

# 7 Overview of Current and Future Marsh Management

The Braunton Marsh was developed through the foresight and capital investment of the landowners and farmers of Braunton parish to create a landscape able to produce high quality food for the British public. Since reclamation, Braunton Marsh has been shaped and maintained by cattle grazing, for which the area is famed. The traditional system of farming has produced a wide variety of habitats, which in turn have resulted in the rich wildlife and varied plant populations we see today, and it should be respected and acknowledged for this. The interests of the Braunton Marsh are best served by the continuation of the established farming practices employed by the marsh owners and tenants, combined with the efforts of the Braunton Marsh Internal Drainage Board (IDB) and the Marsh Inspectors.

On behalf of the Taw Torridge Estuary Forum (TTEF), this study has aimed to provide an insight into the historical, social, environmental and economic development of the Braunton Marsh up to the present day. The Marsh is a multifaceted landscape of high aesthetic value, and incorporates a unique local history of human enterprise, engineering and agriculture. Although those local people who are familiar with the landscape may inadvertently take it for granted, the special character of the Braunton Marsh, and its network of narrow drainage ditches and numerous linhays, is something that can be found nowhere else. In the course of the report-writing process, a limited range of concerns for the future of the area have been identified, together with many opportunities to celebrate this special landscape. These concerns and opportunities are described below, together with a summary of current Marsh management. It is important to note, however, that this short-term, stand-alone project has been conducted on behalf of an organisation without direct influence over the management of the Marsh, nor does the TTEF have the financial resources to support future actions. It is also significant that the Marsh is a collection of Marshes under multiple-ownership, and is without a single management body. As such, the achievement of any subsequent management objectives will ultimately be governed by the actions of the Braunton Marsh landowners, various other organisations, and the availability of any necessary funding.

## 7.1 Marsh Management

The Braunton Marshes are managed primarily through the actions of three major stakeholders, namely;

- The Marsh Landowners
- The Braunton Marsh Internal Drainage Board
- The Marsh Inspectors

The management of the Marsh drainage system is carried out by the IDB, and includes the maintenance of many of the key archaeological features and systems of the marsh. The management of the communal lands of the marsh owners, including the embankments, internal roads and residences, is held under the trusteeship of the Marsh Inspectors. Both systems of management are secure, ensuring the stable maintenance of many of the characteristic elements of the Marsh. The Board Members of the Braunton IDB and the Marsh Inspectors are elected from amongst the Marsh landowners. All Marsh owners pay drainage rates to the IDB and are invited to an annual meeting of the IDB. Given the ongoing communication of the IDB with the landowners, and the significance of landowner cooperation for the overall success of any management initiatives, the IDB seems an obvious management body to assist with the consultation process for any future policies or actions.

## 7.2 Environmental and Cultural Heritage

Evidently, the Braunton Marsh and surrounding area make up a complex landscape of intrinsic historical, cultural and environmental importance. Since reclamation, the environmental and archaeological heritage of the Braunton Marshes has arisen in response to the primary use of the land for cattle grazing. The drainage system is managed for the provision of drinking water for these cattle, and the linhays were constructed and maintained for the purpose of sheltering cattle. Both the drainage ditches and the linhays have, in turn, provided environments in which wildlife

can flourish, along with the floral diversity and birdlife found within the permanent pastures maintained by cattle grazing. As mentioned in section 3.6, ongoing changes in general agricultural practices have led to a decline in the linhays, and to changes in the grazing regime. These subtle changes have implications for the environmental and cultural resources within the Marsh landscape. The economic viability of continued traditional farming practices, therefore, remains the central component for the optimal maintenance of these features. The Braunton Marshes constitute a unique environment, in which successful management initiatives should appreciate the inherent link between important habitats and species, the cultural heritage and agricultural economics.

In view of the concept that the traditional agricultural practices carried out by Marsh farmers should be supported for the benefit of wildlife and for the cultural interest on the Marsh, three key objectives have been identified that would contribute to this goal;

### Objective:

- a) To support the British beef industry, including the purchase and consumption of local produce.*
- b) The verification, quantification, and ongoing monitoring of Marsh Biodiversity.*
- c) To protect the priority species and habitats of Braunton Marsh, together with the characteristic landscape features, particularly the linhays and enclosure boundaries.*

