



Transforming
the Thames



Zoological
Society
of London

The Greater Thames Estuary Restoration Conference

Connecting Practice
and Learning Across the
Thames Estuary

Monday 9th November 2026

Huxley Lecture Theatre, ZSL,
London NW1 4RY





**Transforming
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Contents

Information	2
Organising Committee	2
Equality, diversity and inclusion.....	2
Sustainability	3
Food and drink	3
Photography and videography	3
Social media	3
Drinks reception	4
Travel information	4
Programme overview	7
Session 1, Transforming the Thames speed talks.	7
Session 2, Nature-Based Solutions & Innovation.	8
Session 3, Seascape restoration and connectivity.	8
Session 4, Driving restoration – Finance, incentives, and delivery.	9
Session 5, People, place, and restoration.	9
Session 6, Future planning.	9
Session 7, Panel discussion.	10
Abstracts.....	11





**Transforming
the Thames**



Information

The Greater Thames Estuary Restoration Conference is hosted by ZSL through the Transforming the Thames Partnership. If you have any questions about this programme, please contact transformingthethames@zsl.org

Organising Committee

Olwen Belgrove, Transforming the Thames Project Coordinator, ZSL

Anna Cucknell, UK Coastal Habitat Recovery Programme Manager, ZSL

Thea Cox, Transforming the Thames Senior Restoration Manager, ZSL

Celine Gamble, Transforming the Thames Senior Partnerships Manager, ZSL

Harriet McAra, Science Events and Communications Manager, ZSL

Dr Chris Yesson, Senior Research Fellow, ZSL

Equality, diversity and inclusion

At ZSL we believe that inclusion and diversity is fundamental to our future. We aim to promote equality and diversity in science through inclusive, accessible and equitable programming, ensuring the event is open to those from all backgrounds, roles, and levels of seniority. We strive for our panels of speakers to have a diverse representation and to amplify the voices and experiences of those from underrepresented backgrounds. [Read more about our EDI priority areas.](#)





Sustainability

At ZSL, we strive to employ the most environmentally friendly and sustainable practices possible. More information on ZSL's goals pertaining to sustainability may be found [here](#). This booklet is available in electronic format, with only a small number of printed copies available at the meeting. Please download this booklet onto your devices and refer to the e-copy. We will provide all registered delegates with a name badge and holder. Please return these holders at the end of the meeting and they can then be reused for future meetings.

Food and drink

Lunch will be provided for attendees, as well as refreshments during the breaks and on arrival. Please ensure you included any dietary requirements upon booking or contact transformingthethames@zsl.org to discuss these.

Photography and videography

Please note that photography and filming will be taking place at this event. Photographs and videos may appear on our website, social media channels or other promotional materials. If you would prefer not to be photographed or filmed, please let a member of the conference team or the registration desk know.

Social media

We encourage delegates to tag us when posting about the conference and use #ThamesRestoration26. LinkedIn: [Zoological Society of London \(ZSL\)](#). Instagram: [@TransformingTheThames](#). LinkTree: [/TransformingTheThames](#)





**Transforming
the Thames**



Drinks reception

All delegates are welcome to join for networking and drinks following the conference, details to be confirmed.

Travel information

The conference will be held in the Huxley Lecture Theatre at ZSL London Zoo. Access to the Huxley Lecture Theatre and Foyer is from the Outer Circle, Regent's Park, London NW1 4RY, and there is no need to enter the London Zoo site ([map location](#)).

Tube

Camden Town (0.8 miles). The nearest Underground station to the Zoo (Northern Line). Once out of the station, the route will take you along Camden Parkway and past the canal.

Chalk Farm (0.9 miles). Northern line. Edgware route alternative to Camden Town station, approximately the same walking distance from the Zoo. This station has lift access.

Baker Street (1.1 miles) Approx. 20 minute walk. Serviced by the Bakerloo, Circle, Metropolitan and Hammersmith & City Lines via Regent's Park, and by 274 bus northbound.

Regent's Park (1.2 miles) Bakerloo line station. Once out of the station, cross Marylebone Road and follow the signposts.





**Transforming
the Thames**



National rail

Euston. If arriving at Euston, the fastest route is to transfer to the Northern Line for Camden Town.

Kings Cross station. If arriving at Kings Cross station, the fastest route to transfer to the Northern Line for Camden Town.

Stratford International. If arriving at Stratford international, the most straightforward route is to walk through Westfields shopping centre to Stratford station, and take the Mildmay overground line to Camden road, and walk approximately 25 minutes to ZSL.

