



# OUR DISAPPEARING NATURAL DUNELANDS

Pingao mantles the dunes of Sand Hill Point, Waitutu.

Photo: G. McSweeney

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Our natural dunelands support a small but fascinating range of native plants and animals. Like many of our remaining natural areas, natural dunelands are threatened as a result of past and present development. Despite this, they are inadequately represented in our reserve system.

"To our left was the open ocean. To our right, mile after mile of low, rounded sandhills ... stretched out as far as we could see ... fringed with *Spinifex*, *Desmoschoenus* and other common arenarian plants".

This is an extract from Thomas Cheeseman's account of the dunes of Northland's Aupouri Peninsula in 1896. New Zealand has over 100,000 hectares of dune country bordering its coastline and therefore extensive natural dunelands covered with an array of distinctive indigenous species would once have been a common sight throughout the country. But to many early settlers New Zealand's dune systems were regarded as sandy wastes — unproductive unless developed. Unfortunately, such attitudes persist even today, and reflect our disregard for the protection of our remaining natural dunelands. They have been reduced to a fraction of their former extent. Together with lowland forests, shrublands, wetlands and tussock grasslands, they join the list of our most threatened habitats.

## The dune environment

The dune environment is one of the most extreme and exacting habitats in New Zealand. This ecosystem supports a small group of highly specialized plants and animals.

These species must resist desiccation by unchecked onshore winds, and withstand the burning effects of salt spray. They must cope with large amounts of



At Mason Bay on Stewart Island's west coast prevailing westerly winds have formed 100 metre high dunes covered in rata-hardwood forest. The more recent dunes in the distance support pingao, some marram and red tussock.

Photo: M. Haykes