



for birds  
for people  
for ever

# A 50-year vision for wetlands

A future for England's water and wetland biodiversity



## **Introduction**

Wetlands in England exist within a shrinking natural landscape, where a growing population lives and works. We cannot turn back the clock, but we have the chance to create new landscapes that will nurture wildlife and be treasured by future communities.

By developing a wetland vision together, we can plan for a better future for our wetland landscapes and all of the wonderful wildlife that they support. This leaflet and CD describe how we intend to start the process of developing this vision and some of the tools we will use.

# Why do we need a vision?

Wetlands are one of the most important natural resources on Earth. They provide livelihoods for millions of people, support a stunning variety of wildlife, and form part of a healthy and functional landscape. Sadly, this natural wealth is being eroded. Wetlands have been drained, rivers straightened and the quality and quantity of water in the environment compromised by pollution and abstraction. Restoring wetlands is urgent, because wildlife will need more high-quality habitat if it is to adapt to climate change.

English Nature, the Environment Agency and the RSPB are committed to renewing the wetland environment. Our organisations have come together to develop a vision for wetlands, which we will use to safeguard and enhance our wetland biodiversity.

We will be working as partners, and through engagement with stakeholders, to develop a description of this vision.

This will outline the scale of wetland creation we are aiming for, the most suitable places for different wetland types, and the conditions needed for wetland wildlife. We plan to develop a Geographical Information System (GIS) tool to help people seeking to create wetlands understand where and how they can make them most effective. The examples presented in this leaflet, and on the accompanying CD, give a flavour of the sorts of outputs we are hoping to produce.

The success of this project will depend on the support of a wide range of people and organisations. We need your help to shape the vision and bring about the changes needed to make it a reality. These changes will help to fulfil national and international commitments, such as the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, EU Directives and the Ramsar Convention on the Wise Use of Wetlands – all developed in recognition of the benefits that wetlands provide to people and wildlife.



Colin Wilkinson (RSPB)

**Restoring wetlands is urgent, because wildlife will need more high-quality habitat if it is to adapt to climate change.**



Kingfisher by Nigel Blake (rspb-images.com)

# What are 'wetlands?'

Wetlands are places where water has a strong influence. If you can see open water, you are looking at a wetland. Wetlands are not always obvious, however, perhaps not until you walk over the ground and find it oozes water under your feet. We are familiar with lakes, ponds and rivers, but wetlands also include springs on hillsides, and wide expanses of peat bog or areas of fen such as the Norfolk Broads. Wetlands rely directly on rainfall, and most of them depend on water that has passed through or over the ground as well. Freshwater wetlands merge with saltmarshes at the coast. Wetlands provide a home for specialised plants and animals such as common reed, sphagnum mosses, insectivorous plants, dragonflies, fish, frogs, birds and mammals. Many, including bitterns, otters and the delicate butterwort, can survive only in these habitats.

## Why do wetlands matter?

Fundamental to the well-being of many communities across the world, wetlands provide important but less obvious benefits for people. They can help to protect us and our homes by storing floodwaters. They can filter out pollution, and lock up the greenhouse gases that cause climate change. They are immensely productive, providing people with fish, fuel and reeds. Using wetlands wisely is a skill we all need to re-learn.

Wetlands are some of our most cherished landscapes; places like the Norfolk Broads have been enjoyed for

centuries by fishermen, sailing enthusiasts, birdwatchers, and people who use them for leisure or for products such as reed and sedge.

## What is happening to our wetlands?

Over the last few decades, the extent and quality of our wetland inheritance has continued to dwindle. Drainage, river engineering, pollution, peat extraction, invasive species, neglect and water shortages have all taken their toll. Not surprisingly, our wetland wildlife has suffered too. Water voles are now absent from many parts of England, driven out by insensitive management and mink predation. Plants that depend on clean water, like some kinds of water crowfoot, are becoming less widespread. And wetland birds, like snipe and redshanks, are struggling to breed in drained landscapes lacking in biodiversity.