Stratford. Change at Stratford to the Mildmay overground line to Camden road, and walk approximately 25 minutes to ZSL.

Cycling

We have a public bike shed located at the East Service Gate, opposite the Huxley Lecture Theatre. There are also two TfL Barclays Cycle Hire scheme docking stations, one of which is in the small car park opposite the main Zoo entrance.

Bus routes

88 Northbound: towards Kentish Town. Alight on Albany Street at Prince Albert Road.

88 Southbound: towards Great Portland Street. Alight on Albany Street, Regent's Park Barracks.

274 Northbound/Southbound: Alight on Prince Albert Road, then cross the bridge to ZSL London Zoo.



Transforming
the **Thames**



Driving

The most sustainable routes to the Zoo are by public transport. If travel by car is necessary, the postcode for parking is NW1 4SX. Parking will incur a daily charge. Disabled parking is available in front of the main Zoo entrance and in the main car park.





**Transforming
the Thames**



Programme overview

08:45	Doors open Registration & arrival refreshments
09:15	Housekeeping Anna Cucknell
09:20	Welcome Kathryn England, ZSL CEO
09:30	Framing talk Anna Cucknell
09:40	Session 1, Transforming the Thames speed talks.

Talks

Jim Missen. Native Oyster Recovery in the Thames Estuary.

Sasha Shute. Transforming the Thames: Seagrass Restoration

Jemima Phillips. Restoring and protecting saltmarsh in the Greater Thames Estuary.

Rachel Fancy. Improvement and creation of Saline Lagoons on RSPB reserves.

James Dunn. Best BUDS - Beneficial Use in the Blackwater Estuary for habitat restoration and Natural Flood Management.

Lauren Band. Coastal Grazing Marsh restoration in Kent and Essex.

Catherine Head. Spatial and temporal water quality trends across the Greater Thames Estuary

Celine Gamble. The Greater Thames Estuary Restoration Exchange.



**Transforming
the Thames**



10:30

Session 2, Nature-Based Solutions & Innovation.

Chair: **Rebecca Bromley.**

Talks

Jim Warner. Harwich Haven. BUDS – the client/ port engineer’s perspective.

Katy Gilchrist. Working with Nature: Coastal Adaptation at Northey Island.

Mark Mulligan. Monitoring and modelling Nature-based Solutions strategy and effectiveness assessment in the Thames Estuary.

11:20

Break

11:45

Session 3, Seascape restoration and connectivity.

Chair: **Louise Lawton.**

Talks

Tom Cameron. Ornithology in the Greater Thames seascape - past and present.

Theo Blossom. Sharks Connect the Thames: co-developing shark conservation approaches through fisher engagement and acoustic telemetry in the Greater Thames Estuary.

Max Renton. Benfleet and Southend Marshes SPA Surveys and Mapping.

Howard Freeman. The Value of Seabass Nurseries: Productivity, Connectivity, and Contribution Rates.

Wanda Bodnar. Fish community responses to intertidal habitat condition and restoration across the Thames Estuary.

Alex Smith. Share Our Shores.

Chas Holt. Nightingales around the Greater Thames: key sites and future prospects.

13:05

Lunch





**Transforming
the Thames**



14:05 **Session 4, Driving restoration – Finance, incentives, and delivery.**

Chair: **Vincent Ganley.**

Talks

Nick Reid, Coastal Habitat - The Flood Risk Management Perspective

Kelda Hudson. BNG in highly dynamic coastal systems.

Mark Howland. Sustainable Farming is the key to Habitat Restoration.

David Tudor. Who reports the recovery? Establishing South East Marine Ecosystems.

15:00 **Break**

15:25 **Session 5, People, place, and restoration.**

Chair: **Sorwar Ahmed.**

Talks

Tianna Hewitson. Restoring habitats for everyone: embedding inclusivity into coastal restoration.

Adam Taylor. The Medway Muddies.

15:50 **Session 6, Future planning.**

Thea Cox. Transforming the Thames – Seascape Planning for 2030 and beyond

Graham Underwood. Planning the future, the Blackwater and Colne estuaries, Essex in 2050 and 2100.

Lisa Juangbhanich. REGENYSYS: Enabling a Regenerative Circular Bioeconomy of Wellbeing in the Thames Estuary.





Transforming
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16:20 **Session 7, Panel discussion.**

Chair: **Berry Mulligan**

Panellists: To be confirmed

16:55 **Conference close.**

17:05 Drinks reception





Transforming
the Thames



Abstracts

08:45	Doors open Registration & arrival refreshments
09:15	Housekeeping Anna Cucknell
09:20	Welcome Kathryn England, ZSL CEO
09:30	Framing talk Anna Cucknell
09:40	Session 1, Transforming the Thames speed talks.

