

Seismicity of the Earth 1900 - 2007

Caribbean Plate and Vicinity

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Map not approved for release by Director USGS
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SEISMICITY OF THE EARTH 1900 - 2007
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TECTONIC SUMMARY

[References are listed in separate document on website]

Extensive diversity of tectonic regimes characterizes the perimeter of the Caribbean plate, involving no fewer than four major adjacent plates (North America, South America, Nazca, and Cocos). Inclined zones of deep earthquakes (Wadati-Benioff zones), deep ocean trenches, and arcs of volcanoes clearly indicate subduction of oceanic lithosphere along the Central American and Atlantic Ocean margins of the Caribbean plate, while shallow seismicity and focal mechanisms of major shocks in Guatemala, northern Venezuela, and the Cayman Ridge and Cayman Trench indicate transform fault and pull-apart basin tectonics.

The depth profile panels on this map portray earthquakes that extend from the Middle America Trench axis in the west to depths as great as 300 km beneath Guatemala, and from the Lesser Antilles Trench axis in the east to depths of approximately 200 km beneath Guadeloupe and the NE Caribbean. In contrast, seismicity along the segments of the Caribbean plate margins from Guatemala to Hispaniola and from Trinidad to western Venezuela is indicative of transform fault tectonics.

Along the northern margin of the Caribbean plate, relative North America moves toward the west at approximately 20 mm/yr, resulting in major strike-slip faults (e.g., El Pilar and Boconó faults) and shallow seismicity, resulting from relative plate motion of about 20 mm/yr. Further to the west, a broad zone of convergent deformation trends southwest across western Venezuela and central Colombia. Plate boundaries are not well defined across northern South America, but there is a transition from Caribbean-South America convergence in the east to Nazca-South America convergence in the west, described in more detail below. The transition zone is characterized by high seismic hazard.

The plate boundary curves around Puerto Rico and the northern Lesser Antilles where the plate motion vector of the Caribbean plate relative to the North and South America plates is less oblique, resulting in active island arc tectonics. The North and South America plates subduct beneath the Caribbean plate along the Lesser Antilles Trench at rates of about 20 mm/yr; consequently, there are both intermediate focus earthquakes within the subducted South America plate and a chain of active volcanoes along the island arc.

The southern Caribbean plate boundary with the South America plate strikes east-west across Trinidad and western Venezuela and is characterized by major strike-slip faults (e.g., El Pilar and Boconó faults) and shallow seismicity, resulting from relative plate motion of about 20 mm/yr. Further to the west, a broad zone of convergent deformation trends southwest across western Venezuela and central Colombia. Plate boundaries are not well defined across northern South America, but there is a transition from Caribbean-South America convergence in the east to Nazca-South America convergence in the west, described in more detail below. The transition zone is characterized by high seismic hazard.

The Nazca-Caribbean plate boundary offshore of Colombia is characterized by convergence (Nazca plate subducting under South America plate) at about 65 mm/yr. The 6 January 1906 Mw = 8.5 megathrust subduction earthquake occurred on a shallow-dipping interface of this plate boundary segment. The 1906 earthquake occurred in the Colombia-Ecuador region, with a seismic moment (Mo, equivalent to radiated energy) of 6x10²⁸ dyne-cm (Okal, 1992), and a moment magnitude (Mw) of 8.5 (Tarr and others, 2009.) The nucleation point of this earthquake is indicated on the map (rupture area is from Kanamori and McNally, 1982.)

Along the western coast of Central America, the Cocos plate subducts beneath the Caribbean plate at rates of 72-81 mm/yr, resulting in a relatively high seismic hazard and a chain of numerous active volcanoes; here intermediate-focus earthquakes occur within the subducted Cocos plate to depths of nearly 300 km.

