



**Randy L. Haupt**  
Colorado School of Mines  
Brown Building 249  
1510 Illinois Street, Golden,  
CO 80401 USA  
Tel: +1 (303) 273 3721  
E-mail: rhaupt@mines.edu



**Amy J. Shockley**  
E-mail: aj4317@gmail.com

# A Coconut Deception

*Randy L. Haupt and Amy J. Shockley*

Sue (wife/mother of the authors of this article) was strolling along a beach in Mexico when she got hit in the head by a coconut. Did you know that coconuts actually severely injure people, and may even cause death when they hit someone on the head? If you want to find the odds of dying from a falling coconut and search the Web for “death by coconut,” you will find that a brewery just released a new beer called Death by Coconut. We suggest instead searching for “how many people die from coconuts.” The predominant number that appears is 150 deaths/year due to a coconut falling on someone’s head. Wow!

Where did that number come from? Club Direct (British travel insurance) managing director Brent Escott said that “Coconuts kill around 150 people worldwide each year, which makes them about ten times more dangerous than sharks” [1]. He got his number by extrapolating from the data published in a medical study [2]. One Web page estimates that “6 out of every one million people get bonked by a coconut” [3]. They arrived at that number by first estimating the number of coconuts on trees from the number of coconuts harvested in a year, then used the number of people on Earth and the land area where coconuts live. Assuming that 1% of the people die from getting hit by a coconut, then they estimated that 400 people die each year. These numbers should make you think twice before napping under a palm tree.

So, what happened to poor Sue? If you knew the following facts, you would be concerned: “Mature coconut

palms may have a height of 24 up to 35 meters and an unhusked coconut may weigh 1 to 4 kg, meaning that blows to the head of a force exceeding 1 metric ton are possible” [2]. Fortunately, the tree that Sue meandered under was a rather small palm. In what is probably the most fortunate part of this situation, her head bumped into the coconut: the coconut never fell from the tree. While startling to head-butt a coconut when walking on the beach, not paying attention, physical injury was thus minimal.

Our coconut story was very misleading. We did not lie, but we did purposely deceive you. The coconut was not on a tall tree, and it did not fall. The statistics we cited from the references were also bogus. In reality, it is difficult to find an instance of one person ever dying from a coconut that fell from a tree. The deaths per year that are frequently cited are based on faulty assumptions, and not real data.

To deceive is to instill a belief in someone that is not actually true. Deception is quite prevalent in today’s society, whether driven by true malicious intent, as a mistake, or as a practical joke. The ethical line in deception is intent. If the deceiver is acting with the intent to gain an unjust benefit or cause harm to another, they are acting unethically. Identifying ill-intended deception can be difficult, and requires building upon the skills required to be less gullible. In addition to those skills, you should use your inner compass to gauge if a scenario “feels right.” Include information that you know about the individual, and their morals and past actions. Asking probing questions can help identify a

deception as well as if it is driven by poor intentions (often times, deceit is driven by peoples' inability to say "I don't know"). Don't hesitate to consult others in order to get varying opinions and views of the situation.

Just because a "fact" is quoted in many different places and by reputable people doesn't make it true. Vladimir Lenin said, "A lie told often enough becomes the truth."

## References

1. M. Perkins, *Surviving Paradise*, London, Quidnunc Press, 2006; <https://books.google.com>.
2. P. Barss, "Injuries Due to Falling Coconuts," *J. Trauma*, **24**, 11, November 1984, pp. 990-991.
3. <http://diaryofnumbers.blogspot.com/2010/11/death-by-coconut.html>

## Maxwell Newsletters Available

The spring and summer 2018 *James Clerk Maxwell Newsletters* of the Clerk Maxwell Foundation are available at [www.clerkmaxwellfoundation.org](http://www.clerkmaxwellfoundation.org). Among other items, the spring issue contains an article on the discovery of gravitational waves. The summer issue surveys the use of light as a replacement for radio frequencies in Wi-Fi and micro-cellular communication situations.