Talks

Jim Missen. Native Oyster Recovery in the Thames Estuary.

Setting the scene for the project is the approximately 95% decline of the European native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) and their associated habitat, oyster beds and reefs in the UK since the 1800s. The native oyster in the Thames has a rich cultural heritage spanning back to Roman times when they were first harvested, and they continue to be an integral part of the area’s identity. Following their peak, populations in the estuary have undergone significant declines, with some of the very few remaining pockets of the species still existing in the Thames Estuary.

Native Oyster Recovery forms part of the broader TtT programme and seeks to create positive outcomes for the environment and local community. The talk will provide an update on the recovery projects in Kent and Essex, describing the project lifecycle from action plan creation and site selection through to survey results, before outlining plans for recovery actions next year. Sharing



**Transforming
the Thames**



the lessons learned, illustrating the reality of restoration and the impact of iterative learning rather than presenting it as a linear process.

Sasha Shute. Transforming the Thames: Seagrass Restoration

Seagrass meadows are important intertidal habitats in the Greater Thames Estuary, providing nursery and refuge areas for fish and other marine species, while supporting feeding birds at low tide. Through Transforming the Thames, ZSL, Project Seagrass and Essex Wildlife Trust are working together to restore and reconnect these habitats across Kent and Essex.

Prior to the project, all three organisations had experience delivering seagrass restoration within the estuary. Transforming the Thames brings together this collective knowledge to develop shared, evidence-led approaches to transplantation and monitoring, while adapting methods to local conditions. In May 2026, ZSL led the first seagrass planting for Transforming the Thames at Egypt Bay, Kent, supported by Project Seagrass and Essex Wildlife Trust. A total of 882 seagrass cores were transplanted from the donor meadow at Two Tree Island, Essex. Ongoing monitoring is assessing both transplant establishment and recovery of the donor meadow, providing evidence to refine future restoration methods.

These findings will inform the next phase of delivery, including further ZSL-led planting at Egypt Bay and a new restoration site at St Lawrence Bay in 2027, led by Essex Wildlife Trust and Project Seagrass, as the partnership works towards a more connected and functioning estuary.

Jemima Phillips. Restoring and protecting saltmarsh in the Greater Thames Estuary

Saltmarsh habitat has declined by 43% in the Greater Thames Estuary over the past 130 years. Transforming the Thames aims to focus on small-scale restoration interventions to help protect existing saltmarsh from further





erosion and to help restore small areas of marsh. Restoration will be carried out a site on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent by ZSL and MSEP and at two sites on the Blackwater in Essex by EWT. Interventions may include the use of coir or brushwood barriers placed strategically throughout existing saltmarsh and the creation of sedimentation fields.

Rachel Fancy. Improvement and creation of Saline Lagoons on RSPB reserves.

From arable to avocets, the Transforming the Thames programme is supporting the conversion of a newly acquired area of arable land into a new saline lagoon at RSPB Wallasea. This lower-salinity lagoon (<10 ppt) will complement the existing lagoons at Wallasea and provide valuable new habitat for breeding avocets and gulls, autumn passage waders, and wintering wildfowl. In addition, newly planted scrub areas are expected to attract species not currently recorded at Wallasea, such as yellowhammer. The programme has also funded a new predator fence around an existing saline lagoon at RSPB Old Hall Marshes, which aims to improve productivity for birds that currently breed on the site.

James Dunn. Best BUDS - Beneficial Use in the Blackwater Estuary for habitat restoration and Natural Flood Management.

The RSPB is working with Harwich Haven Authority, Essex Wildlife Trust and the Zoological Society of London to deliver habitat restoration and Natural Flood Management in the Blackwater Estuary through the Beneficial Use of Dredged Sediment. The project will see deposition of approximately 50,000m³ of sand dredged from Harwich Haven's approach channels at two strategically important locations in the Blackwater Estuary to protect eroding saltmarsh, sheltered creeks and harbour of West Mersea. The project will make use of material, that would otherwise be deposited at sea, to create nesting habitat for beach-nesting birds including little tern, ringed plover and oystercatcher



**Transforming
the Thames**



and roosting areas for overwintering wildfowl. The project is funded by the Environment Agency's Natural Flood Management Programme and the Transforming the Thames Programme. This talk outlines the outcomes and benefits of the project as well as challenges and obstacles to delivery.

Lauren Band. Coastal Grazing Marsh restoration in Kent and Essex.

