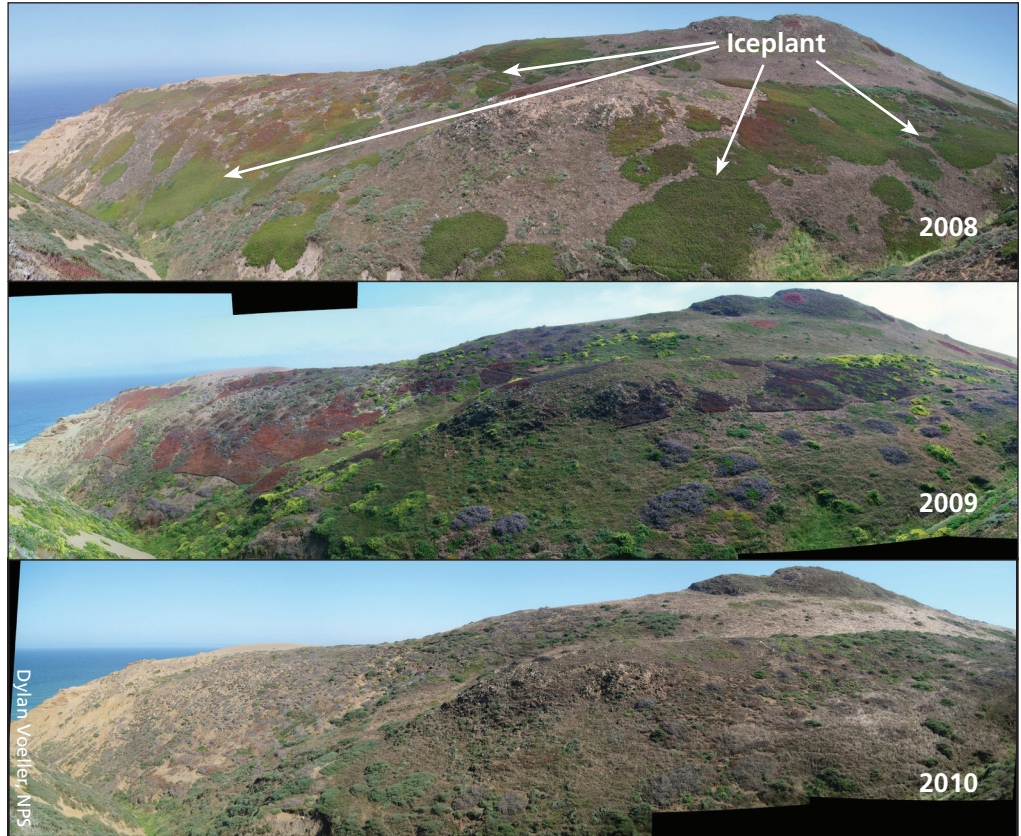


Dune Restoration at the Point Reyes Headlands

By Jessica Weinberg
Science Communication Intern

Less than 10 years ago, Point Reyes National Seashore was on the brink of losing the highly visible dunes surrounding the historic Point Reyes Lighthouse—one of the park’s most iconic features. This beautiful and complex ecosystem is composed of one of California’s only active “climbing” dunes, which has built up on top of more ancient dunes known as paleodunes. Not only are the dunes themselves unique, but they also support 14 rare plants and many extraordinary animals that are all native to Point Reyes, including the endangered Myrtle’s silverspot butterfly.

The major threat to these dunes was an aggressive invasive species called iceplant. Originally brought to Point Reyes from South Africa in the early 1900s to stabilize sand along roads to the lighthouse, iceplant has since spread throughout the area, forming dense mats that smother native habitat. This invader was halting the climbing dunes’ natural movement, overpowering native plants, driving out wildlife, and potentially triggering a cascade of additional unpredictable ecological consequences.



The photo series above shows iceplant covering many parts of the dunes (bright patches in the top photo) and then the gradual return of a mosaic of more natural dune habitat over time (middle and bottom photos)



In many areas of the Point Reyes Lighthouse Headlands ice plant had to be painstakingly removed by hand

Efforts to rescue the Point Reyes Headlands’ dunes from a complete iceplant infestation began in 2002. Between 2002-2004 the National Park Service, with the help of volunteers, hand-cleared iceplant from a 100-acre area south of the lighthouse, which resulted in a 20% rise in native plant diversity after three years. Between 2008-2009 they cleared another 80-acre site, both manually and with the careful application of herbicide, and some rare native plants can already be seen where iceplant once grew. Spurred on by these successes, yet another project is underway to remove any iceplant re-growth, eliminate remaining patches of iceplant bordering previous removal areas, and to control other invasive plants likely to hinder native species as they re-colonize. Since anyone visiting the lighthouse will see these restoration efforts from the road, there will also be informative displays to explain what is being done and why.

For now, native plants and animals are reclaiming the dunes in the Point Reyes Headlands. The continued dedication of park staff and volunteers will be necessary to keep it that way, and to eventually reclaim Point Reyes’ many other coastal dune systems that are still suffering from invasions of iceplant and other non-native species.

More information can be found at: http://www.nps.gov/pore/parkmgmt/planning_dunerestoration.htm.