

MINSMERE LEVELS STAKEHOLDERS GROUP

Notes of a meeting held at 1 Old Store Gardens, Eastbridge
1 March 2008

Attended by:

John Keeble (Convenor)
Jon Swallow
David Robb
Pauline English
Janet Lister
Stephen Brett
Tish Tucker
John Rea Price
Judith Croton (note taker)

Adam Rowlands, Senior Site Manager, RSPB

This meeting was arranged specifically for Group members to meet Adam Rowlands. Several members of the group are current members of the RSPB, two are former members.

Issues the group wanted to raise with him included:

1. Communication with local communities over issues that affect them e.g. the decision to build the fences on parts of RSPB owned land.
2. The attitude of some RSPB staff and volunteers, for example, shouting at walkers if they feel that dogs are straying even a small distance off designated paths.
3. The RSPB's approach to estate management and its position on coastal erosion and inland flooding.

Adam Rowlands said a little bit about his background, then went on to respond to some of the concerns raised by group members. He began his career with the RSPB in the late 1980s, when he had been a volunteer at Minsmere, living in a shed on the reserve. He became site manager at Minsmere in October 2004.

1. Communication

AR said he recognised that communications between the RSPB and local communities was not as good as it could be and that he was working hard to improve matters, for example publishing the six monthly newsletter, the first one of which was dedicated to the fencing. The fences were already in place when he arrived but consultation and communication had not been good, with the RSPB responding in a reactive, rather than pro-active way. The RSPB had talked to Westleton Parish Council but not to the parish council of Theberton and Eastbridge.

The fencing was put up around the time of the Open Access legislation but the fenced-off areas were never part of that. It is livestock fencing to prevent the sheep from roaming. Members questioned why the fence was so high, and

electrified if it was only to keep sheep? AR responded that the original intention had been to keep cattle as well as sheep. The design had been revised following the incidents with red deer getting caught in the top wires. The electric fence is to keep out foxes. Before the measures were taken the last time stone curlews had bred in the area was 1969. In 2007 there were 2 breeding pairs. When there are more pairs the RSPB is likely to be less anxious about losing a few eggs to foxes.

The electric fence carries a 12v charge – it can give a slight shock but is not harmful to humans.

AR confirmed that they still have problems with one local resident who regularly vandalises the fences.

2. Attitudes of staff and volunteers to local residents

AR said that there were 24 full or part-time staff and 70 volunteers working on the reserve. Some of the culture, which he was working to change, comes from the time of Bert Axell who established the reserve in the late 1940s (Minsmere developed after the Second World War when the land had been flooded to deter enemy invasion. The by product was the arrival of the avocets and purchase after the war of the marsh to create the bird reserve.) The approach at the beginning had been to keep people away from the reserve and to shout at them if they were thought to be breaking any rules. Bert Axell was of the view that the reserve could sustain no more than 6000 visitors a year. In 2007 Minsmere received 100,000 visitors. He also suggested that Minsmere would never support more than 4 nesting marsh harriers but last year there were 17 pairs. However, there have been several pieces of research that demonstrated that the density of breeding populations of some species is affected by contact with humans, cats and dogs. For example, the stone curlews will abandon a nest that is within 400 metres of walkers etc, but do not seem to be disturbed by cars. This meeting confirmed that most villagers are anxious to protect and promote the welfare of the birds on the reserve but that it would be helpful, as well as educational, if the RSPB did more to explain developments to local communities. They could do this through the regular newsletter or by putting up signs from time to time. Another example given was of the field on the Westleton road which has recently been ploughed. Some people thought that this was done to help get chemicals out of the soil (it was previously owned by a cement company) but AR was able to tell the meeting that the field supported rare arable weeds, such as Venus Looking Glass, and that ploughing helped them to grow.

The RSPB gets 60% of its income from its members and recognises the need to involve them more in its activities and to improve visitor facilities. He gave the example of the recent application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant to develop the education centre at Minsmere. The HLF said that they liked the project idea but needed more information on what visitors themselves would like to see. As a consequence they have been given a grant to employ consultants to develop the project bid by carrying out local consultations. They are planning to hold open sessions, including an evening meeting, probably in the week beginning 17 March 2008. They would like to hold the meeting in a local pub as they think this would be more neutral than choosing one village hall. One issue is how to get information to people in time. This group suggested the RSPB should use its local members more. AR said they were considering providing a more frequent newsletter to local members. JS

suggested they might want to make use of the Theberton and Eastbridge website. JRP said that he was surprised that the RSPB had no mechanism for local consultation and gave the example of the Sizewell Stakeholders Group, which DR is a member of.

The reserve is almost exclusively within Westleton parish boundaries, with a small area in Dunwich. Although they have no land in Theberton and Eastbridge, AR has been talking to the chair of this parish council (CB) about holding an annual meeting with the parish council, with a view to sharing information and improving communications.