Working with private landowners in Kent and Essex Wildlife Trust, the RSPB is delivering coastal grazing marsh restoration projects at three sites across the Greater Thames Estuary. Through a combination of earthworks, grazing infrastructure, solar-powered pumps and sluices, the projects aim to improve hydrology and habitat condition, benefiting breeding waders such as lapwing, redshank and oystercatcher. This talk will showcase the work delivered to date and outline how we will monitor outcomes and project success.

Catherine Head. Spatial and temporal water quality trends across the Greater Thames Estuary.

The Environment Agency has been undertaking water quality monitoring nationally for 30 years, and this data is freely accessible but under-utilised. We are utilising this dataset to understand the spatial and temporal water quality at over 1200 sites across the Greater Thames Estuary. Fifteen determinants, for example orthophosphates, nitrates and chlorophyll, are being examined. This will allow us to identify areas of high and low water quality, informing future areas suitable for habitat restoration, as well as problem areas where engagement with stakeholders is needed to begin to address water quality issues.



**Transforming
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Celine Gamble. The Greater Thames Estuary Restoration Exchange.

Restoring coastal habitats at scale requires more than individual projects. It needs a connected community where practitioners, regulators, researchers, industry and communities can share knowledge, tackle common challenges and develop solutions together.

As part of Transforming the Thames, we are developing the Greater Thames Estuary Restoration Exchange – a collaborative network connecting those working to restore coastal habitats across the estuary.

In this five-minute speed talk, we will introduce our vision for the Exchange and explore how it could support practical knowledge sharing, skills development and collaboration through site visits, themed webinars, knowledge exchange and the Transforming the Thames restoration conferences.

Our ambition is to build a practical community that helps overcome shared barriers and enables more effective coastal habitat restoration at scale across the Greater Thames Estuary.

10:30

Session 2, Nature-Based Solutions & Innovation.

Chair: **Rebecca Bromley**

Talks

Jim Warner, Harwich Haven BUDS – the client/ port engineer's perspective.

BUDS is considered an excellent example of innovative thinking which can deliver real benefits for nature and people. Despite this, it is extremely difficult to get consent from regulators, consents invariably coming with conditions which expensive, onerous and show little understanding of the engineering process. Following the completion of the first stage of a 78ha saltmarsh restoration project in Copperas Bay on the Essex Stour estuary, this presentation will focus on the practicalities of BUDS work from an engineering



**Transforming
the Thames**



and cost perspective and will set out the changes in attitude and approach needed for BUDS to become a commonplace reality instead of small, localised one-off projects.

Katy Gilchrist, Working with Nature: Coastal Adaptation at Northey Island.

Northey Island nature reserve lies within an area of national and international importance for nature conservation and is valued for its cultural heritage, remoteness and tranquillity. The island is bordered by the largest contiguous area of saltmarsh in the Blackwater Estuary; however, rising sea levels have caused significant losses through coastal squeeze. Without intervention, little or no saltmarsh would remain at Northey Island by the end of this century. Delivery of the Northey Island Coastal Adaptation Strategy since 2018 directly responds to the risks and impacts of climate change through sustainable habitat management. The project aims to create, strengthen, diversify and enhance saltmarsh and associated freshwater habitats for the long term. Key interventions include two managed realignments (building on the UK's first managed realignment at Northey in 1991) and the beneficial use of dredged sediment across four locations.

Outcomes have been monitored using a range of approaches, including bird, fish, benthic invertebrate and vegetation surveys, alongside drone-based assessment of topography and habitat structure. Northey Island now acts as a demonstration site for proactive coastal adaptation, showing how working with natural processes can help address the impacts of climate change.

Mark Mulligan, Monitoring and modelling Nature-based Solutions strategy and effectiveness assessment in the Thames Estuary.

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for coastal resilience require evidence both to determine where interventions are most appropriate and to demonstrate whether they remain effective over time. Within the DEFRA FCRIP Catchment





**Transforming
the Thames**



to Coast programme, we combine low-cost, spatially distributed monitoring with process-based and long-timescale coastal modelling across the north Thames Estuary to support both NbS strategy and effectiveness assessment. Our monitoring uses open-hardware FreeStation sensors to measure inundation depth and duration, wave power, tidal flow magnitude and asymmetry, and wave-driven erosion at intertidal and defence-line sites. These high-frequency observations provide baseline data for identifying vulnerable locations, calibrating and testing models, and measuring the performance of interventions including support for saltmarsh establishment and wave-attenuating structures.

