

Swimming in the Streets: The Beginnings of Planning for Sea Level Rise

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Introduction

As concern about climate change first burgeoned, the prospect of a rise in sea levels attracted particular attention. Research in the late 1970s and early 1980s suggesting an increase of several metres, due to the disintegration of the west Antarctic ice sheet, was the catalyst. But even as these figures dropped, as the collapse of the ice sheets began to be regarded as a distant problem and scientists focused instead on accelerated melting of temperate glaciers and the expansion of the oceans due to higher temperatures, sea level rise remained the aspect of climate change that was highest on the public agenda. At *Greenhouse '87*, the first major Australian conference on climate change, there were ten papers on coastal impacts. In the same year, the Australian writer George Turner published his award-winning novel *The Sea and Summer*, in which he imagined a world where the melting of the polar ice caps had resulted in 'disaster to the coastal cities of the planet', leaving most of old Melbourne underwater and prompting the building of a 'New City' in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges.¹ In 1989, as described by Brian Crowley in *Hotting Up*, one of the flurry of early Australian non-fiction books about climate change, Australian television viewers saw simulated scenes of the Sydney Opera House being flooded, parts of Brisbane and Hobart underwater, and Melbourne as a 'Venice of the South'. They were told that, 'when the seas rise due to the greenhouse effect, the beach at Surfers Paradise will be the first of Australia's famous landmarks to go – and people will be swimming in the streets'.²

An obvious question – then, as now – was how planning laws could be used to reduce the impacts of sea level rise. Even if the law did nothing in relation to existing developments, it had obvious potential for future developments, controlling where and how they were constructed. A small

¹ G Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, Faber, London, 1987, p 3.

² B Crowley, *Hotting Up: How the Greenhouse Effect and Ozone Depletion will change Australia during the next 40 Years*, Matchbooks, Melbourne, 1989, pp 76-77.

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