

Living with the Sea LIFE Project

This is a partnership Project between English Nature, the Environment Agency and the Natural Environment Research Council from August 1999 to 31 December 2003. Funding is provided by the partners and matched equally by the European Commission's LIFE-Nature Programme.

Copyright: Joint copyright EN, EA, NERC

ISBN number: 1 85716 533 0

Living with the Sea LIFE Project

Stephen Worrall

Project Manager

English Nature

Northminster House

Peterborough

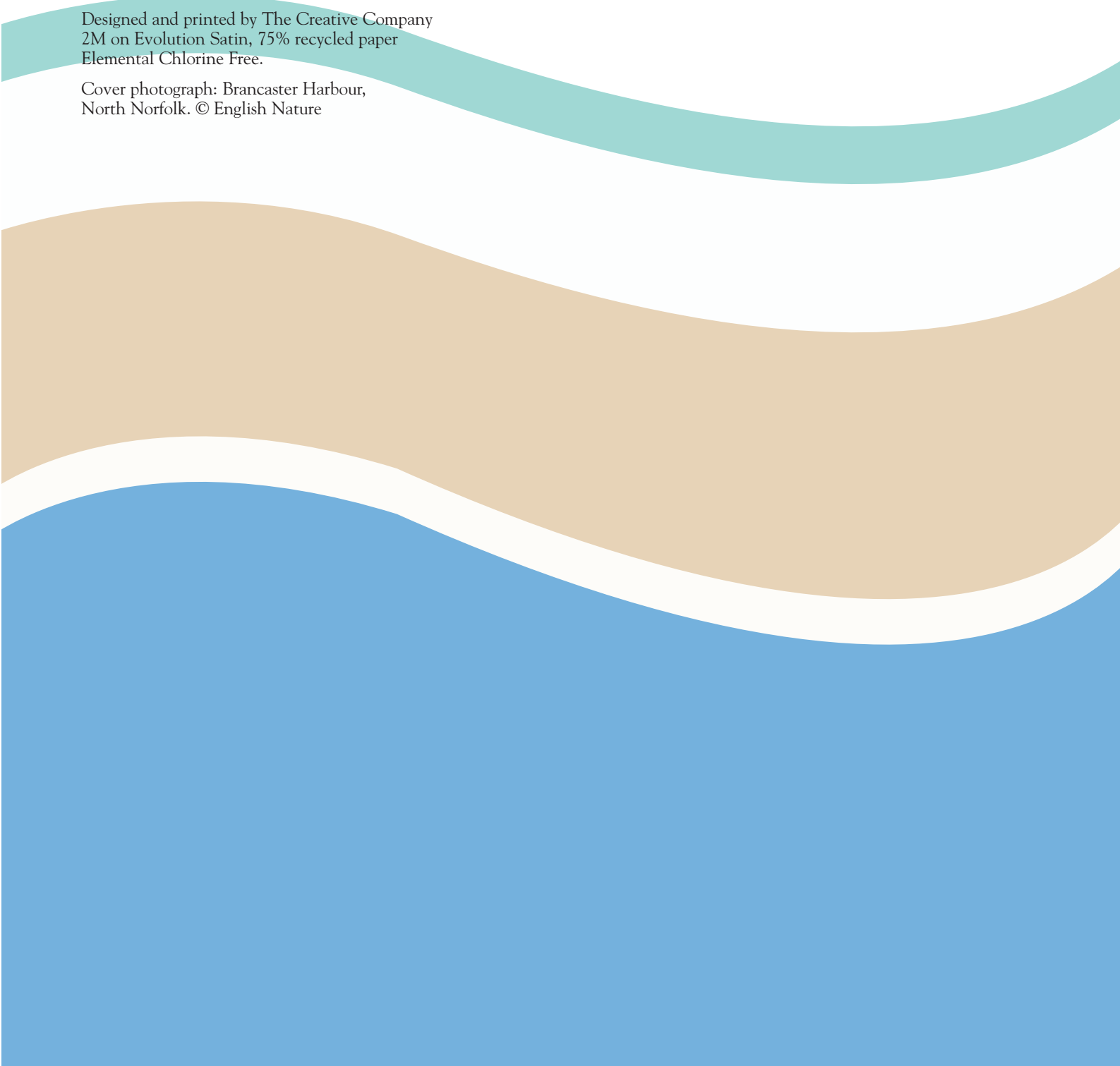
PE1 1UA

Telephone: 01733 455220

Email: stephen.worrall@english-nature.org.uk

Designed and printed by The Creative Company
2M on Evolution Satin, 75% recycled paper
Elemental Chlorine Free.