Alongside monitoring, we apply a coupled modelling framework in which a coastal dynamics model resolves inundation, waves, tidal flows and tidal asymmetry, while an evolution model translates these processes into longer-term patterns of erosion, deposition and shoreline change. Simulations over 100-year and exploratory 1000-year horizons are used to examine sediment pathways, morphological trajectories and the durability of potential NbS under changing sea level and sediment supply.

We focus on two contrasting sites: Leigh-on-Sea, where the foreshore, sea wall and railway are exposed to wave attack, overtopping and tidal scour, and Two Tree Island, where erosion of a historic coastal landfill risks exposing legacy waste. Particular emphasis is placed on tidal asymmetry as a control on net sediment transport and on distinguishing storm-driven erosion from normal tidal variability.

Together, monitoring and modelling provide complementary evidence: observations establish present-day processes and intervention performance, while models allow alternative strategies and future trajectories to be tested. We argue that integrating affordable in-situ monitoring with process and morphological modelling provides a practical framework for deciding where and what NbS to implement, whether they work, and how durable they are likely to be in a changing estuary.





**Transforming
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11:20 **Break**

11:45 **Session 3, Seascape restoration and connectivity.**

Chair: **Louise Lawton**

Tom Cameron. Ornithology in the Greater Thames seascape - past and present.

As part of the Transforming the Thames Research subgroup - we will present on the many and varied volunteer led research initiatives in Ornithology across the Thames seascape. From outstanding and Internationally critical work on Brent geese, through ringing groups and research plans on connectivity and complexities on bird behaviours in the future.

Theo Blossom. Sharks Connect the Thames: co-developing shark conservation approaches through fisher engagement and acoustic telemetry in the Greater Thames Estuary.

The Greater Thames Estuary is an internationally important coastal ecosystem that supports populations of threatened sharks and rays, yet major knowledge gaps remain regarding their movements, habitat use, and reproductive ecology. At the same time, recreational anglers and charter skippers have raised growing concerns about declines in local shark populations and the need for more locally relevant fisheries management.

The Sharks Connect the Thames project adopts a collaborative approach, building on existing partnerships with the recreational and charter fishing community to investigate the ecology of four focal species in the estuary: tope (*Galeorhinus galeus*), spurdog (*Squalus acanthias*), starry smoothhound (*Mustelus asterias*), and thornback ray (*Raja clavata*). Anglers and charter skippers will work alongside the Sharks Connect team to tag sharks, collect



**Transforming
the Thames**



biological data, and record observations through a catch-recording programme.

An acoustic receiver network across the Greater Thames Estuary will track the movements of tagged individuals, while biological sampling and portable ultrasound will help identify reproductive condition and confirm the location of important pupping and nursery habitats. Combining telemetry with fisher knowledge will provide insights into seasonal habitat use and the connectivity of essential shark habitats in the estuary.

By co-developing the aims and methods with those who know the estuary best, the project aims to strengthen relationships between fishers, researchers and management agencies. The ultimate goal is to collect the evidence needed to inform conservation measures for threatened elasmobranchs in one of the UK's most important estuarine ecosystems.

Max Renton. Benfleet and Southend Marshes SPA Surveys and Mapping.

This project undertook comprehensive surveys to assess the abundance, distribution, and condition of designated features within the Benfleet and Southend Marshes Special Protection Area (SPA) and its supporting habitats. The aim was to strengthen the local evidence base and improve the robustness of site condition assessments and management advice.

Phase I and Phase II intertidal surveys, conducted between March 2025 and April 2026, mapped the extent and distribution of intertidal habitats and sedimentary features, with a focus on ecosystem service provision. A total of 85 sediment samples were analysed using Particle Size Analysis to characterise sediment properties, while 56 infaunal samples supported biotope classification according to the JNCC Marine Habitat Classification for Britain and Ireland.

In parallel, winter waterbird surveys (2025/26) comprised four monthly counts (November – February) targeting key non-breeding SPA species, including Dark-bellied Brent Goose, Dunlin, Grey Plover, Knot, and Ringed Plover. Across



**Transforming
the Thames**



these surveys, over 38 species were recorded, totalling 82,641 individual observations.

Additional quadrat-based biodiversity surveys within Pacific oyster (*Magallana gigas*) reef habitats quantified epifaunal diversity and abundance within this non-native habitat.

Together, these integrated datasets provide a detailed, spatial understanding of intertidal habitat structure, sediment composition, and food resource availability, supporting improved ecological assessment and evidence-based management of the SPA.

Howard Freeman. The Value of Seabass Nurseries: Productivity, Connectivity, and Contribution Rates.

