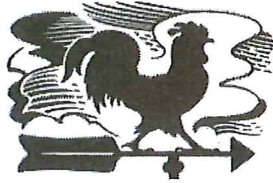

Weather

Weather Eye
Paul Simons



Many ideas have been suggested to prevent future flooding disasters, from more dredging of rivers to homes that float on water, but one simple solution has been overlooked — peat bogs.

Boglands are like sponges that soak up water. They are natural flood defences, although they don't have a glamorous public image compared with large engineering projects such as the Thames Barrage. A project to restore 2,000 hectares (5,000 acres) of peat bog on Exmoor has revealed their value in flood prevention. This £2.2 million project by South West Water and its partners is restoring previously drained moorland by blocking up drainage ditches. The work is due to be completed next year but already a recent study has shown that a third less water escapes from the restored moorland during heavy rainfall, compared with three years ago. The equivalent of 6,630 Olympic-size swimming pools of water no longer flows into rivers. "Across the experimental site we are seeing a rise in water table levels of up to 2.65cm that can be attributed to the ditch blocking and moorland restoration," said Professor Richard Brazier at Exeter University. "This enhanced water storage could, when replicated across the whole of Exmoor, provide a significant buffer against downstream flooding in rivers like the Exe."

The remedial work has boosted water quality. Although peat bogs have a dirty image they filter water and the restored Exmoor boglands have less discolouration of water from dissolved organic substances.

Boglands also lock up large amounts of carbon in the dead remains of plants that form peat. Britain's bogs store 5.5 billion tonnes of carbon — more than half the entire country's carbon storage, or 35 years' worth of the nation's carbon dioxide pollution. By comparison our forests store 150 million tonnes of carbon. Britain has about 8 per cent of the entire world's bogland, so it is a considerable natural resource.
