

Land use and flood protection: contrasting approaches and outcomes in France and in England and Wales

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Abstract

Different approaches to the control of floodplain 'encroachment' exist in France and in England and Wales. In France, a 'coercive' approach emphasises strong central government intervention within a system of designated risk zones for all natural hazards. In England and Wales, a more 'cooperative' approach prevails, with the dominant power being with democratically elected local authorities. Ideas and policies are converging, however, as both local flexibility and national direction are shown to have implementation weaknesses as, in both countries, the development pressures on floodplains continue to grow.

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Introduction

This paper compares the development of floodplain policies in two adjacent countries. We set this comparison in a context of the political systems, the cultural backgrounds and some aspects of the geography of the two countries, building on a decade of

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collaborative flood hazard research (Penning-Rowsell & Fordham, 1994; Pottier, 1996, chap. 12, 1998).

The floodplain policies we examine have similar aims in the two countries (e.g. Bourrelrier, Deneufbourg, & De Vanssay, 2000; Environment Agency, 2001b). They seek both to minimise the adverse impacts that floods generally bring, in terms of flood damage and disruption, and to maximise the productive use and conservation values of the areas liable to flooding (the floodplain) and those generating flood runoff—collectively termed the flood risk zones.

These aims are difficult to achieve and the way that their twin objectives are addressed is different in the different countries. No arrangements are perfect, but future policy makers should be able to learn from our comparisons.

National culture, ‘place’ and flood risk management

The nature of flood risk management in different countries revolves around their legislative and administrative systems, their cultural contexts, and the types of floods that they experience. In this respect, France and England and Wales obviously have significant similarities. They are both members of the EU, and they share many historical experiences; both have occupied each other and fought wars together; both have a common Roman lineage. They share a place dominated by a northern Atlantic geography and climate, and by a western democracy-based capitalist economy. Both have a history over the last 50 years of substantial investment in flood defence, and of continuing flooding during this period leading to some serious loss of life (MEDD, 2004; Tunstall, Johnson, & Penning-Rowsell, 2004).

But there are also significant differences, related to many factors but in particular to the French Revolution and its aftermath (Table 1). In France, politically, there is the well-known emphasis on liberty, equality and fraternity. In the UK, the stress is on freedom, democracy and the rule of law: some subtle differences here. In terms of the drivers of

Table 1

The contrasting contexts of anti-encroachment policies in France and in England and Wales

	France	England and Wales
Legislative systems and legal arrangements	Laws more fully codified. Strong mandatory component; legal base in the Napoleonic Code	Common law base, with strong case law component. Many legislative elements left open, for later Ministerial interpretation
Administrative arrangements	More centralised	More devolved. Separation of judiciary, legislature and executive
Political culture/rhetoric	Liberty, equality and fraternity philosophy carried forward from the French Revolution	Freedom, democracy and the rule of law
Types of key flood problems and threats	Mediterranean summer thunder-storm events; winter floods on the major rivers	Winter floods on the major rivers; coastal flood threat from North Sea storm surges

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