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Venice is drowning.

It's a warning of what's to come.

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Venice is sinking, and the seas are rising — and never before has the water seemed so close. Some 85 percent of the city flooded this week as the highest tideswaters in more than 50 years inundated its historic core. A viral video caught a man swimming through St. Mark's Square, site of the Doge's Palace, the city's iconic campanile and the 11th-century St. Mark's Basilica. In its hundreds of years, the basilica has flooded only six times. Two of those times came in the past two years.

Venice's problems stem from more than just the audacity of those who built a major settlement on a shallow lagoon. The ground below the city is shifting as the aquifer below the lagoon depletes. Meanwhile, man-made climate change is boosting sea levels steadily and promoting extreme weather. Virginia's Hampton Roads faces a similar dual threat of sinking land and rising seas, resulting in major flooding problems.

For coastal areas contending only with climate-related sea-level rise, sinking Hampton Roads and Venice are warnings of what is in store when water levels get increasingly ahistorical. Shoreline development that once faced only occasional risk will be inundated more and more often. Communities will have to face the dilemma of retreating from the coast or spending huge amounts of money trying to engineer protections.

In Venice's case, there is no choice at all. Less a modern city than an open-air museum, Venice cannot be surrendered to the sea, despite expert projections that the city will be entirely submerged by 2100. The current plan to save the city calls for the installation of a system of floodgates that would close when high water threatened, similar to a proposal to wall off New York Harbor in response to sea-level rise. But as the water continues to advance, Venice's lagoon may have to be more or less permanently closed off from the Adriatic, which would radically alter its ecosystem and pose problems for disposing of municipal waste.

Saving Venice will take money, time and compromise. In substantial ways, the place will not be the same. Humanity must ask how many Venices it wants in the decades to come. For centuries, humans have built their civilization around water, under a certain set of climatic conditions, in anticipation of only the rare catastrophe. Unless humans make easier changes now to reduce global warming's risks, they will have harder choices in the future, in places ancient and new, in ways predictable and unexpected.

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