

Phoenix, dodo or butterfly? Three futures for East Anglia

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ENVIRONMENT

By Rupert Read

Let me transport you a decade into the future, in this vulnerable and beautiful part of the world that we share, out here in the East.

It's 2034. Little progress has been made worldwide or in this country at making us safe against climate breakdown.

Here in East Anglia, we are, as a result, increasingly vulnerable to extreme temperatures - and extreme 'weather events' aka climate disasters.

It's early autumn. A huge storm-system is barreling down the North Sea. Combining with ultra high tides, it overwhelms coastal flood defences in some places.

But worse, gigantic volumes of sea water are pushed into the Norfolk Broads. Our National Park - the jewel in Norfolk's crown, a globally unique ecological haven - is transformed, aka wrecked.

Also wrecked are untold acreages of farmland, alongside the Broads system rivers. Underwater, and then encrusted with salt.

Norfolk is down. But not out. Perhaps we can still rise phoenix-like from such ashes of what we've known? It won't be easy though. Nature and agriculture alike are rocked like never before.

And meanwhile the next climate disaster is ready to roll along.

This is a possible future for us, now. But it could be worse.

It's 2034 (version 2). In this future, no climate progress has been made; in fact, we've gone backwards. Far-Right governments in collusion with fossil fuel interests have sabotaged climate action.

More roads have been built, more natural habitat and farmland destroyed. Warnings from our world-leading scientists and writers at UEA have been roundly and utterly ignored. Here in East Anglia, we are as a result now deeply vulnerable to unprecedented heatwaves.

It's early autumn. Temperatures are still hovering around 40C. The land is baked, parched, broken. The grain harvest is pitiful. Animals are dying in some of our fields. Britain is trying to get emergency food aid from abroad. But there is little sympathy for us: countries from whose shores we barred migrants have no interest in helping us; and in any case much of the rest of the world is desperately struggling, too.

Malnutrition stalks the land. If nothing changes, it will yield to famine, and death.

What happened to our green and pleasant land? What have we done? Are we headed the way of the dodo?

This too is a possible future for us, now.

But - dare to believe it - it could be better...

It's 2034 (version 3). In this future, having hit rock-bottom in the mid to late 2020s with a series of dismal harvests, the world and this great country have really had to struggle, but we have seen that this struggle gave us meaning, and could take us somewhere we actually want to go.

There has been a relocalisation: some people have gone back to working on the land, many of us are growing food part-time, and villages and market towns have paid attention to their own resilience in the face of vulnerable supply-lines, and of permanently weirded weather.

We are tending to eat lower on the food chain. We are growing food much more in ways that are compatible with nature finding a place on our land too. It's good for pollinators as well as for people.

In short, we are adapting to the new climate, we are working hard not to destabilise the climate further, and we are transforming how we live so as to be fit for the future. You might say that our caterpillar-like civilisation, which has been steadily eating into the very conditions for its own survival, is changing...into a butterfly.

We have transformed our civilisation from a march to catastrophe, into something very different, that can perhaps last...

Rather than being autumn for us, it's spring...

Phoenix, dodo, or butterfly? This is the great question of our time. It's the question our children will ask us as they look back on these years. They will ask us what we did to help make a 'butterfly' future more likely than a 'phoenix' future, or at least to make a 'phoenix' future more likely than the 'dodo' scenario.

And let's be absolutely clear and honest with ourselves: we quite obviously can't wait until spring 2034 to start getting serious about facing this! The ground needs to be prepared now. It's already time to engage in what I call Strategic Adaptation For Emergency Resilience... It's time to become SAFER.

Luckily, a special piece of help is at hand... Playwright Steve Waters of the UEA has written a series of three playlets, about the three possible futures facing us. These playlets are loosely based on the three scenarios for our future that I set out in my best-selling little book called *This civilisation is finished*, scenarios sketched above. The Arts Council are funding a tour of the playlets around the East, this spring and summer.

Can you guess what the name of the show is? That's right: it's Phoenix, Dodo, Butterfly.

Do consider booking a ticket, and coming along. I can promise that you won't be disappointed.

Nevertheless, perhaps, reader, you may be left with the following thought: Perhaps not everyone is ready for facing up to our futures yet. Perhaps they have to actually hit rock-bottom before they break the addiction to a way of life that is at present sending us towards a nightmare. Perhaps imagining worse and better futures doesn't work for everybody.

Well, even if that turns out true, the answer is that this writing needn't be for 'everybody'.

So long as it is for you. And for the growing number who, like you and me, are wising up.

Emeritus Prof. Rupert Read is co-director of the Climate Majority Project. 'Phoenix, Dodo, Butterfly' is showing at venues across East Anglia in the coming months, including at UEA and Great Yarmouth.

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