

George Monbiot

Noisily Doing Nothing

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The failure to adapt to new realities is not an accident. It's the design.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 7th April 2022

We have a new term for doing nothing: “learning to live with”. Learning to live with Covid means abandoning testing, isolation and wearing masks in public places. Living with it, dying from it, what's the difference? The same applies to climate breakdown. It's not just that countries like the UK have failed to play their part in preventing this catastrophe. They have also failed to prepare for it.

While our primary effort should still be to decarbonise our economies, to prevent even worse impacts, we also need to brace ourselves for the heating that's now unavoidable. But, as the government's climate change committee [points out](#), adaptation in the UK is “under-resourced, underfunded and often ignored”. The head of the committee has spoken of a “[wilful reluctance](#)” to include adaptation in policymaking.

In the five years since the committee last reported on this issue, for example, [570,000 new homes](#) have been built without heat adaptation: in other words, as temperatures rise they're likely to overheat in the summer. Doubtless, many of them have also been built on flood plains. As always, it's much cheaper and easier to prepare for such disasters than to seek to live with them. But government policy is to wish away these problems.

This government is incompetent by design. Doing nothing is what Tory donors

pay for. Doing nothing is what the billionaire press demands. Doubtless we'll soon be told we need to take “personal responsibility” for ensuring our homes are not flooded and our power lines are not destroyed by storms.

But this failure to act is not confined to the government: it's a general failure. On Sunday, the Cambrian railway line that runs from Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth [reopened after six weeks](#) of emergency engineering. In February, the Severn, swollen by a series of storms, had knocked out the ballast, leaving the track suspended in mid-air in 33 places.

As I know to my cost, because I used to rely on it, this is the latest in an apparently endless series of disasters to afflict the line. One bridge alone – the Black Bridge near Machynlleth – was closed about 30 times as a result of river flooding in the 2010s and 10 times in 2020 alone. Last summer, at a cost of £3.6m, Network Rail [raised it](#) by a metre. Again, the line was shut for six weeks. But none of this solves the underlying problem: the fast and violent response of local rivers to heavy rainfall. As climate chaos brings more intense rain, this is likely to become even worse.

There is a rapidly developing science called [natural flood management](#). It shows how, with the right interventions upstream, rivers can be [slowed](#) and their flood peaks reduced. This involves, for example, increasing their “hydraulic roughness”, allowing them to braid and meander and form islands and other obstacles that slow the flow; improving infiltration, so that water soaks into the ground rather than flashing off the surface; and reconnecting rivers to their floodplains, so that wetlands and fields are flooded (with compensation for farmers), rather than homes and infrastructure.

Fascinatingly, a [new tranche](#) of [evidence](#) suggests that among the most effective interventions is reintroducing beavers. Their dams, especially when there is a [long series](#) in the course of the river, appear to be highly effective at [holding back](#) flood waters and [reducing](#) flood peaks. The beaver could be the rail traveller's best friend.

Long sections of the rivers affecting the Cambrian line were straightened and shortened during an entirely misguided phase of river management in the mid-20th century. At that time, engineers, “without any apparent scientific evidence base”, according to [a paper](#) in the journal *Progress in Physical Geography*, believed that rivers needed to be cleared, dredged and “trained”. The result is that water rushes down them much faster than it would otherwise have done. Using only hard engineering to control floods – building higher walls and embankments – tends to [divert water](#) to the next crisis point. It requires constant [reinforcement](#) and upgrading.

But when I asked the company what works it had undertaken to slow the flow and reduce the flood peaks of the rivers that affect the line, it told me: “Network Rail is not carrying out any work of the nature you listed. Our focus is on building additional resilience into local rail infrastructure.” It is now shelling out [another £2m](#) on “rock armour” to protect the parts of the line washed out in February. As so often in the UK, the idea of making the problem smaller, rather than simply pouring more money, rocks and concrete into making the defences higher, doesn’t seem to occur. Working only at the bottom of the catchments, our engineers wait for a wall of water to arrive and pray that this time their defences are high enough.

There is no learning involved in “learning to live with”. It tends to mean an inability to adapt to new realities, and in some cases looks like a total retreat into abstraction. In 2020, the US conservative commentator Ben Shapiro [claimed](#) that 10 feet of sea level rise wouldn’t be a problem, because people could just “sell their homes and move”. Sell them to mermaids, presumably. A few days ago, a senior executive at the Institute of Economic Affairs [suggested](#) that instead of preventing climate breakdown, we could simply “build sea walls”. It is not just denial we’re up against. It’s a belief in magic.

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