

Cattle a controllable threat to plants, DOC says

Cattle were one threat to the rare plants on Wanganui's coastal reserves which the Conservation Department could control, the department claims.

Regional conservator Bill Carlin said the recent shooting of stock which had invaded the reserve was a response to one of the major threats that faced

"this special area on the Wanganui coastline".

DOC scientist Colin Ogle said the Whitau reserves between the Kaitoke Stream and the Whangaehu River were remote and primitive areas which provided nesting sites for many birds including the regionally threatened fernbird as well as gulls and hawks.

"The reserves are home to the katipo spider, native grasshoppers, beetles and numerous native moths, including one rare variety which feeds only on the native sand daphne which is itself threatened."

They have more than 110 native plants, at least five of which are nationally threatened including the rare native herb

Sebaea, a member of the Gentian family.

Mr Ogle said Whitau was the best example of a protected dune area between Taranaki and Wellington and offers Wanganui people something special right on their doorstep.

Cattle were not the only threat to the area. Motorcycles smashed the pingao plants, leaving them to be undermined by the wind, and off-road vehicles churned up the soft ground in wetlands, damaging plants. Efforts were being made to remove these threats as well.

Weeds in the area include pampas, boxthorn and gorse, although there have been substantial control efforts against pampas and boxthorn in recent years. Fire was another threat.

"The area is a treasure that's under a lot of threats and cattle are at least one DOC can control," Mr Carlin said.



Wanganui Department of Conservation advisory scientist Colin Ogle (left) and conservation officer Bob Halsey inspect a flax plant which cattle have eaten.

Dune destruction concerns

The destruction of dune vegetation along Wanganui's coastline is concerning Department of Conservation staff.

About 250 hectares of dunes on the west bank of the Whangaehu River mouth have been formally protected as a scientific reserve since 1991, but cattle from neighbouring farms are continuing to get into the reserve where they trample the dunes and wetlands, eat the native vegetation and spread weeds.

Cattle are not the only problem the Conservation Department has to deal with — the public is also a concern.

The reserve is bordered by Harakeke Forest, Justice Department land, private farmland and the Whangaehu River.

Conservation officer Bob Halsey said the public helped push the cattle on to the reserve while driving through the forest and off-road vehicles being driven over the dunes also contributed to erosion in the area.

Wanganui's regional advisory scientist for DOC Colin Ogle said the reserve was one of the biggest and best dune reserves in the country. "There is nothing as big in such a natural state," he said.

"Among the plants which grow here are four threatened native plants."

The plants are sebaea ovata, a yellow-flowered relation of gentians, sand pinea (or

sand daphne) sand iris and mazus novezeelandiae, a creeping herb with comparatively large white flowers and related to garden snappers.

"The reserve's populations of sand iris and mazus are almost certainly the largest in the North Island," Mr Ogle said.

Under the Reserves Act, the department has the right to hold any stock it finds on the reserve and to have them destroyed if the owners do not claim them after two weeks.

Mr Halsey said letters had been sent to the cattle owners asking them to remove the stock from the reserve.

"We are going to take a much harder line from now on," he said.

"The land is set aside as reserves and cattle are not compatible with reserves."

Mr Ogle said the department regarded the dunes as "an extremely important reserve". Bordering the scientific reserve is a scenic reserve which cattle frequently graze.

Mr Halsey said the department also planned to stop the cattle grazing on the scenic reserve but its priority was the scientific reserve because much of the scenic reserve had already been turned into pasture by the cattle.

"Stopping cattle grazing in the scenic reserve would help stop them from going into the scientific reserve," he said.