



FOREWORD

by Ian Mowll

Many, many years ago, there lived a king of England named Canute. Now Canute was a powerful ruler and his courtiers were always praising him. Each day, he would sit in audience and listen to his people.

“No-one challenges your supreme rule,” one would say.

“You are greater than any king before you,” said a second.

“The seas, the sky and the whole earth obeys your every word,” cried a third.

Now the King was a man of courage and realism and he grew weary of all these foolish words. “So, you say there is nothing I cannot do?” he asked them.

“O king, you are powerful beyond measure!” his courtiers chorused.

“So,” said the king with a glint in his eye, “then I will command the tide to stop! Go and fetch a chair and place it near the incoming tide”.

The courtiers were puzzled that the king would want to do such a thing but nevertheless they hurried off and brought a chair just as he had asked. The king and his courtiers went to the water’s edge and the chair was placed beside the incoming tide. The king sat down on the chair and looked out at the sea.

He turned to his courtiers and said, “I wish the tide to stop, will the ocean obey my command?”

The courtiers looked at each other bewildered but none of them dared to say no. At last, one courtier spoke up: “Yes, your majesty, why the whole earth does your bidding!”

“Very well,” cried Canute, “I command the tide to come no further! Waves, stop your rolling! Surf, stop your pounding! Do not dare touch my feet!” He waited a moment, and then a tiny wave rushed up the sand and lapped at his feet. “How dare you!” Canute shouted. “Sea, turn back now! I, the king have ordered you to stop and now you must turn back!” Another wave swept forward and curled around the king’s feet. The tide came in, just as it has always done. The water continued to sweep in towards the beach. It came up around the king’s chair, and wet not only his feet, but also his robe. His officers stood around him, alarmed, wondering whether he was mad.

“Well, my friends,” Canute said, “it seems that I do not have as much power as you would have me believe. Perhaps you have learned that no-one is able to rule over the seas, the skies and the forces of nature.”

The courtiers hung their heads and looked foolish. And some say Canute took off his crown and never wore it again.

* * *

Even though King Canute lived in the 11th century, this story is still very relevant today. We can imagine that King Canute represents the power of technology and materialism. And that the courtiers represent our society. So often the collective voice of our western society says that science and a growing economy can conquer all.

But as this timeless story shows, the forces of nature do not bow down to our ideas, rationalism and greed. Instead, we need to listen to and live in relationship with nature in order to have any chance of survival in the long run and to live meaningful lives.

And so this book is in two parts. The first part is about the effects of nature and contains experiences of people who have been flooded. The second part is about downshifting; how people have reduced their material lifestyle in some way, have learnt to live in relationship with nature and have increased their wellbeing. By downshifting, it is very likely that carbon emissions are reduced which helps slow down climate change and therefore the probability of future flooding.

Studies suggest that explaining the facts of global warming does not change behaviour. Even though global warming is now irrefutably acknowledged by scientists and that it is ‘very likely’ that global warming is human induced¹ there has been no wholesale change to our lifestyle to mitigate climate change.

So, how can change be effected? How can people be motivated to reduce their carbon emissions to make future flooding and climate change less likely? One way is to tell personal stories. Stories from people that we can understand, relate to, and learn from. And so, it is my hope that some of the accounts contained in this book will inspire us to take more action to face climate change and the environmental issues of our time.

* * *

Reference:

1. A report of Working Group I of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/wg1/ar4-wg1-spm.pdf