MEDIA RELEASE
22/11/21

Scraping the dunes will help save Cumbria's coastal sands

To help combat the biodiversity loss currently experienced by coastal dunes, the ambitious Dynamic Dunescapes project will remove layers of turf from sand dunes in Cumbria

Working in partnership across important sand dune sites at North Walney NNR, Sandscale Haws and Askam Shore, Natural England and National Trust will create five hectares of new habitat for threatened sand dune species this winter starting in December.

When healthy, sand dunes are home to myriad specialist and rare species of plant and animal. Cumbria is known for being one of the few places in the UK that the rare sand dune-dwelling natterjack toad and northern dune tiger beetle can be found.

But coastal sand dunes are the most threatened habitat type in Europe for biodiversity loss. To make sure that these rare creatures have a thriving future, Cumbria's dunes need a helping hand from conservationists. The Dynamic Dunescapes project is restoring up to 7,000 hectares of sand dune in England and Wales by 2023. It is funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund and EU LIFE Programme, and partners in Cumbria are Natural England, Cumbria Wildlife Trust and National Trust.

One of the key drivers of the dunes' ecological decline is a loss of nutrient-poor, bare sandy habitats within the dune system. As more vegetation grows on our dunes, the bare sand becomes stabilised by their roots and a more soil-like turf layer develops. The toads, lizards and insects that burrow in the bare sand find themselves with less space to make their homes, and the plant species like wild pansy and the rare Walney geranium that thrive on bare sand conditions become smothered by turf-loving plants.

Turf stripping exposes the bare sand below, and restores the type of habitat that has been lost in recent decades. An eight-tonne excavator and a six-tonne dumper truck will be used to remove the turf from the scrape area, and use the removed material to build into natural features on the site, which will reduce the amount of disturbance caused moving machinery on and off the site. At Askam, areas of invasive Japanese Rose (*Rosa rugosa*) which are smothering areas of the dunes will also be removed.

Richard Storton, Natural England Dynamic Dunescapes Project Officer for Cumbria, says:

> *"We are working with partners to carry out turf stripping at three sites, and this will help to counteract the over-stabilisation and lack of bare sand on the dunes. There are many specialist pioneer species that have adapted to colonise these areas, such as natterjack toads, northern dune tiger beetle, Isle of Man cabbage and dune pansy. These and many other species will benefit from a range of different work that we are carrying out to increase dune biodiversity over the next few years."*

Darren Mason, Area Ranger at National Trust Sandscale Haws, says:

> *"With no guarantee currently that countries can keep global temperature rise below 1.5^{o}C, habitats such as sand dune systems become ever more significant in helping protect vulnerable coastal communities and the biodiversity reliant on sand dunes against increasing pressures from climate change. The work being undertaken by the Dynamic Dunescapes project will create a range of different ages, heights, depths and vegetation across Sandscale*

Haws, which will enable the site to adapt to the effects of climate change and become more resilient in the future."

Turf stripping is a tried-and-tested technique used by sand dune site managers. Dynamic Dunescapes partner organisation Cumbria Wildlife Trust have used turf stripping to rejuvenate large areas of South Walney Nature Reserve – with the meadows that formed in 'stripped' areas displaying double the number of plant species than before the diggers got to work.

Sarah Dalrymple, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, led the Dynamic Dunescapes-funded turf stripping that took place at South Walney Nature Reserve in the winter of in 2020/2021:

"Dune restoration at South Walney began in 2015 through the Dunes of Barrow project and has continued with the Dynamic Dunescapes project. We have removed a thin layer of species-poor topsoil to expose bare sand underneath, encouraging rarer dune species and increasing plant diversity. It's been a great success, with almost 5 hectares of grassland restored to the dune habitats that would have existed here until 100 years ago."

The public are asked to keep their distance from the work, keep dogs under close control and to pay attention to signs on site.

Natural England are overseeing the works across all sites, and working in partnership with National Trust at Sandscale Haws.

- Ends -

Eve Mulholland, Dynamic Dunescapes Engagement Officer in Cumbria, will be available for TV / radio / podcast / print interviews. Please contact Emma Brisdion as stated below to arrange press opportunities.

For comment and media opportunities, contact:

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- Media -

Images: Single-use only

A range of images are available for download from this Google Drive folder, including:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1jR0wmN3lnIiOldBsGfHkZONagdhq94NT?usp=sharing

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Wild Pansy thriving in bare sand at North Walney National Nature Reserve. Credit: Emma Brisdion

Dynamic Dunescapes and Cumbria Wildlife Trust turf stripping taking place at South Walney Nature Reserve in Dec 2020/Jan 2021. Credit: Cumbria Wildlife Trust

The rare Walney geranium is only found on Walney Island and can only thrive on dunes that aren't smothered with vegetation. Credit: Emma Brisdion

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South Walney in 2015 before turf stripping work, with nutrient rich turf and low floristic diversity.

South Walney several years after the 2015 turf stripping work, displaying a greater number of sand dune plant species than before the turf layer was removed.

- Additional Notes for Editors –

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 will 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.
Follow @dynamicdunes on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.