European Seabass are commercially and culturally important across their range from Norway to Senegal, but particularly in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean. However, they are considered vulnerable to over-exploitation resulting from past fishing pressure and highly variable interannual recruitment. This recruitment variation is thought to be primarily driven by mortality in the early-life stages. Juvenile seabass settle and develop in estuarine nursery systems; however, much remains unclear regarding the factors that influence settlement, survival and subsequent recruitment, and larger scale population dynamics such as connectivity and contribution rates of different nurseries to adult populations. Understanding the mechanisms that drive these processes is critical to sustainable fisheries management and effective habitat restoration approaches and is the primary focus of seabass research undertaken within the University of Essex.

This presentation will provide a brief overview of past findings and future directions across the group's current seabass research, highlighting how these complementary projects contribute to a broader understanding of the species' early-life history and population dynamics. Topics will include habitat associations, population connectivity, spawning phenology and other



**Transforming
the Thames**



emerging areas of research, to provide a snapshot of our current understanding and the questions that will shape future research.

Wanda Bodnar. Fish community responses to intertidal habitat condition and restoration across the Thames Estuary.

Estuarine ecosystems support diverse fish communities through habitat connectivity, nursery areas, refuge, and feeding opportunities. However, urbanisation, habitat loss, shoreline modification, and climate change have altered their structure and function. The Thames Estuary has experienced extensive historical habitat degradation, and while restoration and habitat creation projects are increasing, their effectiveness in supporting fish biodiversity remains uncertain. This study assesses fish community responses across natural, degraded, restored, and created intertidal habitats in the Thames Estuary. Environmental DNA (eDNA) metabarcoding is used to evaluate fish community composition across 23 sampling locations. Paired fyke-net surveys at 10 sampling locations provide complementary data on fish occurrence, size structure, and habitat use, while environmental variables (salinity, temperature, turbidity, and dissolved oxygen) are analysed to identify drivers of community patterns. Stable isotope analysis is applied to investigate trophic relationships and habitat use. A seagrass restoration component further examines fish community development across restoration stages, including restored meadows, natural reference habitats, and control sites, using eDNA metabarcoding. By integrating eDNA, fish surveys, functional guild analysis, and environmental gradients, this research will improve understanding of how restored and created habitats support fish biodiversity, connectivity, and ecological function. The findings will provide evidence to guide restoration monitoring, adaptive management, and future habitat enhancement strategies in the Thames Estuary.





**Transforming
the Thames**



Alex Smith. Share Our Shores.

Since 2024, Share Our Shores has been protecting vulnerable beach-nesting birds by deploying cages on their nests to reduce predation and damage at a remote and protected nature reserve. Ringed plovers, little terns and oystercatchers have all faced significant and worrying declines in recent decades. Across daily surveys conducted by staff and volunteers, all nests are recorded and mapped alongside deployment of cages and trailcams. The site is divided into zones to reduce footfall and disturbance from public, giving the nests the best chance of survival. Prior to interventions, in 2023 just one out of 33 ringed plover nest attempts was successful; in 2025 and the second year of interventions, 16 out of 28 nests were successful. The project has already had some fantastic success, but has encountered difficulties with disturbance and predators, so there is scope for further interventions and redesigns to give Essex's beach-nesting birds the best chance of recovery.

Chas Holt. Nightingales around the Greater Thames: key sites and future prospects.

Nightingale is a red listed bird of conservation concern. It requires dense understory for territory establishment, and a combination of suitable locations for nesting and bare ground within vegetation for foraging. Despite often considered to be a bird of woodland, an increasing proportion of the national population of Nightingales is now found in a range of complex scrub habitat types. Scrub habitats support increasing concentrations of Nightingale territories at sites bordering the Greater Thames Estuary area, with several of the largest concentrations of territories in the country now located at the interface with the coastal fringe in north Kent and Essex. Nightingales at these sites are dependent on successional habitats at sites such as previously developed land, ex quarry workings, or marginal farmland. Historic land use, soils and hydrological characteristics in these favoured areas are often associated with relatively slow rates of habitat change, while others benefit





**Transforming
the Thames**



from management. Although not a coastal bird, the Nightingale can serve as a flagship indicator species of wildlife-rich habitats which are an increasingly important terrestrial feature of the fringes of the Greater Thames Estuary. Current and future research will be presented which contributes to progression of a regional conservation strategy for Nightingale, very relevant to the Transforming the Thames area.

13:05 **Lunch**

14:05 **Session 4, Driving restoration – Finance, incentives, and delivery.**

Chair: **Vincent Ganley**

Talks

Nick Reid, Coastal Habitat - The Flood Risk Management Perspective.

