

Dune Conference Newsletter

Being a Muriwai local, I had noticed an increase in the use of vehicles on the beach over recent years. I was concerned that it was affecting public safety, leading to the alienation of non vehicle beach users, and causing unsustainable damage to dunes systems, and their flora and fauna.

Fortunately, this had also been noticed by the Auckland Regional Council (ARC) who resolved to work to reduce the damaging and dangerous use of vehicles on the beach including 4WDs , dirt bikes and quad bikes.

Late last year, the ARC sought a park ranger to take up an education and dune protection role on the beach over the summer. It was a great opportunity for me to be a part of a campaign to improve beach safety and dune protection in my community.

My education role is just part of a much wider campaign. This year, the ARC, Rodney District Council, local iwi, NZ Police, the NZDF, DoC and Hancock's Forest have worked all together with common goals for Muriwai.

The campaign has included a by-law review, an education campaign, an enforcement programme, infrastructure and dune protection and finally, monitoring and evaluation.

Shortly before I took the reins at Muriwai, speed limits were introduced on the beach. A media campaign informed people that the speed limits had changed and that park staff and the police would be patrolling the beach.

Out on the beach, I was telling users about the new speed limits, educating people to show care and consideration for all other beach users and to understand the significance of the dunes and the need for their protection.

By the end of the first week on the beach, I realised I had taken on a rather interesting job.

There were quite varied reactions to my presence on the beach. Many people were surprised to see a ranger : we haven't had a ranger actively based on the beach before. Others questioned us on what the bylaw changes meant for them 'was it still ok to drive or ride on the beach?'. Then there were the recreational 4x4 vehicles, motorbikes and quads riders that just saw rangers like me, and the police, as an inconvenience to their fun racing up and down the beach and in the dunes.

What really surprises me is that people have such different perceptions of the beach and sand dunes. For some, the beach is a place to relax, yet for others it is a race track. Some see a sand dune as a fragile ecosystem needing protection, for others it is merely a great place to drive a car or jump a motorbike.

After a few weeks of patrolling the beach and monitoring dune areas on a daily basis, I noticed that the level of unruly beach and dune activity decreased noticeably. It seems that many beach users began to see the value of our presence and the education role we perform.

The mere presence of a park ranger on the beach seems to have a big impact on people's behaviour on the beach and in the sand dunes. By simply taking the time to stop and talk to people about the issues faced by the beach and dunes we saw a real improvement in users' behaviour (admittedly, some people did need more than one reminder!).

During the course of the summer, a pleasant beach environment developed and it looks to me as though there is an expectation that this presence on the beach will continue.

The police presence on the beach was just as effective. Their ability to not only educate but also enforce, added significant weight to the campaign and people's perception of the serious nature of it.

Once the vehicles on beaches education campaign was well underway, I began work on the establishment of dune protection zones and the control of illegal access ways. I decided to put up two types of dune fencing. One stops illegal access into the dunes and forest beyond, the other ring fences areas of well established dunes and protects barren areas for dune planting and restoration through this winter.

Once the need for such dune protection became more widely understood, fencing of such zones became more acceptable and less likely to be vandalised by beach users for illegal access. This had been a major problem for many years.

We have been checking this fencing regularly and repairs are carried out as soon as possible.

There are 21 individual fence lines making up about 1500m of dune protection fencing along approximately 6km of beach and foreshore. In the last three months there have been eight breaches of fences, only four being major. It appears now that these major breaches have been done by the same group of people accessing the dunes and forest by 4x4, and they have now been caught by forest patrols.

The vehicles on beaches campaign for this year has achieved a lot; however, I believe its continuation is critical to cement its successes. The momentum must be maintained to maximise education opportunities and meet the expectations of all beach users to create a safer beach environment in conjunction with necessary dune protection.

While great community support is being hugely appreciated, the biggest ongoing issue that I have is the parochial nature of some locals, especially motocross riders and some 4x4 drivers who continue to believe that it is their beach and dune area and they can do what they want. I am presently getting together with local police to work on this problem.

As a full time ARC ranger at Muriwai now, I'm looking forward to the year ahead and working with the community and other groups to continue to build upon the dune work we have been able to get underway this year.

For more information contact:

Van M Haresnape

Park Ranger

Muriwai Regional Park

Auckland Regional Council

Phone: (09) 4118076

Email: van.haresnape@arc.govt.nz