

Weed Alert! Sea Spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*)

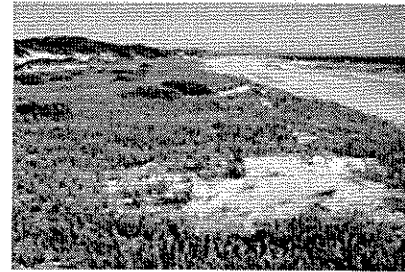
by Amber Bill

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Virtually impossible to purge once established, sea spurge is one invader we have to nip in the bud. Early detection offers the best chance of eradication so learn how to recognise this weed. If you see it, report it to your Conservancy Weed Technical Support Officer or to biosecurity staff at the Regional Council.

Sea spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*) has already invaded the south coast of Australia where it forms dense, continuous stands in foredune and backdune habitats.

Dr Mike Hilton of University of Otago warns that sea spurge has not yet been recorded in New Zealand, but its seeds are likely to float across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand. Dr Hilton says; "We are fortunate to be able to learn from the experience of Australia, where there has been low awareness of the impact of exotic species in dune systems and no systematic surveillance until recently. Eradication of sea spurge, once established, is proving virtually impossible. Our best chance in NZ is to get as many eyes on the look out for this and other invaders as possible."



Sea spurge, *Euphorbia paralias*, South Croppies Beach, Tasmania 2001

Photo: Mike Hilton



Sea spurge, *Euphorbia paralias*, photographed in Tasmania

Photo: Mike Hilton

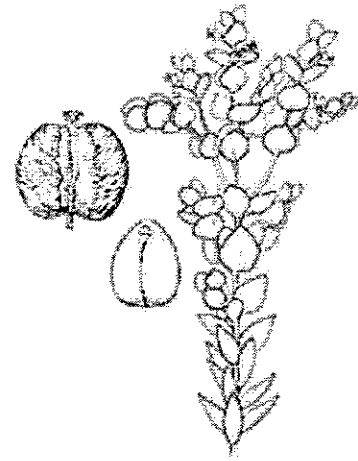
Sea spurge grows to about 70 cm tall. It has multiple stems originating from a common base at ground level. Stems are covered in small (up to 3 cm long) closely packed leaves that are a blue/green colour. Small green flowers occur on the end of prominent stems that die off each year. As with other *Euphorbia*'s the sap of sea spurge is milky (and toxic).

DO NOT confuse sea spurge with the threatened native New Zealand shore spurge, *Euphorbia glauca*. The native *Euphorbia* is distinguishable from all others by its large cigar-shaped leaves and red cups around the flower-like inflorescences ('*cyanthia*'). Also, unlike the invader, the native has single stems when growing on accreting dunes.

According to Dr Hilton, *Euphorbia paralias* invaders are most likely to appear along the western shores of New Zealand, however, recent studies of circulation in the Tasman Sea indicate sea spurge could strand almost anywhere in New Zealand.

Sea spurge is a dune shrub of Europe and was introduced to Australia in ship ballast water and is now widespread from Perth to Tasmania and is spreading up the eastern seaboard of Australia. The University of Otago is researching the ecological impact of sea spurge in Tasmania. Over the medium to long-term sea spurge inhibits or prevents sand movement, reducing the area of habitat for indigenous species. Sea spurge may also be an agricultural weed — several hectares of sea spurge have recently established in pasture bordering dunes on the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia.

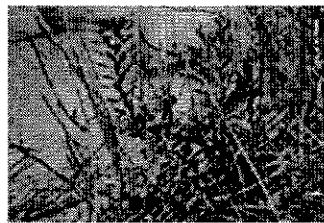
The dispersal of sea spurge in Australia has been singularly rapid. Following its accidental introduction to Western Australia and South Australia early last century, it has spread across the southern coast, most recently reaching the west coast of Tasmania in 1984. Since 1984 it has established large populations, often tens of hectares in area, in almost all dune systems across the north and west coasts of Tasmania.



Sea spurge, *Euphorbia paralias*, showing the flowers, fruit and seeds.

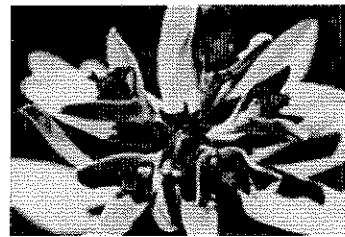
Illustration from Walsh, NG and Entwisle, T.J., 1999. *Flora of Victoria*, Inkata Press, Melbourne.

The seeds of sea spurge have a layer of spongy tissue that helps them float. This combined with their ability to stay viable for a number of years, mean that there is every chance that seeds may float their way from Tasmania to the coast of New Zealand. Seed may also arrive in New Zealand aboard ships, including sand dredges from Australia.



Multiple stems of the native *Euphorbia glauca*.

Photo: Cathy Jones



The native *Euphorbia* has distinctive red cups around the flower-like inflorescences.

Photo: Shannel Courtney

For more information about the potential invader sea spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*), contact Dr Mike Hilton, University of Otago, mjh@geography.otago.ac.nz or visit http://www.biosecurity.org.nz/files/Coastal_Invaders.pdf

To find out more about the threatened NZ shore spurge (*Euphorbia glauca*), visit the New Zealand Plant Conservation Network (www.nzpcn.org.nz).

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