

The changing face of Tomorrow's England

The face of the South East of England could change forever within 50 years if opportunities to lessen the impacts of climate change are not taken now, according to a booklet released today.(1)

Buckled rail lines, parched golf courses, disappearing wildlife and freak weather delivering alternating flood and drought could be part of a dramatically changed way of life illustrated in the booklet which delivers a stark but simple message: If you love England, act now to save what makes it special.

Without action, by people and government, everything from sport to gardening, house prices to hedgehogs and farming to fishing could undergo some form of change. The booklet raises awareness of what hotter drier summers, water shortages, flash floods and storms would mean to the region. It comes with a toolkit to help people communicate the reality of climate change and inspire everyone to take action. (2)

Our changing climate, our changing lives - South East is produced by Tomorrow's England, a coalition of 11 organisations ranging from the National Trust to the National Federation of Women's Institutes, and from the Woodland Trust to WWF-UK. (3)

"An increase in average global temperature of more than two degrees centigrade will have catastrophic results for our planet. Closer to home, the way we travel to work, the sports we play, our health, and our environment could all be affected by shifting weather patterns," explains Colin Butfield, head of campaigns at WWF-UK.

"It is also essential for the government to take a lead now with action to reduce our carbon emissions by including the 80% target for CO2 reduction by 2050 in the Climate Change Bill, currently being debated in Parliament."

Andrea Davies, senior campaigner at the Campaign to Protect Rural England, commented: "The changes which will alter the appearance of so many of our cherished landscapes in the South East are a wake-up call. Climate change presents us with huge challenges, but there are also opportunities for everyone to take action at a personal and a local level to reduce the impacts now and for generations to come."

Ed Pomfret, head of campaigns at the Woodland Trust, added: "Climate change is already having a profound effect on the natural environment including irreplaceable habitats like ancient woodland, raising life changing implications for us all. This is a valuable document which not only presents a snapshot of how that might affect everyday life, but also provides ideas for what we can do to make a real difference."

More than two thirds of land in the South East is farmed with traditional crops such as potatoes, apples and strawberries. Warmer weather could see this landscape altered with the introduction of figs, soya and even olives, suggests the report.

Gardeners would have to learn about new, more exotic species of plants and trees. By 2050 favourites like delphiniums and lupins could be replaced by pomegranates, citrus fruits and apricots.

Models suggest beech and oak trees would come under threat from gales, water logging and drought. Some birds could lose their natural habitats and vanish from the region as new species

like the black kite and the great reed warbler take up residence. The hedgehog, already in decline, could be extinct by 2025 if its habitual food of slugs literally dries up.

As the Mediterranean becomes too hot as a comfortable holiday destination, the south coast would become a more desirable alternative with August temperatures regularly in excess of 30°C. This would reduce carbon emissions from air travel and airport expansion; however, the increased heat could prove disastrous for transport across the region.

Hot spells could cause chaos on the roads as road surfaces suffer. On the trains, speed restrictions from buckled and fractured rails or trackside fires would become the norm but frozen points would be a thing of the past.

These higher temperatures would also impact on the health of the region. Scientists say the death rate increases 3.3 per cent for every degree rise in temperature above 21.5C while instances of food poisoning would become more frequent.

Flash floods and storm surges are set to increase as the climate changes; this will particularly affect the low-lying South East, impacting on thousands of homes and businesses. Water demand in the region is due to rise by 11% by 2030, and water will become more scarce and expensive. Hosepipe bans are likely to become permanent in many places.

Racing at Cowes may increasingly be disturbed by violent summer storms and Henley regatta could be flooded out in a summer flash flood on the Thames. Wetter winters would mean that rain stops play at football grounds across the region.

If the grass burns to a crisp and water restrictions are in place in the summer, golf, cricket and football could all be disrupted. Falling river levels could impact on fish stocks.

With predictions that sea levels will rise by at least 34cm by 2050 in the English Channel, beaches along the coast could disappear and Henry VIII's artillery castles along the South coast could all be affected by increased coastal erosion.

Colin Butfield added: ““We are already witnessing changes in our climate in the South East, along with every other part of the country. Such severe scenarios could be lessened as we still have the power to make changes for the better. The impact of homes on the environment can easily be decreased, for instance, with new developments built to high eco-standards and renewable energy playing an increasing role in providing our energy needs.”

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Editor's notes

1. *Our changing climate, our changing lives - South East* is produced by Tomorrow's England, a joint initiative funded by Defra <http://www.defra.gov.uk>.

2. To download a copy of the report, toolkit and images visit: www.climatechangeandme.net

3. The coalition members are:

Beyond Green
Campaign for Better Transport
Campaign to Protect Rural England
Forum for the Future
Groundwork
The National Trust
The Wildlife Trusts
RSPB

National Federation of Women's Institutes
Woodland Trust
WWF-UK

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