

Of Floods and Folklore

Climate models based on the current rate of increase in greenhouse gases indicate that sea levels will rise at a rate of about two to five times the current rate over the next 100 years from the combined effect of ocean thermal expansion and increased glacier melt.

National Snow and Ice Data Center

nce upon a time, a small herd of woolly mammoths crossed over three sharp hills on the North American continent and moved eastward over a long plain covered with heather and crowberry. After some days they came to a high plateau where they remained long enough for one or two of them to have succumbed.

This was a scene that was repeated many times over the millennia. But in time the rains came and the waters rose and the high hills were covered and the waters prevailed upon the earth.

The high plateau at the edge of the continent is now known as Georges Bank. Fishing boats dragging the bank in the recent past have dredged up the bones of the mammoths that died there when it was dry land.

The three hills that once lay one hundred miles from the seacoast endured for thousands of years after the waters rose and even served as landmarks above a snug harbor first visited by a European named John Cabot in 1536. These same hills were subsequently leveled by English colonists and now survive, like so many natural landmarks, as a street name only—Tremont Street in this case—in the city now known as Boston.

The woolly mammoth itself is extinct and endures only in images scratched and painted on the cave walls of Perigord and in the folktales of the lost tribes of the North American Indians who once chased them across the dry plains east of Boston.

The waters that covered Georges Bank resulted from the melting of the ice walls of the late great glacier, some 11,000 years ago. We are now living at the end of a postglacial warming period, a time when, theoretically, the climate should



be cooling. But as we know (or at least as most of us know), the world climate is changing and the ice caps at the uttermost ends of the earth are melting and sea levels are rising again.

The record of the last great sea rise is fixed in the geological strata and can be read by scientists. But it is also true that the last great flooding occurred within the era of human consciousness. And, although the events associated with the flood took place in prehistorical times, before the advent of agriculture and the invention of the written word, the record of its coming and going is recorded in the folklore of the world. The story of a massive flood that covers the earth is an element of the folkloric histories of a wide variety of world cultures.

The Aboriginal Australians, members of one of the oldest extant cultures on earth, have any number of flood tales, ranging from the legend of a primordial snake that called for rain and caused the waters of the world to rise, to folktales in which rains fell for a long time until there was no dry land and all the people

drowned. The Bahnar, who lived near Cochin in China, have a story in which a vengeful crab caused the sea and rivers to swell until the waters reached the sky. The only survivors were a brother and sister who took one pair each of all the earth's animals with them in a huge chest.

Here in the West, the first written epic, the Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh, set down some 6,000 years ago, has at its core the story of a great flood. The Hebrews told the same story in the narrative of Noah and the Ark, and the Hindu culture recorded the account of a fish who warned Manu, the first human, of the coming of a great deluge and told him to build a ship to save himself and the animals.

And so it goes, down through the ages: rising waters, and a few, ethical, wise human beings who save the world for the future.

The point is there is nothing unnatural or unusual about floods. The problem seems to be that, for all our histories and our record keeping and folklore, people seem to have short memories and tend to settle in floodplains as soon as the waters recede.

Now in our time, with the waters rising again, we continue the practice, trusting in nothing more than suspect technologies to save us from the flood next time.

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