

National Trust press release

Embargoed until 0001 Tuesday 1 February 2022

‘Tobacco cliffs’ at UK beauty spot to be turned into refuge for rare wildlife

- **Sand dune site at Formby, Merseyside was a dumping ground for tobacco waste in 1950s and 60s**
- **Now, the National Trust aims to turn it into haven for native plants, reptiles and amphibians, including the rare natterjack toad**
- **Charity creating gaps in sand dunes to re-establish natural shape and providing 12 breeding pools as ‘lifeline’ for toads**
- **Habitat loss, disturbance and changing weather is threatening the species – 75% of localities lost in past century**
- **Natterjacks are the UK’s loudest amphibian with an extraordinary call that can be heard for 2km**

Sand dunes that were once used as a dumping ground for waste tobacco are to be rejuvenated as a haven for dwindling wildlife – including one of the UK’s rarest amphibians.

The ‘tobacco cliffs’ at Formby in Merseyside are the product of thousands of tonnes of wet tobacco leaf that was tipped onto the dunes between the 1950s and 1970s by the British Nicotine Company, who operated a plant nearby[1].

Today the two-hectare site is carpeted with nettles, which have thrived on the waste, leaving no room for native plants, reptiles or the area’s most elusive inhabitant, the natterjack toad.

Now, the National Trust aims to breathe life back into area by restoring the natural processes of the dunes - which the charity says should be free to shift and move - and create much-needed space for wildlife.

Isabelle Spall, Project Officer for the National Trust, said: “Thousands of tonnes of tobacco were deposited at Formby each year for almost two decades, and while the waste itself isn’t toxic, the sheer quantity inevitably means it is going to have a dramatic impact on the ecology and the structure of any landscape.

“Dunes should look like sandy hills, with rolling undulations – but this area is completely flat and covered in nettles and thistles. It effectively creates a barrier that prevents toads and lizards from being able to move across the site.

“The animals need areas of bare sand mixed with patches of vegetation, so they have places to hunt and bask as well as room to hibernate, and for lizards, somewhere to lay eggs.

“With changing weather patterns, it’s even more important that wildlife can move freely to areas with better conditions[2].”

“This project is all about trying to give wildlife the best possible chance. It’s exciting to be creating something meaningful out of what was essentially a field of weeds.”

Restoration of the cliffs, which is now underway, involves excavating two large V-shaped wedges from the dunes with diggers. This will allow sand blown from the beach to be pushed through the gaps and build up on top of the tobacco waste, covering the nettles and creating new, undulating dunes.

The work is part of the UK-wide £10m Dynamic Dunescapes project funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund and EU LIFE Programme[3] which is based on the pioneering idea that dunes which move and change shape are better for nature than those which are stable.

As part of the same scheme, Trust staff are creating 12 breeding pools for natterjack toads along the length of Formby’s dunes to resemble the ephemeral pools that appear naturally. Invasive plants will be removed to create patches of bare sand around the hollows where the nocturnal toads can hide during daylight, and reptiles can hunt and forage.

Verity Pitts, Dynamic Dunescapes Project Manager, says: “We’re now two years into our work helping to restore 7,000 hectares of sand dune habitat for wildlife and people across England and Wales. It’s fantastic that we’re able to work with organisations like National Trust to use pioneering conservation techniques to secure a better future for some of our rarest native species. This particular piece of work will tackle the issues caused by the former dumping of waste material and help ensure that our charismatic and much-loved natterjack toads will thrive at Formby for generations to come.”

The loss of habitat for natterjack toads extends across the UK and compounded with a changing climate and rising levels of pollution, means the species is increasingly under pressure. It is estimated that 75% of breeding sites have vanished since the start of the 20th century[4].

Formby is part of the 20km Sefton Coast dune system which stretches from Liverpool to Southport and is the largest of its kind in England. It is one of the most important dune habitats in North-west Europe and is home to 40% of the UK’s natterjack population. Organisations managing the land[5] have been working in partnership for several years to try and improve its prospects.

Isabelle continued: “We are one of the last strongholds for natterjack toads so it is crucial we do everything we can to connect up these habitats and boost their chances of survival.

“There is a lot stacked against them. Not only are they reliant on sand dunes – which are now scarce across Europe – but they are vulnerable to unusual weather conditions and are prone to human disturbance. We hope this work will offer them a lifeline.”

Other species set to benefit from the work include sand lizards, which bury their eggs in bare sand, and the northern tiger beetle, a rare insect found only in Merseyside and Cumbria.

