APPG for Wetlands – Minutes of the meeting on 18th May 2023

Attendees (MPs and Peers)

Siobhan Baillie MP (Chair)
The Earl of Leicester (Officer)
The Earl of Devon
Chris Grayling MP

Visit to WWT Steart Marshes

The group first visited Steart Marshes, near Bridgwater, Somerset. Alys Laver, Site Manager, explained its multiple benefits to people and nature.

Working together in partnership, the Environment Agency and WWT created a vast 478 hectare wetland in Somerset– one of the largest wetland creation projects in the UK. WWT Steart Marshes was created in 2014 as a habitat creation scheme to compensate for loss of saltmarsh in the Severn Estuary. It is also a key part of the Severn Estuary flood management, which safeguards 100,000 properties worth £5 billion in places like Cardiff, Newport, Berkeley, Avonmouth, Portishead, Clevedon and Burnham.

Steart Marshes provides a home for wildlife and a special place for people to enjoy nature, while benefitting the local economy and protecting homes. The marshes are now home to a vast array of wildlife and support a range of breeding and wintering birds, as well as providing shelter for the fry of commercial fish such as seabass. Rare plants have also established themselves in the intertidal area. The group saw, in particular, avocet chicks, a cuckoo, and a large population of shelduck.

These wetlands have increased the resilience of local communities to adapt to climate change, protecting nearby houses from flooding and reducing the risks of coastal erosion. WWT Steart Marshes also provides other economic benefits, supporting the raising of saltmarsh beef and lamb that can be sold at a premium price, as well as important nurseries for fish stocks.

Steart Marshes helps mitigate climate change through carbon burial. A study by Manchester Metropolitan University found that Steart stores as much carbon over four years as just over one million new trees grown for ten years. Steart's 250 hectares of restored saltmarsh was found to absorb organic carbon at a rate of 19 tonnes per hectare per year, resulting in a total of 18,000 tonnes of carbon (around 70,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent) being buried at the site over the four year study period. This storage rate is 18 times higher than the rate currently being used to estimate the carbon storage potential of saltmarsh in the UK.

Visit to Bridgwater Meads

Following lunch, the group visited Bridgwater Meads, where Joe May, Project Manager explained how the site is connecting the local community with nature.

Sitting on the banks of the River Parrett (a crucial link to the Severn Estuary), Bridgwater boasts a rich maritime heritage. But the town's future is less certain, with climate change posing a real threat of flooding to the town from tidal surges and increased rainfall. Nature is declining locally and people's wellbeing is suffering too.

WWT's Bridgwater Blue Heritage project uses nature-based solutions to manage rainfall and lessen flood risk, help nature recover and involve the local community. It hopes to build

Bridgwater’s resilience to the growing climate threat by restoring and improving wetland habitat, enhancing green and blue infrastructure and promoting active travel, as well as enhancing wellbeing and celebrating Bridgwater's history.

WWT is working towards this in partnership with the Environment Agency and Sedgemoor District Council and building a community of local citizen scientists and volunteers who have the knowledge and skills to look after their own environment into the future.

Bridgwater Meads is the first part of this project, a 20 ha floodplain grazing marsh on the edge of the town, turning it into a biodiverse wetland. Previously the wetland had been drained for agricultural use. The project restored a historic stream, thereby re-establishing a local connection to wetlands, created habitats in new scrapes and has reduced downstream flooding. Community action included helping design the vision for the site and planting 1,000 reeds. Sustainable cattle grazing continues on the restored site.