



Fact Sheet

Water, Water Everywhere

That water is one of the defining characteristics of a wetland is an obvious statement, and yet we mustn't overlook its importance to the landscape. Water plays a vital role in how wetlands function for nature and for people. Ditches, known as rhydes, criss-cross the Avalon Marshes, acting as both fencing and water troughs for cattle while also providing habitats for wetland species and keeping the peat soils wet and full of carbon. Maintaining the right water levels is vital – but different people don't always agree about the 'right' levels are.



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Managing Water Levels

The Avalon Marshes are a man-made landscape. Nearly all of the rivers and rhydes are man-made and, thanks to two large pumping stations and lots of sluices and weirs, the levels of the water can be controlled. Water levels tend to be kept higher in the summer to provide drinking water for livestock and 'wet fencing' and lower in the winter to increase the area's ability to cope with flood water. In general farmers like to keep the water levels lower than conservationists do.

Who Wants What: Water Levels in the Levels

AGRICULTURE

The favoured case for livestock farming is to have summer water levels moderately high (about 40 cm below ground level) so that the ditches have some water in them, but not so high that the fields are soggy and the best grass struggles to grow. In some places farmers want more drainage to help them grow high value crops like maize, which is fed to cattle. When livestock are moved indoors or to higher ground in the winter, water levels are then kept lower so that winter flooding is kept to a minimum.

CONSERVATION

Wetland wildlife, especially wetland plants, tends to benefit from higher water levels. In spring, having water levels at, or just below, ground level makes the ground soft enough for birds to probe with their beaks before the levels drop in time for the hay to be cut. In winter, flooded fields act as a magnet for thousands of wintering waterfowl, one of nature's spectacles. The other big benefit of keeping peat soils wet is that it stops the peat drying out and releasing large amounts of carbon dioxide.