

## **A Nature development plan for the schelde estuary**

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The Schelde estuary is one of the last European estuaries with a gradient from salt over brackish to fresh water tidal areas. Especially these last are a very rare habitat. However the ecological value of the area is strongly reduced due to water pollution, habitat loss and degradation. Simple protection measures like designation of these sites under national and international nature conservation laws are no guarantee to safeguard these sites as the external pressures are so important and major new infrastructure works for safety and shipping are planned. A more integrated approach is needed. In this paper we present an approach, based on the concept of ecosystem health, to derive ecological quality objectives, mainly based on the different ecological functions of the estuary. These objectives were then translated into different restoration strategies. The first one is mainly based on small improvements in the present management. The second one explores the possibility of extending the wetlands adjacent to the estuary in order to reduce the input of water and nutrients. The third scenario maximises the estuarine surface by managed retreat and the development of controlled inundation areas with a tidal regime. The possibilities but also the problems associated with each of these scenario's will be discussed.