

Abstract

“Where’s the space for water?” - How floodplain restoration projects succeed

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Following the dramatic flood events of the 1990’s and turn of the century, local authority planners and the Environment Agency came under widespread criticism in England. The flooding was said to have highlighted the cumulative impact of land drainage, urbanisation and river regulation over previous decades, significantly reducing natural water storage capacity of catchments. Following the wake up call of the Foresight Future Flooding Report (2004), stating the risk of flooding will increase greatly over the next 30 to 100 years, the Government’s strategy ‘Making Space for Water’ does look to take a more holistic approach to flooding, including the creation of wetlands and washlands achieving multi-functional benefits where possible. Furthermore, the Environment Agency is undergoing a strategic switch from ‘flood defence’ to ‘flood risk management’: ‘squeezing rivers into pipes and underground tunnels is not a solution, and will often lead to worse flooding in the future. We need to make space for rivers to work naturally with floodplains that hold and convey the excess water during floods’.

A decade on, and the Pitt Review Interim Report on the causes and consequences of this summer’s devastating floods in England notes that a greater use of washlands and wetlands, realignment of river channels and reconnection of rivers with their floodplain can all help store and slow water to reduce flooding downstream and mitigate peak flows. However, many of the responses to the Review felt that this approach was not being translated into results on the ground, suggesting more effort was needed to encourage implementation, including finding and obtaining the use of the land needed to make them a reality (p59). Although the political rhetoric is growing and policy is supportive of restoring rivers’ natural floodplains, converting the “rhetoric into reality” at the large spatial scales required is said to represent a serious challenge. A complex series of social barriers prevent the necessary land use change in England; many planners and engineers being dismissive of the new environmental disciplines, fragmented administrative structures, difficulty in obtaining funding and fundamentally a poor understanding and awareness of the issues. Drawing on Master’s degree case study research, the presentation will illustrate best practice examples and highlight key criteria that can help policy makers and practitioners overcome these barriers common across NW Europe-to facilitate a change from the traditional approach of engineered flood defences.