

Findhorn Hinterland Trust Dune Restoration Project - FAQs

Q: Why are you removing all the gorse? This is an important habitat too!

A: We are only removing carefully selected areas of gorse, to make maximum biodiversity benefit for extremely rare species and habitats. Most of the gorse will continue to develop as it will. While gorse is a valuable habitat, it has replaced far more valuable sand and shingle habitats, which support species which are threatened with extinction if action is not taken urgently.

Q: Nature knows best. The dunes are rewilding, why do you want to interfere with this natural process?!

A: The extent of gorse and tree growth on the dunes is not natural. It is the result of previous human actions, mainly house building and tree planting. This has led to reduced wind speeds, allowing scrub to spread quickly, so that natural, rare and fragile sand dune habitats and species are now threatened. We aim to open up the scrub to truly natural, wind-driven, processes, rejuvenating the dune ecosystem. We are carefully targeting our action to benefit key habitats and species. Gorse and woodland will continue to develop elsewhere on the dunes. We are not alone in undertaking this urgent conservation work. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (Europe's largest nature conservation charity), Forestry and Land Scotland (the government agency responsible for the national forest estate), the charity Butterfly Conservation, and the Species on the Edge partnership, all have dune restoration projects on the Moray Firth.

Q: What's the point of doing this work if the gorse is going to take over anyway? It's a losing battle.

A: National biodiversity interest - lichens and insects - are under threat of extinction. We know what the problem is. We can do something about it. If we don't the problem will get worse. We control gorse and tree encroachment on sand and shingle habitats on an annual basis by cutting. Increasing the flow of wind through the area will help to slow the spread of gorse and trees over the long term.

Q: Why should I care about a few moths and lichens? There are far more important things to worry about!

A: Findhorn Dunes are of national importance for rare wildlife. Some species are found at only a handful of sites in Scotland and are under threat of extinction. We are in a biodiversity crisis and as custodians of the land, we have a responsibility to protect high priority species and habitats. We believe that all species and habitats are integral to the web of life, upon which we as humans also depend.

Q: I have heard that this project is all about lichens. Is that right?

A: The project is only partly about lichens. The aim is to reintroduce the natural process of sand movement in a limited area. New sand will benefit a whole suite of specialist sand dunes species, research showing that sand specialist beetles and wasps are likely to be first beneficiaries. It could take many years for lichens to establish significantly as areas of sand slowly restabilise.

Q: How can you justify the use of large machinery to take out gorse and trees in a climate crisis?

A: The climate crisis is of central concern to all who are involved with ecology and the health of our environment. There is also a biodiversity crisis, of equal importance, however. This project is a response to the biodiversity crisis. The latest State of Nature report <https://stateofnature.org.uk/> highlights the urgent need for restoration of rare habitats. Findhorn dunes contains species which are at risk of extinction in the UK due to habitat loss. We are already controlling scrub by hand on the dunes, but the extent of scrub cover on the dunes is such that it will not be possible to restore the sand dune ecosystem without the use of machinery. The climate impact of removing trees and fuel used by the machinery is considered to be of on-site significance only in terms of climate change, in contrast to the national biodiversity interest of the Findhorn Dunes. It should be emphasised that FHT has planted more than 5,000 trees in its woodland area.

Q: What will happen if this work isn't done.

A: Areas of priority sand dune habitats and their associated threatened species will be lost and the overall health of the wider sand dune ecosystem will continue to decline.

Q: How have you engaged with the local community for this project?

A: The FHT is a mostly voluntary organisation which relies on community support to function. A Heritage Lottery funded study undertaken by an independent consultant in 2016, inviting views on how the Hinterland should be managed, highlighted strong community support for action for rare and threatened species.

Community engagement on dune restoration began a full year before any action on the ground was taken. A large and well attended community event took place in February 2024, followed by regular articles in various newsletters and the local newspaper, regular social media posts, guided walks, a successful crowd funding campaign for the first phase of works, attendance at events across Moray, 1:1 meetings with individual community members, and site visits before each subsequent phase of ground works. Another large community event is planned for 2027.

Q: I have heard that this is project is an experiment. How can you be sure of the outcomes and that humans will not be negatively affected?

Rewilding is widely accepted as unpredictable because it shifts management from human-controlled targets to self-sustaining, nature-led ecological processes. The dune restoration technique we are using, of mulching and then burying gorse to create bare sand is established conservation best practice, however, described in the authoritative Sand Dune Managers Handbook. Our project has been carefully planned to avoid unintended consequences of blown sand damaging existing good habitats, or affecting areas of human settlement.