DATA SOURCES

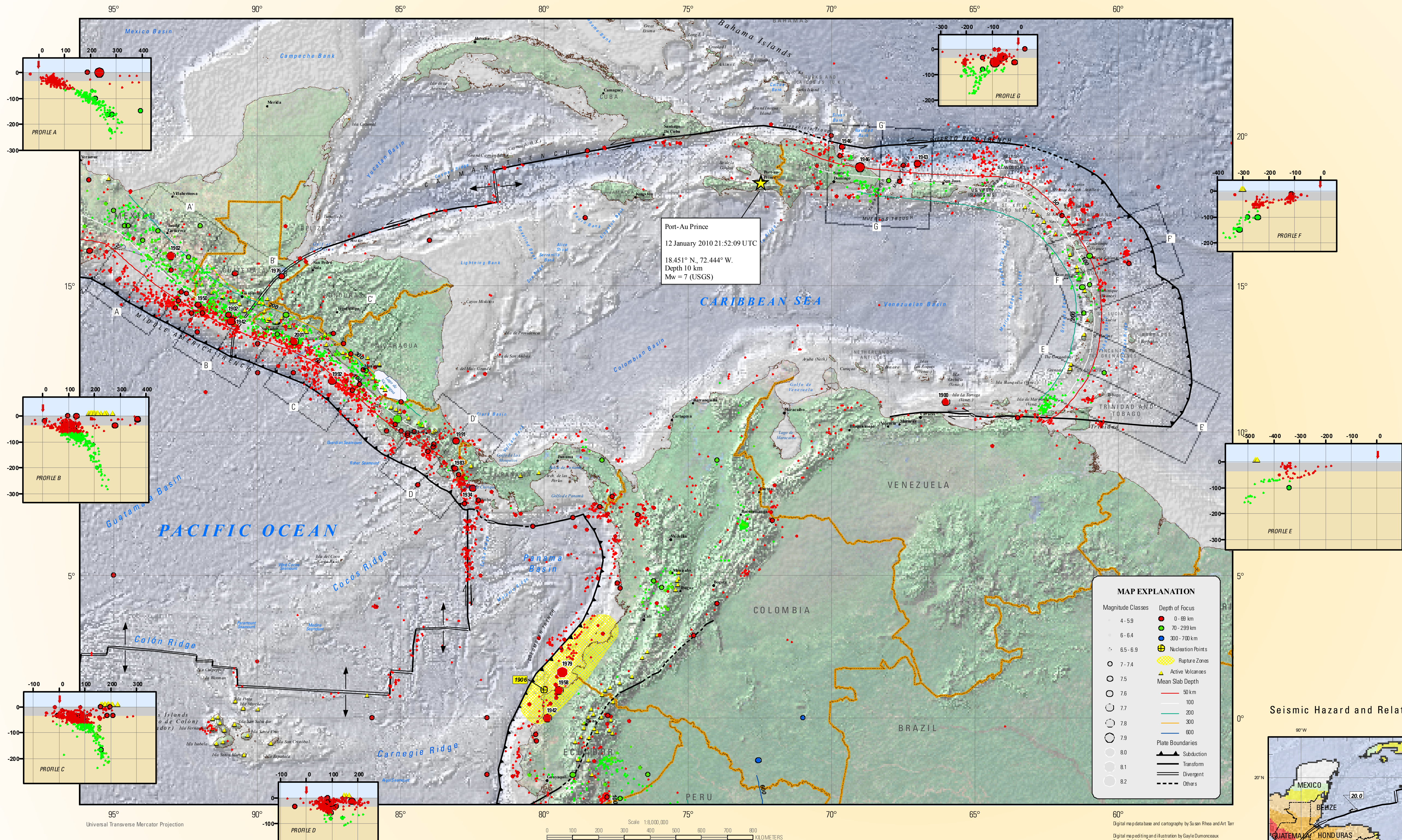
The earthquakes portrayed on the main map and the depth profiles are taken from two sources: (a) the Centennial earthquake catalog (Engdahl and Villaseñor, 2002) and annual supplements for the interval 1900-2007, where the magnitude floor is 5.5 globally and (b) a catalog of earthquakes having high-quality depth determinations for the period 1964-2002 and a magnitude range of 5.0 ≤ Mw ≤ 5.4 (Engdahl, personal communication.)

The nucleation points of great earthquakes (M ≥ 8.3) are designated with a label showing the year of occurrence. Their rupture areas are shown as pale yellow polygons. Major earthquakes (7.5 ≤ Mw ≤ 8.2) are labeled with the year of occurrence.

