

Opinion Where will you go if your town disappears into the ocean?

Readers on how to plan for rising sea levels and a recall election in D.C.

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“Recent articles on accelerated sea level rise in the Gulf of Mexico and up the East Coast presented graphic evidence that climate change is already affecting people’s lives. The gulf region is particularly vulnerable because of its lowlying terrain and frequent tropical storms, and because many cities and towns are located at the water’s edge. It’s worth emphasizing how nature can be used along with traditional hard infrastructure to reduce the impacts of climate-driven disasters. Barrier islands and their dune fields, coastal wetlands, oyster and coral reefs, living shorelines and freshwater marshes, when protected, strengthened and created, can help make coastal areas more resilient to erosion, storm surge and torrential rains. These nature-based solutions also provide habitats for plant and animal species, sustain the commercial and recreational fishing industry, support tourism, and help maintain the important cultural connection between gulf communities and their natural surroundings. The Army Corps of Engineers, long known for constructing large-scale hard-infrastructure projects, has embraced this approach in its Engineering With Nature initiative. In Louisiana, the Army Corps has worked with the state to construct large-scale barrier islands and rebuild marshes being eroded by rising waters. Mississippi River diversions have been designed to restore the natural process of distributing river-carried sediment to rebuild delta marshlands. It is possible to envision a Gulf Coast where natural features are restored and protected natural buffer lands are interspersed with redesigned infrastructure in built-up areas to create a coastal region that is more resilient to storms and rising waters, where natural habitat increases, where there are more opportunities for enjoyment of the outdoors, and where residents can sustain their long-standing relationship to and affection for their coast. Though the private and public investments needed to achieve this future are large, they are far less costly in money and human suffering than the unplanned, repetitive and chaotic responses to increasingly frequent storms and floods. And while nature-based solutions can be useful at every scale — from rain gardens in individual yards to the massive restoration projects to save the Louisiana wetlands — they cannot mitigate every natural hazard, and if decisive action is not taken to address the causes of climate change, both natural and traditional infrastructure will be overwhelmed by rising seas and intense storms.” —Bob Bendick, Winter Park, Fla.

(The writer is director of the Nature Conservancy’s Gulf of Mexico program.)
