



Bay of light

Source talks to Susannah Bleakley of the Morecambe Bay Partnership, the driving force behind the proposed Morecambe Bay and Duddon Estuary regional park.

Q What's your connection with Morecambe Bay?

In the early 1990s, as a student at Edinburgh University, I was looking at environmental conflict for my Masters' dissertation. Morecambe Bay was a natural choice, as my parents had just moved to the area.

I was really drawn to the local fishing communities, full of larger-than-life characters, and so proud of their traditional way of life. Professionally, I've led the Morecambe Bay Partnership's work since 1997. I've got great enthusiasm for the place as a whole, and I want to see the communities around the bay thriving.

Q What's so special about this area?

Morecambe Bay is a big place, large enough for all of Manchester within the M60 to fit inside at least twice. The size and scale gives it a grandeur and sense of openness that is relaxing to the soul.

The view across the bay from either side has a foreground of changing intertidal channels, with a backdrop of hills – whether the Lake District or the Pennines. Islands like Piel and Chapel add further interest to this view.

Most of the Northwest coast to the south is low-lying, but we have headlands and viewpoints from which you can really appreciate these vast panoramas.

Earlier this year, visitors from the Regional Parks Xchange described the bay as 'elemental' – light and water, sea and sky. To experience Morecambe Bay with all its multi-layered sea- and soundscapes prompts a strong emotional reaction, and engenders a sense of freedom. Yet this wilderness is only a short distance from our urban centres.

Q What's your vision for the area?

I'd like the whole bay to be better connected, with really high quality transport infrastructure and new ferry links from Heysham to Fleetwood and across to Barrow.

The existing railway links the communities on the north and east of the bay, but we need to significantly improve some facilities and connections in order to make the whole bay area work, and provide it with an integrated green transport network.

A coastal path exists, but is neither promoted nor well maintained. Signage could definitely be improved. The proposed Morecambe Bay cycle route would also be a great asset.

Something hardwired into the human condition draws us to the coast – Morecambe Bay has lots to offer, but it certainly needs to lift its game. The facilities are patchy and its assets are undersold.

We're pushing for local authorities and other agencies in the bay to work together and formalise a regional park grouping.

Q What are the major obstacles you face?

The 'park' part of the term 'regional park' is unhelpful and misleading, especially in Cumbria where it tends to be associated with planning restrictions. We need to find a way to express the concept of a regional area of regeneration activity which will bring benefits to the economy and to communities, while still celebrating the natural space and wildness of Morecambe Bay.

The bay is split in half by the Lancashire/Cumbria county boundary, and in some places this is a problem. A regional park would be a really valuable aid to better collaboration, but the practicalities are doubly complicated by the administrative set up. Functionally, though, the place works as a cohesive unit, with continuous social, communication and economic links.

However, the biggest obstacle is probably cash and selling the concept. I still need to show the politicians that the idea is irresistible and has great added value.

Q What's the bay's best-kept secret?

The whole place is so little known – it has a low profile and a rather melancholic image. It's time to change that, though, as there are

some great places: the islands of Barrow, for example – Piel Island, which has its own castle, and a king with a huge spirit of enthusiasm. Walney Island, in the shadow of Barrow's shipbuilding cranes, has a maritime character – travel south and the field boundaries are built from beach boulders. There's drama to the western shore, while families of shelduck and eider duck scuttle in the sheltered eastern marshes. Eiders are great, I love their charming, cheeky call.

Hoad Hill, Hampsfell and Arnside Knott all give you knockout panoramas for only a little climbing effort. Humphrey Head is full of mystery and folklore, magic and myth. It claims the last English wolf, and today is the home of otters. It's right in the heart of the bay, and if you take just a short walk along the sands, you get a sense of the beautiful enormity of eternity.

I always get excited by a trip to Sunderland Point – so very much its own place – with its character coming from the isolation as the entry road is covered by the highest tides, when the whole place is cut off for a few hours at a time.

Then there are the great family beaches on the Duddon Estuary at Haverigg, Hodbarrow and Roanhead. What are you waiting for?