

Climate Witness Cassian Garbett (England):

“I am the last permanent resident in one of five coastguard cottages near the town of Seaford. They are all perched on the chalk cliff edge, a conservation area. Built in 1818, the cottages are very historic and feature in tourist brochures around the world.

The army built significant sea defences here when they occupied these cottages during the war. It should be possible to maintain them for the next twenty years, but obviously the challenge is ever greater because of rising sea levels and greater frequency of storms because of climate change.



The sea definitely looks bigger to us, it is a different beast. I suppose there is a perceptible change for us because I work from home, so we see two tides a day.

We witness the changing of the seasons and it is like a very gentle pulse, you can sense the changes that a person living a different life perhaps wouldn't. There has been a greater frequency of storms.

The sea defences here suffered wholesale destruction in 1999. We had a severe force 11 gale - effectively a hurricane. There was nobody around here who can remember them being so thoroughly broken up.

The UK Environment Agency reinstated the shingle bank but the following winter it was punctured and broken up again. In the six years since 1999 it has happened four times; whereas it hadn't happened for 50 years before that. That is the big difference... global warming is like a double whammy because it is accelerating a natural process of erosion.

The hardest thing is that you can repair what is there but what's there was built for a different set of dynamics. What we see along the coast here is the dilemma. Do you put money in to strengthen the defences up or do you let things go? We don't see it as a battle with the sea... we live with it. But in my child's lifetime I can't see how they would be able to maintain the defences.

As an island nation with a very long coastline it is very regrettable that we have put so little money into sea defences for so many years - and that is partly contributing to the difficulties that we are facing today. But the real problem is climate change.

As HRH the Prince of Wales said last month, 'climate change is the 'greatest challenge facing man in order to ensure there is something left to hand on to future generations'. It needs to become a greater priority for everyone - politicians, business and people like you and me.

Please listen to me and WWF and take action to ensure that CO₂ emissions are cut across Europe. Our children are watching.”



Biography

Cassian Garbett was born in London in 1960. He trained as a wood carver and then went on to art school. He travelled in the Far East and taught English in Japan before settling in the Cuckmere Valley on the South coast of England. He has lived here for 15 years and is the last permanent resident in one of five coastguard cottages which perch on the chalk cliff edge and are part of the Seaford Head Nature Reserve. The valley is managed by 3 conservation groups including the Seaford Head Management Committee which Cassian has sat on for 11 years. He is now Vice Chairman. He is also involved with the Environment Agency's plans to flood the valley and convert it back from drained land to saltmarsh. Cassian works from home as a furniture maker, using materials collected from the beach. This is done entirely by hand as the house is not run off the main electricity grid but has a small wind generator. Lighting is provided by candles and the family grow their own vegetables and keep chickens.

Background

The UK has an international reputation for wet weather – but it seems to be becoming increasingly chaotic and unpredictable. In August 2004, flash floods devastated the village of Boscastle in Cornwall and in June 2005, similar conditions caused roads and bridges in North Yorkshire to be washed away. Sea levels in the South of the UK are expected to continue rising by as much as 50cm by 2050 and 86 cm during the 2080s. Combined with the predicted increase in heavy rainstorms, this is likely to double the number of people at high risk of flooding to nearly 3.5 million.