



## **Environment: habitat and conservation**

*Blackwater: Coastal Retreat Schemes*

### **Voice Over**

Contest is our second theme. Choices will have to be made between protecting some areas and letting others go. For instance, by protecting Old Hall Marshes, another important habitat, saltmarsh, found on the other side of the wall, may soon disappear.

### **David Smart, Essex Wildlife Trust, Abbots Hall Farm**

Well we're stood on the sea wall at the moment with saltmarsh seaward, agricultural land the other side. What we've experienced in recent decades is an accelerated sea level rise, which has led to increased and rapid erosion of the saltmarsh that we see here today. Saltmarsh is fundamentally important for two reasons. For us as nature conservationists it's very important because it's such a unique habitat. It's becoming a very threatened habitat; in the last thirty years a thousand hectares of saltmarsh has been lost from the Essex coast because of this accelerated erosion. It supports a variety of unique plants and, in turn, wildlife so we're very concerned as conservationists by its loss. Saltmarsh is also important to the Environment Agency because of its effectiveness as a flood defence mechanism.

### **Voice Over**

But this natural coastal defence is being eroded away in many areas.

### **Chris Tyas, RSPB**

In front of us here we can see some of the saltings, on the Blackwater Estuary, which are looking seriously eroded. The problem is we've got rising sea level forcing the saltmarsh against this hard sea defence, and it's really got nowhere to go, it's being squeezed against the sea defence, and being lost to sea level rise principally, but the converse of that is that this important sea wall is protecting this superb coastal grazing marsh, so that's the quandary – do we allow the saltmarsh to migrate onto the nationally important grazing marsh? Or do we protect the grazing marsh with the sea wall? Those are the sorts of issues that we're interested in here. We're looking very long-term; if the walls remain at their current height, then it may well be that Old Hall will be untenable as a grazing marsh. Difficult to say how long that might be, it might be fifty or sixty years, but what we need to do is decide whether we're going to raise the sea walls and spend the millions of pounds that that'll cost to protect the SPA, or whether we're going to replace the SPA somewhere else. The problem we've got is that it's taken four hundred years for it to form, and it would take the enclosure of a bit of saltmarsh and leaving it for four hundred years to recreate it, so it's going to be very, very difficult; fairly easy to do the birds on a bit of agricultural land with some water, but impossible to put the plants and the invertebrates back realistically.

### **Voice Over**

Loss of precious grazing marsh may be unavoidable, but it may be possible to respond to the loss of saltmarsh by replacing it elsewhere. Schemes of coastal realignment or managed retreat have been successfully undertaken at a few sites on the Blackwater, but many more schemes will be needed to compensate for the losses.

### **David Smart, Essex Wildlife Trust, Abbots Hall Farm**

Well there is a scheme that we have planned here at Abbots Hall, known as coastal realignment, whereby we're planning to breach the wall in five places along our three kilometre frontage to the Salcott Channel, in order to recreate 150 hectares of inter-tidal habitat, so we're looking to replace the area which is rapidly disappearing on the left-hand side here; on the right-hand side, which is currently in arable production. And looking across

here you can see we've already got a line marked on the field, which is where we anticipate the water going on the highest of the spring tides, so we're looking at new areas of saltmarsh re-colonised in this area in years to come, and replacing the habitat which we've seen lost here.

### **Voice Over**

Creating new saltmarsh identifies our third theme: the idea of response. Response isn't simply the ways in which humans respond to environmental changes; it's also the way in which environments respond to change. So as sea level rises new saltmarsh can be created further inland, either as a natural process, or by the deliberate breaching of sea walls. But either way this intensifies the conflict between conservation and farming.