Formby is one of the fastest changing stretches of coastline in the National Trust’s care and much of the conservation work at the site focuses on adapting to the moving landscape.

The Trust is also calling on the public to help by not paddling in or letting dogs enter the dune pools. Visitors are encouraged to stick to the sea for paddling and carry water for their pets.

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Natterjack toad facts

- The natterjack toad is the loudest amphibian in Europe. Males call to females using their distinctive ratchet-like song. These calls can be heard up to 2km and, in Sefton, have given rise to the toad's local names - 'the Birkdale Nightingale' and 'the Bootle Organ'
- Unlike most toads and frogs which move by hopping, the natterjack uses its short legs to run across the sand
- Natterjack toads are nocturnal, therefore difficult to spot, but can be identified by a yellow line running down their back
- Their spawn is very different to typical frog spawn. It looks like a string of small black pearls at the bottom of shallow pools
- Sand dunes are their main habitat, which are listed as one of the habitat most at risk in Europe
- The natterjack toad is a protected species, meaning it is against the law to disturb it
- Natterjacks are our fastest metamorphosing amphibians – in warm conditions they can turn from tadpole to toadlet in around four weeks

For more information or interviews, contact: Sally Robinson, communications officer:
sally.robinson1@nationaltrust.org.uk / 07825 356 544

Chris Marr, marketing and communications consultant (North):
chris.marr@nationaltrust.org.uk / 07824 546915

Images are available for download:

<https://nationaltrustonline.sharepoint.com/:f/s/MediaAssets/EnpVtG8zvzJHoGSIVqLh7I0B7qRm3XPfdcMF7KmMp8jJew?e=ew80AT>

Please note, images are only for use with this story and must be credited as indicated.

Images of the natterjack toads are for illustrative purposes and were taken at other sites in the UK.

Notes to editors

[1] After the Second World War, between 1956 and 1974, the British Nicotine Company Ltd deposited leftover tobacco leaves on disused asparagus farmland lying behind a section of dunes at Formby Point. As the line of dunes running along the beach slowly eroded back, the waste was exposed.

[2] For instance, some wet slacks (breeding pools) are deeper or larger than others allowing animals to breed during drought, when others have dried up, or to find shallow warmer pools to breed in after flooding or heavier than normal rainfall.

The animals need areas of bare sand mixed with patches of vegetation, so they have places to hunt and bask as well as space to dig burrows to hibernate and for the lizards to lay their eggs.

[3] Dynamic Dunescapes is a partnership project funded by National Lottery Heritage fund and EU LIFE programme. Project partners are Natural England, Plantlife, Natural Resources Wales, National Trust and The Wildlife Trusts.

Notches have also been successfully created in other parts of the UK as part of Dynamic Dunescapes, including at Oxwich in South Wales.

[4] [Factors Affecting Population Densities of Adult Natterjack Toads *Bufo calamita* in Britain on JSTOR](#)

[5] Including Sefton Council, Natural England and the National Trust

About the National Trust

The National Trust is a conservation charity founded in 1895 by three people: Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley, who saw the importance of the nation's heritage and open spaces and wanted to preserve them for everyone to enjoy. Today, across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, we continue to look after places so people and nature can thrive.

Entirely independent of Government, the National Trust cares for more than 250,000 hectares of countryside, 780 miles of coastline and 500 historic properties, gardens and nature reserves.

For more information, see: www.nationaltrust.org.uk

About Dynamic Dunescapes

[Dynamic Dunescapes](#) is a partnership project restoring sand dunes across England and Wales for the benefit of wildlife, people and communities, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the EU LIFE Programme. Project partners are Natural England, Plantlife, National Trust, Natural Resources Wales, Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust and Cumbria Wildlife Trust.

The coastal dunes of England and Wales are internationally important habitats for wildlife, listed as one of the most threatened environments in Europe for biodiversity loss. These dunes are a sanctuary to rare species like the fen orchid, natterjack toad and sand lizard. But, dune management messaging, supporting dune stabilisation over many decades, has meant that dunes have become overgrown with vegetation. We now realise that this is putting protected wildlife at risk. Healthy sand dunes need to be free to move and be dynamic. Many species need areas of open sand to thrive, so this project will bring life back to the dunes by creating areas of open sand. Other specialised creatures need us to improve the dune slacks, as these often water-filled dips behind the dunes are important habitats for amphibians and birds. Invasive species will also be removed from the dunes and dune grasslands, to improve conditions for rare native plants to flourish. We work with skilled local and national experts, and involve schools and local groups, volunteers and visitors of all ages and abilities to help rejuvenate our dunes.

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