Worcestershire Wildlife Trust

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Coastal habitats such as beaches form the foundation of major recreational and tourist economies, and can also play a crucial role in coastal defence. The frictional drag across intertidal areas effectively absorbs and dissipates wave energy, so reducing the risk of flooding and damage to both people and terrestrial habitats.

Coasts – biological engines that fuel the world

The international human and ecological significance of the UK's coastal habitats reaches far beyond their physical extent. The sand and mudflats, dunes, marshes, beaches and saline lagoons which fringe our shores are the biological engines which fuel the biodiversity of much of the natural world.

Equally important, coastal habitats such as beaches form the foundation of major recreational and tourist economies, and can also play a crucial role in coastal defence. The frictional drag across intertidal areas effectively absorbs and dissipates wave energy, so reducing the risk of flooding and damage to both people and terrestrial habitats.

Coastal wetlands and intertidal areas also serve a vital function as "sinks" for marine and river-born pollutants.

Our blogs

▶ 30DaysWild2015

▶ 30DaysWild2016

▶ 30DaysWild2017

▶ 30DaysWild2018

▶ ColinsBlog

▶ HardwickGreenMeadows

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area of the European Atlantic and North Sea states. Intertidal areas cover just 1.3% of the UK landmass, but both mudflats and coastal marshes are of incredibly high nature conservation value, being nationally and internationally scarce.

Wildlife rich areas

The abundant bird life for which coastal habitats are best known is just one readily visible indicator of the wealth of wildlife that coastal areas support. Even apparently bare mudflats are incredibly productive, providing a veritable feast for the many marine predators which move in at high tide to feast on rich invertebrate prey.

These coastal habitats also serve a vital function in the marine food chain and wider environment, providing feeding, spawning and nursery areas for many species. Countless migrating fish and birds whose natural range extends over thousands of miles seasonally depend on the UK's coastal habitats for their first feed after a long journey.

Are they threatened?

Coastal habitats are, by their very nature, dynamic environments. Changes in sea level and sediment supply, erosion and accretion are amongst the many variables responsible for the formation of many of the UK's most interesting coastal landscapes and most valued habitats.

The problem is that in order to maintain their intrinsic interest and value, coastal habitats need space to adjust. In a period of sea level rise, the natural response of beaches, dunes, mudflats and saltmarshes would be to migrate inland. But almost everywhere around the lowland UK coast, the intertidal area is increasingly being squeezed between rising sea levels and high tide lines fixed by inflexible artificial defences and land-take for development. This is known as 'coastal squeeze'. In some areas the process is exacerbated by reduced sediment supply.

Coastal squeeze now poses the single greatest threat to the inherent value of our coastal habitats. The problems are worst in south-east England, where it is estimated that 20% of saltmarshes were lost through coastal squeeze between 1973 and 1988.

If current trends continue, a further 13,000 ha of intertidal flats and saltmarsh could be lost in the next 20 years through rising sea level. Without positive intervention, we face losing on a massive scale unique habitat, vital natural sea defence and buffer mechanisms, with serious economic, pollution and wildlife implications.

How we're helping

The Wildlife Trusts believe that any further reduction in the overall quality or quantity of coastal habitats is unacceptable. In the short to medium term, we are powerless to affect rising sea level and the landward trend of the low water mark. Maintaining natural processes and sediment sources which feed and sustain sedimentary coastal habitats, and allowing these habitats necessary space to adjust by relaxing artificially fixed defence lines is therefore essential. We need to work with, rather than against, the natural evolution of the shoreline.

Within the framework of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, we are working towards the conservation of all coastal habitats and the wildlife which they support.

As part of our active campaign to change attitudes and approaches to coastal management, we are collaborating with other organisations to raise awareness that managed realignment and habitat restoration is an economically viable, environmentally acceptable solution to compensate for past and future coastal habitat losses.

Visit wildlifetrusts.org/livingseas to find out how you can help our marine conservation work in the UK.

Depending on where you live, local Wildlife Trust volunteers help out with everything from recording marine wildlife sightings to beach cleans and educational work. Visit our Living Seas pages online or contact your local Trust to find out more.

Typical coastal wildlife
Turnstone, gannet, razorbill, fulmar, puffin, shore crab, sandhopper, edible crab, common gull, black-headed gull, herring gull, dunlin

Other Coastal habitats

Coastal Grazing Marsh

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