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Scapegoats or solutions in Somerset?

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Aller Moor and the Parrett, photo Alison Morgan

As the rain continues to batter Somerset I find myself increasingly reflecting not just on the events of the last few months, but on the deluge of extraordinary media statements which has followed it. Any disaster of this kind of scale offers both the temptation to play the blame game and the opportunity to promote personal agendas. And we've seen lots of both those. Who's to blame? God, suggested UKIP councillor David Sylvester back in January – He's cross about same-sex marriage. No, the Environment Agency, say the farmers and residents who have seen the deliberate abandonment of river dredging in recent years. Actually, Chris Smith personally, shouts MP Ian Liddell-Grainger in a tirade of Anglo-Saxon insult which would have horrified King Alfred even as he surveyed the floods around him back in the 9th century. No, Baroness Young, Smith's predecessor, hisses Christopher Booker in *The Spectator* – isn't she a birdwatcher, doesn't that just prove it? Ah yes – it's the RSPB, they want water everywhere, don't they, they are surely to blame, says Robin Page in *The Telegraph* – and Natural England too, they like birds, don't they; and apparently you can't dredge if there are voles, we don't like badgers but we do like voles. In fact, trills Alice Thompson, writing from her commuter train in *The Times*, the whole thing is a conspiracy – there's a secret 're-wilding' agenda here, and the conservation organisations really want to turn the whole place back into a swamp. Nope, it's the Government, says a chorus of other voices; they cut the funding to the Environment Agency. Ah – but actually it's really the EU, because they formulated the policies which cut the funding which reduced the dredging which flooded the land which undermined the house that Jack built (and while we are there it's worth noting that if Jack hadn't built so many houses in unsuitable places there wouldn't be so much run off; and that brings us back to the farmers upstream who surely shouldn't have straightened their rhynes and the farmers downstream who definitely shouldn't have planted maize, because everyone knows the soil just washes off the fields after harvest and silts up the rivers). Or then again, is it the Met Office – because they said it wasn't going to be particularly wet this winter; and we all know what we think about the Met Office, don't we, with their non-hurricanes and barbecue summers. How can we order our lives if they say stuff like that? And their Chief Scientist blames climate change, and talks about the jet stream, and so we are back to where we started, and we shouldn't panic but we do know we are dooomed.

So - we are angry, and when we are angry feel better if we can find someone to be angry with; and doesn't it all go to show that we were right all along about the dredging or the voles or the EA, about climate change or agricultural policy or planning regulations or the environment?

I live in Somerset, and I have spent many happy hours walking and cycling through its beautiful countryside, learning about its rich and varied history, rejoicing in its unique culture and customs. It's a landscape like no other, not just because of its immense variety, but because of the unique and particular ways it has been shaped. The Levels (land lying on clay) and Moors (land lying on peat) have been inhabited and managed by humans for thousands of years. In 1970 Ray Sweet, father of my local garden centre owner, discovered what was then the oldest known track in Europe, dating back 6000 years – made of wooden stakes, it represented man's first attempt to rise above the flooding. By the Iron Age people were living in Lake Villages built on artificially raised islands. In the 9th century it was from the Somerset Levels – Athelney, a low-lying island near Burrowbridge – that Alfred the Great marched on the invading Danes, winning the victory to which we owe our English identities. In the Middle Ages drainage began, and Somerset became one of the great farming areas of England. Monks created fishing lakes in what are now fields, and the land we now know began to emerge through a unique and creative relationship between human beings and the environment. In the 17th and 18th centuries big drainage channels were built, and the current pattern of fields, rhynes and seasonally flooded wetlands was established. The Somerset Levels and Moors are, and have been for centuries, a managed environment – and therein lies the key not just to its past but also to its future.

On 3rd February the Somerset Levels and Moors Task Force, made up of representatives from Somerset County Council, Somerset District Councils, the NFU, Somerset Wildlife Trust, Somerset Consortium of Drainage Boards, FWAG and the RSPB, issued a vision for the future. While national commentators play the blame game, the locals are thinking ahead. 'We all want the Levels' landscape to remain the green grid-iron of withies, rhynes, meadows and droves that we know and love; we all want it to continue to be farmed productively, but in ways that enhance the nature conservation interest; we all want the water to be managed, so that the flood risk is reduced; we all want an even richer mix of wildlife than we've got already; and we all want a thriving local economy, built around the Levels' special qualities,' they said.

The current situation is no good for the people whose homes are under water. It's no good for the farmers whose fields have become lakes, and whose very livelihoods are threatened. It's no good for wildlife either – the birds and animals so maligned by the anti-conservationists are also threatened: wading birds cannot wade in the 18 feet of water currently on West Sedgemoor, and they won't be able to nest there either; owls can't hunt over water, the voles have all drowned and it seems unlikely that the insects and grass at the bottom of the food chain are flourishing down there beneath the estimated 63 million tonnes of muddy water (or worse). And Johnny come lately, all this is no good for one of Somerset's major sources of income: tourism. The tourists who need to refresh their minds and renew their souls, who come to walk on the Moors, to cycle along the banks of the River Parrett, to visit the Willows and Wetlands Centre or the Abbey of Muchelney – and of course those who come winter and summer to the bird reserves – they are not now staying in the B&Bs, eating in the pubs, drinking the cider, buying the local produce. They are listening to the commentators, and staying away.

So, ask the Task Force, how do we do this? Not by clobbering the RSPB or by swearing at Chris Smith. We have to do it by careful management – management which tackles not just symptoms but causes. That means thinking about land and water management in both the upper catchments and the flood plain, and it means developing increased community resilience. It will mean thinking about building and planning policies, about natural and artificial flood prevention schemes, about agricultural practices and stock management in a fragile environment. It will also mean considering the implications of rising sea levels, and being realistic about the increasing likelihood of severe weather patterns. It means everyone, farmers, conservation organisations, residents, local councils and national bodies, all working together. It's a lot easier to blame someone, of course – but we need managed solutions, not scapegoats.

It seems to me that the only person who's really come out of this at all well is Prince Charles. And did you notice – he didn't blame anyone at all.

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<http://www.westerndailynews.co.uk/Levels-crisis-need-solutions-scapegoats/story-20749716-detail/story.html>