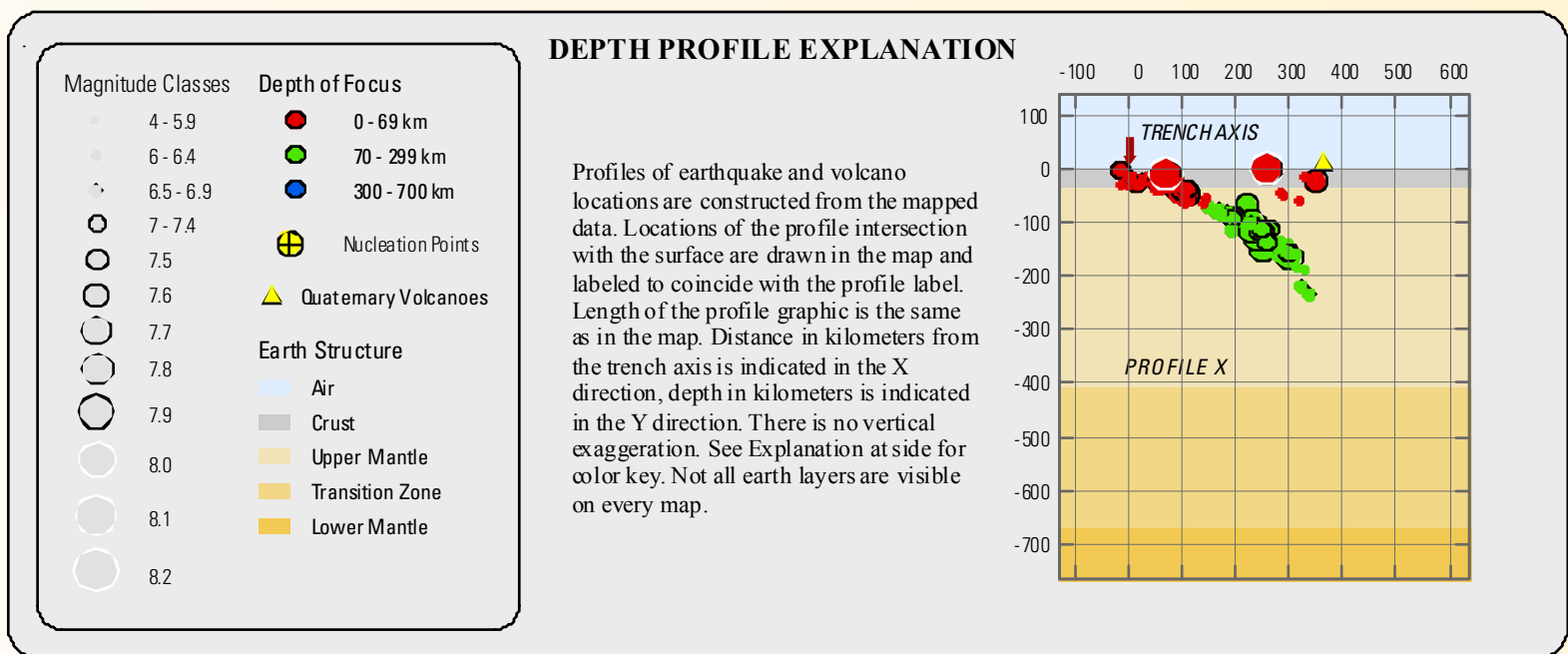
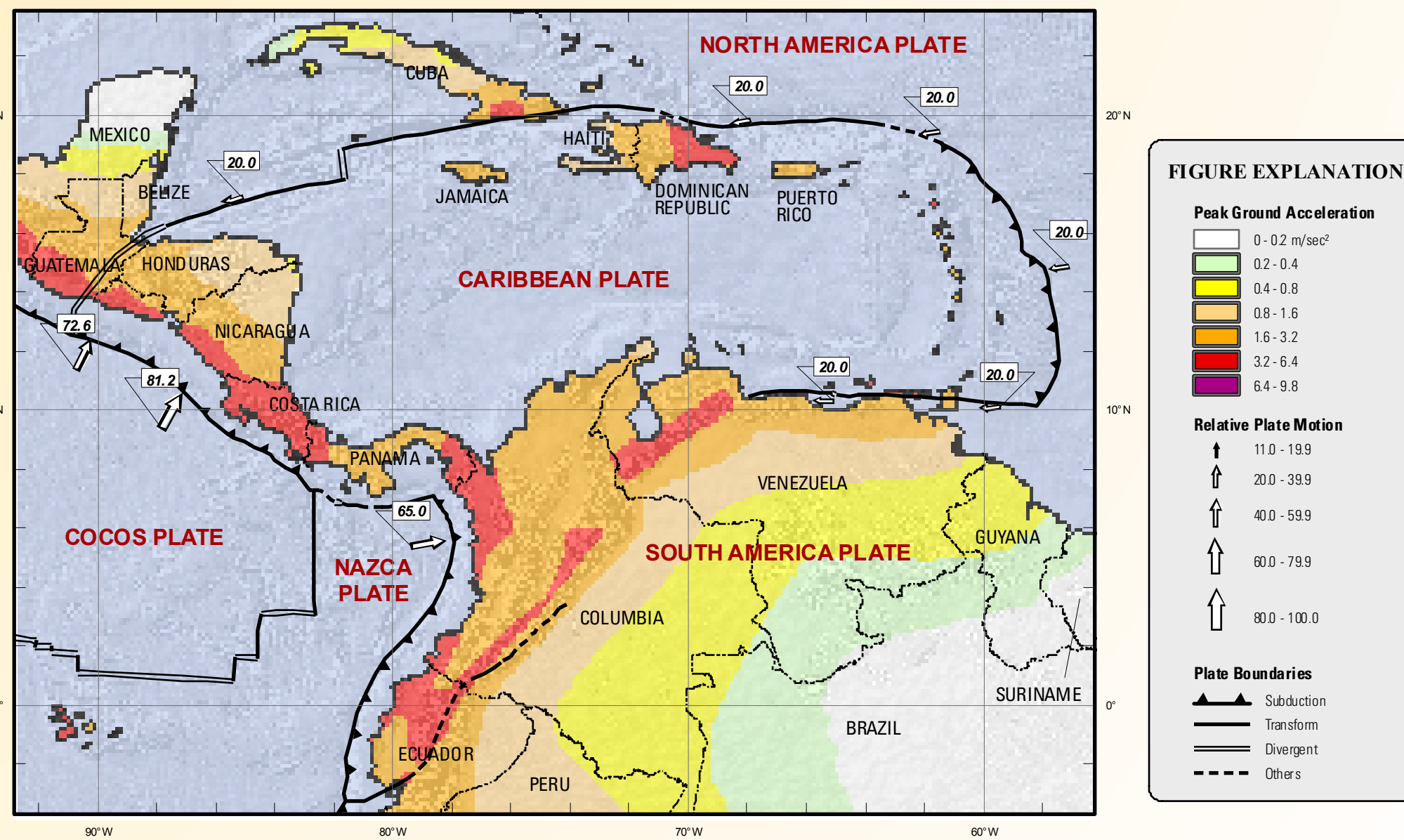
The Seismic Hazard and Relative Plate Motion panel displays the generalized seismic hazard of the region (Giardini and others, 1999) and representative relative plate motion vectors of the Caribbean plate relative to the adjacent Pacific, North and South America plates using the NUVEL-1A model (DeMets, et al., 1994) and updates (Dixon, et al., 1998; Weber, et al., 2001).