Cover photograph: Brancaster Harbour,
North Norfolk. © English Nature





ENVIRONMENT
AGENCY



Natural
Environment
Research
Council



Living with the Sea

Future coastlines for people and wildlife



This document was produced with the support of
the European Commission's LIFE Nature Programme

Think ahead to the distant future. A day by the coast. The usual salty wind is blowing through everyone's hair and the waves are pounding in – but there's something missing... No bird sound, nothing on the wing, in fact the sky is empty; and as for beach combing, forget it. There's nothing left to comb.

This terrible sterile vision could become a reality unless people re-think how our island's coasts are managed –

Our estuaries are being strangled and our coast eroded due to last century's flood defence technology

and the rub is that time is running out. We need to take action NOW.

The last of our coastal wilderness is already being squeezed out of existence. If we don't change the way we invest in our coastal areas, birds such as the avocet, bittern and redshank will be driven from our shores: saltmarsh, shingle ridge and saline lagoon will be washed away by the sea and our children will no longer enjoy the wonders of coastal wildlife.

Our estuaries are being strangled and our coast eroded due to last century's flood defence technology, which involved the 'we can keep it back' strategy that Canute long ago demonstrated would not work. Large lumps of concrete stretching out into the sea won't stop it coming in and will, in fact, stop natural processes taking place which support nature's defences and let wildlife flourish.

We need to think more earnestly about utilising 'soft' defences like sand dunes and shingle banks that the sea itself works to put in place and shape. Human effort can be directed towards augmenting those, and to conserving the natural habitats so created.

If we start to work with the sea instead of against it, both ourselves and our magnificent wildlife can thrive

Sea change n



All pictures: English Nature

in partnership, meaning that future generations will still be inspired by nature.

Time and tide won't wait for us. There's a powerful cocktail being mixed. Climate change is causing sea level rise and storminess, battering dynamic coastal areas. Basic elemental forces of nature

It will be much more sensible to spend the cash on defences which will benefit both people and wildlife

are getting stronger – and, as far as these forces are concerned, we don't count. We have to do a deal with nature.

English Nature's view is that people need to change their minds about how coastal defence is managed around our island. Not an easy task, because we're



talking about a change of philosophy on the subject; a change of view which is vital, not just for ourselves, but for conservation of nature as well. To make it work, we also need a national change in investment thinking. There's no point in throwing taxpayers' millions at hard defences already defeated. It will be much

necessary

Sand dunes (right) are natural soft defences – able to respond to storms by re-shaping to absorb wave energy. Many rural clay sea walls (left) are beyond economic repair, and prevent saltmarsh naturally migrating landward in response to sea-level rise. Tollesbury Fleet, Essex (below), where a sea wall was breached to allow saltmarsh to regenerate



rising ground where the tides can expand and contract safely – a natural pressure release valve. These will be areas of wild habitat, supporting our rural inheritance. Our houses on the coast will, as a result, be better protected.



This is no easy alternative. It is change on a geographic scale, and over generations in human time scales. The forces at play and the scale of the situation demand some fundamental rethinking of what land we can protect and what we must give back to nature. Taking land from the sea does not leave us with a bigger island. The sea will always want to take it back – and one day it will succeed.

What's being done about it?

Through Living with the Sea, a four-year European Union LIFE Nature funded project, English Nature and the Environment Agency are working with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, land-owners, conservation groups and local authorities to breath life back into the natural defences of our coasts and estuaries.

So what action are we taking now? Realigning defences to allow saltmarsh to regenerate has already been tried out in Essex with great success, at Northey Island, Tollesbury and Orplands (Bradwell) on the Blackwater Estuary.

It is essential that we think ahead and plan for the next century's coastal defences and habitats

The LIFE Project is supporting two flood defence schemes on the North Norfolk coast that involve defence realignment on SAC and SPA sites of European importance for wildlife at Brancaster and Salhouse, to ensure both continue to thrive. The LIFE Project will also produce six pilot Coastal Habitat Management Plans (CHaMPs) from The Wash to the Solent; the contract for the work is due to be awarded to a consortium of experts. There will be local and European seminars and workshops to raise understanding and win ownership by engineers, conservationists, planners and landowners.

It is essential that we think ahead and plan for the next century's coastal defences and habitats, and that means organisations, landowners and business working together for the future of people and wildlife.

If this can be achieved, the payback to our coastal areas and communities will start in as little as ten years, but will earn interest for generations to come.

■ For more information contact Stephen Worrall, details overleaf.
stephen.worrall@english-nature.org.uk

more sensible to spend the cash on defences for the next 30 -100 years which will benefit both people and wildlife.

We have to trust natural forces to do the right thing. English Nature's Millennium vision for the coast is one of estuaries being more natural in shape, with large areas of gradually