But there have been success stories, too. We have helped create new areas of wetland habitat in the East Anglian fens. Otters have recolonised many rivers in England following successful pollution control and habitat management. These demonstrate that we can repair England's wetlands.

We believe we can build on these successes to create a country that is once again rich in the sights, sounds and wildlife of wetlands. A vision pointing to where and how we can work together to achieve this is a vital first step.



# What kind of future?

The partners in the vision have shared aspirations for the future of the wetland environment. We will seek to underpin the vision with these key principles as it develops:

- Wetlands are inspirational places, whose wealth of wildlife and importance to communities makes them a national treasure. Future wetlands should be places where people can learn about nature and relax.
- Wetland wildlife remains under threat. We will protect rare habitats and vulnerable wildlife populations and help them recover. We must also meet our national objectives and our international commitment to reverse declines in biodiversity.
- Our remaining wetlands are small and fragmented. We need to restore and create wetlands around existing habitat. Linking wetlands will help species and habitats to adapt to climate change. We need to find ways of reconnecting our rivers with elements of their natural floodplain functioning where this is feasible, and work to put smaller wetland features, such as ponds and ditches, back into the wetland landscape mosaic.
- There is strong competition for land and water, and this must be resolved in planning for new wetlands, particularly as changing patterns of rainfall may make water shortages more acute. In helping communities create new wetlands, we will seek out opportunities that also bring benefits such as improved water quality and reduced flood risk, and which contribute to the local economy in a sustainable way.
- Wetlands should help bring a better quality of life for everyone. We will work in partnerships to help this happen, including through the evolving partnership with the Countryside Agency and Rural Development Service under Natural England, making the most of local enthusiasm and knowledge.

**Wetland wildlife remains under threat. We will protect rare habitats and vulnerable wildlife populations, and help them recover.**



Common frog by david Norton (rsfb-images.com)



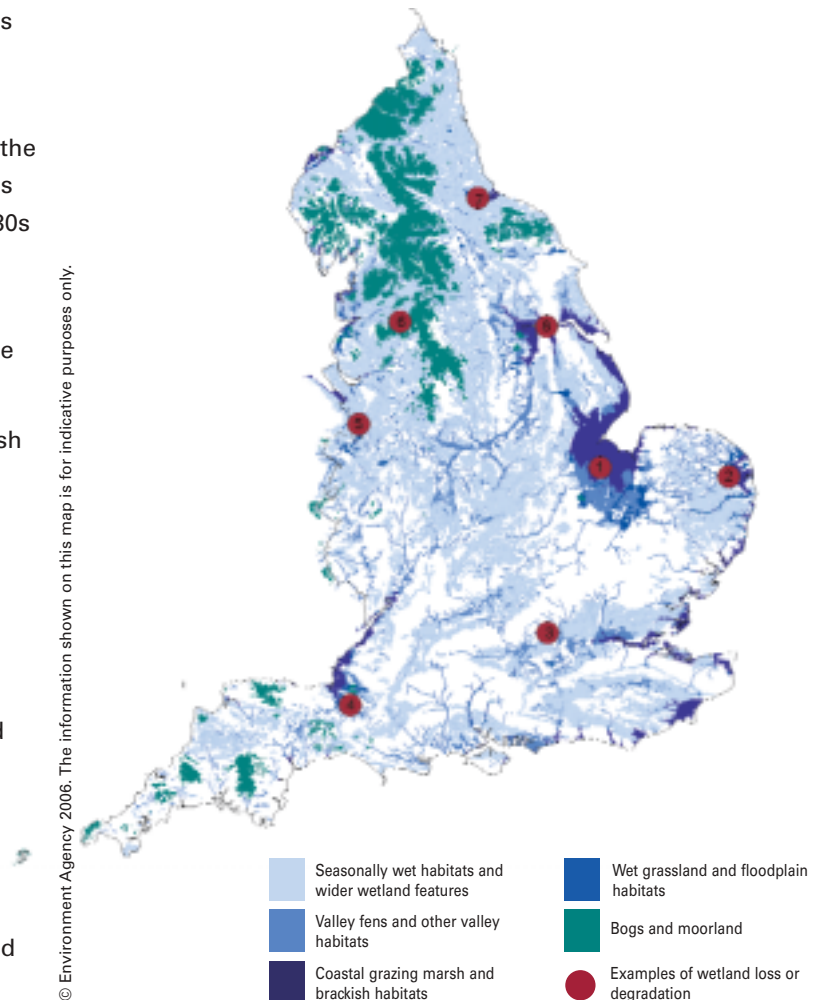
Analy Hay (rsfb-images.com)

