

Drowning out nature on the Levels?

This article offers a personal view from the heart of the response process to Somerset's 2014 winter floods. What are the lessons from a situation where the political message was emphatically 'we cannot let this happen again'?

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Following the major floods of 2012-13 we entered 2014 on the Levels with the wettest Somerset winter for 250 years brewing. Post-Christmas, apocalyptic scenes hit the country's consciousness, with miles of flood water penetrating homes, communities, businesses, major roads and even rail routes. There was misery for those directly affected, magnified by a sense of failure and abandonment, with rural Somerset left to fend for itself in extreme conditions. Self-help and community leadership stirred, the media descended and then the Westminster political machinery began to turn. On January 27 the visiting Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Owen Paterson, called for an Action Plan. As the rains continued and despair built, the Prime Minister, concluded: "We cannot let this happen again" (13 February). The rhetoric was clear, the actuality is in the 20 Year Flood Action Plan and in its longer oxymoronic form 'A 20 year plan for a sustainable future'.^{1,2} But for the nature organisations what was the context we found ourselves in?

Planning for resilience

The nature NGOs, the RSPB and the Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) have a long-standing presence in the Levels, with a range of nature reserves, projects, staff, volunteers and supporters. These bodies all offered constructive ideas, proposing a more sustainable future for this largest of England's lowland farmed floodplains, with nature as a powerful ally in a package of measures for a brighter future. We saw the floods as a foretaste of things to come on the Levels. We have offered constructive engagement at every point.

In response to the 2013-14 flood events the nature NGOs proposed five key principles:

- focus flood defence resources on protecting lives, homes, businesses and utilities;
- slow the water flow upstream to reduce peak floods;
- use the existing water management infrastructure better by spreading flood water more appropriately when it reaches the floodplain;
- build greater resilience in the floodplain land uses; and
- maintain critical watercourses to ensure appropriate levels of drainage.



The biblical flood on the Somerset Levels, Winter 2014

There's nothing new in these points, they had been made collectively by many local organisations after all the big flood events in the last 15 years. We argued that a plan for the Levels should take the best of this tradition-rich landscape but also innovate to unlock change. With the 6 March publication of the Flood Action Plan it's hard to conclude other than that these ambitions barely got out of their starting block. What circumstances prevailed and why were wildlife concerns marginalised?

Plans, visions and politics

One outcome of the 2012/13 floods was a new Vision for the Somerset Levels and Moors, namely: "We see the Somerset Levels and Moors in 2030 as a thriving, nature-rich wetland landscape, with grassland farming taking place on the majority of the land. The impact of extreme weather events is being reduced by land and water management in both the upper catchments and the flood plain and by greater community resilience".³ Here is an all party version of a functional and peopled landscape, one richer in nature than now, but much more resilient in the face of extreme weather. Did this Vision get any traction in the new 20 year Plan? Did the leadership across the Levels stand up for this brighter future? Let's say what we know about the power and guile of the moment as politics at both the highest and perhaps lowest levels came into play.

First, Owen Patterson met a 'gang of five' advisors at least twice in his visits to the Levels: Ian Liddell-Grainger MP (deep blue Tory), Tony Bradford (farmer and

Drainage Board Vice-Chair), John Osman (Conservative Leader of the County), Anthony Gibson (ex NFU Director) and Edwin White (past Chairman of the Royal Bath & West of England Agricultural Society). Perhaps this is not obviously a nature friendly bunch? Indeed from his press musings, Liddell-Grainger appears to promote one of the gravest misconceptions of modern times, that efforts to nurture nature are a real drag on economic growth. Surely the outstanding environment of the Levels is a powerful asset, part of the area's unique selling points, and a resource for enterprise? Even at a micro level, pubs in the Levels are reporting significant boost in their trade from bird watchers and especially the Great crane-watching visitors. Making the most of the Levels brand means getting unambiguous leadership for gaining value from, rather than squandering, this natural capital. Astonishingly though, Somerset's new County Plan⁴ offers nothing on the natural environment – reflecting this hole in parts of the collective psyche?

Second, a 'Leadership Group' twice met the Floods Minister Dan Rogerson. Entering the first meeting of this cadre, I was faced with a room of older (I'm not young) white men (I'm one) with only a single woman. This didn't feel like the kind of multi-perspective, non-dogmatic, group of creative navigators needed to devise a plan for more resilience for people and nature. These meetings smelt of incumbents and status quo (am I part of this?) rather than new direction and change. Maybe we are beginning to understand not just the Plan's contents – an understandable focus on reducing the adverse effects of flooding and who can and should pay - but why these voices are present and consciously or otherwise legitimising a status quo?

Dis-connecting nature with the functional landscape

The more formal work of Plan making was done by an Executive Group, the statutory partners alongside the local authorities, and led by a Defra Deputy-Director. Civil society had a single voice – me, for the nature NGOs. Hard slog by many, under extreme time pressures, generated a wealth of material. But the real brokers of the style and content of the Plan were more out of sight, senior staff of the County and Districts, working to their political leaders. And then to the Defra civil servant - was he only crafting a Defra exit strategy? One which enabled his Ministerial masters to slip away while Somerset chose to agree or otherwise on a brighter future? There's a very human side to this effort too, public servants and a willing third sector (at least as the environmental NGOs) working all hours to find a good response, while the Environment Agency in the thick of the action, got scapegoat treatment. Natural England was reduced to a minor advisor, and the circumstances unleashed a sometimes vicious, 'we-know-best', voice of lazy localism.

Old guard - new Plan

Look at the new Plan - but ask what wasn't included and why? Who and what were missing from the preparations? Is the shared 2030 Vision just an illusion of a nature friendly and resilient C21st Levels? For those with homes and farms ruined, lives turned upside down, even with the tremendous solidarity of the moment, the despair will live on. On the dark side the area needs to cope better with extreme weather events. There could have been a light side – a brighter distinctive future making the most of the area's special assets including wetland nature.

It's too much to suggest an "unconscious workable perversity based on collusive denial".⁵ Most of the people I met this winter, be they farmers fighting for their future, battling locals typified by the social media savvy 'FLAG' (Flooding on the Levels Action Group), or public servants working way beyond the call of duty, know the Levels is special. There's a much more powerful response waiting to emerge, where action for nature is not viewed as an awkward distraction but seen as a genuine ally. Paraphrasing one visiting Dutch flood-risk expert this winter: "Your problem is not what you might do, but choosing together to do the sensible resilience-enhancing things". There's something very deliberate surfaced by the Action Plan, one that feels stuck in the mindset of drainage infrastructure and floodplain politics which marginalises the natural environment. This can't be a Fukuyama-like End of History; it's just too perverse and turning a blind eye to a future when it rains.

When it comes to the next Levels Action Plan (and there's been lots!), for nature's sake, for the sake of a better, safer future for this special place, we will need a different kind of leadership – an outlook which embraces wider public interests as well as the tasks of the moment. Planning a better future for the Levels needs idealism blended with pragmatism, solidly founded on recent achievements which have begun to link people and nature.

References

- 1 *Daily Telegraph* (1 Feb 2014): *Unsung heroes gave Owen Paterson his solution to the Somerset floods crisis.*
2. Levels 20 Year Flood Action Plan March 2014, including the executive summary: <http://somersetnewsroom.com/flood-action-plan/>
3. The Levels Task Force vision: <http://somersetnewsroom.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/task-force-vision.pdf>
4. Somerset County Plan <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/policies-and-plans/plans/county-plan/>
5. Long S. (2008). *The Perverse Organisation and its Deadly Sins*. Karnac Books

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