

Conservation Values of Harakeke Dunes, mouth of Whangapehu River
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Throughout New Zealand, natural vegetation of dunes has been among the most severely modified of ecosystems. Coasts of Wanganui Conservancy are no exception; fires, grazing, pine plantings, urban developments (beach batches, roads), off-road vehicles, and spread of weeds are some of the modifying agents.

Relatively unmodified dune vegetation is rare, even over small areas. The dunes at Harakeke which are Conservation estate cover 250 ha, and are especially important because in many parts, have comparatively low levels of modification. Not only does Harakeke contain large areas of unstable dune with plenty of spinifex and nationally threatened species like pingao and sand daphne (Pimelea arenaria), but it also has extensive, damp sand flats with a cover of native sedges, rushes, herbs and occasional native shrubs. Each sand flat differs in its vegetation from every other sand flat. Nationally threatened herbs such as Mazus "pumilio" and Sebaea ovata are locally common here (Sebaea was found in January 1989 after having not been seen in New Zealand for nearly 20 years - we now know it at Waitotara River mouth as well).

Among other plants, there are patches of creeping sand iris (Libertia peregrinans), a species which may deserve recognition as a nationally threatened species. The Harakeke population of sand iris is almost certainly the largest in the North Island.

Fernbirds occur in tall vegetation of the sand flats. Waterbirds (e.g. royal spoonbill, shoveler duck, shags), terns, and gulls use the river margins, and black-backed gulls nest in some dune hollows.

It is, therefore, of major concern that certain potentially serious weeds are widespread at Harakeke. Two that are especially serious, as they were very conspicuous and spreading until recently, are pampas grass and boxthorn. Gorse occurs in a few local sites. During the winter and early spring of 1989 a restart team worked with DOC staff to destroy most of the pampas and boxthorn. Some control was also done on gorse, brier rose and willow. Because there is native toetoe scattered through the block, those doing pampas control needed training in the differences between these two grasses.

At Himitangi Beach, rather similar native vegetation on damp dune flats contained a few pampas clumps about 5 years ago; today these flats have probably 50% cover of pampas.

Sources of pampas and boxthorn beyond the Harakeke conservation land should also be investigated, and, wherever possible, eradicated with the co-operation of land holders concerned.

Recreational use causes some damage to dunes and vegetation e.g. trail motorcycles, four-wheel drive vehicles, horses, white-baiters. Rabbits and stray cattle graze the vegetation.

Summary

Dune vegetation at Harakeke is regionally and nationally significant, as a comparatively little modified dune system. At least four nationally threatened plant species, and the regionally threatened fernbird occur here.