Managing the flood defences around the Thames Estuary is a balancing act, treading the line between protecting homes, businesses and infrastructure from tidal inundation versus maintaining the intertidal marshes and mudflats that are threatened by coastal squeeze. The majority of our defences were constructed or upgraded after the 1953 floods and now need significant investment if we want them to remain effective with our changing climate. This talk will explain the factors we consider - environmental, economic, social and organisational - in deciding what a sustainable future should look like and how to get there for the estuary, referencing our local shoreline management plans to highlight the opportunity they present.

Kelda Hudson. BNG in the intertidal.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is now a cornerstone of environmental policy; developments must leave biodiversity in a measurably better state than the



**Transforming
the Thames**



predevelopment baseline. While the application of BNG is increasingly established within terrestrial environments, its implementation in intertidal and coastal habitats presents a unique set of challenges. The dynamic nature of intertidal ecosystems, and limited availability of suitable sites can make the delivery and measurement of biodiversity gains difficult.

The Port of London Authority is a trust port and the landowner of the majority of the intertidal zone, as well as being the Statutory Harbour Authority for the tidal Thames. Realising the potential offered by the BNG regime to deliver significant benefits to the environment of the tidal Thames, the PLA has been developing an approach to intertidal BNG since 2021. This includes mapping the extent and condition of intertidal habitats, identifying opportunities for habitat enhancement and creation and developing a financial model for the sale of biodiversity units. This highlights both the opportunities and limitations associated with intertidal habitat enhancement. Attention is given to habitat restoration techniques such as managed realignment, saltmarsh creation, and the incorporation of nature-based solutions within coastal infrastructure.

Mark Howland. Sustainable Farming is the key to Habitat Restoration.

Agriculture has been a key feature of the Greater Thames Estuary landscape for thousands of years and whilst it has, at times, been responsible for some of the environmental problems it must now be seen as one of the key solutions. The Essex Estuaries Farm Cluster looks to support farmers develop more sustainable farm operations based around nature friendly farming. Farmers, as custodians of much of the land around the estuary, are key to delivering habitat restoration, improved water quality and increased biodiversity alongside producing top quality, locally produced food for us all. Working together with members and taking a landscape scale approach, the farm cluster can help scale up existing examples that show that food production can sit alongside, and benefit from, a more nature friendly approach.





**Transforming
the Thames**



The cluster will provide a mechanism to channel both public grant and private investment to projects that deliver on the ground solutions, designed and supported by the people who manage the land on a daily basis.

Successful farm clusters elsewhere are already benefiting from private investment through BNG, Natural Flood Management and Nutrient Neutrality agreements, and we look to build on these successes along the coast.

Whilst our coast and estuarine habitats face significant pressure, the EEFC presentation will show how farmers who work on and manage these areas are a key part of the solution to ensuring that they have a sustainable future.

David Tudor. Who reports the recovery? Establishing South East Marine Ecosystems.

UK marine reporting is largely national and cyclical, running on three- to five-year assessment periods that miss the events and change practitioners observe each year. The Regional Marine Ecosystem (RME) model offers a complement: annual, regional, and built on collaboration rather than new monitoring.

Since 2008, South West Marine Ecosystems has grown into a platform of communities of practice, thematic webinars, an annual conference, a State of the Seas report and press work. Its twelve thematic topics cover natural systems and their management, and map onto UK Marine Strategy descriptors and marine plan policies, linking regional reporting to national obligations. Critically, RMEs do not monitor or hold data; they report the work of those who do, and build the social capital that makes collaboration possible.

With Environment Agency support the model has transferred to the East (2023) and North West (2024), and is now being established in the South East (SEME) and Thames. Drawing on newly published operational guidance, this paper sets out what starting a region takes: an anchor organisation, a steering group formed before anything else, staff with real contact networks, and realistic first- and second-year expectations centred on a conference and an annual





**Transforming
the Thames**



report. It reflects on early SEME progress, what transfers between regions, and where the model is self-sustaining and where it is not. Restoration is measured in decades, and the reporting that tracks it should be too. SEME is designed to become part of how this region works rather than a project with an end date, and it will only take root if this community wants it.

15:00 **Break**

15:25 **Session 5, People, place, and restoration.**

Chair: **Sorwar Ahmed.**

Talks

Tianna Hewitson. Restoring habitats for everyone: embedding inclusivity into coastal restoration.

Successful coastal restoration depends not only on restoring habitats, but also on ensuring the people restoring them reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. Creating inclusive opportunities to engage with nature can broaden participation, strengthen stewardship and build long-term support for restoration projects.

