# Rising sea levels expose Britain’s unpreparedness as global coastal risks escalate



In his seminal work, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, Simon Schama explored the intricate relationship between culture and the ever-present threat of floods in 17th-century Netherlands. This historical context resonates strongly today, as the nation contends with its complex legacy of managing water through dikes and other engineering marvels. The Netherlands’ experience offers vital lessons for other regions, especially as contemporary climate science reveals alarming predictions about rising sea levels and their global impacts.

The urgency of adapting to climate change has never been more pronounced. A report from the UK's Climate Change Committee emphasises that Britain is ill-prepared for the potential inundation of up to 8 million homes by 2050—an increase from 6.3 million currently at risk. The findings point to a pressing need for clear adaptation strategies and better coordination among governmental agencies to effectively tackle the forthcoming challenges posed by rising seas and extreme weather. This inadequacy echoes globally, as countries with less robust infrastructures, such as Bangladesh, may face catastrophic outcomes far outpacing those anticipated for more affluent nations.

According to Professor Jonathan Bamber, the author of a particularly sobering paper on sea level rise, no matter how decisively we cut carbon emissions to meet the 1.5-degree temperature target, it is unlikely to prevent unmanageable sea level rises in this century. The unsettling reality is that many of the world’s low-lying regions, populated by an estimated 230 million people living within just one meter above current sea levels, could face existential threats. In England, areas such as the Fens and Humberside would be particularly vulnerable, risking submergence without adequate coastal protection.

The imminent threat of severe flooding compels us to look beyond despair and toward adaptation. Resilience strategies are essential; they range from infrastructural enhancements to innovative solutions like the creation of 'sponge' cities in China that absorb stormwater. In the U.S., New York City is fortifying its coastal defenses with a comprehensive project to build a 2.5-mile-long seawall designed to protect lower Manhattan from floods. Such manoeuvres reflect a growing recognition of the need for tailored solutions to safeguard densely populated areas against potential inundation.

While the forecasts remain dire, initiatives focused on adaptation underline humanity's historical capacity to respond to natural disasters. Just as the Dutch have learned to live with water through centuries of fortification and innovation, so too must other nations adjust and prepare for the inevitable changes. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has aptly framed rising sea levels as a “significant threat multiplier,” affecting not just the physical landscape but also access to vital resources like water, food, and healthcare.

Global leaders and international bodies reinforce the urgency for collective action. Philémon Yang, President of the UN General Assembly, has called for immediate efforts to keep global warming in check at 1.5 degrees Celsius, warning that unchecked climate change could displace an astronomical 1.2 billion people globally. The implications of this rise are dire not only for low-lying nations but also for affluent countries, whose histories haven’t prepared them for such drastic climate phenomena.

The reluctance of major polluters to engage—exemplified by decisions such as the United States withdrawing from the UN’s loss and damage fund—fueled concerns over global equity in addressing climate impacts. Adaptation and resilience aren’t merely local issues; they necessitate a global perspective where all are invested in future-proofing the planet’s ecosystems and human habitats.

In conclusion, while the potential realities of rising sea levels paint a picture of impending doom, the focus should remain on fostering resilience and readiness. Past experiences can inform present actions, and by prioritising adaptation, humanity holds the potential to collectively mitigate the worst of climate-related crises, ensuring a safer, more sustainable future for all.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/25/the-guardian-view-on-rising-sea-levels-adaptation-has-never-been-more-urgent)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/cop-britain-unprepared-worsening-impact-climate-change-advisers-say-2025-04-29/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/25/the-guardian-view-on-rising-sea-levels-adaptation-has-never-been-more-urgent), [[5]](https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15199.doc.htm)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/08/rising-sea-levels-global-adaptation/), [[7]](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/climate-change-sea-levels-rising-communities-adapting/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3ej0xx2jpxo), [[4]](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154881)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/25/the-guardian-view-on-rising-sea-levels-adaptation-has-never-been-more-urgent), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/cop-britain-unprepared-worsening-impact-climate-change-advisers-say-2025-04-29/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[4]](https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154881), [[5]](https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15199.doc.htm)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/25/the-guardian-view-on-rising-sea-levels-adaptation-has-never-been-more-urgent), [[5]](https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15199.doc.htm)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/25/the-guardian-view-on-rising-sea-levels-adaptation-has-never-been-more-urgent> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/cop-britain-unprepared-worsening-impact-climate-change-advisers-say-2025-04-29/> - A report from the UK's Climate Change Committee indicates that Britain is unprepared for worsening climate change impacts, including rising sea levels. Projections suggest that by 2050, 8 million homes could be at risk of flooding, up from 6.3 million currently. The report also highlights potential increases in heat-related deaths and emphasizes the need for clearer adaptation targets and improved government coordination to address these challenges.
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3ej0xx2jpxo> - UN Secretary-General António Guterres warns that rising sea levels pose a global threat, particularly to Pacific island nations. He emphasizes the responsibility of major polluters to reduce emissions to prevent widespread catastrophe. The World Meteorological Organization reports that global average sea levels have risen at unprecedented rates over the past 3,000 years, with the Pacific region experiencing even higher increases.
4. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154881> - UN General Assembly President Philémon Yang calls for global action to halt sea-level rise by limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. He highlights the existential threat posed by rising seas, which could forcibly displace up to 1.2 billion people. The UN emphasizes the need for enhanced climate adaptation strategies and improved coastal management practices.
5. <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15199.doc.htm> - UN Secretary-General António Guterres states that rising sea levels are a significant threat multiplier, affecting access to water, food, and healthcare. He notes that global average sea levels have risen faster since 1900 than over any preceding century in the last 3,000 years. Even with a 1.5°C temperature rise, substantial sea-level increases are expected, impacting countries like Bangladesh, China, India, and the Netherlands.
6. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/08/rising-sea-levels-global-adaptation/> - The World Economic Forum discusses innovative adaptation strategies to combat rising sea levels. These include strengthening coastal infrastructure in Europe, implementing 'sponge' cities in China to absorb stormwater, restoring tidal marshes in San Francisco to mitigate storm surges, and relocating villages in Fiji threatened by rising seas. These approaches aim to enhance resilience against climate-induced sea-level rise.
7. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/climate-change-sea-levels-rising-communities-adapting/> - CBS News reports on various communities adapting to rising sea levels. In New York City, a 2.5-mile long, 16.5-foot-tall sea wall is being constructed to protect lower Manhattan from flooding. The project integrates floodgates that can be closed during emergencies. Officials emphasize the need for tailored solutions to protect densely populated urban areas from future flood risks.