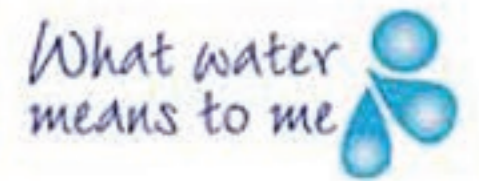


# The art of coastal collaboration

Since joining the River Deben Association, Simon Read has played an important role in engaging the local community in environmental debates and developing ways in which we can protect our watery landscape. CLAIRE HOLMES reports



**S**imon Read has an interesting relationship with the waterways of our area.

The visual artist, who is a senior lecturer for Middlesex University, has lived in Suffolk for 33 years and is passionate about protecting our rivers, estuaries and coast and the habitats they contain.

"I'm based on a big barge, which is moored in Woodbridge for the greater part of the year," he said. "This means that I've become sensitised to the river, the coast and to how tidal dynamics work."

"A lot of my work in the past has been about how an artist can reflect on how things happen and how they can relate to each other. Coming to Suffolk has provided me with a very real landscape to respond to."

As well as heightening his artistic awareness of water, living in Woodbridge has also encouraged Simon to immerse himself in environmental concerns relating to our rivers and estuaries.

And, since becoming a member of the River Deben Association (RDA) in the 1990s he has played a key part in making its work more accessible to the public.

"When I got involved through the association in the discussion over estuary management, I realised that it was far too complex and the language too arcane for most people to grasp," he said.

"So I thought what I should be doing as an artist is devoting a lot of time to thinking how I could articulate the space between science and policy generation."

Simon's aim is to encourage the community to play a larger role in the future of our landscape and to get involved in the development of environmental strategies.

One way the RDA has tackled this in recent years is through a focus on how community management schemes can help with saltmarsh restoration.

Saltmarsh is not only an important habitat – it also helps to protect sea



**GLORIOUS MUD:** Simon Read, right, and Kieran O'Mahoney at work on the saltmarsh project at Falkenham Marshes, on the River Deben. Above, parts of the project's end results.

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walls and defend against flooding by absorbing tidal energy.

"Up until the 1970s – when the EU Habitat Directive laid out very particular guidelines about habitat management – saltmarshes were considered common land to be exploited," Simon explained. "But since then it has been more widely understood to be a very important habitat."

"As a means of getting under the skin of how estuaries work and what is meant by habitat, we researched saltmarsh sites on the river that could lend themselves to a community management scheme and foster a greater sense of ownership and responsibility" he said.

In 2009, the River Deben Association carried out a pilot

scheme to protect the saltmarshes in Sutton from erosion.

This initiative was enthusiastically received by the local landowners and was supported by the Woodbridge Society, HMP Hollesley Bay, and the Sustainable Development Fund of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The success of this project has led to further collaborations to consider other sites, which could benefit from similar work.

Simon is currently celebrating the completion of a project at Falkenham Marshes, which was made possible thanks to funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund through Suffolk's

Touching the Tide programme, the Internal Drainage Board and Suffolk County Council, and with support from the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB, the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Marine Management Organisation.

Led by Simon and project managed by Kieran O'Mahoney, the scheme was driven by the Deben Estuary Partnership (which includes the RDA).

It saw the construction of three structures on the marshes to slow down the flow of the river through the site and allow sediment to settle, thereby reducing erosion and encouraging re-vegetation.

"What I wanted to do was explore the idea that perhaps what we should

be doing before creating new habitat is looking at what we have already got and how we can look after it," Simon explained.

Collaboration between different community groups is really important in Simon's opinion and he believes this is the only way we can address the environmental problems that we are currently facing.

"With issues relating to landscape change, there are so many different interested parties that if you try to develop a plan purely from a flood risk management point of view you miss a lot out and receive a great deal of opposition," he said.

"It's been recognised that the only way to get anything done is take the community with you. Any tension in there has to come out through partnerships."

Simon is also quick to point out that there is not necessarily one "right" way to focus on the development of different strategies. Instead, we have to be willing to engage in discussions with various parties and understand the need for reflection and creative thinking.

"There's no single solution. What interests me is getting involved in a conversation with communities," Simon explained.

"A lot of people think purely about problems, solutions and culpability – it's not as black and white as that."

"Coming from an artist's point of view I can afford to get involved in that conversation, but if I was an engineer I couldn't, as I would be put on the spot to supply a solution."

"But from my field, the need to develop a solution is not as important as increasing sensitivity to how natural systems work, which can lead to a greater likelihood of the right decisions being made in the long run."

"These situations are very complex and because there are so many interests involved, there is no single answer."

"We have to contemplate a whole suite of actions."