# Wetlands – an historical perspective

This map shows areas of England where soil evidence indicates we once would have found different types of wetland habitat. It is difficult to gauge the extent of habitat loss that has occurred from these areas, as it has taken place over a very long period of time in which humans have modified the landscape. The eight locations marked with red dots are examples of where wetland loss has been recorded, or where wetland sites are known to have gradually degraded throughout history. We aim to improve our knowledge of wetland habitat loss and develop maps that demonstrate this.

- 1 The Fens:** extensive loss of fenland habitats. Less than 10 km<sup>2</sup> exist today from 3,380 km<sup>2</sup> in 1637, 2,400 km<sup>2</sup> in 1825 and 100 km<sup>2</sup> in 1934.
- 2 The Broads:** significant loss of fen habitats since the last century, although 5,000 ha still remain. There has been a 37% loss of grazing marsh from the early 1930s to the mid-1980s.
- 3 Upper Thames Tributaries:** general loss and deterioration of wet grassland and associated decline in breeding birds.
- 4 Somerset Levels and Moors:** loss of grazing marsh through drainage and loss of associated wetland species including breeding wading birds and plants.
- 5 Meres and Mosses:** loss and fragmentation of wetland sites (bogs, fen communities, swamp and ponds). Mammals and plants have become increasingly isolated.
- 6 South Pennines:** extensive degradation of upland blanket bog through drainage and overgrazing.
- 7 Lowlands:** habitat loss due to urbanisation and industry. Significant alteration of natural water movement.
- 8 Humberhead Levels:** loss of floodplain habitat and of the extent and quality of bogs, mires and fens.

© Environment Agency 2006. The information shown on this map is for indicative purposes only.



# Creating a wetland vision

In constructing a wetland vision there will be many factors that need to be considered. The maps this project will produce need to be developed in conjunction with other organisations, and with careful consideration of appropriate ways to use environmental data sets, including existing visioning material and initiatives. This flow chart illustrates how this will begin to be achieved with a map indicating how layers can be overlaid to inform aspects of this vision. However, this will be an iterative process with many consultations to ensure that we are on the right track. Further information about how data will be used to inform the development of vision maps is contained within the attached CD-ROM.

## Stage 1

Identify data that indicate where current wetlands are located

Identify current initiatives and existing visions

## Stage 2

Identify the environmental requirements of different wetlands and identify how data sets describe these locations

Where could the wetlands be?

How will the wetlands change?

