

The Water Will Come: Rising Seas, Sinking Cities, and the Remaking of the Civilized World (review)

Book review by:

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If you suffer from climate change anxiety, Jeff Goodell's book; *The Water Will Come: Rising Seas, Sinking Cities, and the Remaking of the Civilized World* (2017), will probably not be the best reading for you. The contributing editor at *Rolling Stone* and author of highly regarded literature on energy and environmental issues brings a clear message: The water is coming to many parts of the world, no matter how much we ignore the facts.

Although the catastrophic style at the beginning of the prologue will probably not attract you, give the book a chance. It is when Goodell shifts to the non-fiction area of globe-trotting that the experience sharing and engaging journey begins.

The book's individual chapters examine dozens of cautionary tales concerning the effects of climate change and rising sea levels worldwide. The voyage takes us from melting glaciers in Greenland to the sinking slums of Lagos, and the reader soon finds that the main thread is in the author's native land, the United States, a place he always returns to. Goodell also skilfully shows his passion for a historical comparison between the communities living by the sea now and in the past.

As an experienced journalist, Goodell builds his argument on a balanced range of facts and opinions, often shared through the expertise of local scientists, politicians, administration representatives and businessmen. The USA is Goodell's main area of interest and the author shows us the tense real estate market and the flood insurance system of the United States. Here the recurring floods and hurricanes restrict state administrations' financial capacities and certainly influence politics as well. Above that the book uncovers how floods financially and physically stretch the U. S. military capacities by endangering naval bases and by attracting old rivals into the melting Arctic. In the meantime the U. S. taxpayers keep contributing to the failing system without funds being invested in long term adaptation projects. Step by step we gradually reveal the paradox that the "very infrastructure of the Fossil Fuel Age" is what makes people vulnerable to the effect of rising seas.

Goodell's talent is in his ability to erode the illusion that wealthy communities will avoid the rising sea levels crisis more easily. In contrast, the examples of New York's Big U, Venice's MOSE and London's Thames Barrier projects prove that difficult and very expensive decisions are already being made, even here. No wonder, as the book states, the sea level

is rising 50 % faster in New York City than the world average, and the Thames River Barriers were closed 75 times between 2000 and 2017 in comparison with four closures in the 80's.

While the wealthy people of Lagos plan to hide in their Eco Atlantic fortresses and the inhabitants of water slums are being displaced, the book presents the moral dilemmas to be faced concerning environmental refugees. The people who proved their ability to adapt with limited resources (something rich people cannot do anymore) are suppressed, and communities who often contribute to the global warming the least, pay a high price.

I also have to give Goodell credit for engaging links such as the one between the Marshall Islands and diabetes. What does that have in common with rising seas? You will find out in the book, as well as the reason the Nile river delta might be uninhabitable by 2100, and what catalyst was behind the current political unrest in Syria.

On the other hand, Goodell reports on positive examples as well: the Netherlands inspires us with their experience in extensive flood protection measures and Miami's "forensic ecology" proposes solutions which will provide more time for long term improvements.

The book is not only relevant because of the facts, but also for its examination of the perceptions and reactions to the convincing evidence of sea level rise. The narrative highlights the need for significant and unpopular decisions on all levels. Goodell proves that neither time, money, nor technology will solve the problems for us. Unfortunately, as the insider's view shows, decisions are often avoided or postponed as people believe that a more convenient solution will be found sooner or later. In addition inappropriate actions are taken due to outdated data and political and business sphere denial. Goodell's flagrant example recalls 2014, when the House Republicans "prohibited the Pentagon from spending any money implementing recommendations in the latest report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change". In the background of this reflection we can recognize the idea outlined in the Miami-Dade County case. It indicates a disconcerting similarity between human behaviour and Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In the meantime, the water keeps coming with every storm and every major high tide. As Goodell quotes Tony de Brum, the foreign minister of the Republic of the Marshall Islands: "For us, the end has already begun". How long will it take to realise that no matter how wealthy you are, everyone is affected by the rising seas?

I would like to recommend the book, especially for those who are not familiar with the acts concerning rising sea levels, or those who are interested in its USA context, since Goodell occasionally uncovers points which are already known or predictable. In that sense the book sometimes loses its momentum and could perhaps be less explanatory.

Goodell's sound arguments help to increase climate change awareness with comprehensible and verifiable evidence. His convincing examples comply with up-to-date scientific

findings and conclusions in similar writings. The book's considerable uniqueness is mainly in its ability to present a variety of stakeholders' perceptions of sea level rise. Intentionally or not, his examples of coping with sea level rise show plenty of ignorance, denial, underestimation and even suppression among people. Overall the book raises questions: How long will we be able to postpone solutions rather than invest in a sustainable future? What might be the solutions? Is the idea of geo-engineering, as mentioned by Goodell, the technological salvation which should be at the forefront of solutions on an individual level? Even though the terrifying reality and the outlook presented in this book may not give you the answers, at least they should convince you to act responsibly. Above all else, mankind needs to be reminded of the seriousness and the changing pace of the climate crisis, issues which prove that the current way of thinking can no longer cope and urgent changes are needed. Those are more than enough good reasons to read Jeff Goodell's book about the unstoppable rise of the seas.

About the author of the review

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