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# We can't allow Somerset to sink into a swamp

Those suggesting we should return the levels to marshland are wrong. It would destroy villages and cost a fortune

**Alice Thomson**



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*What would the world be, once bereft,  
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left, wildness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Every weekend I travel across the Somerset Levels on my way home to Devon, taking Brunel's train line across the now flooded plains. After a month of rain the views are stunning; miles of water stretch endlessly to the hills on either side, shimmering in the weak sunlight, punctuated by the occasional marooned cottage floating on the mirage like a Noah's ark. Shouldn't we just let it go and embrace this vast inland sea, treasure this wetland rather than battling against the lapping water?

That's what the re-wilding movement thinks. There shouldn't be humans, farms and pumping stations cluttering up this landscape. We should leave this vast expanse to the otters, water voles, eels, maybe even wild boar, and return it to a swamp.

Natural England and the RSPB have tacitly held this view, as has the Environment Agency. Eighteen years ago, when responsibility was handed over to the newly created agency, it decided to abandon regular dredging of the four main rivers that carry the water away to the sea. It's not natural to try to hold back the tides.

"You are looking at retreat," Professor Colin Thorne, a flooding expert at the University of Nottingham, said. "It makes no sense to defend the indefensible." This may make sense around some coastlines where rock is crumbling into the sea but to suggest that the Somerset Levels return to prehistoric times is like assuming men should still be

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running around in loincloths, hitting women over their heads with sticks. And what will happen to the M5 and the Great Western Railway? Will Devon and Cornwall just be cut off or will road and rail have to be lifted above the bogland?

The Somerset Levels have been managed successfully since Roman times. They cover a vast agricultural area, more than 50 square miles, larger than some small countries.

Dutch engineers in the 17th century completed what the Romans began, and the medieval monks continued it, turning the levels into rich farmland using an artificial system of ditches and rhynes that directed the flow, and were eventually operated by local drainage boards.

When I visited a farm on the edge of the levels near the flooded village of Muchelney last week, it was clear that this new inland sea made up of 14 billion gallons isn't helping nature to flourish. The water is fetid: stagnant pools mixed with sewage. Fish are dying. Birds are lying in putrid ponds. A bloated badger was floating in a puddle. The farmers have been told not to allow their children to play in this mess that will take months to drain.

If we want to re-naturalise the levels and turn the area into a nature reserve it will cost a fortune to dig up 2,000 years of irrigation systems and canals and return them to proper marshland. It won't happen of its own accord. We would also eventually have to relocate whole villages and hamlets as no one can put up with regular flooding, especially when it is becoming impossible to get insurance. I lived by the Thames as a child — just beyond the floodline — and every few winters I would watch a new set of neighbours giving up the fight after clearing the mud and the debris from their kitchen floors.

We need a new solution for the levels that takes account of the area's history and also protects its future. The Environment Agency says dredging is too costly. The Government's annual funding for flood defences has fallen by 15 per cent in real terms under the coalition. We have to make choices, Chris Smith, the agency's chairman, says — farmland or front rooms, town or country. This is

Dredging would have significantly cut the depth of flooding

disingenuous. It was apparently fine to spend £31 million on a bird sanctuary, but the agency leaks money in ridiculous quantities on its 11,000 staff. Some on the ground now battling the flood waters have become heroes to desperate locals, but it would cost only £4 million to dredge the clogged Tone and Parrett rivers. The agency itself carried out a survey on the impact of dredging on the 2012 floods and found that dredging the two rivers, and increasing their capacity by half, would have "significantly reduced the duration and depth of flooding".

Owen Paterson, the Environment Secretary, having visited the flooded levels last week (unlike Lord Smith),

has talked to the engineers, farmers, councillors and inhabitants and says that the agency must come up with a plan in the next six weeks that looks at dredging. The Prince of Wales who visited in his wellies and is on the side of both the farmers and the conservationists concurs.

Dredging will be a start but it is not enough. Water should be held back in the hills so it doesn't gush on to the plains. There should be more tree planting by farmers, more managed flooding of fields, and a barrier on the Parrett may be needed to prevent a surge in the Bristol Channel pushing water back upstream.

Mr Paterson should also consider taking the responsibility for the levels away from the agency and handing it back to local drainage boards who can balance the needs of the wildlife and human life. Eighteen years ago the Norfolk Broads refused to allow the Environment Agency to take over their flood defences and have been more successful in preventing flooding while still promoting conservation.

Some homes will always remain vulnerable to increasingly erratic weather but we need to show that we can continue to progress from the Romans, medieval monks and Georgians rather than allowing ourselves to be plunged back into a primeval age.