

THE FUTURE OF SOUTH EFFORD MARSH

By now you might have received a personal invitation from the Environment Agency (EA) to a consultation event on the future of South Efford marsh, just downstream of Bridge End at Aveton Gifford, on the eastern bank of the river. The event will take place in Aveton Gifford village hall on 7th July 2010 between 3pm and 8pm and there will be an opportunity to discuss their proposed habitat creation and flood risk management scheme for the marsh with experts and to make comment.

Having just purchased the marsh (fig. 1) as part of their national flood risk management and habitat creation programme, the EA now wishes to consult local opinion on the pros and cons of allowing estuary water into the marsh on a regular basis to create a salt marsh habitat. The precise details of how this process would happen have not been clarified, as yet, and should play a very significant part in the debate. If you live near to the marsh or have any interest in the river and its ecology, it is very important that you attend and make your opinion known.

As a contribution to the debate, we shall be making this website available for the publication of EA statements and other opinion. However, the ACA committee has already reached its own conclusions.



Fig. 1. An aerial view of South Efford marsh (courtesy of the EA).
(Aveton Gifford bridge is off the bottom of the picture, the Tidal Road is on the right)

ACA POLICY STATEMENT:

Based on the information currently available, the ACA committee has considered this proposal for salt marsh habitat creation and climate change-related flood risk management at South Efford very carefully. Many uncertainties exist about the results of what would amount to an uncontrolled environmental experiment. We have examined the effects of similar schemes elsewhere, consulted with local residents and inspected the marsh.

We have concluded that a policy of minimal or no interference with the existing flood-risk management is the best way forward. If anything, there would be a reduction in local biodiversity by artificially extending the existing salt marsh habitat on the Avon.

In the ACA's view, the advantages of this conservative approach of minimal or no change are as follows:-

1. The existing arrangement, whereby salt water is excluded from the marsh, is well understood locally and works effectively.
2. The flood risk to neighbouring properties would remain low. Under extreme conditions the Avon could still overtop the embankment – as now – to reduce flooding elsewhere.
3. An interesting area of wetland pasture habitat could be preserved (much like the nature reserve at West Charleton) to maintain or increase local biodiversity and, with relatively minor financial expenditure, it could be made more publicly accessible as a wildlife resource.
4. A life-less zone of decaying vegetation, generated by any inundation with salt water, would be avoided for an uncertain but lengthy period of time - possibly many years.
5. The potential for increased siltation of the main river channel by debris scoured from the vegetation-denuded, fresh water marshland would be avoided.
6. From South Efford marsh's embankment the community could gain an excellent, traffic-free vantage point from which to view wading birds in the estuary – an improvement to an existing local wildlife resource which can only be viewed at low tide from the Tidal Road at present.
7. The financial costs would be considerably lower than any alternative scheme.
8. Revenue would be available from pasture-grazing rights on the marsh as a source of income – as at present.

Put starkly, the choice is - at best - between creating more, typical, Avon salt marsh (see fig. 2) or enhancing the public availability of an adjacent freshwater marsh area (see fig.3) with its own distinctive ecology.



Fig.2. A downstream view of typical Avon salt marsh. (Taken from the existing tidal gate on South Efford marsh)



Fig.3 One of the existing freshwater drainage ditches with surrounding vegetation on South Efford marsh