

Wallasea Wetlands Creation Project – Allfleet's Marsh

The story so far

In 1997, the House of Lords, after receiving an opinion from the EU Court of Justice, decreed that an area of marine wetlands, mudflats and saltmarsh of international importance for birds that had been left out of a Special Protection Area (SPA) – a designation under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives – to allow for port developments at Sheerness and Felixstowe, should be replaced.

In 2004, Wallasea was chosen, by a team of experts, as the most suitable site because it was big enough to attract the large numbers of birds that had been using the destroyed wetlands, and would not cause damage to the functioning of the surrounding estuary, or adversely affect those who use it.

The existing sea walls on the north shore of Wallasea were also in very poor condition, and the habitat creation project reduced the risk of flooding to Wallasea and subsequent damage to the estuary.

In 2006, a process known as 'managed realignment' allowed the tide back onto its old floodplain – new sea walls had been built some distance behind the original ones, which were then breached. This 'flooded' area then became Defra's *Wallasea Wetlands* – made up of 115 hectares of intertidal habitat.

The primary objective of the project is that by 2016 the site should be of sufficient quality to qualify for designation as an extension to the Crouch and Roach Estuaries SPA and Ramsar site.



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So that we may measure progress towards this objective, and to monitor whether there is any impact taking place in the surrounding estuary, Jacobs Consulting were awarded the monitoring contract by Defra in 2006. The contract follows a monitoring schedule drafted by ABPmer on behalf of Defra, and Jacobs subsequently employed ABPmer to assist with the monitoring. A summary of the latest report from Jacobs and ABPmer can be found on page 2.

The RSPB meanwhile, in 2007, were employed by Defra to

undertake the day-to-day site management of Wallasea, and since having been awarded this contract have themselves bought the bulk of Wallasea Island to create the UK's largest coastal habitat restoration scheme – the Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project. Details of the RSPB's exciting plans for the site can be found on page 3.

The site is also proving to have some recreational value too – 80% of local residents surveyed (652 interviews within a 10 mile radius) had heard of the site, and 85% of those said they planned to visit. And between January and December 2010, pressure pad data indicates 4,700 people visited Wallasea Wetlands.

For those who are interested in seeing the Wetlands from the comfort of their home – good news! The onsite webcam will soon be broadcasting a live stream – viewable at www.rspb.org.uk/wallasea

We are also pleased to announce that the Defra site has now been named Allfleet's Marsh – historically a name given to a marsh on the site in Medieval times.

How are we doing?

Defra is funding a detailed five-year monitoring programme to evaluate the success of the Wallasea Wetlands site and determine whether it meets its targets as compensatory habitat, and to verify whether any physical and ecological changes which occur in the adjacent Crouch and Roach Estuaries are within the limits predicted.

Jacobs have recently presented the latest monitoring report of theirs and ABPmer's monitoring data to Defra and other members of the Project Steering Group, the second such comprehensive report since the breach, which considers where we are two-thirds of the way through the monitoring contract.

Pleasingly, the mudflat and saltmarsh habitats are developing well – sediment in the mudflat has increased in depth by around 18cm (7 inches) over the four years so far. Further, a large expanse of new saltmarsh habitat has been successfully created. Although it can take many years before

this marsh has the full ecological functionality of a mature marsh, progress has been rapid and even in its developing state the habitat will be performing many of the structural and ecological functions of a typical marsh. These functions include wave absorption and providing sheltered feeding and nursery grounds for fish.

From the first survey of overwintering birds the site was supporting good numbers, with the abundance increasing to a peak of 12,000 waterbirds in 2008/09. This includes high proportions of key species such as shelduck, dunlin, black-tailed godwit, and ringed and golden plover. The compensation targets for overwintering birds are based on five-year peak mean values, and therefore any indication of success can only be given after the final years data has been collated – but so far the indication is the site became a valuable roosting site from the very first winter, but it is taking longer to develop as a feeding site.

The development of invertebrate communities is also being studied as an indicator of the abundance of food for the waterbirds. Results show the mudflat was rapidly colonised by invertebrates and within a year after the breach it became a productive habitat. A peak abundance of 19,000 organisms per square metre was recorded in the fourth year, and although the assemblages are highly variable, it is evident that the habitat has continued to mature and is supporting increasingly stable and diverse invertebrate communities.

The Wallasea Wetlands monitoring contract ends in December 2011, so by mid-2012 data should have been collated and been made available to present the full story five years since the breach of the sea walls. The Project Steering Group is already considering how this data can be presented in an informative, accessible style, presenting the key messages underpinned by robust scientific data.



RSPB Wild Coast Project

The Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project aims to extend the good work of the Defra Wetlands in a landmark conservation and engineering project. The RSPB's vision for Wallasea Island is to turn this area of arable farmland, which is in danger of unmanaged flooding, back to its historical condition as a rich mosaic of habitats, with approximately 133ha of mudflats, 276ha of saltmarsh and 56ha of shallow saline lagoons. A habitat adaption zone of 48ha will support further new saltmarsh as sea level continues to rise.

Managing a project of this scale presents huge challenges for the RSPB and its partners. We have carried out detailed studies to help inform the design and assess the impacts of our proposal. Following an extensive period of consultation, the Wild Coast Project received planning permission from Essex County Council in July 2009. Such a complex project requires

a range of other licences and consents; these are being acquired in a timely fashion as the project develops.

The proposed scheme will create new wildlife habitats in phases over about 10 years. This will include making breaches in the sea walls to allow seawater to flow in and out with the tides, similar to those on the adjacent 115 hectares of 'managed realignment' carried out by Defra in 2006.

We plan to import clean, recovered materials by ship, to shape the new landform. This has all been made possible by a partnership with Crossrail, the London rail tunnel project. The materials provided will reduce the volume of seawater entering on each tide and prevent adverse effects on navigation, shell fisheries and on other sea defences in the estuary. The new bank towards the western end of the project will ensure that the RSPB's project does not increase flood risk to properties

and businesses on the rest of the island.

Once completed, it will be a landscape used by people as well as wildlife, enjoyed by local communities and those from farther afield. Visitors will be able to come to Wallasea Island for relaxation and enjoyment, whether for birdwatching, walking, cycling, painting or photography.

Wherever possible, we will provide public access that will allow visitors and wildlife to happily coexist. The current access along the north (Defra) seawall will be unaffected by construction works and we will provide more than 15 kilometres of new and improved access routes, and a range of visitor facilities after the habitat is created.

For more details of the RSPB's Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project please go to www.rspb.org.uk/reserves or contact hilary.hunter@rspb.org.uk



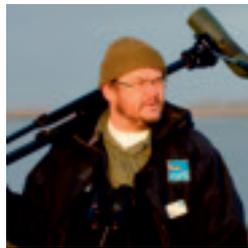
Sea lavender marsh® Ernie James, rspb-images.com

Working in Partnership

The creation of Allfleet's Marsh has been, and continues to be, dependent on excellent partnership working between the key organisations. A Project Steering Group meets on site on an annual basis to track progress, with further regular communications between the partners, as is necessary, to achieve the best outcomes.

Natasha Chick

Defra, Project Manager for Allfleet's Marsh and
Chair of the Project Steering Group



Chris Tyas

Defra Wallasea Wetlands site manager and
RSPB Wallasea Island Project Manager

Hilary Hunter

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Gillian McCoy

Jacobs, Project Manager
for monitoring contract

Colin Scott

ABPmer, Ecologist: Contracted to Defra and
RSPB for the design and impact assessment
work in Allfleet's Marsh and the Wild Coast
projects, and to Jacobs for the purpose
of the monitoring contract

