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Sea defences sacrificed for a wildlife sanctuary

By Lewis Smith, Environment Reporter

FLOOD defences were torn down yesterday to allow the North Sea to swallow a chunk of the Essex coast and create the biggest man-made saltmarsh in Europe.

The Wallasea saltmarsh will be a sanctuary for wildlife and has been created as compensation for the loss of similar habitat elsewhere on the coast.

It will take up to five years for the marsh and mudflats to attract all the plants and animals associated with such habitat but the first birds and marine creatures were already in residence last night.

Avocets were among the first to make use of the new saltmarsh as the tide flowed in yesterday afternoon and they are expected to be quickly followed by a range of other seabirds, fish, and molluscs.

Allowing the sea to encroach at Wallasea is in line with government policy on letting coastlines recede and minimising the cost of defences in the face of rising sea levels.

Mechanical diggers moved into position early in the morning to tear down more than 300 yards of sea wall, which have for decades prevented the sea from encroaching on land. Seawater began flooding the 115-hectare (284-acre) site at high tide in the afternoon.

Mark Dixon, the project manager for the scheme, by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said that the saltmarsh would provide an unrivalled feeding station for thousands of birds.

He said: "It takes two years for all the saltmarsh to get established. That's when it's a completely living marsh. In five years it will be fully established.

"But straight away we are going to get fish in there and in a matter of days we will have some of the interesting invertebrate creatures living in the

muddy bits. Some seaweed will be there within a fortnight.”

Saltmarshes are rich feeding grounds for birds and especially important to migrants which use them to refuel. Fish also find plenty of food in them and use them as nurseries.

Much of the richness is attributable to hydrobia, tiny marine snails, which colonise the mud in huge numbers. Seaweeds, sea grasses and sea asparagus will create “meadows in the sea” in the saltmarsh.

Mr Dixon added: “The Wallasea saltmarsh is like a supermarket for the birds.”

The Essex coastline is one of the most important in Britain for migrating birds but the natural saltmarshes that were once common have been destroyed by development and sea defences. In the 15th century the county had 35,000 hectares (86,000 acres) but now only 2,000 hectares remain.

Wallasea’s new saltmarsh incorporates footpaths on the outskirts, so that the public can view the wildlife, and islands that remain dry during high tide, to provide birds with suitable nesting sites.

Barry Gardiner, the Biodiversity Minister, said of the £7.5 million project: “We have balanced the needs of wildlife, flood management, landscape and people to re-create some of the ancient wetlands of East Anglia. Saltmarsh is more rare than rainforest, and is important to people, particularly as a flood and storm defence, and to wildlife. Hundreds of thousands of wetland birds rely entirely on the Essex saltmarsh for their food each winter.

“Wallasea will be a wonderful feeding and roosting habitat for birds like oystercatchers, avocets and little terns, which have gradually been displaced.”

The wetland will help to protect the land from floods and storms by dispersing wave energy. In combination with the new sea wall behind it, more than two miles long, the wetland provides better protection than the old sea wall.

Wallasea was chosen for a new saltmarsh to replace 34 hectares of habitat lost at Lappel Bank in Kent and Fagbury Flats in Suffolk because of port developments. The decision followed a European Court ruling that the areas should be re-created elsewhere.

Helen Deavin of the RSPB, which made the original legal challenge over Lappel Bank, said: "The site will create compensatory habitat to make up for the damage done."

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