

Arguing With the Sea

For eight hundred years the answer was a higher wall. Then the answer changed.

8 min read

Before you read

- **dyke** — a long bank or wall built to hold back water
- **reclaim** — to take land back from water and make it usable
- **polder** — low land that has been drained and is kept dry by pumps and dykes
- **defence** — something built to protect against an attack or a danger
- **flood plain** — flat land beside a river that water spreads onto when the river rises
- **channel** — the path water follows
- **evacuate** — to leave a dangerous place, or to move people out of one



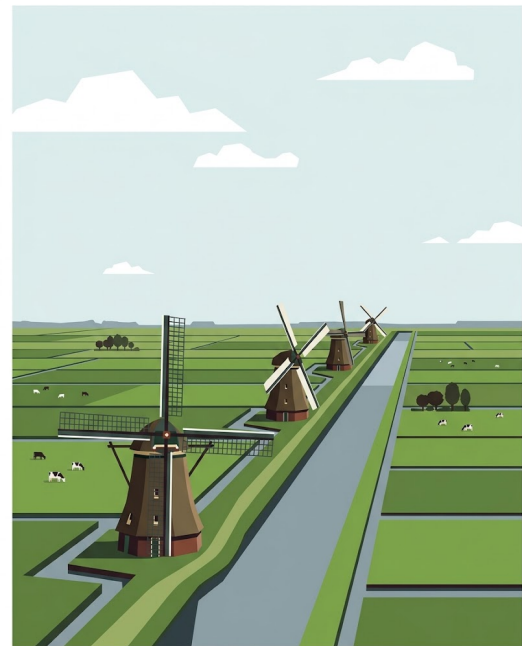
The new side channel at Nijmegen. The water is meant to come here.

¹ Lotte's house stands four metres below the sea. Not beside it, not level with it. Below it. From her bedroom window the ships on the far side of the **dyke** appear to be sailing past at roof height, and when she was small she assumed every country worked this way.

² About a quarter of the Netherlands sits below sea level, and almost none of that happened by accident. For centuries people here drained lakes and marshes to make farmland, ringing each drained patch with a dyke and pumping the water out — first with windmills, later with engines. Land made this way is called a **polder**. Every polder is dry because a machine keeps it dry. Stop the pumps and the water comes back.

³ To **reclaim** land is to win an argument with water, and for eight hundred years the Dutch answer to every rising river was the same: build the **dyke** higher.

⁴ It worked, mostly. In 1953 it did not. A winter storm met a spring tide, dykes failed in the south-west, and more than 1,800 people died in a single night.



Drainage mills. For four centuries these were the pumps.

⁵ What followed was the largest set of flood **defences** ever built: barriers, sea gates and reinforced dykes designed to hold against a storm so rare it might come once in ten thousand years. The country became the place other countries visited to learn how to keep water out.

⁶ Then, in the 1990s, two rivers rose so far that a quarter of a million people had to **evacuate**, and the dykes held only just. Engineers looked at the numbers and reached an uncomfortable conclusion. Squeezing a swollen river between two high walls makes the water deeper and faster, and a wall that fails at that pressure fails catastrophically. Higher was not safer. Higher was just higher.

⁷ So the policy turned around. The programme was called Room for the River, and instead of pushing water away it gave the water somewhere to go. Dykes were moved back from the bank. Side **channels** were dug so a flooding river could split in two. **Flood plains** that had been farmed were allowed to flood again. In a few places whole farms were bought and moved.

⁸ At Nijmegen the river was pinched at a bend where the city had grown too close. The dyke was shifted several hundred metres inland and a new channel cut through what had been a village edge, turning the land between into an island park. People lost houses for it. The river now has space at exactly the point where it used to have none.

⁹ The parks are the part visitors notice. Lotte's class walks there, and her teacher points out the markers showing how high the water reached in 1995. The markers are above their heads.

¹⁰ There is no version of this where the pumps stop. The country is still below the water and always will be. What changed is the shape of the argument: for eight centuries it was fought by building upwards, and now part of it is fought by standing back.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. What is a polder?
 - A A wall built along a river
 - B Drained land kept dry by dykes and pumps
 - C A lake made by a flood
 - D A park built on a flood plain
2. What did engineers conclude after the near-floods of the 1990s?
 - A The pumps were too old
 - B Walls should be built from stronger materials
 - C Squeezing a river between higher walls makes it deeper and faster
 - D The 1953 defences had been a mistake
3. What does the Room for the River programme do?
 - A Raises every dyke by several metres
 - B Gives the river more space by moving dykes back and digging channels
 - C Replaces windmills with modern pumps
 - D Builds sea gates against once-in-ten-thousand-year storms
4. Why was the dyke at Nijmegen moved inland?
 - A The old dyke had collapsed
 - B The city wanted a park
 - C The river was pinched at a bend with no room to spread
 - D The land was no longer farmed
5. Which sentence best sums up the passage's main point?
 - A The Netherlands has solved the problem of flooding
 - B The way of fighting the water changed, but the fight has not ended
 - C Building dykes higher has always been the safest method
 - D People should not live below sea level

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences.

6. Explain why a higher dyke can make a flood more dangerous rather than less.

7. The passage says people lost houses at Nijmegen. Why does the writer include that instead of describing only the park?

8. In your own words, explain what the last paragraph means by “the shape of the argument” changing.

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

9. Room for the River protects many people by taking land from a few. Is that a fair way to make a decision? Give your view and use something from the passage to support it.

10. The writer describes the country as arguing with the sea rather than fighting it. What does that choice of word suggest about the relationship, and do you think it fits what the passage describes?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — drained land kept dry by dykes and pumps | 2. C — higher walls make the water deeper and faster | 3. B — gives the river more space | 4. C — the river was pinched at a bend | 5. B — the method changed, the fight continues

Part B

6. Water squeezed between high walls rises higher and runs faster, so the pressure is greater and a failure releases far more water at once. Accept answers that get either the pressure or the catastrophic-failure point.

7. Because the solution had a real cost, and leaving it out would make the change sound easy and painless. Accept answers about honesty, fairness or balance.

8. The problem has not gone away — the land is still below water — but the method changed from building upwards to giving the river room. Accept any answer that separates the unchanged problem from the changed response.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

9. Either view earns full credit when argued from the text. For: 1,800 died in 1953 and a quarter of a million were evacuated in the 1990s, so the numbers protected are large. Against: the people who lost homes did not choose the risk, and fairness is not only arithmetic. The strongest answers name what would make it fairer, such as compensation or consultation.

10. A strong answer notices that an argument has two sides, continues, and can be settled by giving ground, whereas a fight implies one winner — and tests that against the passage, where the country concedes land rather than defeating the water. Accept disagreement if it is reasoned.

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