

# Driven to the brink – the Frying Pan

Story and pictures by Dave Hansford

Perhaps it's some early childhood association with sandpits, but some of us still regard sand dunes as a place to get out and play.

Certainly, somebody has carved these ones up pretty badly. Wellington City Council Park Ranger Brian Thomas is ruefully tracing a set of four-wheel drive tracks that go up a steep sandy face and then plough headlong into a swathe of fragile dune plants – spinifex, pimelea and endangered pingao.

The plants, now crushed and dying, were doing a fine job of holding part of this dune complex known as the Frying Pan – a sandy basin on the seaward boundary of Kinnoull Station on the South Coast and the only one of its kind in Wellington.

Life is hard enough already for the plants trying to survive here; thrashed by Cook Strait gales, withered by searing summer drought. The last thing they need is a tonne-and-a-half of sport utility vehicle on top of them.

Brian had erected signs here asking drivers to keep off these dunes – which apart from anything else are on private property – but the signs are lying vandalised on the ground.

Not that he has anything against people driving to the Frying Pan. If they want to use four-wheel drive to get here to fish, or picnic, or dive, he's all for it.

"But some people regard this as a destination for four-wheel driving alone and that can't happen," he says.

The reason is obvious. Pingao is a beautiful, but beleaguered, native sand binder. It's now rare throughout most of the country, and the Frying Pan is one of its last naturally-occurring refuges in Wellington. But these golden tendrils, wherever they have been crushed by tyres, have withered and died.

"Pingao spreads by putting out runners which catch the sand and bind it, allowing dunes to form and stay put," Brian explains. "But it only needs one vehicle over them, and they die."

When that happens, precious sand is lost to the wind. The dune erodes and, weakened, "blows out" in the next gale, scattered by the winds. That's a tragedy not just for the pingao and other plants, but all the insects, lizards and birds that called them home and the reason the Council is coordinating a project to get these dunes fenced off.

It's not going to be easy; timber posts are out, for starters. "We can't run the risk of someone coming out

here with a chainsaw and destroying all our hard work in five minutes," he says. "It'll need to be steel railway girders or similar."

And you don't just take a spade to this kind of country – posts will need to be rammed with some serious machinery, before thick wire ropes are threaded through them. It's difficult, expensive work, but funding from the Department of Conservation's (DoC's) Biodiversity Fund, as well as contributions from Greater Wellington Regional Council, and a willing land owner has made it possible.

Tyres are not the only things to have left tracks on the Frying Pan; signs of hares are apparent on the sand. Once the fence is taken care of, the Council will look at doing something about the pests and weeds here. Goats, while they don't appear to be eating the dune plants, nevertheless clamber the steep greywacke buttresses behind, stripping away the vital vegetation that holds the hills.

Clumps of marram, an introduced sand binder, with an aggressive growth habit, is also a threat because it alters the very form of the dunes, building them up high, steep and vulnerable to the elements.

Today, vapours of salt settle on empty gravel flats, where ranks of dunes once kept sea and land at a safe distance. But if vehicles can be kept off the survivors, and if the pingao and other plants can be left to do their job, Brian believes the dunes can rebuild.

That's a future that fits perfectly with the ideals of Kinnoull Station's owner, Wes Garrett, who has already covenanted some of the station's native vegetation. "One of the philosophies behind the Kinnoull Station subdivision is to restore the land to its former glory," he says.

"These sand dunes are probably the most delicate area on Kinnoull, and we're very glad to work with DoC and Wellington City Council on their restoration."

The bid to save the Frying Pan comes not a moment too soon; as we leave the area, we spot a pair of oyster-catchers on the stony shore. And beneath the female's wing, a fluffy brown chick, not a week old. The trio are resting in the tyre tracks left by a four-wheel drive.

**Right:** Being run over even once means certain death for pingao plants. These ones – seen withering here at the Frying Pan – have fallen victim to a foray by four-wheel drivers. With no plants to hold them, dunes quickly scatter on the wind, leaving the shore more exposed to erosion.