

Press release: Estuary wildlife of the River Tees gets increased protection

Natural England is celebrating the decades of work by industry and nature conservationists to restore the wildlife of the Tees Estuary by confirming the notification of the Teesmouth and Cleveland Coast Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Today's announcement will ensure that the amazing wildlife of the Tees Estuary has a secure future and will make a strong contribution to the 'blue belt' of marine protected areas around England.

The Tees Estuary is a unique environment where industrial facilities share the landscape with a wide range of coastal habitats which teem with wildlife.

There were previously seven SSSIs protecting parts of the Tees Estuary, which have now been merged and expanded into a single, landscape-scale SSSI, totaling nearly 3000 hectares (or 12 square miles). The newly enlarged SSSI will provide clarity for developers and other stakeholders regarding the environmental assets of the site, thereby contributing to sustainable development of this key area for the national economy.

The extensions have more than doubled the area of SSSI in the Tees Estuary. Additional areas of sand-dune, saltmarsh, mudflat, grassland, lagoons and estuarial waters are protected, along with the populations of breeding and wintering birds, the iconic population of harbour seals and sand-dune invertebrates.

The extended SSSI continues to protect two areas of nationally-important geology, notably the mysterious prehistoric 'submerged forest', a part of which was exposed on the beach at Redcar after the 'Beast from the East' in 2018.

Steph Bird-Halton, Natural England's Area Manager for Northumbria said:

This is the culmination of many years' work by a wide range of partners to protect and create habitat in one of England's most surprising places for wildlife. The Tees Estuary shows how sustainable development can go hand-in-hand with environmental enhancement, exemplified by the return of harbour seal to the estuary in the 1980s, and the colonisation by avocet in the 21st century.

The SSSI, together with the new ways of working enshrined in the Tees Estuary Partnership, will help secure the future of this world-class landscape for nature. The newly-opened stretch of the England Coast Path will showcase the area's wildlife – and the

tireless work of site managers to look after it – to local people and visitors from further afield.

Natural England sees the confirmation of the SSSI as a celebration of our partners' commitment to nature conservation, and as a springboard to future successes for the Tees Estuary Partnership.

Extending the designated sites is recognition of the conservation achievements of our partners, from management of industrial premises to attract breeding avocet, the creation of a popular nature reserve at RSPB Saltholme, and the return of breeding harbour seal to the estuary following major investments in improving water quality.

Natural England has worked closely with our partners on the Tees. The Teesmouth and Cleveland Coast SSSI will contribute to the sustainable development of the Estuary. We have also provided advice on day-to-day operations on the estuary 'up front' to set out how current activities can take place in a way that continues to allow wildlife to flourish. This advice is enshrined in the Memorandum of Understanding of the Tees Estuary Partnership, which has an ambitious vision to enhance both the economic and environmental assets of the area. This approach embodies the ambitions set out in Defra's 25 Year Environment Plan, which seeks to put people at the heart of nature by working closely with others and developing shared objectives at a landscape-scale.

Given its location close to the urban centres of Hartlepool, Stockton, Middlesbrough and Redcar, the importance of this area for people is integral to our work with partners. The designation will ensure that local communities continue to have this amazing natural resource available as part of their daily lives. Research has shown how the natural environment provides society with benefits in terms of helping mental and physical health, offering informal recreation opportunities, inspiration for art, and helping people feel connected with their local area. The long sandy beaches, nature reserves (including Natural England's Teesmouth National Nature Reserve) and harbour seal haul-outs are integral and well-loved parts of the local landscapes.

Whilst Natural England has led on this new designation, this achievement is thanks to the hard work and support of many key stakeholders:

- Tees Industry Nature Conservation Association
- industry and ports representatives
- local landowners
- local authorities
- Tees Valley Combined Authority

This partnership approach will continue in the coming years, as we work together to build the long term vision for the estuary.

Confirming the notification of the Teesmouth & Cleveland Coast SSSI, Natural England board member Dr Andy Clements said:

Protecting this landscape-scale site of intertidal mudflats and coastal habitats is a significant step forward for the region. The outstanding work of Natural England staff and our partners has achieved a great outcome for wildlife alongside the strong industrial heritage of the area, and will help to provide recreation and well-being benefits for local communities. That encapsulates what Natural England is all about.

The consultation on the SSSI took place alongside a consultation on the extension of the existing Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site to include additional marine, coastal and freshwater habitats and new bird species for protection. Following the consultation, Natural England will be has submitted its recommendations on these extensions to Defra for consideration.