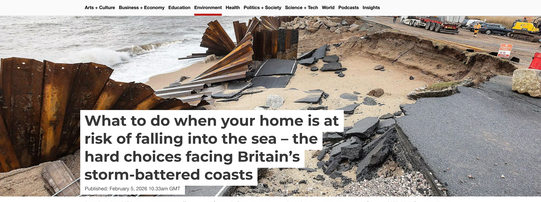

What to do when your home is at risk of falling into the sea – the hard choices facing Britain's storm-battered coasts

Published: February 5, 2026 10.33am GMT

A section of the A379 coastal road between Torcross and Slapton in Devon washed away after being battered by the storms in February 2026. Mark Passmore/Alamy Live News

Recent storms washed away large sections of roads in the UK after sea defences were damaged. For residents, it was a shock. But for coastal scientists, it was not unexpected.

Parts of the A379 between Torcross and Slapton, in south Devon, collapsed leaving a 200-metre stretch of road broken apart and part of a nearby car park destroyed. Engineers say even steel-reinforced protection failed under repeated wave action.

The road runs along the crest of a shingle barrier beach, with the sea on one side and Slapton Ley, a freshwater lake, on the other. Recent monitoring shows the beach has become narrower and steeper as storms move sediment along and away from the shoreline.

With less material in front of it, waves now break closer to the road and can undercut the edge of the carriageway. In places like this, the problem is not a single extreme storm. Rather, it is the gradual loss and redistribution of beach material that leaves the road increasingly exposed.

Hard defences such as seawalls and rock armour are often the first response. They can hold the line for a while, but they do not remove the force of incoming waves. The energy simply moves elsewhere, often speeding up erosion further along the coast. The risk is diverted rather than resolved.

As sea levels rise and storms intensify, these defences simply cannot keep up. What they usually provide is time, not lasting protection.

Even the science used to inform coastal management decisions comes with caveats. Computer models help estimate how beaches might change in the future, but real coastlines are messy and constantly evolving. Small differences in the assumptions of these models can produce very different forecasts, which makes long-term planning difficult.

The A379 has been closed since recent storms damaged this Devon coast road. Mark Passmore/Alamy Live News

Natural ways to manage the coastline are increasingly put forward as alternatives. Restoring dunes, saltmarshes or wetlands can help absorb wave energy while supporting biodiversity and storing carbon. These natural landscapes can adapt, hard defences cannot.

However, they are not quick fixes. They take time and space to establish, and their protection varies. Studies show they can reduce wave energy, but often only modestly reduce flooding during extreme events.

Public expectations often pull the other way. In the UK, natural ways to manage the coastline are popular in principle, yet when storms threaten, people tend to favour hard defences because they offer immediate, visible protection, even if it does not last.

The economics add another layer.

Flood and erosion risks affect where people live and invest. When people see flood maps, they often look elsewhere and pay less for homes in exposed areas. Property prices and insurance costs reflect that. But these maps are usually treated as certain, even though they are not, so prices can fall suddenly after major storms.

In practice, that means money and development often remain concentrated in places that science suggests will become increasingly vulnerable.

A wake-up call

The situation at Slapton brings all of this into focus. Rebuilding the same stretch of road after every storm may not be physically or financially realistic.

Some shoreline plans already acknowledge this potential reality through policies such as managed realignment or "no active intervention", allowing the coast to move inland and creating natural buffers such as mudflats and marshes. In some places, relocating development inland may simply be safer and cheaper than trying to defend an increasingly exposed shoreline.

But these decisions come with real trade-offs.

At Slapton, the sea and freshwater ley is divided by an A road. Mark Passmore/ Alamy Live News

Roads may need to be rerouted. Farmland may flood more often. Homes and businesses may have to relocate. Existing habitats may be lost before new ones establish. In areas dominated by high-value waterfront properties or second homes, decisions about who receives protection, and who does not, quickly become political as well as practical.

The alternative is a costly cycle of damage, repair and rebuild, with less benefit each time.

Slapton is not simply an engineering failure. It is a reminder that coastlines are inherently dynamic and cannot always be pinned in place. Seawalls can buy time. Nature can help soften impacts. Better information can guide smarter decisions. But none of these removes risk altogether.

Long-term resilience means accepting how coasts really behave and being practical about where to defend, where to adapt and where it may be wiser to step back and let the shoreline reshape itself.

Coasts | Coastal erosion | Climate resilience | Sea defences

Authors

Avidesh Seenath
Course Director, MSc Environmental Change and Management, University of Oxford

Scott Mahadeo
Lecturer in Economics, University of Reading

Disclosure statement

The authors do not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and have disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Partners

University of Oxford | University of Reading

University of Oxford and University of Reading provide funding as members of The Conversation UK.

The Conversation UK receives funding from these organisations

View the full list

DOI

https://doi.org/10.64828/AB.e50vdvk43

You might also like

Climate change: we need to start moving people away from some coastal areas, warns scientist

Rising seas: to keep humans safe, let nature shape the coast

How to gauge flood risk before you buy or rent a seafront property

Can the UK's crumbling coasts be saved from erosion?

1 Comment

Oldest | Newest | Sign in to comment

Jerry Whitmarsh

I would like to see a government document of general guidance as to how to deal with coastal erosion. For example, what should happen when a right-of-way is eroded away? This is a real problem in several areas, how should the county council concerned respond?What should be done to identify which areas will go next, Can't we identify areas the way we do flood plains and manage movements or defences in good time? Perhaps some areas do this already but mine doesn't and it should be co-ordinated. I can find a map of the whole of England showing flooding patterns and risks, but not erosion.

about 15 hours ago • Report

Events

Panel Discussion: 'Measuring what matters: biodiversity metrics for business and finance' — Oxford, Oxfordshire

'Putting nature on a path to recovery: how are we doing?' with Dr David Cooper — Oxford, Oxfordshire

Book talk - 'The Means of Prediction: How AI Really Works (and Who Benefits)' with Maximilian Kasy — Oxford, Oxfordshire

A picture of migration — London, City of

Keeping global warming below 2°C: a feasible action plan — London, City of

More events

Editorial Policies
Community standards
Republishing guidelines
Friends of The Conversation
Analytics
Events
Our feeds
Donate
Get newsletter

Who we are
Our charter
Our team
Our audience
Our blog
Partners and funders
Contact us
Member training resources
Universal Impact