

£440,000 bill for flood plan

GOVERNMENT inspectors are investigating the amount of money spent on drafting proposals to allow a beauty spot to flood.

The Environment Agency wants to remove flood defences at the Cuckmere Estuary near Seaford and allow the land to return to salt marsh and mud flats.

The agency, supported by English Heritage, the National Trust and the South Downs Joint Committee, says the controversial plan would create a wildlife haven and return the estuary to a more natural state.

But figures uncovered by Lewes MP Norman Baker in April revealed the agency had already spent £440,000 researching the possibility.

The National Audit Office – the Government's spending watchdog – is investigating whether that money has been well-spent.

by RACHEL PEGG

A spokesman said inquiries began as the result of a letter to the House of Commons public accounts committee.

He said: "We are examining the steps being taken by the Environment Agency to maintain the Cuckmere Estuary."

Residents are unhappy at the idea of the estuary, which attracts 350,000 to 450,000 visitors a year, being swallowed up by the sea.

Mr Baker said: "It is wrong for an unelected Government body to pursue a policy which hasn't been approved independently and which local representatives, myself and Nigel Waterson, MP for Eastbourne, have objected to."

"It is not acceptable for them to spend a sum of this magnitude."

Roger Frost, vice-chairman of Seaford Residents' Association,

said: "We have always supported the opposition to this idea of abandoning the Cuckmere Valley to become mud flats."

"I hope the National Audit Office gives them a spank on the wrist for wasting so much money."

Rupert Clubb, Sussex area manager for the Environment Agency, who has met National Audit Office inspectors, said the money could save many millions in the future.

If the agency were to try to defend the estuary it would have to spend about £17 million for the life cycle of the defences, probably 100 years.

A managed retreat, he said, would cost only about £2 million.

He said: "Sometimes when you have to take decisions you need the information to back up that decision."

A lot of the work we have done has been to get those facts."

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Dive in to find out about dolphins

CHILDREN are being given a chance to brush up on their knowledge of dolphins and whales.

The Sussex area of the Sea Watch Foundation is running a course to show youngsters how to identify different species and find out how the mammals live in the sea.

The course will be held at the Booth Museum in Brighton during August.

The foundation is a conservation charity that monitors whales and dolphins around the UK.

Sussex is one of 35 regional

groups which contribute sightings of 28 different types of sea mammals, ranging from the fin whale to the harbour porpoise.

Regional coordinator Stephen Savage said: "We get a lot of enquiries from parents about courses for children."

"We run various sessions in schools which have been very popular so we have been keen for some time to run a summer course."

"We have a life-sized inflatable bottlenose dolphin and the museum has some fascinating skeletons

which the children will be able to study. They will find out about the dolphin sightings that occur off Sussex each year and what we have learned about them."

The course is aimed at seven to 11-year-olds and will run on Tuesdays throughout August.

It coincides with the foundation's National Whale and Dolphin Watch event, where hundreds of people will be recording what they see.

The course costs £2.50 a session or £10 for all four. Spaces are limited so call 01273 424339 to book.