### **a) To Support the British Beef Industry, Including the Purchase and Consumption of Local Produce.**

The strength and profitability of the British beef industry is the cornerstone of the future of the economic agricultural activity on the Marsh, and the wildlife that depends on it. As such, the British beef industry should be promoted wherever possible. A strong market for British beef would provide a real and ongoing incentive for the continued farming of cattle on the Marshes, which has featured so strongly in creating and maintaining its existing character. While many consumers may wish to buy British beef, and to support the ability of this country to produce its own food wherever possible, it is felt that issues such as the clear, transparent labelling of food requires further attention at a national level. The poor prices received for wholesale produce relative to the price paid by consumers at the supermarket is also a significant problem. Local branding initiatives may offer one opportunity to address both of these issues at a local level. In recent years, there has also been a growing consumer awareness that buying local produce not only supports the local economy but may also help to reduce food miles. The Braunton Marshes have, for over 150 years, held a reputation for producing high-quality beef. The Marshes have a strong individual identity, and clearly fall within the UNESCO International Biosphere Reserve buffer zone, owing to its position immediately adjacent to the Biosphere Reserve core area of Braunton Burrows. In view of these characteristics, the Marshes seem ideally poised to lend themselves to local produce initiatives, such as those of the North Devon Marketing Bureau, the North West Devon Economic Partnership 'North Devon Alive' brand, and the suggested development of a 'Biosphere Reserve' brand. The TTEF would be willing to act as an intermediary between local Marsh producers and the promoters of any such initiative in the future.

### **b) Verification, Quantification and Ongoing Monitoring of Marsh Biodiversity.**

As described in section 5, the Marshes contain several priority habitats and important species. However, the monitoring of wildlife interests remains intermittent, fragmented and incomplete. Even in recent times, despite several calls for further systematic studies of Marsh wildlife, no resources have so far been forthcoming, and the assessment of biodiversity across the Marshes remains poor. Identification of any Marsh management requirements and the evaluation of the success of management initiatives will obviously be inhibited by a lack of underlying knowledge, or baseline data. For example, the impact of recent changes in the grazing regime, the optimal variation in poaching levels along the drain edges, and the long-term significance of changes in bird population are all unknown. In view of such changes, it is felt that a greater degree of monitoring would be of long-term benefit for the guidance of future management.

## Suggested action:

### Assessment of Potential County Wildlife Sites.

Surveying the potential County Wildlife Sites within the Marsh may represent one possible opportunity to determine the biodiversity within the Marsh pastures. It is felt that Devon County Council should be encouraged to prioritise the assessment of these sites. The cooperation and consent of land-owners should be encouraged, and it is felt that the IDB holds a strong position to support this. The assessment of biodiversity may also help to increase eligibility for land-management grants, such as Environmental Stewardship.

### Establishment of Regular Survey Work through Voluntary Community Involvement /Educational Groups.

The 2002 policy statement of the IDB contains two specific aims, i.e. to 'ensure no net loss of habitats covered by Biodiversity Action Plans, monitoring any gains and losses, and reporting annually to the Environment Agency' and to 'take appropriate opportunities to enhance habitats'. In line with this policy, the coordination of volunteer surveys of flora and fauna has the potential to provide greater qualification of the environmental resources across the Marsh. This monitoring might be achieved through a liaison with local schools and colleges, or through the volunteer networks of existing organisations, such as the Devon Wildlife Trust and the North Devon Coast and Countryside Service. According to practical constraints and the wishes of landowners, such activities would almost certainly be restricted to pre-determined areas although, through liaison with the IDB, it would be hoped that such issues would be quite straightforward to resolve. Universities may also wish to conduct research based upon the Marsh and, again, this could be facilitated through the IDB.

### c) To Protect the Priority Species and Habitats of Braunton Marsh, together with the Characteristic Landscape Features, particularly the Linhays and Enclosure Boundaries.

The historic Great Sluice continues to be positively managed through the IDB and the Marsh Inspectors, whilst the stiles running along the route of the North Devon Coast Path are maintained by the Northern Devon Coast and Countryside Service. The Great Sluice and three of the stiles, together with their flanking walls, are Grade II listed. The Marsh has over thirty linhays, nine of which are Grade II listed. Despite repeated concerns, features such as the linhays, both listed and unlisted, and the enclosure boundaries which evoke the history and culture of the Marsh, have continued to decline following agricultural changes in the latter half of the Twentieth Century. The future of the Marsh linhays, together with the dividing walls and hedgerows, is linked to the pressure and direction of the agricultural industry. Without specific funding, it seems likely that the decline of these buildings will continue, resulting not only in a loss of both the archaeological and cultural heritage, but of the wildlife interest, such as the owls, which have been acknowledged as having inhabited most Marsh linhays in the past. Similarly, agricultural changes potentially threaten to reduce floral biodiversity through pasture improvements and altered grazing regimes, and more must be done to quantify this threat. Financial support is also required to support traditional farming practices for the benefit of wildlife.

## Suggested action:

### Investigation of Long-term Funding Streams Available for the Conservation of the Environmental & Cultural Heritage of the Marsh.

