

PIHA COMMUNITY NEWS

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Piha Beach – Sands of Controversy



Piha Beach and Moana Stream delta in the early 80s, before the sand build-up)

With the approach of winter the South Piha beachfront and its residents are bracing themselves for another onslaught of sandstorms, with sand obstructing driveways, spilling onto car parks and blocking drains. It continues to be a headache for Council, which has to keep clearing the car parks and drains, while residents are increasingly apprehensive of growing dunes that eventually will block sea views. The problem of how to deal with the ongoing sand problem has plagued Council and community for years, and continues to be a topic of hot debate.

Newcomers to Piha might be interested to know that the topographies of Piha Beach have changed considerably over the years. There is the theory that the sand problems all started with human intervention on the beach 20 years ago. So what happened?

Piha Beach, now more commonly referred to as South Piha, is unique to the Waitakere Coast. Because of its

small size in comparison with other West Coast beaches, and its prominent headlands, namely the Camel and the Lion, it is referred to as a pocket beach. These headlands together with the beach's northerly aspect give the beach a sheltered position from the predominant southwest winds and swells. Piha used to have a regular rip system that generally moved southward along the beach, gaining strength around the Pakiti Reef, into the bay at the southern end and finally easing as it passed the Beehive Rock. In the past this rip removed excess sand off the beach and deposited it out past the Beehive on what was known as the Piha Bar. In recent years, because of a build up of sand on the beach and an ongoing movement of the high water mark seaward, this rip system has been weakened and has lost its ability to cleanse the beach of excess sand. The Piha Bar, once famous for its quality surf (seen in the classic NZ surf movie 'Children of the Sun'), has gone, rips and holes have become unpredictable and this summer new sandbanks have started to appear further out to sea.

By the early 1950's the beachfront had been largely developed to the degree it is today. The beach front sections had been built on, the roading system was in place, the dune area in front of the surf club had been levelled for car parking and the low dune area at the southern end of the beach was grassed and was also being used for parking. In 1966 the carpark in front of the Piha Surf Club was tar sealed.

In theory all of this development could have been expected to have had an effect on the shape and dynamics of the beach. But nothing much changed and there was not the problem of wind blown sand that we now have. The beach levels were considerably lower than they are today, and were often almost completely covered by the sea during spring tides and high swell situations. The water would lap up against the low but steep grass banks, and rush up the Moana stream delta. Wet sand is a lot less likely to blow in strong winds. The strong and predictable rip system regularly removed excess sand off the beach. This state of affairs on the beach pretty much remained the same until the mid-1980s.

1980 saw the first of several screen fence systems placed on the beach. These fences were very effective in catching wind blown sand and, as the initial fence became buried, additional fences were constructed, either on top or seaward of the original. In time they created a substantial sand dune. The early 1980's also saw the progressive

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Piha Beach – Sands of Controversy

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The first reclamation works in Nov.'80, before the Resource Management Act!



April '82, Moana stream delta reclaimed.

reclaiming of the small delta through which the Moana stream meandered.

By 1985 the stream delta had been fully reclaimed and the stream had been concreted. The higher beach levels and the associated seaward movement of the high water mark meant there was now a considerable area of beach that was rarely covered by the tides. This increasing area of dry sand was prone to be blown landward by onshore winds. None of the reclamation work had taken into consideration what effect raised beach levels would have in generating wind-borne sand.

The problem of wind-blown sand continued and by 1991 the Piha Environmental Group had produced a plan, which they felt would alleviate this problem. In May of that year a large artificial dune was created on and in front of the screen fencing. This new dune was planted in Spinifex and Pingao, the theory being that beaches require a fore dune as a transition buffer between the beach and those areas behind. The planting of the dune in sand-binding plants was to reduce the problem of wind blown sand by catching

this sand within the dune area. The theory in general was ok, but in practice it didn't quite work out as intended. Sand dunes of course do not remain static, and in fact grow as the sand accumulates. Today we still have an ongoing problem of wind blown sand,

and are now faced with an ever-increasing dune system that is beginning to block views from car parks and properties, invade grassed areas, roadways, car parks and private property and block storm water systems. At the time the project caused considerable controversy in the community. At the 1992 Resource Consent Hearing on the artificial dune creation Commissioner A. Turner found "that the reconstruction of the beachfront by the shifting and shaping of sand was not necessary nor desirable; but that to undo that work would itself be a major interference with the beachfront and would cause more damage." The dune was there to stay.

There is well-documented evidence that sand levels on the Waitakere Coast have been increasing for years, and many would say that the build-up of sand at Piha would have occurred anyway. In 1999 NIWA conducted a survey that included the progradation of sand on both South Piha and North Piha between 1940 and 1993. The survey showed sand build-ups over this period of up to 77 meters at North Piha. But, interestingly, natural build-up at South Piha was significantly lower. Said NIWA: "At Piha Beach the shoreline has accreted about 20m in between 1940 and 1993. The growth in this area is in part due to the reclamation to form the carpark and dunes, which built the shoreline seawards. At the Moana Stream the large progradation is a function of artificial dune building (...)." However, later in the report NIWA concluded that human intervention had no effect on ocean currents or beach levels, if put in the context of the massive forces at work along the entire coast. The NIWA report underwrote the Piha

Screen fencing and visible widening of dry sand area in 1985



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South Piha today

Coastal Management Plan, which was adopted in 2000 following a lengthy consultation process. The Plan endorsed the dune planting theory in an effort to curb the windblown sand problem and planting and dune-building projects are ongoing today.

We know what was. We can only guess at what would have been today, had there been no human intervention. But now the huge increase in numbers of people using the beach sees the artificially created dune system at South Piha struggling to cope with the pressures that are being put on it. Something the Piha Coastal Management Plan had perhaps underestimated.

So where to from now? There is no question we are stuck with the dunes, as Commissioner A. Turner had concluded in 1992. The official view today is that

the dunes are still incomplete as an 'eco-system', and that building them up and out further should, eventually, solve the wind-blown sand problem, never mind the ocean views. New sand-catching screen fences to create another dune have been placed on the beach either side of the boat ramp just –recently. But some question if, in view of the impact of growing human activity today, trying to create a big and wide out-of-bounds 'dune eco-system' along the entire beachfront at South Piha is really sensible, or desirable. Perhaps, taking all of the above factors into account, the real question is, how do we see South Piha beach evolving in the coming years and how would we like it to be?

If it is our aim to create a beachfront where the needs of all user groups are met in an environmentally sustainable way, a beachfront that is aesthetically

pleasant to look at, in tune with the west coast landscape, clean and with an infrastructure that is functional and can cope with the huge influx of people, than perhaps we should be flexible and keep our options open as to the means of achieving this objective. We should also accept that, when dealing with the subtle forces of nature, many projects remain a question of trial and error. The Piha Coastal Management Plan said: "The effect of the reclamation works undertaken in the past at Piha Beach will be monitored on an ongoing basis". WCC is currently working on its Long-Term (10 year) Community Plan. Perhaps it is time for us to step back, evaluate the past 10 years, look at what has worked and what hasn't and think about how we see South Piha in 10 years time.

Monique Davis

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