

Wetland Futures 2015

Bridging the conservation gap between freshwater, saltwater & transitional wetlands

14th-15th October 2015, Priory Rooms, Birmingham

What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of the spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. **All things are connected.** *Chief Seattle 1854*

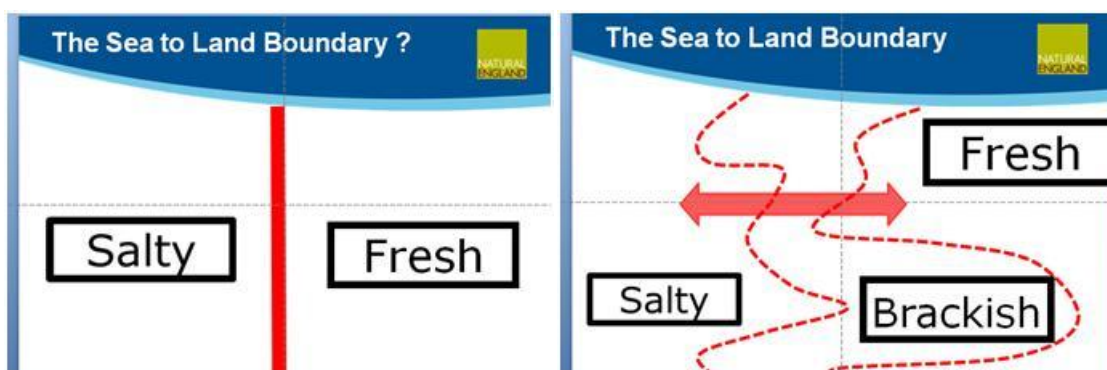
Wetland Futures is a biennial conference organised by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust with assistance from BESS, Cranfield University, Environment Agency, National Trust, Natural England and RSPB. The overall aim of Wetland Futures is to facilitate cross sector partnerships and networking, showcasing best practice and case studies to ultimately ensure better protection and creation of wetland habitats.

The future of wetlands will only be secured by a truly “source to sea” approach, engaging the right people to achieve a holistic framework, but this is difficult to achieve. The aim of the conference was to raise awareness of the disconnect between freshwater, transitional and marine policy and conservation, and to come up with some recommended solutions. Through discussion, we hoped to explore opportunities, frameworks and funding for ambitious and co-ordinated wetland creation and restoration.

The Wetland Futures 2015 conference explored the connectivity between the freshwater and saltwater environments and how we can better utilise our knowledge to assist conservation efforts. Brian Moss opened the proceedings, with a passionate call for a substantial change in how we manage water in the UK. He argued that slight adjustments to current processes is simply not going to be enough. We need to tackle climate change face on; we need to change land use for up to one third of current global agricultural and pasture land, with priority to restoring wetlands. This ambitious call for action started our two day excursion into freshwater and salty environments— bearing in mind that all things are connected.

It was widely accepted that action has to happen across a whole catchment and that source-to- sea approaches are needed to tackle the main issues, with climate change (and population growth?) exacerbating the problems. Penny Johnes concluded that controlling nutrient enrichment impacts in inland & coastal waters requires a holistic and joined-up approach if stable, improved ecological health is to be attained.

In many policy and decision making scenarios, fresh and salt water systems are considered separately (as shown the diagram below on the left), overlooking the complexity and dynamics of the actual situation (as shown on the right).



The coast is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Case studies of options protecting freshwater coastal wetlands and species and creating new saline habitats were presented and trade-offs and decision making processes were discussed, demonstrating new real world approaches to sustainable coastal zone management. This included options around where to let the sea in and whether to manage this process. We identified a strong need to promote the benefits of adopting a holistic approach to different audiences, targeting key decision makers and opinion leaders, using modern techniques of communication.

The need for long term thinking was highlighted, with an urgent need to start acting now and to be proactive rather than reactive, using existing and new evidence to inform an adaptive management approach, suited to changing circumstances and knowledge. We heard how ongoing research on economic valuation of fresh and saline wetlands, for example, can help us to make the case for creation, protection and restoration.

The conference brought some brilliant examples of how to set our sights on a greener wetland future that will give multiple benefits to society. There are many fantastic large scale re-creation projects and we heard about the Steart managed realignment project creating salt marsh habitat and offering long term flood risk management which was created in partnership by the Environment Agency and the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust. We heard about the work being carried out to protect freshwater wetlands in the Norfolk Broads and their impressive community involvement initiatives. The work of the National Trust was also presented, using various techniques to allow their land to best adapt to rising sea levels, by protecting critical infrastructure and strategically letting the sea in.

