

Dunwich Heath and Minsmere

Case study showcasing approaches recommended in the National FCERM Strategy

The aim of the Environment Agency's *National flood and coastal erosion risk management strategy for England* is to ensure that the risk of flooding and coastal erosion is properly managed and co-ordinated to minimise its impact.

It sets out a statutory framework, recommending a number of approaches, that will help communities, the public sector and other organisations to work together to manage flood and coastal erosion risk.

At Dunwich Heath and Minsmere in East Anglia, the National Trust has led a flood risk management project. **Habitat creation and soft engineering, combined with local engagement and partnership working**, is already producing good outcomes for people and the environment.

Background

The old town of Dunwich was once a prosperous port and the capital of East Anglia. Bad storms and coastal erosion from the thirteenth century onwards have reduced Dunwich to barely a village, and the old town is now under the sea. The heath is still being eroded; approximately one metre of land is lost to the sea every year. The land mass in this part of the country is dropping in relation to the level of the sea. Long-term protection is unsustainable and not economically viable.

Approach

Dunwich Heath is a mixed lowland heath of international nature importance. The shoreline is rapidly being eroded by rising sea levels and storm surges. The Trust is looking to purchase some land to ensure that the equally valuable cliff top habitat is maintained. This will mitigate against sudden environmental changes to the heath. It has also purchased adjoining arable farmland, Mount Pleasant Farm, which is being restored to acid grassland and heather heath.

'Encourage buy-in to the idea that change will happen and can be good.'

Within the same area, but unrelated to Mount Pleasant, the Trust owns a narrow, eroding stretch of beach. This is the first line of sea defence for the RSPB's freshwater wildlife sanctuary at North Marsh, Minsmere. As the beach is eroded, local habitat is lost. But, in a wider context, this is an important part of a dynamically functioning coastal system.

The Trust and the RSPB share similar interests and problems on this stretch of coast. Several years ago, they began discussions on its sustainable future involving the Environment Agency, Natural England and Defra. The discussions focused on both physical and legal protection and the current/predicted future threats. They explored potential opportunities, as well as the possible losses, of existing habitats and species. They looked at the effects changing coastal processes and climate change would have on relevant standards of protection and conflicts of designation.



In this last case, protecting one designation (Special Area of Conservation - habitat) would be at the detriment of another (Special Protection Areas - bird), and vice versa, so questions around precedence had to be resolved. The decision process was further complicated by the presence of two nuclear power stations, and potentially two more, sited nearby.

Outcomes

Despite the large area of the Suffolk Sandlings, heathland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, there are only four heathland sites other than

Dunwich which are greater than 90 hectares. This is significant because larger areas of heathland are more sustainable; the successional changes in vegetation offer variety in an otherwise fairly uniform habitat. Acquiring the farmland and replanting it will mean that, by the time the old coastline disappears, a new area of lowland heath habitat will be established.

The access route, holiday cottages and other buildings located at the site are also at risk. The road will disappear, the drainage services may be exposed within 20 years and the buildings will disappear some 10 to 15 years later. The exact timing depends on coastal processes and events such as high tides, storms and surges. But what is certain is that these events will happen. Plans are already in place to extend the life of the remaining cottages until the cliff edge reaches them, and to ensure access can continue as the old route is lost.

At Minsmere, the Trust recognised the inevitability of coastal change. They agreed that the first line of defence to the RSPB sanctuary, the narrow shingle beach and dune system, should be left to natural processes. It is likely to disappear over the next few years but could be lost at anytime in a major storm event. The second line of defence, a constructed clay bank, will be maintained but with minimal intervention in recognition of its estimated 15 to 20 year life span.

The keys to success

- **Having a vision and a plan to achieve it.** This was by far the most important factor. The Trust has managed the changes that have taken place so far and are confident about coping well with future change.
- **Building minimal intervention in to the plan** by allowing natural processes to run their course and working with them.
- **Purchasing land near to the coast (i.e, the future coast).** By doing this, the National Trust ensured the right habitat could be created. This is essential to protect the future coast from development.
- **Keeping good relations and working closely with neighbours.** Although not a joint project, the National Trust worked in harmony with the RSPB at Mount Pleasant Farm. They shared knowledge and experience as well as providing heather seed and some grazing land.

Other lessons learned

- **Plan forward.** Expect and plan for the current coastline to move inland.
- **Look ahead.** It's important to consider coastal properties and where they might be 50 years, or even 100 years, ahead.
- **Discuss implications for existing rights of way early in the process.** Closure or re-routing can take a long time to resolve and can be a source of contention with local people. Work with the council on any temporary or permanent re-routing.
- **Partnership working is essential** with relevant agencies, neighbours and local residents.
- **Good communication.** Encourage buy-in to the idea that change will happen and can be good.
- **Recognise loss** but encourage people to see opportunities and gains.

More information

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