



## **Environment: habitat and conservation**

*Blackwater: Experimenting with Nature*

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

The main disadvantage of creating new salt marsh here at Abbots Hall is that in the long-term we're going to be losing agricultural land. The scheme here is planned to recreate around about fifty hectares of inter-tidal habitat, and once the breaches take place and sea water comes in, we will no longer be able to grow crops on that land. Now this is particularly relevant because if this scheme is to be taken up by landowners more widely, then I think the problem of compensation in the way in which farmers are going to receive compensation for this kind of scheme needs to be addressed.

### **Chris Tyas, RSPB**

I would say that certainly birds have got a reasonable level of protection, but I don't think it's more than they deserve and it's, I mean there are problems along the coast with the support in the agricultural system, and certainly if we're expecting farmers to give their land up to the sea then they need to be sufficiently compensated; there isn't a package in place at the moment that provides sufficient money to get the levels of salt marsh that we need.

### **Voice Over**

The idea of managed retreat has certainly been contested by those with most to lose, notably the farmers.

### **Andrew St. Joseph, Farmer and Landowner**

I think you've got to take an individual approach. In the short-term the key thing is how good is the structure and there is no point in removing a sea wall that doesn't need much repair. The key thing is the amount of money that's needed to repair a wall; several areas' walls have been breached because it simply isn't cost-effective to keep them going. The second key thing is that the sea wall is actually privately owned and it's really quite difficult to knock on somebody's door and say, "Excuse me, we've come to knock a hole in your sea wall". The landowner's quite capable of saying, "Well, thank you very much, it's my sea wall, I'm quite happy with it where it is". Somehow or other a more balanced approach has got to be found. The people who make these wonderful plans about "let's flood the whole of the coast of South East England" are people who've thought it up in an office, and have actually no hands-on ability to manage land in all weathers, in all years, for fifty years in a row.

### **Voice Over**

So managed retreat is bound to have economic as well as environmental impacts. A further problem is that it's by no means certain what those impacts will be. As a result, managed retreat has become controversial. Oyster fisherman, Allan Bird, spells out the uncertainties.

### **Allan Bird, Oyster Fisherman**

Well the problem of managed retreat is that they're experimenting with nature, and in a large way; they've really got no idea how it's going to go, they've done other projects and some of these other projects haven't gone as expected. This creek has remained unchanged for the whole of my working life. Nature has fashioned it like this over many hundreds of years. The sort of projects they're talking about doing with managed retreat is they're knocking down sea walls, and letting the sea water into behind the sea wall. It's going to have a big effect on sedimentation in the creek, big effect on tidal flows in the creek, and it's bound to change some of the characteristics of the creek.

**Voice Over**

Clearly responses to environmental change will affect different interests in different, and sometimes, unpredictable ways. Nicky Spurr.

**Nicky Spurr, Blackwater Project**

There might be some people who would say that they had problems with some of the elements of change and, yes, if we're looking at managed retreat as a way forward, there are certainly some people who agree with that approach and therefore, you know, if that actually affects their land, there could be people that lose out but, again, it's important, I think, that we're working with people to try and find a way where their views and their concerns can be taken into account, for instance, some of the oystermen have been involved in local managed retreat consultation so, in fact, you're involving them and their concerns, and you're taking those on board as we move forward.

**Voice Over**

The challenge, then, is to try to accommodate the various demands for growth around the estuary, whilst maintaining the variety and quality of its important habitats and species, and its sense of wilderness. Any response needs to be based on a knowledge of the pressures, and an understanding of the complexities of environmental change.

**Nicky Spurr, Blackwater Project**

We've got a number of different conflicts here, or things to balance is the way I look at them really; we've got to look not only at the environment as we've talked about, but also the economy is hugely important, people do live and work here, and it's important that they should continue to be able to do that, and that we should continue to look for ways to encourage that growth. The priorities, I think, are in a way to inform and educate a lot of people so that perhaps some perceptions that people have might be dispelled, or they might become more aware and therefore change their behaviour and become more responsible in the way that they actually treat the area. We can't just build on every available area of coast, it's not a sustainable approach; with rising sea levels, and so forth, if you build there, they're going to get, you know, erosion, or knocked into the sea within years, you've got to take a longer term approach, not just what can we do this year but, nor five years, but much, over much longer scale to actually start working now to get the research in place, but also to actually encourage people to come with you in that. As far as we're concerned we're looking at the potential and growth, but trying to do it where you're not going to actually damage the environment.

**Voice Over**

The three themes we've been exploring - change, contest and response – indicate that it's neither possible, nor desirable, to treat nature as somehow apart, separate from human society. The Estuary shows how nature and society are inseparable, interconnected, indissoluble. Humans can affect environmental change for better or for worse. We've seen how rising seas make the existing environment unsustainable in the long term. Achieving sustainable forms of development is the challenge for the future.

**Allan Bird, Oyster Fisherman**

Yeah, this is a very fragile environment. We have to work very closely with nature, and you have to understand nature to be successful. It is a sustainable industry. In this period of difficult change, when a lot of the fisheries are going down and not sustainable, because of the way we work the creek, we're farming these oysters, and taking a lot of care with the creek, then we can make it sustainable, and we work very, very closely with nature to do this.

**Nicky Spurr, Blackwater Project**

To look at a sustainable way forward so that you're identifying all the issues of concern around here, embracing both obviously the environmental aspects, but not limited to that, but looking at the economy, looking at social aspects, and actually trying to link those all in together really, and find a sustainable way forward where you're obviously encouraging the growth of the area, but as long as it's in a sustainable way.

**Mark Dixon, Project Manager, Environment Agency**

In most people's eyes sustainability means things will not change, and we have to bear in mind that coastlines are pleasurable and estuaries in particular, because they are constantly changing, and we have to get used to the idea that constant change, in actual fact, is the order of the day and that if a bit of coastline washes away, it doesn't actually matter, and if perhaps bird population shift, or plant population shift, then that doesn't matter either. What we have to think about is over the course of time that areas like this will have to gradually move inland. So sustainability must mean very much a mindset of people, an education of the people, that it doesn't mean being static.

**Voice Over**

The Blackwater Estuary, like any environment, possesses features of habitat, of human influence, that make it unique. But at the same time the example of the estuary enables us to explore those processes of change, of contest, and of response that are common to all environments. By focusing on the ever-changing relationship of land and sea, we've seen why environmental issues are so pressing, why the idea of a sustainable environment links together the natural and human worlds. Our study of this stretch of coast yields ideas and concepts that we can use to seek answers to the question – how can we make sense of our environment?