Threatened sand dunes set for a golden future



Sand dunes at Duddon Estuary, Cumbria Natural England/Peter Wakely

Sand dunes are listed as the habitat most at risk in Europe. They are a sanctuary for endangered plants and animals like the dune gentian and sand lizard. However, many are being smothered and fixed by a tide of invasive scrub, becoming sterile, grassy hillocks.

Now the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has given initial support* for a £4.1million grant to an innovative four-year partnership project, Dynamic Dunescapes, which will restore some of the most important sand dune landscapes in England and Wales.

Natural England, National Trust, Plantlife, The Wildlife Trusts and Natural Resources Wales will work with local coastal communities to conserve and restore up to 7000ha in nine areas across England and Wales.

Sand dunes are a naturally dynamic habitat. As the coastal winds blow, new ‘embryo’ dunes are formed at the top of the beach and they slowly grow and shift to create the landscapes we know. The early stages of the project will explore how we can re-establish the natural movement within dunes, to create the conditions that some of our rarest wildlife relies upon.

Natural England's Chairman, Andrew Sells, said: "We're really excited about this fantastic project to save our dunes and give more people the opportunity to learn about our fascinating wildlife. Dunes are not only a backdrop to a day at the seaside – they are home to some of our rarest species and are in desperate need of help. That's why we're working with our partners from across the conservation movement – spanning two countries – to tackle this problem together."

The project will concentrate on improving the condition of nine identified dune cluster sites at: Lincolnshire Sand Hills; Studland Dunes, Dorset; North Cornwall Coast; Braunton Burrows; North Devon Coast; Swansea/Neath Port Talbot; Carmarthen; Anglesey/Gwynedd; Sefton Coast; and Cumbrian Coast/Solway.

The projects will include:

- conservation work to re-establish natural processes;
- a programme of removal of native and non-native invasive species;
- restoration and creation of dune slacks and dune wetlands;
- turf stripping and sand scraping to create bare sand patches;
- on site interpretation and a national promotion programme;
- community education activity, including a schools programme; and
- a programme of adult and youth volunteering.

Drew Bennellick, Head of Landscapes and Natural Heritage at HLF, said: "This is a really exciting project as it is pioneering a new approach to dune management. In recent decades many sand dunes have become smothered by thick vegetation. We now know that this is bad news for some of the rare species that make their homes among our dunes and need a mixture of open sand, pools of water and varied vegetation to thrive. Thanks to this National Lottery funding and the expertise of the partnership organisations, we can begin to find ways of addressing these pressing issues."

Hugely popular among beachgoers, there are 200m visits a year to sand dunes in England and Wales. Less well known is their role as a sanctuary for endangered plants and animals. Species that make their home in the dune landscape include:

- colourful flowers like purple milk-vetch and dune gentian;
- invertebrates such as the spectacular silver-studded blue butterfly and snail-killing flies;
- mosses and liverworts (with the diminutive petal-wort found only in dune slacks); and
- reptiles and amphibians such as natterjack toads, sand lizards and great crested newts.

Dunes have a long place in the cultural history of the United Kingdom. These special places include prehistoric sites around the coast and medieval religious settlements. Sand dunes are popular destinations for seaside recreation, from sand-castle building to surfing. The England Coast Path will open in its entirety by 2020. This will allow more people than ever to access the sand dunes along our shores. This project will ensure those visitors can enjoy our sand dunes, now and in the future.

Marian Spain, Plantlife Chief Executive, said: "We're an island nation: millions of people either live in coastal communities or visit the seaside every year. This new project will give us all the chance to enjoy the unique wildlife that relies on our sand dunes and, for those that want to, to get involved as citizen scientists and help improve the fortunes of unique sand dune habitats and the hidden gems they harbour.

"It is hard to overstate how greatly imperilled our dunes are; within one lifetime, 87% of bare sand has been lost on Welsh dunes, buried under a uniform blanket of thick grass and scrub. This had led to three dune plants becoming extinct, while one of our rarest orchids – the fen orchid - has been taken to the very brink of extinction.

"The dramatic loss of dune habitats must be arrested and reversed if we are to protect and promote the prospects of species such as purple milk-vetch and dune gentian which now face an increasingly uncertain future without the help of this exciting project."

Dr Simon Pryor, National Trust's Director of Natural Environment, said: "Sand dunes form a wild and exciting backdrop to many of our beaches, and a great place to explore – not to mention seek shelter from the wind. But many of the people who venture into them don't realise they are also incredibly rich in unusual plants, insects, and reptiles. But just because they are precious does not mean they are out of bounds; providing we take a bit of care, we can continue to enjoy them as places to picnic and to play. This project will help us do vital conservation work on the sand dunes at one of the National Trust's most popular and beautiful beaches: Studland in Dorset."

Stephanie Hilborne OBE, Chief Executive of The Wildlife Trusts, said: "This grant is fantastic news for the wildlife that depends upon one of the UK's most threatened habitats - sand dunes. Many of us have happy memories of exploring dunes on holiday, and now HLF is ensuring many more people can have those experiences now and in the future. Dunes also act as a sponge during coastal floods. So national lottery players are contributing to wildlife, people's happiness and our economy all at once."

Kevin Ingram, Natural Resources Wales interim Chief Executive, said: "Sand dunes are some of the richest places for wildlife in Wales but many of the rarest species have declined and in some cases disappeared as the dunes have become more stable.

"This project will bring many of these species back, benefiting not only our environment but also our people and our economy as it builds on the strong links between coastal communities and their dunes."

Notes to editors

* HLF Heritage Grants (HG) applications are assessed in two rounds. Dynamic Dunescapes has initially been granted round one development funding of £181,100 by HLF, allowing it to progress with its plans. Detailed proposals are then considered by HLF at second round, where a final decision is made on the full funding award of £4,131,100.

Selected images are downloadable from this folder: http://bit.ly/2hlLUfd

Sand dunes are listed as the habitat most at risk in Europe, and were highlighted as one of the habitats least likely to meet Biodiversity 2020 targets and as being a major concern by EU-funded IPENS (England) and Wales N2K projects (which assessed the state of all internationally-designated habitats).

In total the project will reach 150,000 through volunteering, monitoring, the schools programme, citizen science and the programme for older audiences. This will include over 3000 people, including 670 young people, who will be involved in volunteering; 10,000 people from new and harder to reach audiences; 1000 children monitoring wildlife on the dunes; and 3000 older people (including a special programme for those with dementia and their carers).

The conservation programme will restore 135 hectares of sand dunes, create 17 hectares of new dunes, land purchase of 23 hectares, and ensure sustainable management across 34 dunes sites.

In 2020 the England Coast Path (ECP) will be opened in its entirety. This will enable greater access to these threatened dune habitats, and the project will help these new visitors understand and appreciate the dunes. It will capitalise on new audiences providing lasting socio-economic benefits to deprived coastal communities.

Further information

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