3. The RSPB's approach to estate management and its position on coastal erosion and inland flooding.

AR had brought an aerial map of the reserve together with a hydrology map showing all the drainage ditches and sluices on the land. Minsmere is designated for its landscape, flora, invertebrates and birds. AR has a statutory responsibility to uphold its designation and conservation aims.

The 2 main drains affecting the draining of Eastbridge are

- i) The New Cut (designated a river so the responsibility of the Environment Agency)
- ii) Minsmere Old River (the EA has an outfall sluice. On RSPB land, just before the main sluice). The main drains are controlled directly by the EA, (acting as an IDB)

The RSPB has no right of control over either of them. It cannot build bridges or sluices, or change any drainage ditches.

The 2 other drains are No.7, which runs just below the Eel's Foot and round the back of the houses on the north side of the village, and the Leiston Main Drain.

SB pointed out, and AR confirmed, that the Old River has not been dug out on the RSPB's side (the Dowleys own the land on the other side) for more than 20 years.

The Government is changing its arrangements for Inland Drainage Boards. There will be a new one for the whole of East Suffolk, from Lowestoft down to Felixstowe. Although there will be fierce competition for funding that will have to be bid for, AR thinks that it will give the local area a voice for the first time. There is no guarantee that there will be any money for maintenance of ditches on the Minsmere Level.

Why was there a large pipe at the side of the New Cut? The EA had found asbestos sheeting reinforcing the bank and had abandoned the work (the pipe has been there for several years).

AR explained that the RSPB has been digging out its reed beds over the winter. They have to keep their water independent of both the New Cut and the Old River. (The Scotts Hall Drain is separate from these and belongs to the RSPB.) They have been opening up the waterway to encourage the fish which the bitterns scavenge for.

In response to the suggestion that there was convergence in the agendas of the MLSG and the RSPB, AR said that the RSPB's drivers are conservation.

There are 2 processes in terms of flood regulation:

- i) Humans, communities and settlements - the EA and DEFRA just cost benefit analysis in deciding how to fund these activities, which the RSPB don't get involved in.
- ii) Conservation of habitats and birds - there are EU Directives governing these activities, which are fundamental to the RSPB's work.

In terms of bitterns, 1 : 5 of the male population and 1 : 3 nesting females in the UK are at Minsmere. If the sea breaches the defences it will kill off the fish supplies, in particular rudd, that the bitterns depend on. The RSPB wants to maintain Minsmere for as long as possible, but with climate change and rising sea levels, it may not be possible to do this indefinitely. The EA project manager, Stuart Barbrook (see e-mail correspondence with DR) is looking at the residual life of the sea defences, which is calculated to be between 50 and 200 years. However, there are 'pinch points' between the end of the north wall and Dunwich cliffs, which probably has a natural life of about 20 years. (The area between Southwold/Walberswick and Thorpeness forms a natural bay, but there is pressure from the sluice water and the sluice structure and from the hydraulic outfall at Sizewell, which is 'holding the coast'.) However, the November surge tide, which was described as a 1:40 or 1:50 event, did not overtop the defences so perhaps there are grounds for greater optimism. There may well be an opportunity to have a managed retreat when the defences finally give way, with the RSPB sacrificing the north marsh and building out to protect the Scrape and the reed beds. This could be done relatively cheaply. In answer to a question from JL, AR said that the RSPB had purchased land at Snape to provide an alternative habitat for bitterns (10% of the nesting bitterns were on the north marsh last year.) It takes 10 to 20 years to develop reed beds from scratch and so they were planning for the bitterns in 20 years time.

In response to a question from JS AR explained that north Norfolk was getting EU money for the protection of its wildlife because it was in an area that had already been designated as in need of funding for other reasons. This would not be the case at Minsmere.

4. The meeting agreed that it would be an excellent idea for AR to speak at the public meeting on 11 April. AR confirmed that he would be prepared to do this and hoped he would be available. He could follow on from DR, linking together the issues of ditch drainage, sluice maintenance and managed retreat. DR and AR will liaise over this.
5. Can AR get involved with the Minsmere Levels Stakeholders Group if it is formally set up after the public meeting? The RSPB cannot affiliate or align itself with SCAR because there are fundamental differences in approach to coastal erosion. (This meeting also confirmed that although it will link to SCAR, it will be a completely independent body.) AR could provide information to MLSG and could attend meetings with observer status, as Rob Macklin does with the Alde and Ore Group. The key issue for Minsmere currently is freshwater drainage and inland flooding, not seawater erosion, and this is

where the interests of the RSPB and the MLSG converge. The meeting was surprised to learn that the RSPB has 30 kilometres of ditches on the reserve.)

The meeting ended at 6pm with the group thanking AR for attending and for providing the meeting with a large amount of interesting and helpful information.