetlamps were swaying," Wiseman recalls. "I couldn't believe it was happening. It was kinda cool."

"That's one of my earliest memories. Since then, I've always had an interest in earthquakes."

In college, Wiseman majored in geophysics and completed a summer internship in which she studied the San Andreas Fault—the fault that caused the quake of '89. Today, Wiseman is a graduate student at the University of

California, Berkeley, furthering her interest in earthquakes, this time in one of the planet's shakiest regions.

## Broken Plates

Earthquakes are set off by the movement of *tectonic plates*, the enormous slabs of Earth's shell that intersect like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Tectonic plates are always in motion; on average, they move between 2.5 and 15 centimeters (1 and 6 inches) per year. Wherever two tectonic plates border each other, they interact in one of three ways: they either pull apart, press together, or slide past each other.

The movements of tectonic plates cause large *faults* (cracks) to appear in the crust near the plate boundaries. The ground normally moves along the two sides of a fault, but that movement isn't always smooth and gradual. The two sides of a fault can get hung up against each other. Stress builds up there until—*snap!*—the fault slips with a jerk. Seismic waves ripple through the ground, and an earthquake happens. Wiseman's work involves monitoring the gradual and abrupt movements of the ground on either side of faults.

## Wall of Water

Wiseman's main focus is the Mentawai Fault near Sumatra, an island in Indonesia. A nearby fault called the Sunda Megathrust, which runs under the Indian Ocean, caused one of the worst natural disasters in recent memory: a huge *tsunami* that struck the coasts of southern Asia in 2004, killing more than 280,000 people. A tsunami is a huge sea wave or series of waves set off by a submarine earthquake, landslide, or volcanic eruption.



Joe LeMonnier

The tsunami started where two tectonic plates—the Indian Plate and the Sundaland Plate—are slowly *converging* (colliding). As the Indian Plate moves under the Sundaland Plate, it sticks in places and pulls the edge of the Sundaland Plate down with it. In 2004, the edge of the Sundaland Plate snapped up, triggering a magnitude 9.2 earthquake. The motion of the snap pushed the water above the Sunda Megathrust upward. At the surface, the water formed a hill that spread, forming the waves of a gigantic tsunami.

"My adviser at Berkeley was interested in studying the great 2004 Megathrust earthquake," she explains. "I expanded the project to include other large earthquakes and faults in the Sumatra region." Wiseman leads a team whose members hail from not only the University of California, but also Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and the Indonesian Institute of Sciences.

Wiseman has never actually visited the Mentawai Fault. She uses the *Global Positioning System (GPS)* to observe it instead. The GPS is a network of 31 satellites orbiting the globe that monitors Earth's surface, including its tiniest movements.

Using GPS data, Wiseman and her team receive real-time updates on the movements of the Mentawai Fault. "We can track everything from the computer," says Wiseman. "We are able to locate a position on Earth's surface within a few millimeters."

### Stressed Out

Wiseman's research has revealed that the Mentawai Fault is an *active fault*, which means another earthquake is likely to occur there. The project has documented the occurrence of two earthquakes along the Mentawai, one in 2005 and one in 2009.



John Russel/AFP/Getty  
Images/Newscom  
On an island in Thailand,  
people flee the tsunami  
that struck coastal regions

of southern Asia in 2004.

Those two earthquakes resulted from ruptures along small portions of the Mentawai Fault, so they didn't produce tsunamis. But the size and nature of the fault suggest that a rupture of the whole fault "could trigger a significant tsunami," says Wiseman. Small quakes such as the two she has documented could be signs that the region's crust is close to being "critically stressed."



Philip A. McDaniel/CNP/Corbis  
A village in Sumatra that the same tsunami inundated with water

Wiseman hopes her research will better assess the hazards of earthquakes and tsunamis in the Sumatra region. "Much of what I study," she says, "forecasts the dangers we'll see in this lifetime and our grandchildren's lifetime."

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. All of the following are faults EXCEPT

- A Palembang
- B San Andreas
- C Mentawai
- D Sunda Megathrust

2. Kelly Wiseman studies earthquakes. What causes earthquakes?

- A a reoccurring series of landslides
- B volcanoes with frequent eruptions
- C the occurrence of huge tsunamis
- D the movement of tectonic plates

3. What can you most likely conclude about Wiseman after reading the passage?

- A She finds her job interesting and rewarding.
- B She hopes to move to Indonesia one day.
- C She is frustrated by the pace of her research.
- D She would rather work alone than with a team.

4. Read this sentence from the passage: "But the size and nature of the fault suggest that a rupture of the whole fault 'could trigger a significant tsunami,' says Wiseman."

In this sentence, the word **significant** means

- A small
- B large
- C loud
- D calm

5. The primary purpose of this passage is to describe

- A Kelly Wiseman's research of earthquake activity
- B why Sumatra is such a dangerous place to live
- C how Global Positioning Systems help scientists
- D the difference between an earthquake and a tsunami

6. What was Wiseman's college major?

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7. When she was 6 years old, Kelly Wiseman was traveling in a car with her mother when an earthquake struck. How did Wiseman react? What does this tell us about her as a person?

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8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Kelly Wiseman and her team use GPS data \_\_\_\_\_ receive real-time updates on the movements of faults.

- A or
- B for
- C to
- D but

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

In 2004, more than 280,000 people were killed by a huge tsunami that struck the coasts of southern Asia.

Who? \_\_\_\_\_

(were) What? were killed

How? \_\_\_\_\_

Where? \_\_\_\_\_

When? \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Vocabulary Word:** converge: to collide or to move towards something from different directions.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: \_\_\_\_\_