Pre-instrumental seismicity was obtained from the NOAA National Geophysical Data Center database of significant earthquakes. This database contains information on earthquake locations, source parameters and macro-seismic effects for earthquakes with associated reports of at least one of the following: moderate to major damage, 10 or more deaths, an estimated magnitude of 7.5 or greater, Modified Mercalli Intensities X or tsunami generation. Earthquake locations shown on the pre-instrumental map are approximate, based on macro-seismic reports and field investigations. Earthquakes for which deaths are reported in the NOAA significant earthquake database are identified by their year of occurrence. More importantly, all of the earthquakes on this map, combined with earthquake information found on the main map, play a role in understanding and addressing seismic hazards in the Caribbean basin.

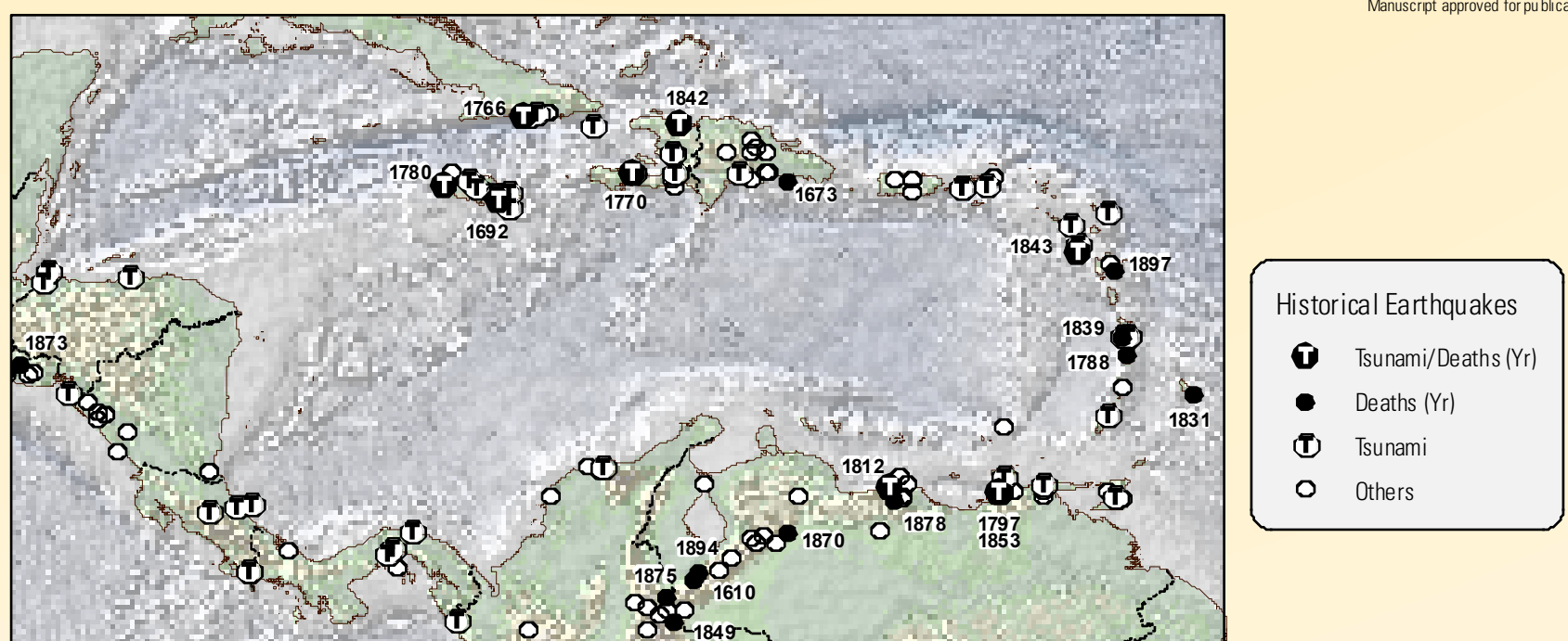
Base map data sources include GEBCO 2008, Volcanoes of the World dataset (Siebert and Simkin, 2002), plate boundaries (Bird, 2003), Digital Chart of the World and ESRI.



Seismic Hazard and Relative Plate Motion



Pre-Instrumental Seismicity 1500-1899



Any use of trade names is for descriptive purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.
This map was produced on request, directly from digital files, on an electronic plotter.
For sale by U.S. Geological Survey Information Services Box 25086, Federal Center, Denver, CO 80225 1-800-485-0085
A PDF for this map is available at <http://pubs.usgs.gov/ofr/2010/xxx/>
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