



Coastal Habitats

Coasts are areas where the land meets the sea. There are many different types of coastal landscape and habitat. There can be soaring cliffs, sandy coves, rolling sand dunes or salt marshes. Each of them is a precious habitat. In fact, about one quarter of the planet's diverse life is found in coastal habitats. This means they need to be protected. Here are three special coastal habitats found around the UK.

Cliffs

Cliffs are normally created when softer rock is worn away by the sea and wind. The harder rock is left behind like a wall. The force of the wind and sea forms features such as caves, arches and stacks. Sea cliffs are a challenging environment for plants. Only the toughest species can find home on the rocks and cope with the salty air. However, cliffs are perfect habitats for sea birds. They can nest high up and stay safe from predators. Bass Rock, in Scotland, is home to the biggest gannet colony in the world. 150,000 of these birds spend the summer on this lump of rock. They even make it appear white because there are so many. Other birds such as puffins are popular sights during the summer too. Sea birds rely on healthy oceans. Though some species are flourishing, others are struggling because over-fishing and pollution are making it harder for them to find food.

Sand dunes

Sand blown inland by the wind can build up into sand dunes beyond the tide line. Special grasses such as sand couch and marram grass take root and help stabilise the dunes. Dunes are home to unique wildflowers and grasses as well as insects, birds and reptiles. However, they are fragile and can be harmed by careless walkers. The delicate plants can be damaged and nesting birds like oystercatchers or plovers can be disturbed. Moreover, development of coasts is also removing these beautiful and important habitats. Coasts are popular places to live and visit but it is vital to take care of them too.

Salt marshes and mudflats

Salt marshes and mudflats are formed in sheltered, low-lying areas of coast. The sea rises to flood the land when the tide is high. When the tide goes out, it leaves behind mud and silt which settles on the land. This rich mud is home to many small living



things such as crabs, worms and molluscs. Wading birds enjoy feasting on these treats. Further inland, salt-resistant plants like samphire grow. This area is called salt marsh and it is used by many species as a 'nursery' where their young are protected and can grow. Salt marshes can also act as flood defences, protecting the land beyond. Finally, salt marsh is called a 'carbon sink' because the plants collect carbon dioxide from the air and store it deep underground. This makes these habitats fantastic for helping in the fight against climate change. However, like sand dunes, they are threatened due to coastal development.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. What does 'flourishing' mean?
2. What does stabilise mean?
3. Find two words in the section on sand dunes which mean the opposite of strong and tough.
4. What word in the section on sand dunes means the same as 'important'?
5. What does 'low-lying' tell us about the coast where mudflats form?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

I

Why are cliffs safe from predators?

R

Where is the largest gannet colony in the world?

S

In what ways are humans threatening sand dune habitats?

R

Give an example of a wading bird's diet.

S

Summarise the different reasons why salt marshes are important habitats.