

Flooded British villages ignite climate debate

February 3 2014, by Jill Lawless



In this photo taken Sunday Feb. 2, 2014, a man walks along the raised banks of the flooded River Parrett near Muchelney in Somerset, England, the village has been cut off by road since Jan. 1 this year. Here on the Somerset Levels _ a flat, marshy region of farmland dotted with villages and scored by rivers and ditches _ it's often wet. But not this wet. Thousands of acres of this corner of southwest England have been under water for weeks, some villages have been cut off for more than a month, and local people forced to take boats to get to school, work and shops are frustrated and angry. Some blame government budget cuts and environmental bureaucracy. Others point to climate change. Even plump, endangered water voles are the target of ire.(AP Photo/Alastair Grant)

As children climb into boats to get to school and scores of hoses pump

floodwaters from fields day and night, one corner of southwest England is trying to reclaim its land. Other Britons watch and wonder: How much can you fight the sea?

Here on the Somerset Levels—a marshy, low-lying region dotted with farmland and villages and crisscrossed by rivers—thousands of acres have been under water for weeks.

Some villages have been cut off for a month, leaving residents who have been forced to make long detours or take boats to school, work or grocery shops frustrated and angry. Some blame government budget cuts and inept environmental bureaucracy. Others point to climate change. Some wonder if flood defenses for major cities like nearby Bristol or London will take precedence over protecting their rural hamlets.

"I'm used to seeing floods on the Levels, but this is just something else," said 28-year-old Kris Davies, who was dragging sodden carpet from his cottage in the village of Thorney. He, his wife and two daughters have just returned after a month staying with family in a nearby town.

He said when the area flooded less severely last winter "we were told it was a one-in-100-year occurrence."

"The following year it happens again—only worse!" he said.

The disaster has put the Levels at the center of a debate about the effects of climate change and the cost of preserving an agricultural landscape created over the centuries since medieval monks began draining the wetlands around nearby Glastonbury Abbey.

Meteorologists say Britain's future will involve more extreme weather.

Rainstorms have battered Britain since December and this January was

the wettest in more than a century in southern England. The region was due to be hit by more rain and gale-force winds starting Monday.

Floods have already inundated an area covering some 25 square miles (16,000 acres or 65 square kilometers). The River Parrett and other waterways have burst their banks and fields that normally sustain crops, dairy herds and beef cattle are under several feet (more than 1 meter) of water.

Many roads are impassible and the village of Muchelney is now an island reached only by boats run by firefighters.

On one road, the top of a car peeks out above the water.



In this photo taken Sunday Feb. 2, 2014, people take photos and look at the flooding from the River Parrett on the Somerset Levels from Barrow Mump, Somerset, England, Here on the Somerset Levels _ a flat, marshy region of farmland dotted with villages and scored by rivers and ditches _ it's often wet. But not this wet. Thousands of acres of this corner of southwest England have been under water for weeks, some villages have been cut off for more than a month, and local people forced to take boats to get to school, work and shops are

frustrated and angry. Some blame government budget cuts and environmental bureaucracy. Others point to climate change. Even plump, endangered water voles are the target of ire. (AP Photo/Alastair Grant)

Davies' home in Thorney, a hamlet of sandstone-colored buildings and thatched cottages, is normally a few minutes' drive from Muchelney. It now takes 45 minutes to get there unless you take a boat.

"Having to kayak to your front door is a bit of a novelty," Davies said. "The kids loved it for a couple of days but the novelty has worn off."

No one in Somerset thinks floods can be avoided. Much of this land is below sea level, and it's as marshy and porous as a sponge. But many locals blame this year's devastation on the Environment Agency's decision, in the 1990s, to abandon a policy of routinely dredging local rivers, which are now clogged with silt and running at between a third and two-thirds of capacity.

They say this disaster has been building for years.

"A really carefully constructed landscape which works quite well, which has worked for 800 years, has suddenly been left untended," said Andrew Lee, founder of a "Stop the Floods" advocacy group.

"There are fields I can see from my house that were underwater for 11 months between 2012 and 2013," he said. The anger around here is that it has taken another major disaster for it to get any attention at all."

Some say spending cuts by Britain's Conservative-led government have made things worse. The environment department has seen its budget reduced by 500 million pounds (\$820 million) since 2010.

The Environment Agency says budget cuts have not weakened its flood protection efforts. But agency chief Chris Smith, in an article for Monday's Daily Telegraph, conceded that the relentless demand on resources means "difficult decisions" about what to save: "Town or country, front rooms or farmland?"

The government also argues that dredging alone is not the solution. It speeds up rivers and can cause flooding downstream and it disturbs the habitats of fish, otters and water voles, an endangered rodent.

That attitude infuriates some locals.

"They have got to stop worrying about the water voles, stop worrying about the birds—just do the job," said Conservative lawmaker Ian Liddell-Grainger.



In this photo taken Sunday Feb. 2, 2014, Cattle try to graze amidst the

floodwater of the River Parrett near Langport, Somerset England. Here on the Somerset Levels _ a flat, marshy region of farmland dotted with villages and scored by rivers and ditches _ it's often wet. But not this wet. Thousands of acres of this corner of southwest England have been under water for weeks, some villages have been cut off for more than a month, and local people forced to take boats to get to school, work and shops are frustrated and angry. Some blame government budget cuts and environmental bureaucracy. Others point to climate change. Even plump, endangered water voles are the target of ire. (AP Photo/Alastair Grant)

Somerset's flooded landscape has lasted long enough to become a tourist attraction. People clamber up the muddy hill known as Burrow Mump to look out over fields that now resemble an inland sea, with the tops of hedges, gates and trees poking out from the water.

The waters have receded only slightly, despite having 65 pumps running around-the clock to drain almost 400 million gallons (1.5 million tonnes) of water a day from the land. Prime Minister David Cameron, stung by the uproar, has promised to resume dredging.

Some environmentalists and scientists say in the long run, as ocean levels rise, it's a doomed effort. They talk about "a managed retreat"—abandoning some farmland and letting marsh and sea reclaim it.

"Retreat is the only sensible policy," Colin Thorne, a flood expert at Nottingham University told the Sunday Telegraph. "If we fight nature, we will lose in the end."

Others, though, want to be as ambitious as those medieval monks who transformed a marsh into valuable farmland.



In this photo taken Sunday Feb. 2, 2014, floodwater from the River Parrett blocks a road from Thorney to Barrington in Somerset, England. Here on the Somerset Levels _ a flat, marshy region of farmland dotted with villages and scored by rivers and ditches _ it's often wet. But not this wet. Thousands of acres of this corner of southwest England have been under water for weeks, some villages have been cut off for more than a month, and local people forced to take boats to get to school, work and shops are frustrated and angry. Some blame government budget cuts and environmental bureaucracy. Others point to climate change. Even plump, endangered water voles are the target of ire. (AP Photo/Alastair Grant)

"You've got to think big," said John Wood, a parish councilor looking out from an elevated churchyard as the sun glinted on the silvery floodwaters.

"It looks beautiful," he said—asking why not keep the water, collecting it in giant reservoirs? "You've got boating lakes, you've got fishing. Tourists will come."

He says that's a better idea than rows of pumps fruitlessly trying to compete with nature at a current cost of 100,000 pounds (\$163,000) a day.

"What are we doing at the moment? We're pouring banknotes into that river and watching it go out to sea," he said.

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