Between land and sea

by Tom Jeffreys

The flood is an archetypal narrative. Gods have sent great waves of destruction through the story-telling traditions of many different cultures. From the 4,000 year-old Epic of Gilgamesh to the Bible, the Torah and the Quran, the flood is not only a story of mass extinction but also of renewal. It wipes away what preceded it, leaving just a select few survivors to start afresh. The flood is therefore a story of resilience against the odds. In its repetition across the ages, it tells us that the end of the world has happened before and that it will happen again. What such narratives omit is that, for many of the world's most vulnerable, the end of the world is not an event but a process, and it's happening right now.

Perhaps this is where saltmarshes come in. For saltmarshes may not at first seem conducive to such epic narratives. Neither land nor sea: they are slippery places between one thing and another. Magic that might gather in the depths of a dark forest is blown away by biting coastal winds. The wild beauty which, thanks to the enduring influence of Romanticism, we might associate with craggy mountain tops, somehow dissipates with so little verticality to draw the eye. 18 million people visit the Lake District each year. How many of them come to the wide flat saltmarshes of Barrow-in-Furness?

A saltmarsh is an area of coastal wetland that lies between what we might think of as the sea proper and other land ecosystems, such as forests or sand dunes. The vital force in every saltmarsh is the tide, which regularly brings in and drains away sea water, carrying in its flows not only salt but also silt, micro-organisms, seeds, spores, industrial effluence, agricultural run-off, radiation from nuclear power plants or arms factories and all the flowing materiality of extractive capitalism. Saltmarshes are places where all this sundry matter is deposited and where a select few species of plants are somehow still able to grow, providing shelter for many different fish, mammals, birds and insects.

Even within individual areas of saltmarsh, conditions can vary significantly: from wet and salty at lower levels to dry and low in nutrients inland and higher up. Small salt-tolerant succulents like samphire are often the first to make their homes amid mud flats, stabilising and oxygenating the surface and enabling other plant species to grow too. While samphire is delicious and full of nutrients, it is not always safe to eat due to high levels of pollution. If samphire is stocked in UK supermarkets, it is often imported from Israel.

"If mountains are poetry," writes Noreen Masud in *A Flat Place* (2023), "flatlands are prose". As Masud points out, the prosaic is also worthy of our love and care, for that is where most of us live our lives. Of a walk across Morecambe Bay, just across the water from Barrow, she writes: "Like all flatness, if you look close, it's a thousand tiny vibrations." This idea feels apt: landscape as a multiplicity of juddering movements. For saltmarshes, flooding is not so much an event as a rhythm. It happens so often that it's hardly worth turning into a story. While epic flood narratives divide history neatly in two (before the flood; after the flood) saltmarshes exist in an ongoing ebb and flow of becoming.

In such fluid terrain, it can be difficult not to lose your footing. This is, in part, because saltmarshes are living sites of decay and decomposition, where bacteria break down plant matter into thick, shifting layers of mud and peat. These deep peaty layers are carbon sinks: washed-up sediment and decomposing plant matter lie buried within wet layers of mud instead of being released into the atmosphere. In saltmarshes, carbon is typically captured 40 times faster than temperate forests.

Saltmarshes can also play a valuable role in mitigating flooding, by providing a buffer between land and sea and slowing down encroaching waters far more effectively than any human-made wall. Unfortunately, because they can be in desirable locations (flat, coastal), saltmarshes have often been seen as wasteland, valuable only insofar as they can be drained and developed. In England, 85% of saltmarsh habitats have been destroyed since 1860. Across the world, 450 square miles of saltmarsh are being lost every year. That's an area about half the size of the Lake District. This destruction means all that sequestered carbon is released back into the atmosphere. More positively, unlike rainforests which can take centuries to recover from anthropogenic damage, saltmarshes can be re-established relatively quickly. Recent studies suggest that it is young or expanding saltmarshes that sequester carbon at the highest rates. While most climate narratives are justifiably bleak, saltmarshes offer at least the possibility for hope.

As a contemporary art project, while DELUGE encourages more meaningful engagement with and care for saltmarshes, it also asks difficult questions. In the face of so much loss, what spaces are there for grief as well as action? When we speak of care or conservation, what exactly is being protected, for which communities, and on what grounds? How can we disrupt the extractive systems that have brought about the current ecological crisis? And what might ethical living even look like in this context?

While the word 'deluge' implies a kind of overwhelming excess (we might think of a deluge of information, for example), saltmarshes can often seem underwhelming, in contrast to more celebrated landscapes like mountains or forests. As artist and writer Lydia Catterall has asked: "If over and underwhelmed are both things, can you be just *whelmed*?" Yes, she continues: "It turns out you can." As if thinking out loud through the word's etymology (*whelm* in Middle English has to do with arches and vaults, with turning over or upside down, covering, submerging), Catterall writes:

Submerging, emerging, overturning; all quite active in their individual ways, but together a sort of dance. A flow. Riding the waves, in your vessel, responding to the immersive landscape. Becoming part of things: Gently, ferociously, either way, with acceptance of the motions.

The ideas that Catterall gives life to here feel like saltmarsh thinking: a rhythmic dance between the too much and the not enough. The need for acceptance. Similarly, Masud speaks of the wisdom of such places: "Flat landscapes ask us to tolerate not knowing things."

This is the terrain that DELUGE navigates. Three artists, three cultural organisations, three saltmarsh locations. Taking place via a series of journeys over the last three years, the project has enabled the artists to engage with the saltmarshes in Aberlady (Edinburgh), Barrow-in-Furness and the Wadden Sea in the Netherlands, which, although ecologically similar, are nonetheless quite different landscapes, connected in different ways to planetary flows of material and power, and taking up different positions in their corresponding local imaginaries. The Wadden Sea is vast. The world's largest mass of intertidal sand and mud flats (*wad* is Dutch for 'mud'), it forms a significant presence in Dutch identity and has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2009. Aberlady, by contrast, is tiny and quite literally overlooked. Most people simply walk across it via an elevated walkway on their way to the beach. Barrow perhaps sits somewhere between these two – mesmerising in its wide rich roughness.

Different rules, customs and uses govern each site too. In Barrow, various designations (National Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest) and management organisations (National Trust, Natural England, Cumbria Wildlife Trust) mean that different activities are encouraged or prohibited in different places within the same saltmarsh landscape. In every site, multiple uses overlap: industry, agriculture, tourism, urban development, multiple strategies of management or protection. This multiplicity shines through the exhibition. Saltmarshes are by turns vast and fragile, material and mythological, overlooked and utterly essential, critical to learn about and perhaps, in some vital and important ways, unknowable.

Between land and sea is commissioned by Art Walk Projects (Edinburgh) for DELUGE 2025.

Tom Jeffreys is a writer who lives in Edinburgh. His books include: _Walking: Documents of Contemporary Art_ (Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2024); _To an island in a loch on an island in a loch_, with Kirsty Badenoch (Mouldy Books, 2023); _The White Birch: a Russian Reflection_ (Little, Brown, 2021); and _Signal Failure: London to Birmingham, HS2 on Foot_ (Influx Press, 2017).