

Kicking sand in the face of a good idea



By DAVID BRUCE
in Hawera



STICKY SITUATION: In his 1982 New Plymouth beach project, artist Michael Smither (right) explains to Mayor David Lean how the twiggy piles trap sand.

FACED with a rocky foreshore and too little beach, some find it hard to see sand as a problem.

Sand comes in all colours and textures. Silvery sand, fine and silky soft, glittering with mica, or golden, gritty with fragments of shell and fossil. Pure white coral sand and the soft dove-grey of pumice.

Green sands tell of serpentine and reds of eroded scorias. Even gold dust is a sand. Run a magnet past Taranaki black sands and the iron in them will stand to attention, under the heat of a summer sun their capacity to hold heat is legendary.

Some sands become ingredients for glass, others for mortar and concrete.

Over the past century and a half, Taranaki iron sands have been the stuff of pioneer steel-making speculation and boom and bust exploitation. It has also been the ingredient of conjecture and legend as our errant memories join with aberrant tides to shift the stuff on and off our beaches with unpredictable irregularity.

Bell Block's rumbling stone beach can suddenly become gentle with sand, while sandy Waitoitoi erodes to sculptured papa and fossilised puriri.

When the Pelican disgorges its dredgings off New Plymouth's foreshore, some folk monitor every millimetre of sandy gain at a possible centre city beach while others fret about sand burying kai moana-bearing reefs.

At no small expense, Wellington city has transported a little of a Golden Bay sand mine to become an Oriental Bay beach. Fed into a geotextile sausage skin, sand will be the basis of Opunake's artificial surf reef.

Another sand-filled geotextile tube is seen as part of Patea's \$1 million plan to protect the entrance to its crumbling river mouth.

We build sand castles, write love letters and draw lines in sand; sometimes we bury our heads in it. As deadlines and destiny approach, our sands of time run out.

Sometimes we try to control the shifting sands. Before he left Taranaki's ironsands in search of the softer sands of an eastern coast, artist Michael Smither devoted a lot

of energy to the control of sand movement on New Plymouth's northern beaches. His innovative use of green waste, garden prunings and driftwood groynes to stabilise sand movement was the precursor to much of the foreshore dune re-planting that has subsequently occurred.

Waxing poetic he once wrote of how driftwood and twigs opened their arms to entangle other flotsam to form rafts against which the lighter sand could drift and stabilise, to become in turn the habitat for stabilising native vegetation.

DOC is critical of the dune restoration programme using garden waste and lopped branches, but a genuinely concerned conservator might try pulling weeds rather than counting them

South Taranaki latched on to this idea in a big way at Patea's river mouth. There, every year, every prevailing westerly wind drives millions of grains, hundreds of cubic metres of sand east towards the river mouth. Funnelling up channels in the cliff faces and swirling along the beach, the sand spills into Mana Bay, and washes out the narrow harbour entrance to form dangerous bars.

Stinging, gritty, pervasive, the sand blasts picnic areas and clogs roadways. Where others have too little sand, Patea has too much.

The concept of utilising the district's green waste to assist in stabilising the sand offered a double-whammy of benefits. With an increasing burden on the region's increasingly sophisticated and expensive landfills, anything that did not have to go into the rubbish bag and the non-biodegradable waste stream but could offer a green solution instead, seemed like a good idea.

On the wind-swept, sand-blasted

slopes beside the river mouth, twigs and prunings, lawn clippings and tree limbs could all contribute to a massive green raft, blotting up the drifting sand. Occasional overburdens of soil and clay would help to consolidate the building dune, occasional planting exercises would help to beautify it.

Sounds great and it is working. Allowed to dry out to minimise the risk of cuttings taking before being woven into the raft fabric, the skeletal remnants of many weekends of gardening, tree-loppings and storm cleanups are now part of the framework of the dunes, flaxes and native grasses have been planted on the fringes and are establishing.

Thousands of cubic metres of green waste have not been put into landfills, have not burdened the district's wheelie bins and overloaded rubbish collections.

Stand there on a windy day and you can actually see the sand building against twigs and branches.

Pity is that not everybody approves. The Department of Conservation has chosen to look at the downside of the exercise rather than its benefits.

Citing the Patea dune stabilisation project as "unfortunately legal" and stating that they do not approve of stabilising mobile dune systems with garden waste, DOC has set out on a weed hunt, blaming the project for the occasional presence of 249 species of exotic weed (including common vegetables) they have identified over a four-year period.

They do admit that not all of those persist at the site, due to the application of clay overburden and they draw a long bow when they blame the dumping for the presence of gorse, boxthorn, pampas and brush wattle, which probably blew in on the last westerly. Not that that is an excuse for them to stay, of course.

Surely the answer is somewhere in the middle ground, the advantages of the project are manifold, both environmentally and economically, stabilising the dunes and helping to solve the growing problem of garden waste as an unnecessary ingredient of modern landfill. In reality too, the weeds "establishing" are far from being an epidemic, even if they are diverse.

A genuinely concerned conservator might try pulling them rather than counting them. The department might also try to enlist the support of the dump users to help. Patea is good at that.

It is to no one's advantage to kick sand in the face of a good idea.