

DECLINING ENGLISH WETLAND 'IS POOR ADVERT FOR UK'

By
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Brent geese flying over Chichester Harbour, globally important for migratory birds.
Image: Carolyn Cobbold

A declining English wetland will embarrass the UK government at November's UN climate conference, campaigners say.

LONDON, 23 March, 2021– The area around Chichester Harbour on Britain's south coast overlooks the English Channel. Famed as a beauty spot, it is a draw for holiday-makers from the crowded towns and cities of southern Britain. It is also one of the UK's key habitats for many bird species and for endangered mammals such as water voles. But the condition of this declining English wetland is stirring concern.

Coastal wetlands are not only important for wildlife and tourism, conservationists argue. They are one of nature's most efficient ecosystems for absorbing carbon dioxide, and [among the best forms of coastal protection](#), increasingly recognised for making low-lying areas more resilient and adaptable to sea level rise.

A report by researchers at the University of Cambridge, UK, published in the journal [Nature Sustainability](#), spells out how the value of natural wetlands far exceeds that of managed or farmed land.

The low-lying coastal plain surrounding [the ancient Roman city of Chichester](#) is one of the UK areas most vulnerable to sea level rise, increased storminess and intense rainfall.

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It has done pioneering work in climate change mitigation and adaptation, including protecting the Medmerry Reserve wetlands, Europe's largest [coastal realignment scheme](#) when it opened in 2013. The Harbour contains the largest salt marsh on the south coast, but nearly half of it has been lost since 1970.

But now local people charge the government with neglecting their efforts to increase the area's resilience. Libby Alexander founded the [Save our South Coast Alliance](#) (SOSCA). She says: "The sad plight of Chichester's wetlands is an embarrassment for the government as it prepares to host COP-26, the UN's annual climate conference, due to be held this year in Glasgow in November." Nor is the physical condition of the Harbour her only concern.

"The government continues to preach to us and the rest of the world about climate change and the environment", she says, "but practices an entirely different agenda. It is driving forward a building programme which is endangering the future of some of the country's most important wetlands."

Unfavourable condition

A report in [the Guardian newspaper](#) described the fear of many local people at "the threat of 'rural sprawl' creating new landscapes ... the 'suburbanisation' of the countryside", resulting from the government's plans for changes to England's planning system.

SOSCA says the threats it faces from the government's drive for more housebuilding in south-east England include 12,650 unnecessary new homes across the coastal plain with the strong possibility of many more – "the wrong houses in the wrong places" – which will inevitably lead to extensive and irreversible damage through pollution and flooding. It says Chichester is being forced by the government to build far more new houses than it can safely accommodate.

Residents say a real threat is the untreated sewage that is pumped into the harbour, for which the local water company, Southern Water, has been penalised. [It was fined £126 million in 2019 for spills of wastewater into the environment](#) from its sewage plants and for deliberately misreporting its performance. A great number of these discharges went into Chichester Harbour. The Environment Agency is reported to have launched a criminal investigation into the case.

[Chichester Harbour Trust](#) says not enough is being done to improve water quality in the Harbour. Its chairman, John Nelson, said: "We all need to force the regulators to take immediate action before we have an environmental and public health catastrophe."

In January this year [the Chichester Observer reported](#) that over the 2020 Christmas period there were uninterrupted sewage discharges into Chichester Harbour for six days. Mr Nelson said: "Given Southern Water's record over the Christmas period the time has come to implement radical change. The Trust is calling on the regulatory body [Ofwat](#) to use its legislative powers to put Southern Water into special administration in order to avoid an environmental catastrophe."

Natural England is the government's official environment adviser. It has published [a new and authoritative report](#) which describes Chichester Harbour, globally important for migratory birds, as now being in an "unfavourable and declining" condition, because of increasing development and rising sea levels.

Serious climate change adaptation and mitigation needs to be factored into the planning process immediately, says SOSCA. "Ironically, the UK government is promoting global coastal wetland conservation through its [Blue Forests Initiative](#) but failing to support the efforts of its own citizens", said Libby Alexander. – *Climate News Network*

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23RD March 2021