Drawing on experiences from queer volunteer opportunities for seagrass restoration in Essex, this presentation will explore why inclusivity should be considered a core component of restoration planning rather than an afterthought. Coastal conservation activities often present barriers to participation, including difficult terrain, transport limitations, specialist equipment requirements, financial costs, confidence, and a lack of representation within the environmental sector. Recognising and addressing these barriers can enable more people to contribute meaningfully to habitat recovery.





**Transforming
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The talk will share practical lessons from volunteer seagrass restoration events, highlighting simple changes that can make a significant difference. These include providing clear and accessible communications before events, offering flexible volunteering roles that cater to different abilities and interests, ensuring appropriate and accessible equipment is available, and creating opportunities for people to contribute both in the field and through supporting activities.

By sharing successes, challenges and lessons learned, this presentation aims to encourage restoration practitioners to consider inclusivity alongside ecological objectives. Building diverse and representative volunteer communities not only improves access to conservation but also brings a wider range of perspectives, skills and experiences that can strengthen restoration projects and help deliver more resilient, community-supported outcomes across the Greater Thames Estuary.

Adam Taylor. The Medway Muddies.

For almost a century gangs of clay diggers known as Muddies dug millions of tons of mud from the remote salt marshes of the Medway estuary to satisfy the relentless cement industry of the 19th century.

They worked hard, drank hard, and played even harder, changing the tidal flow of the Medway forever.

This talk uses animation, sound and imagery to illustrate this forgotten piece of social history and highlights how nearly 100 years after 3 million+ tons of clay was removed, efforts are being made to restore lost habitats.





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15:50

Session 6, Future planning.

Thea Cox. Transforming the Thames – Seascape Planning for 2030 and beyond

Transforming the Thames is dedicated to restoring the ecological function of the Thames Estuary, enhancing its recovery, connection and resilience, and re-establishing it as a thriving coastal wetland for nature and local communities. This is our long-term vision for the future of the Thames. As the Transforming the Thames project approaches the end of its first 18 months of delivery, the partnership is looking ahead to how we continue to work towards this vision in the most impactful and strategic way. This talk will explore the seascape recovery planning progress so far for the next phase of Transforming the Thames and what seascape recovery from 2030 onwards could look like.

Graham Underwood. Planning the future, the Blackwater and Colne estuaries, Essex in 2050 and 2100.

The Blackwater and Colne estuaries in Essex have been the recent focus of research looking at ecosystem services, natural capital and future pressures due to climate-change. As part of the EU project REWRITE ([Rewilding and Restoration of Intertidal Sediment Ecosystems](#)), stakeholder interviews and an in-person workshop have investigated possible future outcomes for seascape scale restoration. This approach will be described, and some of the next steps planned in the development of future scenarios that may be feasible and achieve stakeholder support.

Lisa Juangbhanich. REGENYSYS: Enabling a Regenerative Circular Bioeconomy of Wellbeing in the Thames Estuary.

REGENYSYS is a 5-year ESRC-funded project exploring the capacity of the Thames Estuary to transition towards a Regenerative Circular Bioeconomy of





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Wellbeing (RCBW). The project examines four interconnected subsystems – Ecological Regeneration, Regenerative Food Systems, Bioprocessing, and Regenerative Culture – through a systems-thinking, transition theory, and design-thinking approach. It seeks to co-create transition experiments that support regenerative innovation, alongside an experimental education programme designed to strengthen stewardship and engage young people with future green and blue economy career pathways.

Drawing on over 50 stakeholder interviews conducted across Kent and Essex, desk-based research, and participatory systems mapping workshops, the research identifies significant strengths and challenges within the Thames Estuary's ecological regeneration landscape. Findings reveal a mature and highly engaged nature recovery system supported by Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), farm clusters, conservation organisations, local authorities, nature partnerships, water companies, and community stewardship initiatives. There is strong foundation for biodiversity enhancement, catchment management, habitat restoration, and landscape-scale recovery.

However, a key challenge is in delivering regeneration at a scale required to achieve long-term transformation. Existing efforts remain constrained by fragmented governance, limited institutional capacity, reliance on short-term funding, and uneven engagement beyond the environmental sector. Growing interest in biodiversity net gain, nature markets, blended finance, and community stewardship presents opportunities to broaden participation and unlock new forms of investment.

We argue that future progress depends on building coalitions that connect nature recovery with health, education, culture, and economic development, enabling more coordinated and long-term forms of regenerative governance across the Thames Estuary.

