

Levee Removal

Humans have been building levees in my country ever since colonization - in a way they're part of an unending campaign to 'civilize' the land, smoothing out rough terrain, straightening and containing rivers, filling in wetlands, and generally drying out the continent.

Prior to levees, river landscapes were often messy, complex, and full of food for birds, fish and invertebrates. They would spread and braid across a wide area, and their slow-moving, shallow channels formed sprawling wetlands full of native grasses and willows which provided critical resting and rearing sites for young salmon before they headed out to sea. These wide spaces could flood safely during storms, and they played an important role in slowing and cleaning floodwaters.

These shifting rivers and sprawling wetlands were generally inconvenient to farmers and other settler types, who prized floodplains for farmland and development. To protect their new territory from flooding, they built thousands of miles of levees along nearly every major waterway, constraining their movement until some looked more like canals than natural rivers.

This was disastrous for the species which had evolved to occupy the niches now buried under levees and fill but it also hasn't worked out great for humanity. In a narrowed, straightened river, that surge of water has nowhere to go, and nothing to slow its movement. As climate change alters weather patterns, intensifying storms and worsening both droughts and floods, we've seen frequent levee failures as hundred- and thousand-year floods become routine events.

There's a self-defense truism that "the best defense is not to be there" which I think applies in this situation.

[Levee removal](#) recognizes that this modern configuration isn't working well for anyone, humans or the species we share our environment with, and seeks to restore rivers to [something closer to their original configuration](<https://www.knkn.org/environment/2022-04-29/nature-rebounds-on-the-green-river-after-large-levee-removal>). This can be beneficial in two ways - it allows the river to safely spread into designated areas where it can slow during a flood and it allows for the restoration of habitats where native species can return and flourish surprisingly quickly.

In this way levee removal is part of a wider rejection of modern human landscapes. Flood- and erosion-mitigation tactics like [sponge cities](#)), [beaver dam analogs](#), and [rough mounding](#) all focus on restoring or simulating preexisting conditions, and on slowing the movement of water and catching it in place, allowing it to permeate the ground again. And because these are the habitats most native species evolved to find their niche in, it's no surprise that they often start to recover almost as soon as we nudge things back in this direction.

Making these changes is difficult though. It's not just farmland behind these levees - the sad truth is that there are many places where homes were built, families raised, memories made, that were never really suitable for development (this will probably include wildfire zones soon) and we're going to have to reckon with that in the coming decades, whether we're in a solarpunk society or not. We're already seeing the beginnings in our present with insurance companies refusing to cover some areas and [floodplain buyouts](#) where government agencies purchase flood-prone land, moving or demolishing any structures, and returning them to open space to restore and conserve natural floodplain functions.

Some areas just make more sense as floodplains and wetlands, providing important habitats and

giving the rivers room to safely spread and slow their movements than they do as eternally-imperiled developments.

Preparation for Levee Removal may involve removing any structures on the site. [this levee removal project](<https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dnrp/nature-recreation/environment-ecology-conservation/flood-services/capital-projects-studies/jan-road-levee-setback>), where a structure on site was demolished to clear the floodplain.

I don't know the specifics of that particular building, what condition it was in, whether anything was salvaged (or was worth salvaging). But there are two alternatives to demolition which I've been trying to showcase in my work:

[deconstruction](<https://jacobcoffinwrites.wordpress.com/2024/05/02/deconstruction-crew-disassembling-abandoned-mcmansions-so-the-material-can-be-reused/>) - the process of [disassembling a building](<https://wiki.slrpnk.net/writing:deconstruction>) to salvage as many construction materials as possible, and house shifting, the work of physically moving a suitable structure rather than building new. Both can be wonderful solarpunk alternatives to demolition which make the society less extractive on its environment and reduce the amount of landfill space it requires.

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