

Over the Seawall: Tsunamis, Cyclones, Drought, and the Delusion of Controlling Nature

Stephen Robert Miller

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Stephen Robert Miller issues an appeal for realistic, long-term responses to climate change in *Over the Seawall*, a book that examines failed attempts to control nature.

Often, the expensive, complicated engineering projects that are designed to counteract natural calamities fail. Here, three such cases are described in detail: seawalls erected to shield Japanese cities from tsunamis; embankments built along river deltas to prevent periodic flooding in Bangladesh; and canals constructed to channel water toward residents in the Arizona desert. Because of the mistaken belief that expensive fortifications enable unaltered growth, hundreds of millions of dollars were invested in these projects; countless corporations and investors profited. And, in all three cases, the “fix” fell apart.

In Japan, during the catastrophic 2011 tsunami, 130-foot waves overwhelmed “protective” seawalls. Thousands perished, including those who trusted the technology to save them. Miller notes that taller, stronger seawalls have been constructed since then—but that they are also inadequate. And in Arizona, the high-priced infrastructure that channels water from the Colorado River is but a temporary way to address water shortages, Miller says, even as it allows for astronomical growth in Phoenix and elsewhere. As droughts stretch on and the water table collapses, though, such projects just postpone the inevitable.

Speaking against short-term thinking, poor policy decisions, and the illusion of abundance, the book includes moving portraits of the local people who are most affected when fortifications fail. For instance, in Bangladesh, crumbling embankments, built in the 1960s when ruling nations wanted to “squeeze” as much productivity as possible out of the land, now impede the country’s agriculture; impoverished farmers struggle because of them.

Over the Seawall is a challenging, persuasive text that uses examples of infrastructure failures to urge people to adapt to a natural world that they cannot control.

KRISTEN RABE (November / December 2023)

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