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# Conference seeks to protect our favourite playground

BY MURRAY CRAWFORD

Described as a 'back to your roots' conference, the Dune Restoration Trust of NZ is currently holding its annual conference in Wanganui. The trust aims to share information with interested parties with an emphasis on the use of New Zealand native dune vegetation to restore the dune's natural character, form and function.

It's the trust's 11th annual conference and the first time it's been held in Wanganui. Formed in 2007, it aims to provide sustainable management on dune eco-

systems and to promote awareness of their need for protection, restoration and conservation. Trust chairman is Harley Spence, who has achieved a long held ambi-

tion to have a job that involves his favourite playground - the beach. Harley is a director of Coastline Consultants, which advises district and regional councils on environmental issues. He says the trust has worked hard to achieve a good mix of expertise and is achieving its aims by liaising with scientists, local authorities and the community.

"The most important reason for protecting our dunes is because to many Kiwis it's the place to play," says Harley. "When dune areas are damaged or lost, it decreases our experience of being able to go to the beach. Secondly, sand dunes are an incredibly important and fragile ecosystem. Plants and animals have developed over millions of years to exist in that particular spot and there's nothing better than what is naturally there. When it's lost, we end up with a problem. Thirdly, protection of our dunes is important in the debate about rising sea levels and climate change. The dunes give us protection from the sea so if we lose them, we lose our protection. Many countries around the world are spending millions of dollars to try to reverse the

problems that have been caused."

That's where the importance of retaining sand dune vegetation comes in, says Harley. "If we lose the vegetation, we lose the dunes. If we lose the dunes, we lose the beach. At present we have a unique opportunity to not repeat mistakes that have been made overseas and to enhance what we already have."

Harley says there's been a major shift over the past ten years concerning awareness of our coastal environment and its importance. "Now it's not a matter of should we, but how we go about it. The ongoing task of the trust is to make sure the issues are raised. Last year some Lotteries funding enabled me to attend an international sand dune conference in Spain. I came away even more confident that we're on the right track here in New Zealand and that the world is learning from us."

Delegates for the conference have come from the North Cape to the Bluff, with one southern farmer concerned about seals breaking down fences and allowing



Harley Spence checks out the dunes at South Beach.

his cows to graze along the sand dunes.

A purpose of the conference is to allow members to catch up with the latest research on dune ecosystems. The trust commissions dune research projects and publishes regular newsletters to update members on activities. Research is presently being carried out at Ohiwa, Petone and Eastbourne. Past projects include the development of reliable techniques for raising low cost spinifex seedlings for dune revegetation programmes, seed collection and germination techniques. Studies relat-

ing to flowering, fertilising and seeding have been carried out, along with the restoration of exposed sites such as the planting of spinifex and marram grass on the foredunes at Santoft in the Rangitikei. The trust has also conducted a review of rabbit and hare control methods on sand dunes.

The conference will look at the form and structure of the Wanganui dunes and the systems that drive them, the weeds and threatened plants of the region, the special insects they're host to, historical and cultural aspects of the dune systems and seed sort-

ing techniques. There'll also be two field trips, one to Castlecliff to look at the educational use of the dunes by schools, weed management, beach grooming and the impact of vehicles and subdivisions. The second will be to a coastal windfarm to view its massive dune building operation. While there, delegates will take a look at the Patea beachfront to see how successful the use of green waste has been to stabilise the dunes. Also on the agenda is a welcome to the Borders Bookshop chain, the trust's first sponsor.

The conference won't be all study and research. A little recreation has been planned as well, including a barbie at the venue (Wanganui Yacht Club) and a conference dinner on the Waimarie.