Case Study

Holding Water, Building Resilience:

The Ouse Washes Landscape Recovery Project

There are easier places to attempt ecological restoration than the Fens. They are flat, famously reluctant to give up water when you want it gone, and equally stubborn about keeping it away when you need it. They are also, inconveniently, one of the most heavily anthropogenic landscapes in the country, which makes the ambition behind the Ouse Washes Landscape Recovery project admirably bold.

At its heart, this is a project about water and nature: where it goes, when it arrives, how long it stays, and crucially what happens when those patterns begin to change. The Ouse Washes themselves were never meant to be pristine wilderness. They are a 17th-century piece of engineering, a 30-kilometre flood storage system designed to protect surrounding land and settlements. And yet, through a combination of necessity and good fortune, they have become a SSSI UK Ramsar site, one of the UK's most important wetland ecosystems.

That dual identity working landscape and ecological stronghold is both the Washes' strength and its current problem.

A landscape under pressure

The Washes now hold a disproportionate share of what little wetland habitat remains in the Fens; around 1% of the original extent. They support internationally important populations of wintering wildfowl and serve as one of the last strongholds for breeding waders such as lapwing, redshank and common snipe.

However, flooding patterns are changing. Water is arriving more often in late spring and early summer precisely when ground-nesting birds need dry-ish ground to breed. Winter floods are deeper. Nutrient levels are higher. Vegetation is shifting from open grassland towards more

vigorous swamp species. The system still works for now, but not quite in the way its wildlife requires.

Add climate change to the mix; wetter winters, more erratic rainfall and the trajectory becomes clear: more water, at the wrong times, in the wrong places is creating a massive problem.

Not retreat, but expansion

The Landscape Recovery project does not attempt to "fix" the Washes in isolation. Instead, it proposes something more pragmatic: give nature more room to move.

By creating over 500 hectares of new wetland habitat and improving nearly 3,000 hectares of existing land, the project aims to build a surrounding network of wetlands effectively a set of ecological "overflow areas." When the Washes flood at the wrong time, species will have somewhere else to go.

It is, in ecological terms, a refusal to put all one's eggs in one increasingly flood-prone basket.

These new habitats are not generic. They are carefully varied:

- Wet grasslands for breeding waders, managed through grazing and precise water levels
- Floodplain mosaics combining grassland, scrub, woodland and open water
- Reedbeds, fen and swamp habitats for invertebrates and specialist birds
- Transitional "fen edge" habitats, where wetter landscapes give way to drier ground

The result is not a single habitat, but a patchwork, arguably closer to what the Fens once were before drainage simplified everything into straight lines and yields.

Farming, but wetter

This is a farmer-led initiative, built on the idea that agriculture and ecological restoration do not have to be mutually exclusive, provided the economics stack up. Wet grassland, for instance, is not abandoned land; it is grazed land. Livestock remain central, helping maintain the short sward that breeding waders require. Farmers and environmental organisations are also exploring biodiversity net gain and carbon credits on these restored landscapes to diversify productive farming systems.

There is also a practical benefit: when the Washes flood unexpectedly and around 2,000 cattle need relocating, these new wetlands can act as alternative grazing land. In other words, nature recovery doubles as contingency planning.

The project leans on a blend of public funding and emerging private finance particularly around carbon. Rewetting peat soils reduces emissions significantly, while also slowing the physical loss of the soil itself, with the project estimated to reduce emissions by over 5000 tCO2e a year. Farming the Fens, after all, becomes rather difficult if the soil continues to disappear.

Engineering meets ecology

If this all sounds pleasantly naturalistic, it is worth remembering that none of it works without infrastructure.

Water control structures, abstraction licences, storage reservoirs, these are the less romantic but critical components. The project depends on being able to hold water back in winter, move it around the landscape, and release it at the right times. It is a choreography of sluices as much as reeds and redshank.

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There is a certain irony here. The original Washes were an engineering solution that accidentally created a wildlife haven. This project is, in part, an ecological solution that hinges on more engineering.

A question of scale and patience

What sets this project apart is not just its ambition but its scale and timeframe. A 30-year funding horizon allows for permanence; it also enables coordination. In theory, this allows for a more intelligent approach: one site can remain wetter each year, another drier, ensuring that suitable conditions exist somewhere, even if not everywhere. Multiple landowners, environmental organisations and public bodies are working together across a connected landscape to deliver multiple project wins.

In practice, of course, coordination at this scale is never simple. But then, neither is trying to restore a landscape while continuing to farm it, store floodwater, reduce emissions and support internationally important wildlife populations.

The long view

There is a tendency, in discussions about nature recovery, to look for quick wins. Species returning, habitats restored, metrics achieved. The Ouse Washes Landscape Recovery project is not built for this type of narrative.

It is slower, more structural. It accepts that change is already happening hydrologically, ecologically, climatically, and focuses instead on resilience. Not preserving a snapshot of the past but ensuring that something ecologically rich survives into the future, even if it looks slightly different.

And perhaps that is the most important shift. The Washes themselves were never static; they were always a managed landscape. What this project recognises is that management must now evolve again this time with climate change in mind, and with a broader definition of what "productive land" really means.

In the Fens, water has always had the final say. The question this project asks is whether we can learn, at last, to negotiate with it rather than simply trying to keep it in its place.

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