Ongoing or long-term funding streams would ideally offer the best security to ensure that structures such as the linhays remain a central feature of the marshes, and that traditional farming methods are maintained regardless of the pressures within the farming industry. Naturally, as long-term schemes require large sums of money, such schemes are invariably operated through government agencies. Currently, Defra schemes seem to offer the longest-term funding opportunities, however, even here, it is clear that funding is a finite resource. While many Marsh farmers are now participating in the Defra Entry Level Stewardship scheme, this does not include specific environmental targets for discrete areas of land. However, Defra's Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme aims to: *'deliver significant environmental benefits in high priority situations and areas. HLS is discretionary and concentrates on the more complex types of management, where land managers need advice and support and where agreements need to be tailored to local needs.'*

Under the 2005 Targeting Statement for the area of Exmoor, which includes the Braunton Marsh, the characteristics of the Marsh score highly against Defra key targets for the area. These targets include the maintenance of priority habitats and species, and the conservation of archaeological features, including walls and historic farm buildings. In an area such as the Braunton Marsh, however, individual applications for pastures would be unlikely to fulfil sufficient key targets to be successful, and despite supporting the aim to conserve the wildlife and the cultural heritage on the Marsh, many farmers may be reluctant to become involved in the scheme over their whole farm. A joint HLS application between multiple farmers might be a possibility, although the process is complex, and it is unclear who might coordinate such an application. Whilst the HLS scheme should theoretically provide the ideal solution for the Marshes, the system has unfortunately been subject to administrative problems, and is regarded by many as overly complex and bureaucratic. It is hoped that current problems and short-comings will be rectified in the coming years, and that funding will continue to be made available through a scheme with similar objectives for environment and culture.

### Investigation of Alternative Sources of Funding/ Expertise/Volunteers.

The aim to preserve the environmental and cultural heritage on Braunton Marsh also suggests future projects might be eligible for funding through sources such as; Awards for All, Heritage Grants, Community Grants, English Heritage Grants, The Viscountess Boyd Charitable Trust and The Claude and Margaret Pike Woodlands Trust, amongst others. Although such sources are likely to offer funding only on a one-off basis, they may offer scope to develop a carefully-targeted project for the benefit of the Braunton Marsh nonetheless. This might perhaps take the form of the restoration of the linhays, or the establishment of ongoing initiatives, such as volunteer or community schemes that might offer more sustainable, long-term solutions including maintenance or monitoring. Natural England, or other advisory bodies, might be able to suggest the best methods for the restoration of the linhays. It should be noted, however, that previous grant schemes have insisted on the use of authentic materials, such as slate tiles, whose high value has led to theft from newly-restored linhays. Hence linhays repaired through grants allowing cheaper, but visually-similar materials, have often fared better in the long-term, highlighting the importance of learning from past experience. It might also be possible to involve volunteer groups associated with traditional rural skills to help maintain the linhays and walls.

### Monitoring the Status and Condition of Buildings on the Braunton Marshes.

This study has produced a photographic inventory of the current condition of the Marsh linhays, together with any known sites of linhays, which have now been lost forever. Comparison with the architectural survey commissioned by Devon County Council in 1982 reveals how the linhays have changed since that time. The monitoring of agricultural buildings on the Marsh would not only help to identify priority structures in need of attention, but would also help to observe the frequency of any new structures on the Marsh, such as those erected for equestrian purposes. Monitoring could also help in the development of a future strategy from a landscape perspective. Whilst the future may lead to the acceptance that it may not be possible to maintain all existing historic structures, it might be desirable to restrict the development of certain types of modern structure should they threaten to impact radically upon the character of the Marshes.

## 7.3 Education and Cultural Awareness

Recreational interest in the area of the Braunton Marshes has increased dramatically over the last fifty years. However, in recent years, visitor numbers appear to have remained relatively stable. Visitors can access views across the Marsh pastures from the Braith or Toll Road, and from the South West Coast Path, which runs along the embankments. The Marsh is currently included under the Heritage Coast designation, which supports the aim to enhance recreational opportunities, public appreciation and understanding on the proviso that such measures are sympathetic to environmental and cultural protection. Similarly, enhanced public understanding is a key aim of the North Devon Interpretation Strategy, and of the North Devon AONB which, it is

hoped, may incorporate the Marsh within its boundaries at some point in the future. The development of increased recreational interests or the encouragement of greater visitor numbers is considered to be counter to the environmental and agricultural interests of the Marsh. However, initiatives to support the environmental, historical and cultural awareness of the Braunton Marsh do offer scope for development. Heightened awareness has already been achieved, in part, through the publication of this study. However, three further actions have now been identified that offer a realistic opportunity to achieve a greater understanding of the Marsh.

