

As a political scientist, not an engineer nor an ecologist, it seems that the essential question is whether we should be protecting the natural environment from society, or society from natural disasters. If we endeavor to understand and ultimately to change the behavior of people and institutions, should we focus on how to get people to live and build in areas where they minimize their disturbance of the natural environment and are at minimal risk from the environment, or should we be learning how to convince people that spending large amounts of money on engineering away the risks of natural disasters is as high a priority as national defense and should have a high priority in public budgets?

In Venice, according to John Keahey in *Venice Against the Sea* (St. Martin's Press, 2002), Roberto Frassetto, originator of the flood gate proposal approved in 1982, said in 2000, "All the politicians will say, 'Tomorrow, Venice will be saved,' ... When the election is gone, nothing. Everything will return to the drawers of the politicians and the bureaucratic organizations. ... It will only be a miracle if they decide. Even a crisis [like the 1966 flood] has an effect that is very temporary." He notes that Venetians are not likely to die in the midst of rising waters – "over centuries the lives of very few have ended that way." Most attention in Venice to date has focused on saving individual works of art and individual buildings. Citizens seem resigned to the inevitability of occasional flooding, and signs of adaptation are evident – construction to accommodate rising water levels, raised walkways in Piazza San Marco.

However, like in other regions, Venice has responded to disasters. A flood in 1979 spurred new laws that called for interventions to protect the lagoon and to develop a plan to restore buildings, preserve Venice's historic town plan, its environment, and its economy. It also led to the creation of the Consortio Venezia Nuova, the group responsible for the flood gates.

Scripps Institution of Oceanography is under contract to an Italian engineering company (a partner in CVN) to study the ecotoxicology of the Venice Lagoon as plans progress to move sediment with toxic pollutants as part of the floodgate project. MIT has been under contract to the Consortio as engineering advisors for many years. It appears that the Italians in charge of the project are sincere in wanting expert scientific and engineering advice to bolster their credibility with politicians and the public.

The Italian political system is not a model we want to emulate in New Orleans, but it is interesting that there are different political parties responsible for the city of Venice, the region, and the federal government, with tensions similar to what we see in New Orleans where the Mayor and Governor are from a different party than the President. Any proposal with substantial funding is inherently political. However, the prospects for success in securing support for a program will be enhanced to the extent that a consortium can be formed that embraces all the major political interests, and has the "objective" input of the academic community.

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