



Earth in crisis: environmental policy in an international context

The Isle of Sheppey

Commentary

The Environment Agency has responsibility for managing flood risk throughout the country.

Andrew Pearce

The coast of England has been broken down into a series of lengths which are covered by shoreline management plans. And these lengths are determined by the extent to which coastal processes impact on how the coastline needs to be managed. In estuaries it's even more complicated and so in some cases for open coast, we can undertake a shoreline management plan along one coastline, but for estuaries such as the Thames estuary, then we have to have an estuary-wide approach which means various regions within the Environment Agency, various government departments have to work together to get this integrated approach to managing flood risk.

Commentary

Within the Thames estuary, risk areas such as the Isle of Sheppey have their own shoreline management plans.

Andrew Pearce

The issues facing Isle of Sheppey as sea levels rise are pretty typical of the South East but in many cases they have an element of each of the issue that we are going to face – soft coast erosion, low-lying fresh water, grazing marshes, but also quite high urbanized areas. So in studying the Isle of Sheppey you are getting a good understanding of the basic problems that we are going to face for the next 100 years.

Ian Lewis

One thing we do within the Coastal Group is produce something known as a 'Shoreline Management Plan'. And within this, this will actually dictate what our coastal management process is for the next 100 or so years, in the case of the one we've recently completed. One of the key factors within the recent Shoreline Management Plan that's been adopted here in the south-east, is climate change.

Commentary

This is evident in the policies for managing the cliffs on the north side of the island.

Andrew Pearce

The soft clay cliffs on the Isle of Sheppey have been eroding through natural processes for, obviously for a long period, but this will be exacerbated by climate change both in terms of increased sea level rise and the wave action on the tow, but also additional rainfall which will make the cliffs softer and more saturated and more likely to slip, so we need to look at both those impacts, but at the moment the policy is to, is not to intervene and to let the cliffs continue to erode.

Ian Lewis

The actual measures you would need to implement any sort of defence along that line would be so prohibitively expensive and environmentally damaging that the best thing to do there is actually just let the coast follow its own natural erosion pattern. What this means is that we don't allow, through our planning policies, any development to take place within what we call the 'erosion risk zone', which is an area behind the cliff where we know erosion will happen within a reasonably short period of time. A good example of, of how this erosion has, has occurred over the years is on the horizon over there. There's a pill-box which in the Second World War was actually at the top of the cliff, but over the intervening 60 or so years has actually slid down the cliff. It's not fallen off; it's actually slid down as the cliff has eroded.

Paul

My house is a 100 foot down the lane. This is the end of our garden and if you just want to walk this way. This is the end of the cliff.

Angela

Well as you can see there is a notice up there saying danger. This is the very end of the cliffs. This is where the Royal Oak pub stood – in fact that land along there still belongs to Shepherd Neame. And there was to the right of it, where you can see all the cliff's fallen away, there was there in the '50s there was actually a cricket field where they used to come out of the pub and play cricket. And as you can see now, it's just all fallen away.

Really what's happened all along here is that, you know, at various stages people have gone along planting stuff just to simply to try and hold the cliffs as everybody's in total despair that anybody else is ever going to do anything. This is the house obviously at the very end of the lane which is nearest to the cliff edge, and obviously they're in the unenviable position that it's not possible to get a mortgage on the place and the property is practically worth nil now. At some point that will go over the cliff edge.