#### **Suggested action:**

##### **Initiatives with Local Educational Institutions.**

Initiatives with local schools or colleges might involve practical fieldwork, which could perhaps be associated with the monitoring of environmental resources on the Marsh. Such fieldwork might be organised through the IDB, and conducted over a period of one or two days each summer. The Northern Devon Coast and Countryside Service has also advised that it may possibly be able to provide some guidance for simple monitoring techniques. Such fieldwork would cause very little disruption to the consenting landowners, and provide a basic, but ongoing source of information. Community involvement would also simultaneously promote the natural heritage of the area, and a better understanding of the intrinsic connection between Marsh wildlife and agriculture. Classroom-based or virtual fieldwork also offers further opportunities for raising local awareness of the area.

##### **Inclusion within the Explore Braunton Project (subject to funding).**

A funding bid for an innovative project aimed at increasing the awareness of North Devon's natural and cultural heritage has been submitted through the Northern Devon Coast and Countryside Service. Although this bid has not yet been granted, subject to funding, the Explore Braunton Project aims to develop a number of new initiatives, with a particular emphasis on utilising new technology to enhance access to information and archive materials, including a website. The Braunton Marsh represents an ideal area to include in such a project.

##### **Information Leaflet Distributed at the Toll House.**

It has been noted that many visitors to the area express a desire to know more about the area, and frequently enquire about the availability of an explanatory leaflet at the Toll House. A leaflet could be produced independently, through a small funding bid, or through other public awareness initiatives that may arise.

## **7.4 Consultation**

Horse Island is an area of land adjacent to the Braunton Marsh which was reclaimed during a second phase of engineering work in the 1850s. Horse Island has been identified in several estuary management documents, including the Shoreline Management Plan, as a potential site for saltmarsh restoration through managed realignment. If Horse Island is allowed to return to the sea, the original Great Embankment, bordering the Toll Road, would once again become the main sea defence, which would have implications for the Marsh environment, its cultural heritage and its management. The realignment of Horse Island was not supported in the 1998 Shoreline Management Plan, which recommended that the stretch of coastline between Crow Point and Chivenor, should be "observed and monitored". At Horse Island, the responsibility for the notoriously expensive maintenance of the sea embankments falls to the landowner. In order to avoid the breaching of the embankment, as occurred previously in 1910, these costs will undoubtedly grow, particularly as a result of anticipated sea-level rise and the increase in storm frequency and intensity predicted with climate change. Consequently, the area faces ongoing controversy over its long-term future, either due to a catastrophic failure of the sea defence, or following a strategic review of the sea defences within the next few years. In view of the close association between Horse Island and Braunton Marsh, the Braunton IDB must be an essential component of all future decision-making processes regarding this stretch of coastline.

Similarly, any potential future development affecting other sites adjacent to the Marshes, such as renewed calls for a Braunton Bypass, should also involve comprehensive consultation with Marsh landowners to establish any potential impact on the Marsh.

#### **Suggested action:**

**Government bodies must ensure that the Marsh landowners, the IDB and the Marsh Inspectors are included in the consultation process for all future issues which may potentially impact upon the Braunton Marshes.**

## **Overview of Current and Future Marsh Management**

As described above, the future of the Marsh will ultimately depend upon the wishes, and actions of the landowners, together with the support and initiatives of a variety of organisations at national, regional and local level. What is clear, however, is that Braunton Marsh represents a unique and special area, both in terms of wildlife and as a fundamental part of local history, which contributes to the cultural identity of North Devon. The Braunton Marsh is neither a time capsule, nor a nature reserve. It is a working agricultural environment. As with all living landscapes, the area is inevitably in a state of constant change. The Braunton Marsh has seen many changes through the last 200 years, moving from a natural saltmarsh to an environment dependant upon agriculture. Agriculture remains central to its future. Without intervention, such as measures to halt the decline of all the marsh linhays or economic incentives to help guarantee the continuation of traditional farming, the management of the Marshes will remain at the mercy of external pressures. Would the character of the Marsh be changed by the absence of linhays, and is the environmental interest of the area negated by a reduction in the diversity of species within the pastures? Surely the answers to both of these questions would be 'yes'. Therefore it seems prudent that the costs of ensuring that current resources are preserved for future generations do not fall entirely upon the farmers, whose primary concern is naturally to secure their livelihood. The costs of long-term environmental and cultural conservation, so beneficial to our society as a whole, should be a collective responsibility, and not a financial burden placed upon a few individuals. The absence of a central authority or coordinating body for the Braunton Marsh presents an obvious difficulty regarding whose responsibility it is to act. However, it does provide, simultaneously, the opportunity and the scope for a large range of individuals and organisations to play a key role in the future of the Marsh, should they choose to do so. The TTEF could act as an intermediary for any organisation or individual who would like to get involved. The location of the Braunton Marshes also falls within the UNESCO International Biosphere Reserve Buffer Zone, a designation with strong objectives toward sustainable development. The area, therefore, presents an ideal opportunity to demonstrate what can be achieved when people decide to be proactive and to work together in order to facilitate solutions incorporating economic, environmental and social interests.

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