We also had some help noticing change, with news of up-to-date monitoring and prevention of invasive non native species (INNS). Excellent talks were given on the threat of INNS and a project looking at estuaries in particular (SEFINS), which included detecting the presence of an invasive non native species of comb jelly in an estuary using eDNA techniques. With aquatic and marine species in particular, prevention is where we need to focus our effort. For most INNS once they are here it is very difficult to eradicate or control them.

The importance of effective communication across sectors and with the general public was continually highlighted. Conservation is about engaging people effectively. If we want to convince farmers to reduce nutrient pollution, or help/show communities why they need to care about wetlands, we need to make a clear case to them. This means:

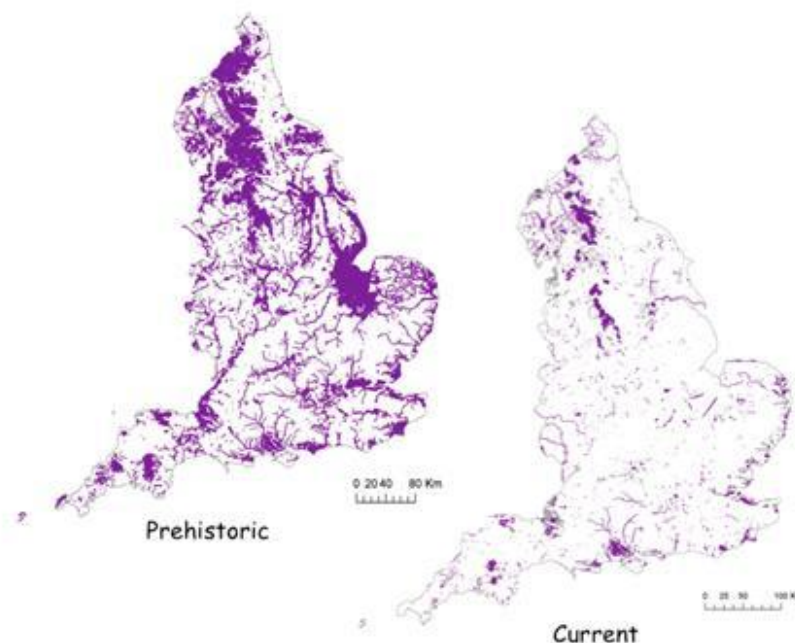
- Being positive about the impact that interventions will have
- Achieving consistency over the long term, many feel disillusioned with the process. We need to develop short term changes which also help to achieve long term goals.
- Clear messages and pathways to action are essential. The number of policy initiatives, partnerships and strategic action plans in some places is bewildering. People need clear, focused and simple messages, with locally focussed action plans they can engage with.
- We need to use the right language for the audience we are approaching, we could be making better use of communication experts to do this effectively.
- We need to encourage thinking big but ensure actions are realistic to demonstrate the art of the possible; practical examples help to develop local champions and showcase thinking/best practice actions/examples.

- We need to learn from each other; being imaginative and aligning our plans and priorities; pooling our knowledge of effective communication techniques and messages.
- Listening and engaging to find common ground and ignite their interest and get people's ownership and support as part of the solutions.
- Reconnect people with nature and demonstrate the value of these natural processes. We need to raise awareness of how working with nature can help us achieve so much more; to be constructive in our communications and build engaged and informed communities. We need people to understand the issues in their locality, how the problem affects them and how they are a key part of the solution(s).
- We need to use demonstration projects as these are visual and show a positive outcome.

The conference highlighted that the financial, economic and social systems that we work within fundamentally separate fresh and salt water and that we all need to work better together and — going back to Professor Moss's message—consider that all things are connected.

Ultimately we need both a long-term vision of a more sustainably managed planet and much short(er) term actions that will be appropriate stop-gaps while we work for global societal change that will bring about sustainability, the wise use of resources and a truly source to sea approach.

We need to reconnect people with nature and we need to get better at communicating its value to everyone.



Showing the huge loss of wetland habitat in England

© Hume, C. (2008) Wetland Vision Technical Document: overview and reporting of project philosophy and technical approach. The Wetland Vision Partnership.