## Stage 3

Identify existing priorities and targets

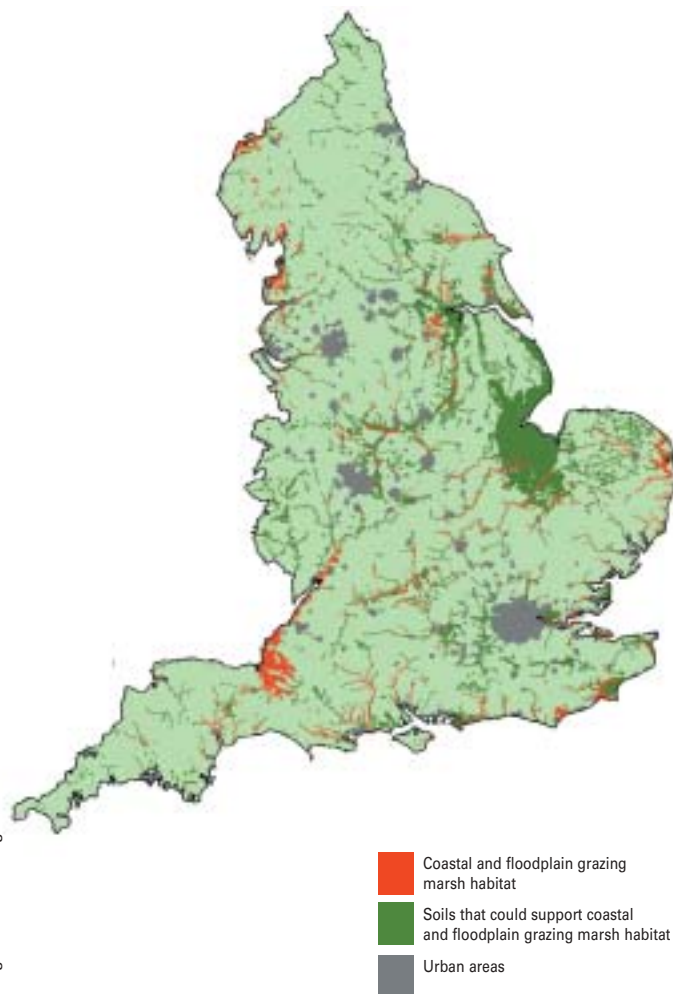
How much wetland do we need to support our future biodiversity?

What are current wetland priorities and what targets exist already?

Work with stakeholders to develop vision maps

Map priority areas for wetland creation and enhancement

© Environment Agency 2006. Coastal and floodplain grazing marsh habitat obtained from English Nature © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved English Nature 100017954 2006



# Challenges and issues

Planning for the future in a world with shrinking natural resources and a sprawling population is not easy, and there are serious challenges facing us. We will look at each challenge in detail as we develop the project with our partners in the conservation community and beyond. In particular, we will consider:

- **Climate change.** There may be dramatic changes in the distribution of habitats and species and the way wetlands function in the future. We need to plan for these uncertainties.
- **Sea-level rise.** Large areas of wetland lie on or close to the coast and will be affected by rising sea levels, partly as a result of climate change. The vision will need to illustrate how we can manage our coasts sustainably, to protect, enhance and, where appropriate, replace saline and freshwater habitats affected in this way.
- **Water availability.** Some areas of the country are already short of water and demand is growing. We will need to develop smarter ways of predicting water availability and ensuring that wetland needs can be met.
- **Future farming.** Many wetland landscapes are intimately linked to particular patterns of farming, and improving the quality of our wetlands depends on farmers and other land managers for its delivery. We will work with the farming community to develop and achieve the vision.
- **Natural processes in a managed world.** In the past, wetlands were created and maintained by the relatively unconstrained movement of water in catchments. The aim over centuries, however, has been to tame and

channel this water flow. There may be practical, financial and landscape reasons for seeking to restore some catchment processes where feasible, and this will be explored as part of the vision. It will be important to ensure that new wetlands are created within their landscape setting, enhancing the character of their areas.

## Involving others

We hope that the vision for wetlands can be developed by Spring 2007. In the meantime, we will be working to ensure that the developing vision and its associated map-based tools can be made as useful as possible for policy-makers, planners and those interested in or involved with the freshwater environment.

We want to involve other stakeholders in developing a vision for wetlands, and to understand what sort of information will be most useful. We will therefore be consulting and involving others widely over the next 18 months through workshops and other events.

In developing the wetland vision, we are collating a substantial amount of information that can aid decision-making about wetlands, and we will seek to improve this over time and incorporate new information. We will work with partners and data providers to find ways that enable us to share as much of this information as possible.

**‘A vision without a task is but a dream, a task without a vision is drudgery, a vision and a task is the hope of the world’**

Black Elk (1863–1950) – a native American holy man and visionary.



## Contact us

If you would like to know more, or be involved in this process, please contact: [info@wetlandvision.org.uk](mailto:info@wetlandvision.org.uk).  
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[www.english-nature.org.uk](http://www.english-nature.org.uk)

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[www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)

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