



Earth in crisis: environmental policy in an international context

The Thames Barrier

Commentary

Historically there have always been floods in the Thames gateway. The last major one was in 1953. It was caused by a combination of low atmospheric pressure, a strong north wind and a high tide all of which combined to generate a storm surge. The surge hit the east coast of England during the night of the 31st of January and flooded the low-lying areas on either side of the estuary. Canvey Island was badly affected and so was Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey.

Angela Wardour

My parents had a shop in Sheerness High Street and we woke up one morning to sort of water halfway up the shop floor and loud speakers out in the road and being told no school, which was great. Milk had to be brought round separately and all the other services. It was pretty awful actually.

Commentary

Because the islands and the coast along the estuary took the brunt of the storm water, London escaped most of the flooding. But it was clear that both the estuary and the city were vulnerable and this led to the large-scale building of more sea defences. Now throughout the Thames region there are over 300 kilometres of walls and embankments and the Thames Barrier to protect London.

Tim O’Riordan

The Thames Barrier was a brilliant move. Without it London would be really in trouble. But even now the Thames Barrier is showing signs of being inadequate in relation to surge and high tides. Somewhere down the line it’s not going to be possible for the Thames Barrier to hold the water back, especially if you have a decent surge.

Rachel Hill

Thames Estuary 2100 is an Environment Agency strategic flood risk management project. It’s looking at how we need to change how we manage rising water levels through the rest of the century. Because the Thames is changing. The Thames is changing as a response to climate change, but also it’s changing because we’re seeing more people and property coming into areas which are at risk of flooding. Today we have 1.25 million people, many of which living in areas below sea level. We have 300 schools; 16 hospitals; we have City Airport; we have the Olympics site; our seat of government at Downing Street and the House of Commons. We have over 30 kilometres of overland railway. So there is a huge amount of infrastructure which is not only important for London, Kent and Essex, but it’s important for the UK.